

Arousing the Aspiration for Enlightenment

Shobogenzo Hotsu Bodaishin (Bodhichittotpada)

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There are three types of consciousness: One is chitta [mind], which is called “discerning mind.” Another is hridaya [heart], which is translated as “grass and tree consciousness.” The last is vridha [center, essence], which is translated as “essential assembling consciousness.”

Among these types of consciousness, discerning mind is used for arousing the aspiration for bodhi. “Bodhi” [enlightenment] is an Indian word, translated into Chinese as “dao” [“Way” or “enlightenment”]. “Chitta” is also an Indian word, meaning in this case, “discerning mind.” Without discerning mind, the aspiration for enlightenment cannot be aroused. It is not that discerning mind is the aspiration for enlightenment, but that the aspiration for enlightenment is aroused with discerning mind.

Arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is making a vow to bring all sentient beings across [to the shore of enlightenment] before you bring yourself, and actualizing the vow. Even a humble person who arouses this aspiration is already a guiding teacher of all sentient beings.

This aspiration is neither originally existent nor does it emerge all of a sudden. It is neither one nor many. It is neither spontaneous nor formed gradually. This aspiration is not in yourself, nor are you in it.

This aspiration is not pervasive in this world of phenomena. It is neither before nor after. It is neither existent nor nonexistent. It is neither self nature nor other nature. It is neither common nature nor causeless nature.

Yet, in response to affinity [mystical communion between buddhas and sentient beings], the aspiration for enlightenment arises. It is not given by buddhas or bodhisattvas, and it is not created by yourself. The aspiration arises in response to affinity, thus it is not spontaneous.

This aspiration for enlightenment has been aroused mostly by humans who live in the southern continent of Jambudvīpa. It has also been aroused by those who abide in the eight difficult places [to attain enlightenment], but not by most of them.

After arousing the aspiration for enlightenment, bodhisattvas practice for many eons, for one hundred great eons. They practice for countless eons, become buddhas, awaken, and benefit sentient beings through this bodhisattva determination. Or, they practice for countless eons for the benefit of sentient beings, enjoying their bodhisattva determination to help sentient beings cross over before they themselves cross over and become buddhas.

The meaning of the aspiration for enlightenment is to endeavor—without ceasing in body, speech, and mind—to help all sentient beings to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment. This leads them into the buddha Way. To provide sentient beings merely with worldly pleasure is not beneficial to them.

Arousing such aspiration, and the practice-realization of it, goes far beyond the boundary of practice and realization, delusion and enlightenment. It excels in the three realms and is outstanding among all things. It is not anything that shravakas and pratyeka-buddhas can reach.

Mahakashyapa extolled Shakyamuni Buddha with a verse:

Although beginner’s mind and ultimate mind are indistinguishable,
the beginner’s mind is more difficult.
I bow to the beginner’s mind
that lets others awaken first.
Already a teacher of humans and devas,
the beginner’s mind excels the mind of a sravaka
or a pratyeka-buddha.
Such aspiration is outstanding in the three realms.
So it is called unsurpassable.

Arousing the aspiration means to intend to awaken others before yourself. This is called the beginner’s aspiration for enlightenment. After arousing this aspiration, you encounter and make offerings to see buddhas. You see buddhas, hear dharma, and arouse further aspiration for enlightenment. It is just like adding frost on top of the snow. The *ultimate mind* means attaining enlightenment, the buddha fruit. If you compare unsurpassable, complete enlightenment with the beginner’s aspiration for enlightenment, it is like comparing a blaze that destroys the world with the twinkling of a firefly. Yet, if you arouse the intention of awakening others first, these two aspirations are *indistinguishable*.

[The *Lotus Sutra* says:] “I [the Tathagata] always hold in mind how to help sentient beings enter the unsurpassable Way and immediately attain buddha bodies.”

This is exactly the timeless activity of the Tathagata in his aspiration, practice, and fruit-of-realization.

To benefit sentient beings is to help them arouse the aspiration to awaken other sentient beings before awakening themselves. Do not think of yourself as becoming a buddha by arousing the aspiration to awaken others before awakening themselves. Even when your merit for becoming a buddha is matured, you turn it around and dedicate it to others that they may become buddhas, attaining the Way.

This aspiration is not self, nor other, and does not come from somewhere else. However, after arousing this aspiration, when taking up the great earth, all of it turns into gold; when stirring the great ocean, it immediately turns into nectar. After arousing this aspiration, if you hold mud, stones, or pebbles, they also take up the aspiration for enlightenment; if you practice splashes of water, bubbles, or flames, they intimately bring forth the aspiration for enlightenment. Thus, the offering of land, castles, spouses, children, men and women, the seven treasures, heads, eyes, marrow, brains, bodies, flesh, and limbs, is all the continuous arousing of the aspiration for enlightenment, the vital activity of the aspiration for enlightenment.

