

# What is it Like to be a Bodhisattva? Moral Phenomenology in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*\*

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## 1. Introduction: the Text, its Title and some Readings

*Bodhicaryāvatāra* was composed by the Buddhist monk scholar Śāntideva at Nalanda University in India sometime during the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE. It stands as one of the great classics of world philosophy and of Buddhist literature, and is enormously influential in Tibet, where it is regarded as the principal source for the ethical thought of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The title is variously translated, most often as *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* or *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, translations that follow the canonical Tibetan translation of the title of the book (*Byang chub sems pa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*) and the commentarial tradition of Tibet. But that translation itself is a bit of a gloss on the original Sanskrit, and I think that a more natural English rendering of the Sanskrit title is simply *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, and that indeed describes the content of the text admirably. Taking this as the title of the text might also issue in a kind of gestalt shift in our view of the text, allowing us to see it not so much as a characterization of the extraordinary moral life of a saint, but as a guide to moral development open to any of us. So, let's take that as the English title for now.

Śāntideva's understanding of how to lead such a life is distinctive, and is very different from accounts of the moral or the exemplary life familiar in the Western tradition. It is, I will argue, primarily a phenomenological account, and that is why I

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think it important for this account of Buddhist ethics to be taken as a voice in the present conversation.

The central moral phenomenon taken up in the text is that of *bodhicitta*, a term I prefer to leave untranslated. We will require a preliminary gloss, before entering into Śāntideva's own characterization of this extraordinary state of mind, and of the difference it makes in our moral experience. This gloss should be taken as only preliminary, and we will come to a deeper understanding of the term as we see more of the account in the context of which it figures.

This term is usually translated either as *the awakened mind* or as *the mind of awakening*. But that's not very helpful, in part because of the different connotations of *citta/sems* and *mind* in Buddhist and Western philosophy, respectively, and in part because of the unclarity of the bare genitive construction in English. Avoiding the temptation to follow attractive philological and metaphysical byways, let me offer this reading of the term: *Bodhicitta* is a complex psychological phenomenon. It is a standing motivational state with connative and affective dimensions. It centrally involves an altruistic aspiration, grounded in compassion, to cultivate oneself as a moral agent for the benefit of all beings.<sup>1</sup> That cultivation, as we shall see, demands the development of skills in moral perception, moral responsiveness, traits of character, insight into the nature of reality so deep that it transforms our way of seeing ourselves and others, and what we would call practical wisdom. In short, *bodhicitta* entails a commitment to attain and to manifest full awakening for the benefit of others. A bodhisattva is one who has cultivated *bodhicitta* in at least one of two senses to be adumbrated below.

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<sup>1</sup> We must tread with care, here however. As Susanne Mrozik has pointed out to me, Stephen Jenkins argues (1998) that "altruism" may be a bit strong, since, as we shall see below, *bodhicitta* and the motivations and skills connected to it, are beneficial to the bodhisattva as well as to others. It is, as Śāntideva will emphasize, always in the end in one's own interest to cultivate *bodhicitta*.

*How to Lead an Awakened Life* addresses the nature of *bodhicitta* and the means of cultivating it. We can read it as a treatise on the distinction between the phenomenologies of benighted and of awakened moral consciousness. The text itself divides into ten chapters, and we will have cause to remark on their order. The first is *In Praise of Bodhicitta*; the second, *Explanation of Vice*; third, *Adopting Bodhicitta*; fourth, *Explanation of Care*; fifth *Maintaining Awareness*; sixth, *The Perfection of Patience*; seventh, *The Perfection of Enthusiasm*; eighth, *The Perfection of Meditation*; ninth, *The Perfection of Wisdom*; and finally, *Dedication of Merit*.

