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## ***Bodhicitta* and the spiritual path of the Bodhisattva**

### 1. Methodological considerations

**B***odhicitta* is a common technical term in Buddhist Sanskrit literature. Within the Mahāyāna tradition, it is closely related to the spiritual practice of the Buddhist aspirant to enlightenment (Bodhisattva). *Bodhicitta* is a Sanskrit compound composed of the words *bodhi* and *citta*. The feminine verbal noun *bodhi* usually means, in the Buddhist context, the state of being *buddha*, or the quality in virtue of which one is *buddha*, that is, awakened. In general, this term means: “perception,” “comprehension,” “knowledge,” or “wisdom.”<sup>1</sup> To modern translators it means either “enlightenment” or “awakening.”<sup>2</sup> As for the Sanskrit term *citta*, the situation is a little bit more complex. This term has a long history dating back to the Vedic literature. It is also extensively employed in the Upaniṣads and in Buddhist canonical literature. *Citta* has consequently acquired various technical meanings in the course of the development of Indian philosophy and psychology. For the purpose of the present study, let us just mention its most basic and common meanings. These are: “mind,” “thought,” “attention,” and also “desire,” “intention,” or “aim.”<sup>3</sup> Similar to the English word *mind*, as in the expressions “to keep in mind” and “she changed her mind,” *citta* has therefore either a cognitive or a conative connotation. Consequently, Buddhist scholars, depending on their interpretation of *bodhi* and *citta*, have suggested, among others, the following translations: “Thought of enlightenment,”<sup>4</sup> “Mind of enlightenment,”<sup>5</sup> “Desire for enlightenment,”<sup>6</sup> “Will of enlightenment,”<sup>7</sup> “Mind turned to Enlightenment,”<sup>8</sup> “Awakening mind,”<sup>9</sup> or “Desire for awakening.”<sup>10</sup>

At this stage, it may be pointless to decide which translation is the most appropriate, because, no matter how accurate the linguistic analysis, I believe

that one has to consider the context in which it is used in order to understand its meaning. In Chinese Buddhism, for example, *bodhicitta* has been rendered by *fa-hsin* or *ch'i-hsin*, or “arousing the mind.” *Bodhicitta* has then been interpreted as “initiating the aspiration and determination to become awakened.”<sup>11</sup> This interpretation seems to suggest a meaning that is not explicitly given by simply a literal translation of *bodhicitta*. Something has been added to it and to find out what it is, one would have to look at how and why Buddhist Chinese used the concept of *bodhicitta*. One may, for example, investigate whether *bodhicitta* is a means to enlightenment, a simple act of will, or a description of a mental state.

I assume that Buddhism is primarily a system of ideas and practices whose goal is to bring about a liberation from conditions recognized as unsatisfactory. Its doctrines are not speculative but rather soteriological. I use the word *soteriological* by way of extension from its usual meaning in Christian theology. It is the idea of being free from one's limited and unsatisfactory conditions that is emphasized and not the idea of salvation brought about by a savior. One can then speak of a soteriological system when referring to Buddhism by asking three basic questions. The first question deals with the description of the human situation, a situation that is deemed unsatisfactory. This question often reveals the most basic nature of human existence and of its destiny. It may also tell us about the intrinsic negative quality of this world. The second question relates to the means to overcome, to change, or to be free from an unsatisfactory condition. Finally, the third question, always implicit in the other two, has to do with a portrayal of the state to which the application of the means to solve the human problem leads. In other words, the soteriological context refers to the character, the structure, and the assumptions of any system whose main purpose is to effect a radical change of conditions of living or being.

The relevance of this context was pointed out to me by Charles J. Adams, a scholar of the Islamic tradition, who attempted to identify the fundamental differences between Islam and Christianity in an article entitled “Islam and Christianity: The Opposition of Similarities.” The reason for using such an approach was that, since Christianity and Islam share many symbols such as the idea of sin or the role of prophecy, one may be misled by these similarities when trying to understand their exact significance. Besides, without an awareness of the differences between their spiritual and cultural contexts, there is always the possibility of interpreting the symbols of one tradition in terms of another soteriological system. The most important implication of this is the idea that, the words or the symbols

being similar, they do not necessarily refer to the same thing. To give an example, to determine the meaning of the word *rendez-vous*, one has to know whether it is used in English or in French.

In Buddhism, we face the same situation. Some of its concepts have persisted over many stages of its historical and doctrinal development. The concept of *upāya* (skillful means) is perhaps such a concept. As it is presented in the simile of the Burning House of the Lotus Sūtra,<sup>12</sup> it advocates the idea that all Buddhist doctrines and practices are just provisional means skillfully designed by the Buddha or by the Bodhisattvas to help all unenlightened beings to attain enlightenment in ways that fit their own mental dispositions. From a certain point of view, one may argue, as Pye did, that “‘Buddhism,’ as a specific religion identifiable in human history, is a skillful means.”<sup>13</sup> This affirmation is true as long as one makes no distinctions between the various means possible to achieve enlightenment. By overlooking these distinctions, one also downplays the importance of the identity or the characteristics of the various Buddhist traditions or schools that have indeed insisted on these distinctions by developing their own approaches to enlightenment. When one considers these various approaches, one may notice that the significance of *upāya* is likely to vary according to context. Thus, *upāya* has a different meaning whether one views enlightenment as a gradual process or as a sudden one. In the context of gradual approach, all means to enlightenment are skillful means; here the emphasis is on the word *means*, and the term *skillful* is to be understood as efficacious with respect to the goal to be achieved (*upeya*). In the sudden enlightenment approach, *upāya* refers to preliminary teachings that are in effect less important compared to the means that bring about enlightenment. In this case, the emphasis is on the word *skillful* that is interpreted as clever, ingenious, and even deceptive.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the discussion concerning gradual versus sudden enlightenment involves many more issues than just the means to enlightenment. It affects all aspects of the soteriological context: does the experience of enlightenment, for example, admit degrees or is it indivisible? Is the human problem fundamentally an error in perception or is it woven throughout the whole fabric of the personality? All the possible answers to these questions will again depend on the structure and characteristics of the soteriological context in which ideas such as *upāya* are articulated.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as it has been pointed out by Tao-sheng, a Chinese Buddhist monk (ca. 360–434 C.E.),<sup>16</sup> that *upāya*, being identified as an element of the gradual approach, can only lead to a state where the ties with this world are subdued and never eradicated.

