AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE CONCEPT OF BODHICITTA

[WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM]

Buddhism originated in India over 2,500 years ago. It seems that in India there were two main streams of Mahāyāna during the dawn of this tradition. One developed from the Bodhisattva ideal which was held by lay people, and originated in North India. The sūtras\(^1\) of this stream advocated the career of Buddha and Bodhisattvas as the central idea. On the other hand, another stream developed the philosophical aspects of this tradition with Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtras in South India. Although, they vary in tendency, both of these streams observed the vow of Bodhisattva – to seek enlightenment and to save mankind, as the central core of their doctrine.

In contradiction to the Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna’s conception of Nirvāṇa and the way of realisation included not only negative but also positive elements. From this more balanced tradition developed – common to all its schools. That Enlightenment (Bodhi) consists not only in Wisdom, but in the inseparability of Prajñā or Wisdom and karuṇā or Compassion. The union of these two was termed bodhicitta, or Enlightenment-Mind, to the arising (utpāda) of which the Mahāyānists attached, unprecedented importance. By means of wisdom, in the limited sense of insight into the unreality of the self, one could, as the Mahāyānists conceded, attain the peace and Nirvāṇa.

But this one-sided transcendental state of personal emancipation was not enough, but, as they maintained, the highest goal was supreme enlightenment for

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\(^1\) Avatāmsaka sūtra (the Gandhavyūha sūtra and the Daśabhūmika sūtra, etc.), Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra, vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra, etc.
the sake of all sentient beings. This was attainable by transcendental wisdom that is
to say, by insight not only into the ego-less-ness but also into the substantiality of
all things and the consequent unreality of the distinction between *Nirvāṇa* and
*Saṃsāra*. By his attainment of this non-discriminating Wisdom, the *Bodhisattva*,
instead of remaining like the *Hinayāna*’s ‘Arhat’ immersed in the quiescent state
of *Nirvāṇa*, liberates a purely transcendent force, the dynamic aspect of wisdom,
by means of which he is able, even after attaining Supreme Enlightenment, to live
and act in the universe for benefit of all sentient beings.\(^2\)

In *Mahāyāna* tradition, the term *bodhicitta* is not only one of the most
important terms, but also a practical method of Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* through
*Citta-upāda* (arising of enlightened mind).

*Bodhicitta* is the essence of all the precious teachings of Lord Buddha.
Lord Buddha emphasized the essential importance of *bodhicitta* in all the *Sūtras*
and *Tantras*, and He spoke many times about *bodhicitta*, as a means of
transformation. Negativity can be transformed by *bodhicitta*, suffering can be
transformed by *bodhicitta*, and ignorance and all three vices (greed, hatred and
ignorance) can be transformed by *bodhicitta*. So, there is no more virtuous and
powerful mind than *bodhicitta*. For the accomplishment of one’s own ultimate
purpose and for the welfare of the other living beings there is nothing superior to
*bodhicitta*. The awakening mind is the unsurpassable way to collect merit. For
protection from interference, *bodhicitta* is supreme. It is the unique, all
encompassing method. Every kind of ordinary and supra-mundane power can be
accomplished through *bodhicitta*. Thus, it is absolutely precious.

The Buddha taught numerous techniques for liberation in his teachings. According to some Mahāyāna texts, these profound and effective techniques that the Buddha and all great masters always emphasised are given only to those who have bodhicitta. When one possesses bodhicitta, any sacred method is good and effective for him and in the absence of that the methods become useless and of no benefit. In “Taming the Monkey Mind”, Suddhisukha said: “To neglect the bodhicitta mind when practising good deeds is the action of demons.”

The great Bodhisattva Śāntideva also said in his work, Bodhicaryāvatāra: “If you churn the 84000 teachings of the Buddha, their essence is bodhicitta”. By churning milk we get butter, which is the very essence of milk. In the same way, if we examine and churn all the 84000 teachings of the Buddha, their very essence is the practice of bodhicitta. Therefore, it is extremely important for us to generate bodhicitta, practice bodhicitta and to achieve the highest goal of supreme enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

On the backdrop of this introduction, a critical analysis is attempted in the present work to reflect upon various aspects of bodhicitta.

The scope of this research is restricted to the concept of bodhicitta in Mahāyāna Buddhism, with the range of reference to the citta, the bodhi, bodhicitta, Mahāyāna, etc. Attempt is made to treat the concepts in greater detail with regards to its characteristics and functions. The materials on which the present work is based on are the original Pāli and Sanskrit literature. References are drawn from trustworthy sources, like, Avatamsaka-sūtra (The Flower Ornament Scripture), Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra (The Lotus Sūtra), Prajñāpāramitā literature, Bodhicaryāvatāra (The Way of Bodhisattva) of Śāntideva, etc. along with all available literature in English and Chinese.

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3 Suddhisukha, Taming the Monkey Mind, Taiwan, 2002, p. 63.
The Thesis is organized in the following headings:

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The first chapter starts with introducing the subject of research along with some explanations on the significance and relevance of the subject. It also contains a critical survey of the researches already done on the topic fixing the scope of the present research. Methodology employed in carrying out this research is also recorded. This chapter is a general introduction about the importance of bodhicitta in Buddhism, especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It also contains a critical and exhaustive survey and comments in brief on some of the important research works that have been done in this field to justify the relevance of the present endeavour.