Although chitta is neither near nor far, neither self nor other, if you are unremitting in the aspiration for awaking others first with this chitta, this is arousing the aspiration for enlightenment. Thus, the offering of grass, trees, tiles, pebbles, gold, silver, and the rare treasures that sentient beings cling to as their own possessions to the aspiration for enlightenment—is this not also arousing the aspiration for enlightenment?

It is not without cause that minds and all things, self and other, come together, therefore at the moment you arouse the aspiration for enlightenment, myriad things become conditions that increase this aspiration. At each moment all aspirations for enlightenment and attainments of the Way are born and perish. If they were not born and did not perish at each moment, the unwholesome actions of the past moments would not go away. If the unwholesome actions in the past moments did not go away, wholesome actions in their future moments would not manifest at this moment.

The scale of this moment can only be known by the Tathagata. “The mind of this moment manifests one word. The word of this moment expounds one letter” [as in the *Maha-Vibasha Shastra*]. This can only be done by the Tathagata, and not by other sages.

There are sixty-five moments when a strong person snaps the fingers and the five skandhas are born and perish. Ordinary people are not aware of it.

Ordinary people know about the moments as uncountable as the grains of the sands of the Ganges. But they are not aware that there are six billion, four hundred million, ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred eighty moments within one day and night when the five skandhas are born and perish. Because they are not aware of this, they do not arouse the aspiration for enlightenment. Those who do not know and do not believe in buddha dharma do not believe in birth and death at each moment. On the other hand, those who clarify the Tathagata’s treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous heart of nirvana, believe in this principle of birth and death moment by moment.

You now encounter the Tathagata’s teaching and appear to clarify matters, but you may only know moments as unaccountable as the sands of the Ganges and may believe that time works in this way. But you may not understand the entire teaching of the World-honored One, just as you may not know the scale of a moment. Those of you who study should not be proud of yourselves. You may not know what is extremely small or extremely large.

If sentient beings rely on the Tathagata’s ability of the Way, they see one billion worlds. From the present existence you reach an intermediary existence, and from an intermediary existence you reach a future existence, passing through moment by moment. In this way, beyond your intention, you pass through birth and death driven by your karma, without stopping even for a moment.

With the body and mind that migrate through birth and death, you should arouse the aspiration for enlightenment to awaken others first. Even if you spare your body and mind from the way of arousing the aspiration for enlightenment in the course of birth, aging, sickness, and death, you cannot in the end keep them as your own possessions.

The life of a sentient being changes swiftly through birth and death without ceasing.

During the lifetime of the World-honored One, a monk visited him, bowed to the ground, touching his feet, looked at him, and said, “How fast does the life of a sentient being change through birth and death?”

The Buddha said, “I can explain it but you won’t understand it.”

The monk said, “Would you show it to me by an analogy?”

The Buddha said, “Let me explain it to you. It is like four excellent bowmen who take their bows and arrows and stand together back to back. When they are about to shoot, a fast runner comes up to them and says, ‘Shoot your

arrows all at once. I will catch all of them without dropping a single one to the ground.’ What do you think of this man? Is he not fast?”

The monk said, “Yes, World-honored One, he is very fast.”

The Buddha said, “This man is not as fast as a demon who runs on the ground. This demon is not as fast as a flying demon. This flying demon is not as fast as the four deva kings. These deva kings are not as fast as the sun and the moon. The sun and the moon are not as fast as the devas who pull the cart of the sun and the moon. These devas fly around very fast. However, the change of life through birth and death is faster than these devas. It flows moment by moment without stopping.”

How our life changes moment by moment, flowing through birth and death, is like this. You practitioners should not forget it for even an instant of thought. If you arouse the thought of bringing others across first while in this swift change through birth and death, a timeless lifespan is immediately actualized.

All buddhas of the ten directions in the past, present, and future, including the Seven Original Buddhas— the World-honored Ones, the twenty-eight ancestors of India, the six early ancestors of China, as well as other ancestors who transmit the Buddha’s treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous heart of nirvana, have all maintained the aspiration for enlightenment. Those who have not aroused the aspiration for enlightenment are not ancestors.

The one hundred twentieth question in the *Guidelines for Zen Monasteries* says, “Have you realized the aspiration for enlightenment?”

Know that the study of the Way of buddha ancestors invariably makes realizing the aspiration for enlightenment a priority. This is customary for buddha ancestors.

Realize the aspiration means to become clear about it. It is not great enlightenment. Even if you suddenly realize the ten stages [of bodhisattvas], still you are a bodhisattva. The twenty-eight ancestors of India, the six early ancestors of China, and all other great ancestors are in fact bodhisattvas, and not buddhas, shravakas, or pratyeka-buddhas.