Śāntideva's account of morality has been read in the West as a distinctively Buddhist theory of moral *virtue*, that is, as structurally Aristotelian, even if very different in content from Aristotle's account of virtue and the good life. (Keown 2005, 2007) It has also been read as consequentialist. (Goodman 2008, Siderits 2007) Each of these readings, I fear, is a symptom of a dangerous hermeneutic temptation to force Buddhist ethics into a Western mould, and while each reading reflects something of the content of Śāntideva's approach, each misses the heart of the matter.

It is true, as proponents of the areteic reading note, that Śāntideva focuses in *How to Lead an Awakened Life* on the cultivation of traits of character, and it is true that he contrasts moral virtues such as patience and compassion with moral vices such as a irascibility and selfishness, and recommends virtue over vice, focusing on states of the agent as opposed to actions or obligations. On the other hand, for Śāntideva the point of all of this is not to lead a happy life, or even to be a good person: *bodhicitta* does not take the moral agent as its object. The point is to benefit others, as well as oneself.<sup>2</sup> Perfection itself, in other words is, for Śāntideva, neither an end in itself, nor final, nor self-sufficient. This is no virtue theory, and awakening, while analytically related to the perfections, is not a kind of *eudemonia* analytically related to virtues.

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Steve Jenkins for emphasizing that for Śāntideva, as for most Buddhist ethicists, there is no difference between self and others as objects of moral concern.

It is also true that Śāntideva urges us to care for the happiness of others, and to reduce their suffering. And it is even true that we can find verses in the text that enjoin us to compare how little our own happiness or suffering is in comparison to that of all sentient beings in order to motivate us to sacrifice our own interests for that of others. Here is an example many cite in support of a consequentialist reading:

III: 10      Without any hesitation, I relinquish  
                 My body, my pleasures,  
                 And all virtues achieved throughout all time  
                 In order to benefit all sentient beings.<sup>3</sup>

But to take these to be the expression of a kind of consequentialism would be to take them seriously out of context, and to miss the heart of Śāntideva's account. This verse, as we will see below, occurs in the context of a resolution to abandon selfishness, and to broaden my moral gaze to universal scope, to cultivate a way of seeing myself in the context of a much broader whole in which my own interests are a rather small affair. Śāntideva does not argue that *bodhicitta* or the perfections cultivated by the bodhisattva are valuable *because of the consequences* they entail; and there is never a suggestion that the suffering of one can be balanced against the happiness of another. Whereas for a consequentialist, balances of benefits and harms are the ground of the value of actions or attitudes, but not necessarily their objects, for Śāntideva, the good of others is an *object* of *bodhicitta*, but not the *ground* of its value. Its value is grounded instead in the fact that it is the only rational way of

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<sup>3</sup> All translations are my own, from the sDe dge edition of the Tibetan text, as reprinted in rGyal tshab (1999). As Wallace and Wallace note in Śāntideva (1997), the Tibetan version of the text differs in many—usually minor—ways from the available Sanskrit edition of the text. It appears that even early on there were at least two versions of the text, and there is no way of determining whether the Sanskrit edition from which the Tibetan and Indian translators worked was in some respect preferable to that which survives today or not. But it is worth noting that because of the importance this text attained in Tibet, most of the significant commentarial literature refers to the Tibetan version. The notable exception is Prajñākaramati's *Bodhicaryāvatāra-pañjikā*, which follows the available Sanskrit.

taking up with the world. And comparison, or tradeoff of suffering and benefit is never on the table.<sup>4</sup>

Tillemans (2008) sees *How to Lead an Awakened Life* as centrally concerned with the problem of *akrasia*, arguing that Śāntideva is concerned with the problem of how to overcome the conflict between his knowledge of what is best—both for himself and for others—and his desire for vice. There are certainly passages, for instance those in which Śāntideva attempts to cultivate revulsion for sexual behaviour that support this interpretation:

VIII: 52    If you do not lust for the impure,  
               Why do you repeatedly embrace another  
               Who is only flesh-smear'd bones  
               Bound together with sinew?