CHAPTER II. Historical and Doctrinal Background of Buddhism

In this chapter, before surveying of bodhicitta, the origination of Buddhism is presented. The founder of Buddhism is the Buddha Shākyamuni and Buddhism began with the history of the Buddha Shākyamuni. The Shākyamuni is known as Gautama Buddha. Bodhicitta is a Sanskrit compound composed of the words ‘bodhi’ and ‘citta’. ‘Bodhi’ means Enlightenment or Awakening, which is very importance in Buddhism. Because in Buddhism, the goal of the spiritual practice of its aspirant is bodhi or enlightenment, therefore, in this chapter we have presented characteristics of Enlightenment in Buddhism and importance of it in Mahāyāna Buddhism.
CHAPTER III. Place of Bodhicitta in Mahāyāna Buddhism

As one of the most important doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism, bodhicitta has a central place in Buddhism. In this chapter, we have mentioned the basic characteristics of Mahāyāna Buddhism, such as: altruism, karuṇā, muditā upekkhā, pāramitā, and upāya-kauśalya, etc. Further in this chapter, the meaning of Bodhisattva, Bodhisattvayāna, Bodhisattva’s vows and career etc., are also presented. As a prominent teaching, bodhicitta is praised by many famous Mahāyāna masters: Nāgārjuna produces bodhicitta to save all living beings: ⁴ “Just as the Bhagavāns Buddhas and all the great Bodhisattvas produced the thought of enlightenment (bodhicitta), in the same way, from now on until (I realize) the heart of bodhi, I shall also produce the thought of enlightenment in order to free those who are unfree, to save those who are unsaved, to relieve those who are not relieved, and to lead beyond suffering those who are still prisoners of it”. Vasubandhu considers bodhicitta as the ocean:⁵ which is the store of all kinds of jewels, inferior, medium, and superior, valuable and invaluable wish-yielding gems. Just so, at the beginning bodhicitta, too, should be thought of as the store of gods, men, disciples, Pratyekabuddhas, Bodhisattvas, merits, meditation and wisdom. And Śāntideva has praised bodhicitta as power source to cross the manifold miseries of the world:⁶ Bodhicitta takes this unclean form (body) and transforms it into the pure and priceless form. Bodhicitta helps everybody become the object of reverence of men and gods in the world, etc. This chapter gives an account of all these.

⁴ His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, Nāgārjuna’s Bodhicitta Commentary. Ocean of Wisdom, Dharamsala, 2007: p. 19.
⁶ Parmananda Sharma, Bodhicharyāvatāra, First Indian printed, Delhi, 1990: ps. 8.
CHAPTER IV. The Concept of Bodhicitta in Mahāyāna Sūtras

This is the main and central point of discussion in this work. Bodhicitta is ‘thought of enlightenment’, ‘mind of enlightenment’, ‘will of enlightenment’, ‘mind turned to enlightenment’, ‘awakening mind’, or ‘desire for awakening’. Therefore, person, who practises in Buddhist doctrine, has to have bodhicitta; if he does not have bodhicitta he will not attain his purpose.

The details of the subject treated in this chapter are:

1. The Concept of Bodhicitta
2. The concept of bodhicitta in Mahāyāna sūtras
3. And the meaning of bodhicitta, etc.

As a central philosophy of Buddhism, bodhicitta is depicted in most of Mahāyāna sūtras with metaphors and similes, which are exciting. Therefore, in this chapter, the metaphors and similes related to bodhicitta in the Mahāyāna sūtras have been presented.

CHAPTER V. The Concept of Bodhicitta in Mahāyāna Buddhism

The main purpose of practising the Mahāyāna is to attain Buddhahood to benefit all living beings. To accomplish this aim, firstly, the aspirant must generate bodhicitta and cultivate bodhicitta. In the beginning of the chapter, we have presented various aspects of bodhicitta, which include: Cultivation of bodhicitta, generation of bodhicitta (motivation and methods of generation of bodhicitta).

An analysis is attempted to explain important terms in Mahāyāna Buddhism, such as Bhūtatathatā, Dharmakāya, etc., which are related to bodhicitta.
CHAPTER VI. Applications of Bodhicitta in Modern Society

Previous chapters, we have seen that approaches of Mahāyāna are generation of bodhicitta. That is based on the great compassion wishing to remove the suffering of all others. It is ideal to attain enlightenment. With such a thought or attitude, Mahāyāna’s approaches have much significant in the world as well as in the modern society, especially in modern crisis of war, increasing population, degrading environment and human moral, etc. In this chapter, the subjects discussed are the following:

1. Mahāyāna’s approaches to the modern crisis (The crisis of the war, crisis of increasing population, crisis of degrading environment, and crisis of human moral).

2. Compassion in modern society

3. Philosophical aspects of bodhicitta

4. Ethical and Social aspects of bodhicitta.

CHAPTER VII. Conclusion

In the conclusion of this thesis, a summary of the preceding chapters is presented. The observations by the researcher are presented from three counts:

1. Conclusive remarks of the above discussions

2. Evaluation of the concept of bodhicitta


It is observed at the end that bodhicitta is the foundation of human morality, capable and having potency of removing any crisis, the negative social elements etc.
the today world is facing. It is the path of peace and happiness in the world, and also the path leading to liberation, enlightenment for ourselves and all beings. That was the message from the heart of the Buddha quietly sent to all people in the world, especially in this era, which is very aptly and charmingly presented in *Dhammapada*:

*Hatreds never cease through hatred in this world;*

*Through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law.*

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7 *(Nahi verāni – sammanti ‘tha kadācanaṃ,
Averena ca sammanti – esa dhammo sanantano.)*

*(The Dhammapada, verse 5.)*