I am aware of the fact that attributing importance to the soteriological context to understand the meaning of a concept might be violating some principles of the historico-philological method, because it is likely to leave out many details and exceptions in order to reveal only a broad picture. Nevertheless, I feel justified to adopt it because I believe that a comprehension of the general picture is what ultimately gives the true significance of an idea or a concept. The idea of a soteriological context could in fact be a very powerful hermeneutical tool. Just assuming that there is such a context already leads one to a different interpretation. It has been argued, for example, that the fundamental preoccupation of Dīnāga and of his followers was metaphysical in nature. Others have said in this regard that his principal concern was with language. According to Richard Hayes, these views completely miss the point about Dīnāga's philosophy because they overlook the fact that Buddhists' actions are oriented toward the goal of emancipation.<sup>17</sup> In other words, these views fail to bring to light the full significance of Dīnāga's ideas because they are not articulated within a soteriological context.

Having discussed the approach I intend to use in order to analyze the significance of *bodhicitta*, I would now like to give a few details about the text I have chosen for my study of this concept as well as details about the background of its author, Śāntideva, and of its main Sanskrit commentator, Prajñākaramati.

## 2. Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is a text of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition known to have been composed by Śāntideva, a Buddhist monk and philosopher who lived around the eighth century C.E.<sup>18</sup> It also exists in Tibetan, Mongolian, and Chinese versions. According to Hajime Nakamura, there are at least nine commentaries and summaries.<sup>19</sup> This text had little influence in later Chinese and Japanese Buddhism but became very popular in Tibet. Even today, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is considered an important source of spiritual information for Tibetan Buddhists.

In the West, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* also aroused interest among scholars of Buddhism. It was first brought to their attention in 1889 by Minayeff, a Russian scholar. Since then, it has been translated, not always in its entirety, in modern European and Asian languages. To name the most important, we have the French translations produced by Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1892, 1896, and 1907) and by Louis Finot (1920). In English,

there are the translations of Lionel D. Barnett (1909), of Marion L. Matics (1970), of Stephen Batchelor (1979), and the most recent are those of Parmananda Sharma (1990), Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (1996), and Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace (1997). To these, one has to add the translations in German (Richard Schmidt, 1923; Ernst Steinkellner, 1981), Italian (Giuseppe Tucci, 1925; Amalia Pezzali, 1975), Japanese (Y. Kanakura, 1958), Dutch (J. Ensink, 1955), Danish (Christian Lindtner, 1981), and those produced in a few modern languages of India such as Hindi and Marāṭhī. It has been argued by Finot that this text has had a certain appeal to Western scholars because of its similarity with the *Imitatio Christi* of Thomas a Kempis, a well-known text of the Christian spiritual tradition. This comparison is valid as long as one considers the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, as will be mentioned later, from the point of view of only one of its many aspects.

#### i. The text

According to Paul Williams, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* “is, like the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, a statement of the Bodhisattva’s path to Buddhahood, but distinguished by a poetic sensitivity and fervour which makes it one of the gems of Buddhist and world spiritual literature.”<sup>20</sup> He also says that it is one of the great spiritual poems of humanity.<sup>21</sup> According to David Seyfard Rugg, this text has been predominantly perceived as a religious and devotional poem rather than as a philosophical treatise. However, he believes that it is hard to agree with such a view since it appears to overlook the importance of chapter 9 dealing with the Perfection of Wisdom. This chapter clearly places the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in the main current of Madhyamaka thought; thus, “it becomes abundantly clear that the work is hardly more religious in any sense exclusive of philosophy than certain earlier works of the school attributed to Nāgārjuna.”<sup>22</sup> Irrespective of this difference of perception concerning the nature of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, what is certain about this text is that it definitively deals with the spiritual practices of the Buddhist aspirant to enlightenment, the Bodhisattva, within the context of the Mahāyāna tradition. Whether it is a philosophical treatise or a devotional guide might not be an issue when looking at the soteriological context in which its philosophical ideas or devotional practices are articulated.

This context seems to be already alluded to in the title of Śāntideva’s work. When comparing the various translations of the Sanskrit compound *bodhi-caryā-avatāra*, one sees various preferences. There is one type of

translation that appears to take into consideration the title of the Tibetan version of Śāntideva's work, *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (*Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*), replacing thus the word *bodhi* by *Bodhisattva*. Examples of this type of translation are: *Introduction à la pratique des futurs Buddha*, *Exposition de la pratique des bodhisattvas* (both translations from La Vallée Poussin), or *A guide to the Bodhisattva's way of life* (Batchelor and Wallace and Wallace). A second type of translation, on the other hand, lays more emphasis on the notion of path. Examples of this type are *La marche à la lumière* (Finot), *The path of light* (Barnett), *In cammino verso la luce* (Tucci), and *Satori e no michi* (Y. Kanakura). What is noticeable in these translations is the fact that the word *avatāra*, in the expression *bodhicaryāvatāra*, has been disregarded. This point is, however, not true for all translations referring to the idea of path, for instance, *Der Eintritt in den Wandel in Erleuchtung* (Schmidt), *Eintritt in das Leben zur Erleuchtung* (Steinkellner), *La descente dans la carrière de l'éveil* (Pezzali), and *Entering the Path of Enlightenment* (Matics). The point I want to raise by presenting these translations is that it seems that the word *avatāra* as such gave some difficulty to modern translators. While some translators decided to omit the term altogether, others were split over the choice between two meanings. On the one hand, there is La Vallée Poussin who interpreted it in the sense of "introduction" or "presentation of a subject matter." This interpretation is confirmed by Apte's Practical Sanskrit-English dictionary. Analogously, *avatāra* can also mean "to explain" as "now, in order to raise the desire that causes the grasping of *bodhicitta*, [its] praising is to be explained, introduced or presented."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, there are translators who interpreted it in a more literal sense, that is, as entering, descending, or going down into, thus alluding to some kind of happening. Similarly, the word *'jug*, which is the Tibetan rendering for the word *avatāra*, means "to go," "to walk in," or "to enter." This rendering is also supported by Prajñākaramati's commentary on the dedicatory verse of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* where the word *avatāra* is glossed by *mārgaḥ* (path). It is further explained as that by which, having attained the stage of Bodhisattva, Buddhahood is reached, obtained, or secured.<sup>24</sup> Given this understanding, the idea of entry into may be, for example, compared to the first stage of the Theravādin's spiritual life that is incidentally called entering the stream (*sotāpanna*). This interpretation takes into consideration some aspects of the spiritual practice of the Bodhisattva. Indeed, it is said that a Bodhisattva's career begins with the production or arising of *bodhicitta*. As will be seen later, the Sanskrit term that is here translated by the word "production" is