In passages such as these, Śāntideva clearly aims to counteract vicious desire by reminding himself of the knowledge of virtue. Nonetheless, as I hope will be clear from the remainder of this discussion, just as the conception of virtue, vice and moral perfection at work in this text are non-Aristotelian, the conception of moral conflict at work in *How to Lead an Awakened Life* is not Aristotelian. Śāntideva is more concerned with the conflict between desire or aversion and impersonal aspiration—or, perhaps more clearly, the conflict between attachment and freedom—than he is in a conflict between knowledge and desire.

The akratic desires one thing, but knows that another is better, and the Aristotelian puzzle concerns reconciling rationality, knowledge of the good and desire for the ill. The solution to *Akrasia* is the cultivation neither of more knowledge, nor of other desires, but of moral strength. Not so for Śāntideva: although confusion, on his account, is the root of desire and aversion, and eliminating that confusion is the ground of awakening, moral conflict for him is not so much cognitive as connative. It

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Steve Jenkins points out (1998), in the end there never is a tradeoff—most accounts of virtuous action end up with the claim that *everyone* benefits, even those who apparently suffer temporary adversity, although perhaps one must take the long view to see those benefits.

is to be resolved by firmly establishing metaphysical knowledge in one's mode of taking up with the world, a knowledge which issues in the relinquishing of desire and the arising of the appropriate aspiration, not through cultivating moral strength. Moreover, for Śāntideva, since vice is always ultimately rooted in confusion, and the elimination of confusion issues in virtue, there can never be a situation in which one *really* knows what is right but chooses what is wrong. There is always a failure of knowledge, not just of will, in vicious action.

It will hence be better to set aside the doxography that helps us to sort Western ethical theories, and to approach Śāntideva on his own terms in the context of Buddhist ethical thought. The insights we will gain from reading him in this context will repay forbearing to locate him in our landscape. We will focus on the place of the bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna ethics as a preliminary to exploring the phenomenology of morals in *How to Lead an Awakened Life*.

## **2. The Buddhist Moral Outlook and The Bodhisattva Ideal**

Buddhist moral theory is not Western moral theory. What is it? I have argued elsewhere (Garfield unpublished) that Buddhist ethics is best thought of as an attempt to solve a deep existential problem—the problem of the ubiquity of suffering—and as an attempt to solve that problem by developing an understanding of our place in the complex web of interdependence (*pratītya-sammutpāda*) that is our world. Buddhist ethics is grounded in the so-called “four noble truths” discussed by the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, at his first public lecture in Sarnath and in the Buddhist analysis of the relationship between interdependence, impermanence and essencelessness. A bit of this background will help to set the stage for a closer examination of Śāntideva's contribution to this enterprise. I will perforce move very quickly through a vast and complex territory.

The first of the four truths is the truth of suffering. It sets the problem that Buddhism sets out to solve. The universe is pervaded by suffering and the causes of suffering. The Buddha took this as a datum, obvious to anyone on serious reflection, though one that escapes most of us most of the time precisely because of our evasion of serious reflection. The Buddha also assumed that suffering is a bad thing.

The second truth is that, popular bumper stickers to the contrary notwithstanding, suffering does not just happen. It arises as a consequence of actions conditioned by attachment and aversion, each of which in turn is engendered by confusion regarding the nature of reality. The confusion at issue is a kind of primal cognitive instinct, which includes a tendency to reify ourselves, and that which pertains to ourselves; to take that which is impermanent to be permanent; that which is insubstantial to be substantial; that which is interdependent to be independent. The consequence is unwarranted attraction to that which in the end causes suffering; aversion that leads us into suffering, and actions that perpetuate that knot of confusion, attraction and aversion. This is the predicament to which Buddhists refer as “cyclic existence,” a life in which we go around in circles perpetually undermining our own prospects for growth and happiness, and those of others as well.