Those who study the Way nowadays are bodhisattvas and not shravakas. Not one of them has clarified it. They groundlessly call themselves monks or robe wearers but don’t know who they are. What a pity that the ancient ancestral Way has declined!

However, whether you are a lay person, a home leaver, a deva, or a human, whether you are suffering or in bliss, you should quickly arouse the aspiration for bringing others across before yourself. Although the realm of sentient beings is neither bounded nor boundless, you should arouse the aspiration for bringing others across before yourself. This is the aspiration for enlightenment.

Before descending to the Jambudvīpa Continent, a bodhisattva who teaches for a lifetime in Tushita Heaven gives the final discourse and says, “The aspiration for enlightenment is a gate of clarifying dharma; it does not cut off the three treasures.”

We clearly know in this way that *not cut off the three treasures* is the power of the aspiration for enlightenment. After arousing the aspiration for enlightenment, guard it tightly without relenting.

The Buddha said:

What is the one thing that bodhisattvas guard? It is the aspiration for enlightenment. Bodhisattvas, great beings, always endeavor to guard this aspiration for enlightenment just as people in the world protect their only child. It is like a one-eyed person protecting the working eye, or people traveling in a vast wilderness protecting their guide. Bodhisattvas guard the aspiration for enlightenment in this way.

Because bodhisattvas guard the aspiration for enlightenment, they attain unsurpassable, complete enlightenment. Because bodhisattvas attain unsurpassable, complete enlightenment, they embody consistency, enjoyment, freedom, and purity. This is unsurpassable great parinirvana. Thus, bodhisattvas guard this one thing.

The Buddha’s words about guarding the aspiration for enlightenment are like this. The reason for guarding it without relenting is that, as is commonly known, there are three things that can be born but that are hard to ripen. They are fish eggs, mango fruit, and the aspiration of bodhisattvas. As there are many who turn away and lose their aspiration, you should always be careful not to lose your aspiration. For this reason, you guard your aspiration for enlightenment.

Often, the reason beginning bodhisattvas lose their aspiration for enlightenment is that they haven't met authentic teachers. If they don't meet authentic teachers, they don't listen to true dharma. If they don't listen to true dharma, they deny cause and effect, they deny emancipation, they deny the three treasures, and they deny all things in the present and future. Then, they are wastefully attached to the five desires of the present moment and lose the possibility of enlightenment in the future.

In order to distract a practicing bodhisattva, Demon Papimant (Mara), or someone like him, disguises as the Buddha, a parent, teacher, relative, or deva, approaches the bodhisattva and makes up a statement like: "The buddha Way is long, far away, and painful, which is most worrisome. It's best to become free from birth and death first, then bring across sentient beings." Hearing these words, practitioners turn away from their aspiration for enlightenment and their bodhisattva practice.

Know that such words are a demon's statement. Bodhisattvas should be aware of this and not follow such words. Never give up the vow of practice to awaken other sentient beings first. Know that any words that are against this vow are a statement of demons, those outside the Way, or unwholesome friends. Do not pay attention to such words.

[The *Treatise on Great Wisdom* says:]

There are four types of demons: demons of delusions, demons of the five skandhas, demons of death, and the celestial king of demons.

"Demons of delusions" include those of one hundred eight delusions. They can be classified as eighty-four thousand delusions.

"Demons of the five skandhas" are causes and conditions of delusions interacting with one another. They came from the four great elements, as well as from things consisting of the four elements in the body and the root of the eyes. They are called the "form skandha."

The perception of all things including one hundred eight delusions is called the "perception skandha." Innumerable large and small feelings, including a sense of possession, interacting is called the "feeling skandha."

The suitable and unsuitable mental activity that arouses greed and anger, based on the mind of liking and disliking, is called the "inclination skandha."

The six sense organs and their objects interact with one another and cause six types of consciousness. These six types of consciousness interact with one another and form immeasurable, boundless mind. This is called the "discernment skandha."

"Demons of death" means that, because of the impermanence of all things, the life span of the five skandhas, as well as the three matters—consciousness, warmth, and life that has lasted thus far—are destroyed. This is why they are called "demons of death."

The "celestial king of demons" is the lord of the desire realm. As he is deeply attached to worldly pleasures and the love of possessing things, he arouses crooked views and is jealous of the practice of all sages' path of nirvana. This is called the "celestial king of demons."

"Mara" (demon) is an Indian word. In China it is translated as "Taker of Life." Although demons of death can take people's life, other demons can also take life, as well as the life of wisdom. This is why they are called "Killers."

Question: "The demons of the five skandhas include three other types of demons. Why are they classified as four types of demons?"

Answer: "They are indeed one type of demon. But in order to show [their] various aspects, they are explained as four types."

These are Ancestor Nagarjuna's explanations. You practitioners should be aware of them and study them diligently. Do not be tempted by demons and lose your guard, turning away from the aspiration for enlightenment. This is called guarding the aspiration for enlightenment.

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