*utpāda*. This term is often used with the attainment of a mental state. In this circumstance, the title of Śāntideva's work could very well be rendered as "the attainment of a mental state making possible the practice to enlightenment" where the attainment of such a mental state is what it means to be a Bodhisattva. The validity of this interpretation can only be determined, as mentioned earlier, by examining the nature of the spiritual approach suggested by Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. For the moment, I just want to point out the possible clues with regard to Śāntideva's conception of the spiritual path of the Bodhisattva. Next, I would like to consider the structure of the text itself and see whether it may reveal other clues as to this spiritual path.

The original text of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in Sanskrit consists of ten chapters. These are (1) *Bodhicittānuśaṃsā* (The Praising of *bodhicitta*), (2) *Pāpadeśanā* (Confession of sins), (3) *Bodhicittaparigrahaḥ* (Acceptance of *bodhicitta*), (4) *Bodhicittāpramādaḥ* (Perseverance in *bodhicitta*), (5) *Samprajanyarakṣaṇam* (Guarding alertness), (6) *Kṣāntipāramitā* (The Perfection of patience), (7) *Vīryapāramitā* (The Perfection of endeavor), (8) *Dhyānapāramitā* (The Perfection of meditation), (9) *Prajñāpāramitā* (The Perfection of Wisdom), and (10) *Parīṇamanā* (Dedication).

It has been argued that chapter 10 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was not part of the original text.<sup>25</sup> This affirmation is based on the fact that one of its major commentators, Prajñākaramati, disregarded it and that Tāranātha, a Tibetan historian of Buddhism (1575–1608),<sup>26</sup> doubted its authenticity. In this regard, P. L. Vaidya, a modern editor of the text, has drawn to our attention the fact that this chapter was extant in the various manuscripts that were used to prepare basic editions in the Sanskrit as well as in the Mongolian, Tibetan, and Chinese versions.<sup>27</sup> It would most certainly require extensive research—which is beyond the scope of this book—to determine which affirmation is exact. The interesting point about this chapter is, however, that it is considered an example of the Perfection of giving (*dānapāramitā*). Usually, this Perfection is the first of a series of six—the other five being *śīla* (discipline), *kṣānti* (patience), *vīrya* (endeavor), *dhyāna* (meditation), and *prajñā* (wisdom)—where each is often considered to be a prerequisite to the next. By putting the Perfection of giving at the end of the text, it may be seen as a result of having accomplished the goal of the spiritual path suggested in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* rather than being its beginning or a prerequisite to it.

There is another interesting point to note concerning this text. A recension of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is reported to have lacked chapters 2 and 9.

In the *IDan-dkar-ma* Catalogue (no. 659), the extent of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is given as six hundred *ślokas* (stanzas) rather than as a thousand as indicated by Bu-ston, another Tibetan historian of Buddhism (1290–1364).<sup>28</sup> Bu-ston discussed the discrepancy and attributed it to the fact that chapter 2 had been omitted in this recension and that chapter 9 had been ascribed, according to some, to a certain Blo-gros-mi-zad-pa (Akṣayamati). Chapter 2 deals principally with the worship of holy figures of the Mahāyāna tradition. It is because of this chapter that the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* has somehow been compared to the *Imitatio Christi* and, consequently, perceived as a devotional breakthrough within the Buddhist tradition. In this regard Har Dayal, a scholar of Mahāyāna Buddhism, wrote that “the ideas of sin as an offense against higher deities, and of confession, repentance and extraneous protection were alien to the spirit of Buddhism during several centuries.”<sup>29</sup> Also worth noting concerning chapter 2 is that Tibetan Buddhists, who extensively use this text as a source of spiritual inspiration, understand these devotional practices as preliminary steps in the cultivation of *bodhicitta*.<sup>30</sup>

As just mentioned, chapter 9 deals with Wisdom, that is, the realization of emptiness or of the Perfection of transcending discriminative understanding. This chapter is considered to be the accomplishment of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* since it is argued that without Wisdom, all other Perfections are worthless. What is significant about this chapter is that *bodhicitta* is hardly mentioned and that the chapter itself could be considered as a separate entity from the rest of Śāntideva's work.<sup>31</sup> One finds herein the bulk of the philosophical ideas discussed in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Perhaps for this reason, Tibetan Buddhists consider chapter 9 as the way to cultivate what they call “the ultimate *bodhicitta*.”