This triune root of suffering is represented in the familiar Buddhist representation of the Wheel of Life with the pig, snake and rooster at the hub, the six realms of transmigration representing aspects of the phenomenology of suffering—brutality; pain and despair; insatiable need; arrogance and the need for recognition; insensitivity to the pain of others in our own happiness; and the vulnerability and imperfection that comes with being human—revolving around them, structured by the twelve links of dependent origination (a detailed psychology of perception and action), all of which is depicted as resting in the jaws of death, the great fear of which propels so much of our maladaptive psychology and moral failure. This diagnosis of the cause of the problem sets the agenda for its solution.

The third truth is that, because suffering depends upon confusion, attraction and aversion, it can be eliminated by eliminating these causes. And the fourth, which starts getting the ethics spelled out in a more determinate form, presents the path to that solution. The eightfold path is central to an articulation of the moral domain as it is seen in Buddhist theory. It comprises correct view, correct intention, correct speech, correct propriety, correct livelihood, correct effort, correct mindfulness and correct meditation. All of this is basic Buddhist theory, as propounded in the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*, and is common to all Buddhist traditions.

In the Mahāyāna, the context of Śāntideva's project, moral attention is focused on the cultivation of a set of perfections, or virtues, including those of generosity, patience, propriety, attention, meditation and wisdom. This ethical innovation is not an abandonment of the more basic framework, but an enrichment and a refocus. The eightfold path remains a central guide to the domains in which the perfections figure, and the perfections are manifested in the propensity to the kinds of actions appropriate to the eightfold path. The framework of the perfections hence only represents an increased focus on states of *character* as opposed to their *manifestations* as the immediate goals of moral practice.

The most important innovation in Mahāyāna moral theory, however, is not the framework of the perfections but the installation of compassion as the central moral value and the model of the bodhisattva's compassionate engagement with the world as the moral ideal. The compassion at issue is not a passive emotional response, and not a mere desire. Instead it is a genuine commitment manifested in thought, speech and physical action to act for the welfare of all sentient beings.

Compassion in this tradition is founded upon the insight to which Śāntideva gives voice, that suffering is bad, *per se*, regardless of whose it is. To fail to take another's suffering seriously as a motivation for action is, he argues, itself a form of suffering and is irrational.



- VIII: 90      “Self and others are the same,”  
One should earnestly meditate:  
“Since they experience the same happiness and suffering,  
I should protect everyone as I do myself.”
- VIII: 91      Divided into many parts, such as the hands,  
The body is nonetheless to be protected as a single whole.  
Just so, different beings, with all their happiness and suffering,  
Are like a single person with a desire for happiness.
- VIII: 92      Even if my own suffering  
Does no harm to anyone else’s body,  
It is still my own suffering.  
Since I am so attached to myself it is unbearable.
- VIII: 93      Just so, even though I do not experience  
The sufferings of others,  
It is still their own suffering.  
Since they are so attached to themselves, it is hard for them to bear.
- VIII: 94      I must eliminate the suffering of others  
Just because it is suffering, like my own.  
I should work to benefit others  
Just because they are sentient beings, as am I.
- VIII: 95      Since I am just like others  
In desiring happiness,  
What is so special about me  
That I strive for my happiness alone?
- VIII: 96      Since I am just like others  
In not desiring suffering,  
What is so special about me  
That I protect myself, but not others?
- VIII: 97      If, because their suffering does not harm me,  
I do not protect them,  
When future suffering does not harm me,  
Why do I protect against it?
- VIII: 98      The idea that this very self  
Will experience that suffering is false:  
Just as when one has died, another  
Who is then born is really another.