Indeed, according to them, *bodhicitta* has two aspects: the conventional *bodhicitta* and the ultimate *bodhicitta*. The cultivation of the conventional *bodhicitta* is the means to develop compassion for all sentient beings. It consists in a variety of meditations where, for example, one imagines one's own mother and tries to extend the benevolent feelings one usually has for her to all sentient beings starting from one's own friends, then to people one is normally indifferent to, and finally to one's enemies. Cultivation of the ultimate *bodhicitta*, on the other hand, trains the mind to perceive the phenomenal world as impermanent and empty of intrinsic existence. By constantly entertaining the idea that everything is like a dream, even while eating, drinking, and doing all kinds of activities, one is likely to come to realize emptiness. This emptiness is beyond this world and cannot be for-



culated by concept or speech.<sup>32</sup> It is to be noted that, although this twofold conception of *bodhicitta* dated back to as early as the composition of the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, a text of the Cittamātra tradition composed after Nāgārjuna (circa second century C.E.) and before Maitreya (ca. 270–350 C.E.), it is not discussed in the context of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

The relevance of this discussion to the structure of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is that it may be possible to see chapter 2 (Confession of Sins), chapter 9 (The Perfection of Wisdom), and those dealing specifically with *bodhicitta*, that is, chapters 1, 3 to 8, and 10 as three autonomous and self-sufficient entities. In other words, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* seems to offer three different spiritual approaches: the first focuses on the concept of *bodhicitta*, the second approach focuses on the idea of Wisdom (*prajñā*), and the third one is based on what one might identify as devotional practices. This means that such devotional practices, for example, are not some kind of preliminary exercises and that the realization of emptiness is not that which the entire *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is exclusively aiming at. From the point of view of the soteriological context, it could therefore be argued that these approaches lead to different spiritual experiences, each having its own definition of the human problem, each adopting the appropriate means to solve it, and each visualizing its own specific state to be attained.

## ii. Śāntideva

In addition to being the author of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva composed the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, an anthology with comments compiled on the basis of citations from various *sūtras* and a third text entitled *Sūtrasamuccaya*. This last text is not extant in any language and one knows of its existence from the fact that it is quoted in one verse (chap. 5–106) of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. On the basis of this fact, Bu-ston and Tāranātha have ascribed this work to Śāntideva. In this verse, however, Nāgārjuna, the author of another text also called *Sūtrasamuccaya*, also happened to be mentioned. Ruegg believes that it is ambiguous and argues that it is erroneous.<sup>33</sup>

What we know of Śāntideva is from biographies produced by three Tibetan historians: Bu-ston, Tāranātha, and Sum-pa mkham-po (1704–88). There is also a fourth source constituted from a Nepalese manuscript of the fourteenth century. According to J. W. de Jong,<sup>34</sup> this Sanskrit version and the Tibetan ones seem to go back to the same original source. Apart from these sources, we may rely, only as the dates of Śāntideva's life are

concerned, on a few historical facts. It has been ascertained, for example, that I-Tsing, one of the Chinese pilgrims to whom we owe a lot of our knowledge on the history of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, left India in 685 C.E. In his account, there is no mention of Śāntideva nor of his works. One might assume from this that, at the very most, Śāntideva was not known before this time. Another significant event concerning Śāntideva is the first trip to Tibet of Śāntarakṣita (c. 725–88 C.E.) in 763 C.E. This is probably the latest date of composition of one of his works, the *Tattvasiddhi*, in which one verse of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is quoted. Given these details, it is believed that the productive life of Śāntideva is situated approximately in the period between 685 C.E. and 763 C.E. For the other details concerning the life of Śāntideva, one has to rely on these biographies that are in fact more legendary than historical. However, some details of his legend might be of interest.

According to tradition, Śāntideva, whose childhood name was Śāntivarman, was born in the southwestern part of India as the son of a royal chieftain named Mañjuśrīvarman. In his past lives, he served the various Buddhas and thereby accumulated the necessary merits that would later lead him to final liberation. His mother, who is said to be a reincarnation of the goddess Tārā, encouraged him to abandon the mundane life to become an ascetic. Another account claims that Śāntideva had a vision of Mañjuśrī enjoining him to forsake the throne for the ascetic life. What should be noted here is that the tradition does not relate Śāntideva to the Brahmanic tradition but rather presents him as a true member of the Mahāyāna lineage.<sup>35</sup>

Having set forth to lead the ascetic life, Śāntideva met a teacher with whom he studied for twelve years. With his guru, he learned the science of Mañjuśrī. We are told that Śāntideva was able to produce a vision of Mañjuśrī by invoking him. After this period of training in the forest—chapter 8 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* praises dwelling in the forest and living the ascetic life—Śāntideva became a knight at the court of King Pañchamasīṃha. There, he was forced to display his wooden sword that caused the king's left eye to fall out of its socket because of the dazzling light it produced. It is believed that Śāntideva's wooden sword was special because it bore the seal of Mañjuśrī. Thereupon, Śāntideva restored the king's eye and, acknowledging the suffering he had caused, decided to leave the mundane life once and for all.

It is probably at this moment that Śāntideva became a monk. He joined the monastic university of Nālandā where he was ordained by Jayadeva and received the name Śāntideva because of his quietness. There, the other

monks despised him and, to them, it appeared that he did nothing but eat, sleep, and defecate. In reality, Śāntideva was meditating on the teachings during the night and sleeping during the day. As was the custom, each monk had to periodically give a discourse to the entire monastic community. When it came to Śāntideva's turn, the monks thought they had a good opportunity to humiliate him. Instead, when asked to recite something new, he began to disclose the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* thus showing that he was a real *paṇḍit*. Thereupon, he left for the south of India never to return to Nālandā. According to his biographers, Śāntideva left three manuscripts in his cell that correspond to the three texts that it is believed he had composed. This could be understood as an attempt by the tradition to settle the dispute over the authorship of the *Sūtrasamuccaya*.

Because Śāntideva is known to have performed miracles—for example, according to legend, he increased rice production to feed hungry people—and also due to the fact that a certain Bhusuku had been recognized as the composer of songs belonging to the Vajrayāna school of Tantric Buddhism, it has been argued that Śāntideva was an adept of Tantra or has been influenced by it.<sup>36</sup> It also appears, in the *Bstan 'gyur*, that a certain Śāntideva was the author of Tantric texts.<sup>37</sup> Despite these facts or coincidences, most scholars of Buddhism do not accept the idea that Śāntideva was connected in some way or another to the Tantric schools of Buddhism. According to Ruegg, he is considered a representative of the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, most probably its Prāsaṅgika branch.<sup>38</sup>

### iii. Prajñākaramati

On the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, as just mentioned, there exists a number of commentaries. Prajñākaramati's *Pañjikā* is probably the best known in Sanskrit. Not much is known about the life of this commentator. It is generally believed that he was an erudite Buddhist monk who lived at the monastic university of Vikramaśīla around the last quarter of the eighth century and the first quarter of the ninth. This assumption is based on the fact that, in his commentary, he quotes abundantly from earlier works such as the *Tattvasaṃgraha* of Śāntarakṣita.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Prajñākaramati refers to more than seventy-three *sūtras* in his *Pañjikā*. It also appears that he had at his disposal more than one manuscript of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* for his commentary.<sup>40</sup>

Having presented the text I intend to use as the data for my study of the concept of *bodhicitta*, as well as of its author and its most important Sanskrit commentator, I would now like to discuss the various interpretations

of this concept provided by modern scholars of Buddhism. This discussion is in fact an analysis of their assumptions concerning the soteriological context in which *bodhicitta* is believed to be articulated.

### 3. Review of literature

In this section, I intend to look at two scholars of Buddhism. The first one is D. T. Suzuki, issued from the Zen tradition of Japan. His approach to the study of Buddhism is strongly influenced by the presuppositions of this tradition and by his long friendship with William James. The second, Sangharakshita, is in fact an English scholar who presents Buddhism as a practical system with a definite purpose: the attainment of emancipation. He attempts to give a comprehensive picture of the soteriological context in which the concepts and ideas of Buddhism are articulated. For this review of literature, I also relied on a third scholar, L. M. Joshi, who is not, as far as I know, identified with any schools of Buddhism and whose study of the concept of *bodhicitta* is probably the most comprehensive in terms of the textual sources analyzed.

#### i. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki

Daisetz Teiraro Suzuki was probably one of the first non-Western Buddhist scholars to try to give a scientific explanation of the main concepts and practices of Buddhism. His contribution, especially in the area of Zen Buddhism, is without doubt impressive. He also translated and analyzed texts such as the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Daśabhūmikasūtra*. Both texts deal explicitly with the practices of the Bodhisattva and with the concept of *bodhicitta*.

One of his basic assumptions concerning the development of the Buddhist tradition as a whole is that it began at some point in its history to evolve into two distinct directions. For him, as the idea of the Bodhisattva was being developed, “a sort of secular Buddhism came to replace the old school of ascetic and exclusive monasticism. This democratic social tendency brought about many great changes in Buddhist thought. One of them was to analyse in a practical way the process of enlightenment.”<sup>41</sup> This assumption is not without consequences in Suzuki's interpretation of *bodhicitta*. According to him, the appearance of this concept was closely linked to the development of the Mahāyāna approach to spiritual fulfillment. Indeed, he argues, “When the actual process of enlightenment was

examined, the Mahāyāna found that it consisted of two definite steps. In the beginning it was necessary to create for the sake of others an urgent longing for enlightenment, and then the attainment of the final goal would be possible." He further adds, "The motive determined the course, character, and power of the conduct. The desire for enlightenment intensely stirred meant, indeed, that the greater and more difficult part of the work was already achieved."<sup>42</sup>

In this context, *bodhicitta* refers to the driving force leading the Bodhisattva to his final goal. As such, it could be argued that this concept is not entirely new because, even though the term is not found in pre-Mahāyāna literature,<sup>43</sup> it is well-known that Gotama, the historical Buddha-to-be, after renouncing the household life, also resolved to put an end to all sufferings of existence. According to the Pāli tradition, we also know that the Buddha, after his experience of enlightenment, decided to preach to others the truth he had discovered out of great compassion for all sentient beings. Assuming that the spiritual career of the Buddha, including that of his previous lives, was taken by the early Buddhists as a model to emulate, there seems to be not much difference between them and the Mahāyānists from the point of view of the quality of their commitment. In other words, when *bodhicitta* is understood as an earnest decision to become enlightened, there is nothing that could later justify, that is, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, its promotion to the status of a technical term. Why then did the desire for enlightenment become pivotal to the path of the Bodhisattva whereas in early Buddhism there is no special emphasis on this idea? As mentioned in the preceding quote, this difference is to be attributed to a new understanding of the process of enlightenment. What then, according to Suzuki, is this process of enlightenment?

It is probably in the description of the *Satori* experience of the Zen tradition that Suzuki makes this process explicit. This experience is said to be brought about by an intense reflection on a *kōan*. A *kōan* may be considered a type of riddle given to a student to solve. A famous *kōan* is: "Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of the one hand?" What is interesting concerning the circumstances of its resolution, which is considered to be the experience of *Satori*, is that it "comes on in connection with the most trivial incidents such as the raising of a finger, uttering a cry, reciting a phrase, swinging a stick, slapping a face, and so on."<sup>44</sup> Suzuki interprets this experience in the following manner: "As the outcome is apparently incongruous with the occasion, we naturally presume some deep-seated psychological antecedents which are thereby abruptly brought to maturity."<sup>45</sup> To explain the nature of these deep-seated

psychological antecedents, Suzuki analyzed the career of three early Zen masters.