- VIII: 99      If another should protect himself  
Against his own suffering,  
When a pain in the foot is not in the hand,  
Why should one protect the other?
- VIII: 100     One might say that even though it makes no sense,  
One acts this way because of self-grasping.  
That which makes no sense with regard to self or to others  
Is precisely the object you should strive to abandon!
- VIII: 101     The so-called continuum and collection,  
Just like such things as a forest, or an army, are unreal.  
Since the sufferer does not exist,  
By whose power does it come about?
- VIII: 102     As the suffering self does not exist,  
There are no distinctions among anyone.  
Just because there is suffering, it is to be eliminated.  
What is the point of discriminating here?
- VIII: 103     “Why should everyone’s suffering be alleviated?”  
There is no dispute!  
If it is to be alleviated, all of it is to be alleviated!  
Otherwise, I also am a sentient being!

This is a deep insight, and one over which we should not pass too quickly: the bodhisattva path is motivated in part by the realization that not to experience the suffering of others as one’s own and not to take the welfare of others as one’s own is to suffer even more deeply from a profound existential alienation born of a failure to appreciate one’s own situation as a member of an interdependent community.<sup>5</sup>

Interdependence guarantees that our joys are social joys; our sorrows are social

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<sup>5</sup> I must concede that, as Steve Jenkins has urged (personal communication), although dependent origination plays a central role in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist metaphysics, and although confusion is often glossed as the failure to understand or to apprehend interdependence, and although vice is held to be grounded in confusion, there is no explicit assertion in classical Indian Buddhist literature or in Tibetan commentarial literature that virtue arises from the appreciation of community membership, or of interpersonal, or of inter-sentient being connection. The closest an Indian text comes is Śāntideva’s analogy at VIII:90-92 of the moral community to the body. More explicit uses of interdependence as a moral idea await the engaged Buddhism of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Nonetheless, it should be clear that the material for the rational reconstruction I offer is present in the classical texts. Moreover, canonical meditation practices in the Tibetan tradition intended to cultivate compassion, such as the visualization of all sentient beings as one’s mother, emphasize this point.

sorrows; our identity is a social identity; the bounds of our society are indefinite. We either suffer and rejoice together in the recognition of our bonds to one another, or we languish in self-imposed solitary confinement, afflicted both by the cell we construct, and by the ignorance that motivates its construction.

Compassion, grounded in the awareness of our individually ephemeral joint participation in global life, hence is the wellspring of the motivation for the development of all perfections, and the most reliable motivation for morally decent actions. Compassion is also, on the Mahāyāna view, the direct result of a genuine appreciation of the essencelessness and interdependence of all sentient beings. Once one sees oneself as nonsubstantial and existing only in interdependence, and once one sees that the happiness and suffering of all sentient beings is entirely causally conditioned, the only rational attitude one can adopt to others is a compassionate one. This is the Mahāyāna philosophical framework that sets the more specific context for Śāntideva's project.

### **3. The Structure of the Text and the Structure of Moral Experience**

I noted at the outset that the structure of *How to Lead an Awakened Life* is a clue to Śāntideva's account of the structure of moral experience. Let us examine that structure in more detail. As a reminder, the chapters run as follows

1. In Praise of *Bodhicitta*
2. Explanation of Vice
3. Adopting *Bodhicitta*
4. Caring for one's Attitude
5. Maintaining Awareness
6. The Perfection of Patience
7. The Perfection of Enthusiasm
8. The Perfection of Meditation
9. The Perfection of Wisdom
10. The Dedication of Merit.

Many commentators note immediately that Śāntideva’s presentation of the Mahāyāna list of the six perfections appears incomplete, leaving out what is generally regarded as the first—the perfection of generosity. (The fourth and fifth chapters are really a presentation of the second—the perfection of mindfulness.) Tibetan commentators present a twofold solution to this apparent problem. First, they note, the third chapter, on *bodhicitta*, is replete with references to generous intentions and so can be construed as a presentation of that perfection. Second, they point out, the final chapter, the dedication of merit, addresses generosity at a much deeper level. Here Śāntideva discusses the experience of giving even one’s own moral attainments and aspirations, and the universal scope of moral concern. This return to the theme of generosity is taken by these commentators to present a deliberate contrast between the way generosity is experienced at the beginning of the bodhisattva path in the context of what Śāntideva calls *aspirational bodhicitta* and the way it is experienced in the context of the *engaged bodhicitta* achieved in the cultivation of an awakened life.