The first example given is that of Hui-k' ê. He was a learned scholar dissatisfied with mere scholarship. He was earnestly searching for an inmost truth that would give peace and rest to his soul. It is believed that a long period of intense lucubration took place prior to his experience of *Satori*. The second example is that of Hui-nêng. Contrary to Hui-k' ê, Hui-nêng was not a scholar. The facts show, however, that he had some knowledge of several Mahāyāna *sūtras*. In his case also, Suzuki assumed that a great spiritual upheaval was going on in his mind, since, in spite of being assigned to menial work in the monastery, the purpose of his being there was to study Zen. The third example is that of Lin-chi who spent three years of silence under his master in order to grasp the final truth of Zen. In fact, he spent three years in silence because he did not know what to ask his master, thus pointing to an intense mental application and spiritual turmoil.

According to Suzuki, the common denominator of these three examples is that each aspirant to enlightenment cultivated an intense desire for its attainment. This cultivation is pivotal to the experience of *Satori*. As he explains, "The searching mind is vexed to the extreme as its fruitless strivings go on, but when it is brought up to an apex it breaks or it explodes and the whole structure of consciousness assumes an entirely different aspect."<sup>46</sup> According to Suzuki, this phenomenon is not exclusive to Buddhism; it is to be experienced whether one is pondering over a difficult problem or contriving a solution to an apparently hopeless situation. This phenomenon could be explained, as far as psychology goes, by the following law: "accumulation, saturation, and explosion."<sup>47</sup>

It is from the point of view of this understanding of the spiritual process or, as I called it, the soteriological context, that Suzuki interprets *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* is therefore not a simple desire to become enlightened, as can be seen in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism and in which case it has a relative significance, but rather, a strong commitment that is the primary cause of the experience of enlightenment. As Suzuki puts it, *bodhicitta* "is the becoming conscious of a new religious aspiration which brings about a cataclysm in one's mental organization."<sup>48</sup> This is essentially the reason why, according to Suzuki, the concept of *bodhicitta* is specific to the Mahāyāna tradition: only this tradition has recognized the value of desire as a spiritual catalyst, and this catalyst is best brought into function by *bodhicitta*.

To sum up Suzuki's understanding of *bodhicitta*, one may use an example taken from the physical world, namely, the process of lamination.

This process is used, among other things, to make gold sheets. Through successive striking on a gold ingot, one obtains very thin sheets of gold, so thin that no other method, such as cutting with precision instruments, can achieve this result. Furthermore, the result is sudden and unexpected. In this circumstance, the last blow that brought about the transformation of the ingot into sheets is no more important than all the previous blows. The last blow is like the trivial incident that brings about the experience of *Satori*. All other blows, like the intense desire stirred up by *bodhicitta*, produce an accumulation of pressure. In the case of the *Satori* experience, it is the structure of the mind, composed of false assumptions about reality, which is under pressure. In this context, *bodhicitta* is the instigator of a brute force, that is, the intense desire for enlightenment, and, as such, it is totally devoid of knowledge. In other words, *bodhicitta* has a definite conative connotation and therefore, the appropriate translation for it is, according to Suzuki, “Desire of Enlightenment.”

Suzuki recognizes the fact that *bodhicitta* has acquired other connotations in the course of the development of the Buddhist tradition. In an earlier work, he defined it as “intelligence-heart.” Thus *bodhicitta* is understood as a form of the *tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-womb) or *ālayavijñāna* (substratum-consciousness). As such, *bodhicitta* is hidden in each being and constitutes its essential nature. It is something which, similar to the Buddha-nature or Buddha-essence, one ought to be awakened to. Many Mahāyāna *sūtras* and Buddhist philosophers in general confirmed this connection between *bodhicitta* and the description of metaphysical realities. For example, in the *Treatise on the Formless Enlightenment-Mind*,<sup>49</sup> *bodhicitta* is free from all characteristics; it is universal and is the highest essence.<sup>50</sup> Sthiramati, an author of the Cittamātra (Mind-only) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in his Discourse on the *Mahāyānadharmadhātu*, also said that *bodhicitta* is the Cosmic Body of the Buddha (Dharmakāya) or Reality as such (Bhūta-tathātā).<sup>51</sup> It is, however, within the Tibetan tradition that *bodhicitta* has acquired the strongest connections with metaphysical realities.

In the Vajrayāna school of Esoteric Buddhism, for example, a school that had been founded in India around the third century C.E. and that eventually became popular in Tibet, *bodhicitta* is understood as the final unification of *śūnyatā* (emptiness; also called *prajñā* [Wisdom]) and *karuṇā* (compassion; also called *upāya* [skillful means]). This term also very often refers to the Great Delight (*mahāsukha*) itself.<sup>52</sup> *Mahāsukha* is related to a practice of Esoteric Buddhism involving rituals connected with the enjoyment of meat, intoxicating liquors, and sexual intercourse. In the *Guhyasamājatantra*, a text produced by the Esoteric Buddhist tradition at its last

stage, the great Bodhisattvas, headed by Maitreya, pay homage to *bodhicitta* in the same manner in which Nāgārjuna has paid homage to the *prajñāpāramitā* (the Perfection of Wisdom). *Bodhicitta* is, consequently, described as born of the emptiness of things, complementary to the Buddha's awakening, beyond imagination and without support.<sup>53</sup> In this text, an interesting definition of *bodhicitta* is given: "The *bodhicitta* is the unity of voidness and compassion; it is beginningless and endless, quiescent and bereft of the notion of being and non-being."<sup>54</sup> And, in another text of the same tradition, the *Prajñopāyavinīscayasiddhi* (composed about 650–800 C.E.), *bodhicitta* is considered the eternal, luminous, pure, abode of the Conquerors, made of all *dharma*s (phenomena), divine, and the cause of the whole universe.<sup>55</sup> And later in the text, the same homage as that just mentioned is paid to *bodhicitta*.<sup>56</sup>

According to Suzuki, all of these metaphysical connotations must be regarded as a degeneration of pure Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>57</sup> The reason for this shift of meaning is that the "historical connection between the compound *bodhicitta* and the phrase *anuttarāyāṃ samyaksambodhau cittam utpādam—bodhicitta* ought to be considered as the abbreviation of this phrase that means "to cherish a spiritual aspiration for the attainment of supreme enlightenment"<sup>58</sup>—was altogether forgotten so that the *Bodhicitta* came to be treated as having an independent technical value."<sup>59</sup>