In chapter III, for instance, we encounter resolutions such as these, as Śāntideva cultivates the aspiration to lead the awakened life. The generosity he imagines cultivating involves depersonalizing his own motivations and developing a commitment to benefit all beings in direct material ways:

- III: 6      And so I will perform these deeds.  
               Through the virtue I thereby acquire,  
               May I completely alleviate  
               All of the suffering of all sentient beings.
- III: 7      May I be the medicine  
               For all who are ill.  
               May I be both medicine and physician  
               Preventing the recurrence of illness.
- III: 8      Through showers of food and drink  
               May I alleviate the pain of hunger and thirst!  
               At times of famine  
               May I be both food and drink!

- III: 9      To all destitute and miserable beings  
              May I be an inexhaustible treasure!  
              May I be the one who presents them  
              With all their many necessities.
- III: 10     Without any hesitation, I relinquish  
              My body, my pleasures,  
              And all virtues achieved throughout all time  
              In order to benefit all sentient beings.

In the tenth chapter, on the other hand, the generosity described is that of one who has cultivated *engaged bodhicitta*. Śāntideva is now depersonalizing not only his ends, but his own state of being. The transference of merit he envisions involves conceiving of his own virtue not as a state pertaining to *him*, but as a more general feature of the moral universe, and hence his own experience of himself, as of generosity, is transformed through the cultivation of *engaged bodhicitta*.

- X: 1        Through the merit attained  
              By my composition of  
              *How to Lead an Awakened Life*  
              May all beings lead awakened lives.
- X: 2        Through my merit, may all those  
              In all directions, who suffer  
              In mind or in body  
              Attain oceans of bliss and happiness.
- X: 54      May by life be just like that of  
              Mañjuśrī, who strives to benefit  
              All sentient beings  
              Dwelling in the ten directions of space.
- X: 55      For as long as space endures,  
              For as long as there are beings in cyclic existence,  
              So long may I endure,  
              In order to dispel the suffering of those beings.

The generosity embodied in aspirational *bodhicitta* is *personal*, taking as its intentional object my own contribution to the welfare of the world; the generosity embodied in engaged *bodhicitta* is *impersonal*, taking as its intentional object only the benefit of others, with my achievements, not myself serving as its condition. This observation provides one interpretative key to a reading of *How to Lead an Awakened Life* as a treatise on moral phenomenology. But we can go further. Śāntideva opens the text with reflections on the moral experience of one contemplating serious moral development, writing, as he does throughout the text, in an intensely first-person confessional voice enabling deep phenomenological reflection, and often calling to the Western reader's mind the writing of Augustine:

- I:2           There is nothing here that has not been said before,  
                   Nor do I have any skill in composition.  
                   Thus, I have no concern for others and  
                   I have composed my text solely to cultivate my own mind.
- I:3           Since my virtue is cultivated,  
                   My faith thereby increases in power.  
                   Nonetheless, if someone else with an outlook like my own  
                   Sees this, it would be meaningful.

Śāntideva emphasizes here not only his own moral deficiency, but more importantly that moral practice is aimed principally at self-cultivation. What is to be cultivated, he tells us, is *bodhicitta*. Śāntideva emphasizes its importance, and immediately distinguishes two important degrees of *bodhicitta*. The first, to be cultivated at the outset of moral development is *aspirational bodhicitta*, the serious intention to lead an awakened life with a commitment to cultivating one's moral capacities; the second is *engaged bodhicitta*, the set of spontaneous moral perceptual skills and dispositions that lead one to act in beneficial ways.

- I: 9           When *bodhicitta* has arisen, in an instant,  
                   Even a wretch who is bound in the prison of the cycle of existence  
                   Comes to be known as a child of the tathāgatas,  
                   And becomes an object of reverence in the realms of gods and men.

- I: 15      In brief, *bodhicitta*  
Should be known to be of two kinds:  
Aspirational *bodhicitta*  
And Engaged *bodhicitta*.
- I: 16      Just as one can tell the difference between  
One who aspires to travel and a traveler,  
The learned can tell  
The analogous difference between these two.

The second and third chapters explore the nature of vice and the motivation for aspiring to an awakened life. Once again, the exploration of these themes is undertaken through a reflection on Śāntideva's own experience, and emphasizes the interior quality of vice and of the desire to transcend it.

- II: 38      Thus, since I have not realized  
That I am ephemeral,  
Through confusion, attachment and aversion,  
I have committed many kinds of vicious deeds.
- II: 42      O Protectors, through being inattentive  
And heedless of this danger,  
For the sake of this impermanent life  
I have achieved much that is vicious.
- II: 45      With distressed glances,  
I seek protection in the four directions.  
Which good person  
Will protect me from this great fear?
- II: 46      Having seen that there are no protectors in the four directions,  
I fall into total confusion.  
With no protectors anywhere,  
What shall I do in such a state?

Here we see Śāntideva taking a state of moral immaturity to be a state of intense suffering, conditioned by confusion and permeated by fear. We will return to this central role of fear in Śāntideva's distinctive analysis of moral vice below, but the general point to observe at this stage is simply that Śāntideva's approach to the question, "why be moral?" at this stage of the text is directly phenomenological: vice

feels just *terrible*, and terrible in characteristic ways.<sup>6</sup> And the motivation to moral progress is characterized in similar terms:

- II: 49      Overwhelmed by fear,  
              I offer myself to Samantabhadra,  
              And of my own accord,  
              I offer this, my body to Mañjuṣa.
- II: 50      In despair, I cry out for help to  
              The protector, Avalokiteśvara,  
              Who acts compassionately and inerrantly,  
              Begging him to protect my vicious self.
- II:53      Now, having experienced the great terror,  
              Heeding what you once told me,  
              I approach you for refuge so that you  
              Might quickly dispel my fear.
- II: 58      It makes no sense for me to enjoy the present day  
              Saying to myself, “I will not die just now.”  
              The time when I will cease to exist  
              Will inevitably arrive.

The subsequent chapters take up the path to an awakened moral life. The account is rich—far too rich to take up in full detail. But the sequence of the chapters demonstrates the strikingly phenomenological approach to ethics adopted by this text. Śāntideva begins by considering how one, having developed aspirational *bodhicitta*, cares for and nurtures the attitude; he then turns to how one develops the concentration required to maintain introspective awareness of one’s own

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<sup>6</sup> Two things need clarification here: first, the sense of the word “vice,” that I use to translate *pāpa/sdig pa* (often translated as *sin*—see Wallace and Wallace 1997 p 24, n 22 for a discussion of this issue; second, the sense in which it feels so terrible. First, “vice” denotes any state of character, motivation or mind that conduces to maintaining confusion, attachment and aversion, and hence constitutes an obstacle to the liberation from suffering. It thus contrasts with virtue, which conduces to liberation through reducing confusion, attachment and aversion. Vices include such mundane states as selfishness, carelessness and sloth as well as more florid states such as murderous rage or boundless avarice. Second, the fact that vice feels terrible does not entail that it is always explicitly experienced as terrible. Śāntideva anticipates by a bit over a thousand years Freud’s insight that our deepest pain may be unconscious—that everyday life is often full of pathology precisely because of underlying, unacknowledged, unconscious suffering. Often, as Śāntideva recognizes here, and as Freud was to discover much later, the recognition of one’s own pain is the first step to its resolution.



motivational and affective states; to the development of patience and then enthusiasm for ethical practice.