The view that there are two different meanings for the concept of *bodhicitta* has also been advocated by L. M. Joshi in a short paper surveying the literature of the Mahāyāna and of the Tantric Buddhist traditions.<sup>60</sup> According to him, *bodhicitta* is understood in Mahāyāna "as a strong resolution to work for the spiritual benefit of all creatures; . . . it is nevertheless, a mere thought or will (a strong will, no doubt) turned towards *samyaksambodhi* [perfect enlightenment]." With regard to the Tantric tradition, he adds, "*bodhicitta* is not a way of Bodhi or *nirvana*, but it is *nirvana* itself. It is the supreme Reality."<sup>61</sup> Concerning the question of how this change of meaning was brought about, Joshi only says that it occurred gradually but, contrary to Suzuki, he does not attribute it to some kind of degeneration. At this point, it might be appropriate to look at Sangharakshita's ideas on *bodhicitta*.

## ii. Sangharakshita

Sangharakshita is probably among the first Westerners who devoted their life to the practice as well as to the spreading of Buddhism. His major contribution is without doubt his attempt to translate the ideas and practices



of this Eastern spiritual tradition into Western languages. For that purpose, Sangharakshita has not shied away from borrowing concepts from the field of science. As such, he could be compared, in his enterprise, to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Catholic philosopher and paleontologist, who tried to explain religious phenomena in terms of scientific language.

Sangharakshita has been a very prolific writer, translator, and practitioner of Buddhism. One of his books, *A Survey of Buddhism* is still a valid source of information, even for non-Buddhists. One of his major preoccupations was to demonstrate the unity of Buddhism's metaphysical ideas as well as of its diverse spiritual approaches. It is therefore in the context of his vision of the unifying principle of Buddhism that he discussed *bodhicitta*.

According to Sangharakshita, the practice of Going for Refuge to the Buddha, the *dharma*, and the *saṅgha* is the central and definitive Act of the Buddhist life and the unifying principle of Buddhism itself.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, in his opinion the language of Going for Refuge provides the most helpful model of spiritual life.<sup>63</sup> Before looking at Sangharakshita's understanding of *bodhicitta*, it is therefore necessary to explain this model of spiritual life based on the practice of Going for Refuge.

Going for Refuge can be defined as the expression of one's commitment to the ideals of Buddhism. Sangharakshita explains that this practice has, in the course of time, in effect lost this meaning. Going for Refuge has more or less become a formality. "In some 'Buddhist countries' virtually the entire population will recite the formula when they go to temples, but few will do so with much consciousness of what the words really mean."<sup>64</sup> Because of this, Sangharakshita therefore argues that other means of expressing the essential act of commitment had to be developed. One of these expressions came to be known as "the arising of *bodhicitta*."<sup>65</sup> In this way, *bodhicitta* could be understood as an alternative to the practice of Going for Refuge. Eventually, in the course of the development of the Buddhist tradition, other forms such as the Tantric initiation of Vajrayāna appeared because even the arising of *bodhicitta* degenerated into a mere ritual. To be more precise, Sangharakshita did not say that these new forms of expressing this essential act of commitment were exactly like the original Going for Refuge, but rather, he argued that the development of these new forms resulted in making more explicit certain dimensions of Going for Refuge. For example, the arising of *bodhicitta*, which is interpreted as a deep urge to go forward on the path for the benefit of all beings,<sup>66</sup> came to reveal its altruistic dimension. However, it is essential to realize that, for Sangharakshita, the arising of *bodhicitta* brings nothing new to the basic act of commitment encompassed in the Going for Refuge: "The spiritual path

[based on Going for Refuge] is of its very nature altruistic, a growth in harmony, friendship, and compassion."<sup>67</sup>

The act of Going for Refuge can be done, according to Sangharakshita, at five different levels. These are the Cultural, the Provisional, the Effective, the Real, and the Absolute. Although this classification is his own, it is not without basis in the canonical literature of Buddhism. These levels represent the various degrees of commitment to the ideals of Buddhism. The first level, the Cultural Going for Refuge has the least spiritual significance and probably plays the most prominent social role. Here, the formula of Going for Refuge is an affirmation of cultural and national identity; it is a characteristic of the tradition one vows allegiance to. The second level is called Provisional because it refers to an act which, although marked by strong feelings of devotion and reverence toward the ideals, falls short of being a true commitment. At this level, one is still torn by competing interests and ambitions. At the third level, the Effective Going for Refuge, these interests and ambitions are still there but one "is sufficiently drawn to the Three Jewels to be able to commit oneself to making systematic steps towards them. It is really at this point of 'Effective' Going for Refuge that the spiritual life begins in earnest. Here, the decisive reorientation from the mundane towards the transcendental is made."<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned earlier, these levels represent degrees of commitment. Sangharakshita has also provided a model to explain the succession of levels; he calls it the principle of Higher Evolution. The idea of evolution is one of these concepts used by Sangharakshita to make certain ideas of Buddhism easier to understand by a Western audience. It is to be considered a metaphor. The principle of Higher Evolution is to be contrasted to the Lower Evolution: where the latter corresponds to the scientific principle of evolution used to explain the developments of the biologic world, the former is used to describe the developments of the spiritual life. The Lower Evolution is cyclic and does not require consciousness to happen whereas the Higher Evolution evolves like a spiral and requires personal commitment and sustained effort. The image of the spiral is used by Sangharakshita because along this path toward greater commitment one experiences a deepening of self-awareness, that is, an increase in transcendental consciousness. As long as efforts are sustained, one moves upward along the spiral toward enlightenment. This progression, however, does not seem to be linear.

At the fourth level, the Real Going for Refuge, one gains a transforming insight that brings one onto the transcendental path. "It is the point on the path of the Higher Evolution where transcendental consciousness arises

and one becomes a true individual.”<sup>69</sup> This transition is a point of no-return; it is considered the first goal of spiritual life. In the Buddhist tradition, there are many images used to describe this moment: Stream Entry or the Opening of the Dhamma-Eye in the Pāli tradition, the attainment of the eighth *bhūmi* called Acalā in Mahāyāna, or entering the Path of Vision in Tibetan Buddhism. At this point, one is assured of gaining enlightenment. In other words, at this level the act of commitment has become a second nature for the aspirant to enlightenment. Finally, there is the Absolute or Ultimate Going for Refuge. This is the point of full Enlightenment. Here, “the cyclic trend of conditionality is completely exhausted and there is only a spontaneous unfolding of the spiral trend in unending creativity. Here, even Going for Refuge is transcended, since one has oneself become the refuge. In fact, in so far as all dualistic thought has been left behind, there is no refuge to go to and no one to go to it.”<sup>70</sup>

To sum up, the progression from one level of Going for Refuge to the next corresponds to a more radical turning toward the Three Jewels. “It is Going for Refuge that drives one to leave behind what one has presently achieved and to seek yet greater heights. Going for Refuge therefore takes place within the context of the Higher Evolution, of which it is the vital fuel and spark.”<sup>71</sup> The relevance of this idea for the concept of *bodhicitta* is that to Sangharakshita Going for Refuge is the expression, within the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, of a general principle. This principle that Sangharakshita refers to as the “Cosmic Going for Refuge,” is “considered the universal principle that underlies the entire evolutionary process.”<sup>72</sup> This interpretation of *bodhicitta* has been corroborated by Marion L. Matics, a modern translator and commentator of Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. According to him, [*bodhicitta*] “is the force of the thought which thus turns one’s life completely upside down (as any thought is a force insofar as it results in action). Consequently, Bodhicitta (like Citta) partakes of a quasi-universal aspect, because in the latter sense, it is a force let loose in the universe to work for the good of all.”<sup>73</sup> What this means is that the commitment for enlightenment does not only depend on one’s individual will, but rather, it could be stirred up by a cosmic force. The best way to get attuned to this force is through the practice of Going for Refuge. As Sangharakshita explained, “The individual’s spiritual efforts are not merely the efforts of an individual entirely isolated from everything else: they take place within a vast context.”<sup>74</sup> It is probably at the fourth level, the Real Going for Refuge, that one has the experience of being carried off by this cosmic force.

Sangharakshita’s understanding of *bodhicitta* is not devoid of interest. Earlier in my introduction, I drew a parallel between him and Teilhard de

Chardin. The comparison was not gratuitous. This Jesuit scholar also saw in the phenomenon of evolution a principle of spiritual growth, a force leading it to a spiritual finality. According to him, the evolution is “une cosmogénèse en mouvement dans laquelle, de lentes maturations en brusques explosions, quelque chose se fait, de la matière à la vie, de la vie au phénomène humain et jusqu’à, préparé et attendu, un ultra-humain. (a cosmogenesis in movement, in which, by dint of slow maturation and sudden explosions, something is brought forth; from matter to life, from life to the human phenomenon and even—prepared for and awaited—a beyond-the-human.)”<sup>75</sup> This “phénomène humain” is a crucial moment of the evolution because it is the point where consciousness starts to grow in complexity. In Sangharakshita’s language, this is the beginning of the Higher Evolution.

When one compares Suzuki with Sangharakshita, one can see that they stand at the opposite ends of a spectrum with regard to the significance of *bodhicitta*. Suzuki understands this concept as purely motivational and does not recognize the validity of its metaphysical connotations. The abstract and technical meanings that developed in the Tantric tradition, for example, must be regarded, as mentioned earlier, as a deviation from the original meaning of *bodhicitta*. On the other hand, Sangharakshita’s understanding of this concept, based on his vision of the soteriological context in which it is found, renders it, at the motivational level, somewhat redundant and obsolete. As he himself says, “I think it is all the more necessary to fall back on the Going for Refuge as the basic Buddhist act, not on the arising of *bodhicitta* and becoming a Bodhisattva—which is the archetype of Going for Refuge, on a cosmic scale.”<sup>76</sup> In a way, Sangharakshita has, if one allows me the analogy, given to the concept of *bodhicitta* a seat in the House of Lords knowing that in fact things really happen in the Commons. In this context, although *bodhicitta* is translated as “Will to Enlightenment,” this “will” should not be understood as the usual mental event of volition but rather as the description of a metaphysical reality.

Despite these two opposing views, I am of the opinion that it is possible to find a middle way, that is, to elaborate a soteriological context that would allow both aspects of *bodhicitta*, the functional and the metaphysical, to have a role to play in the process of spiritual transformation. As a matter of fact, this concept also has an important ethical aspect. In many instances, the person in whom *bodhicitta* arises is considered a son or a daughter of the Buddha. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, for example, it is said that “the moment *bodhicitta* arises in a wretched man who is attached to existence, he becomes a son of the Buddhas and is praised by both men and gods.”<sup>77</sup> This event is viewed as a life-transforming experience and is characterized by

the acquisition of an attitude or spontaneous feeling of compassion toward all beings. Such a person is also said to be instantaneously freed from negative mental tendencies. In other words, this ethical aspect is related to the behavior or state of being of the person in whom *bodhicitta* has arisen. In this circumstance, I believe that any suggested soteriological context should take these three aspects into consideration.

As the next step of my study, I would like to investigate the possible functions that *bodhicitta* might assume in the context of a spiritual path. One function, as we have already seen, is *bodhicitta* as a desire for enlightenment, where the desire is to be understood literally, that is, as an act of the will and by extension as a commitment. A second function is *bodhicitta* as an object of concentration. Here, the emphasis is on the experience of calmness of the mind. The third function, the one that will lead me to the elaboration of what I believe to be an appropriate soteriological context for the understanding of *bodhicitta*, is *bodhicitta* as a basis for the cultivation of awareness.