The final chapters of the text address the role of meditation in stabilizing the qualities and ways of seeing cultivated earlier, and finally the importance of a particular kind of wisdom as the foundation of the engaged *bodhicitta* that is the foundation of awakened life—that is, the ability to see all phenomena—including oneself, that to which one is intimately related, and other moral agents—as empty of inherent existence, as interdependent and as impermanent. For Śāntideva, the culmination of ethical practice is a cognitively rich perceptual skill—a new way of experiencing oneself in the world.

#### **4. Fear and Refuge: Suffering, Aspiration and Awakening as Moral Development**

The role that fear plays in Śāntideva's account of the phenomenology of moral life is striking, and the diagnosis of this fear is subtle. This point connects deeply with the centrality of the practice of taking refuge in Buddhist life. The Buddhist path to liberation commences with refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and this need for refuge itself suggests an overarching experience of fear—perhaps a fear whose dimensions and objects are to a large extent opaque to the sufferer. The ultimate source and object of this fear is depicted graphically in the Tibetan representation of the wheel of life, in which all of existence takes place in the jaws of death. The iconography suggests that our cognitive and emotional lives, the constant cycling between states of mind and the experience of being buffeted about by events—whether external or internal—that are beyond our control, gives rise to so much suffering and is driven in large part by the unconscious awareness and fear of the inevitability of death.



That fear engages us psychologically at the hub. Although the awareness of our own impermanence and that of all about which we care constitutes the horizon of our experience, we suppress that fear in confusion, living our lives as though these impermanent phenomena are permanent. This is why Tsong khapa (2006, pp 34-35) remarks that confusion, in this sense (*avidya/ma rig pa*) is not simply the absence of

knowledge, but the direct opposite of knowledge—a psychologically efficacious and destructive *denial* of the truth. In this case, it is a denial of what we at a deeper level know to be true, of a troubling knowledge.

This confusion born of fear generates attraction and aversion. Our attachment to ourselves, to our own well-being, to our possessions, to our conventions and practices, and in general to all that in the end is a source of suffering, Śāntideva urges, is at bottom a reflexive defensive reaction to the fear of loss. Our aversion to that which we find distasteful is at bottom a reaction to the fact that it reminds us of our own impermanence and vulnerability. Our conviction that we are independent agents interacting with other independent agents—a feature of our moral experience that runs both so very deep and so contrary to all that we know upon reflection—he urges, is a way of warding off the fear of interdependence, of being out of control, of being subject to the natural laws that issue in our aging, infirmity, reliance on others, and eventual demise. And around the hub cycle our emotions, desires, actions, and experiences.

II: 38      Thus, since I have not realized  
              That I am ephemeral,  
              Through confusion, attachment and aversion,  
              I have committed many kinds of vicious deeds.

II: 42      O Protectors, through being inattentive  
              And heedless of this danger,  
              For the sake of this impermanent life  
              I have achieved much that is vicious.

But *fear* and *awareness* of fear are two very different things. Though we all *live* in fear, we are not, Śāntideva thinks, all *aware* of that background of fear, or of its impact on our lives. Moral sensibility properly so-called, according to the account of *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, arises when one becomes truly aware of the terror that frames one's life and that lies at the root of self-deception and vice. That awareness

generates the impulse to take refuge and to strive for awakening, and as a consequence, the cultivation of aspirational *bodhicitta*.

- II: 47      From this very moment I go for refuge to  
              The victors, protectors of all beings,  
              Who strive for the purpose of protecting all,  
              And who have great power to completely eliminate all fear.
- II: 48      Likewise, I honestly go for refuge to  
              The Dharma in which they are completely engaged,  
              Which completely eliminates the fear of cyclic existence,  
              As well as to the assembly of bodhisattvas.
- II: 49      Overwhelmed by fear,  
              I offer myself to Samantabhadra,  
              And of my own accord,  
              I offer this, my body to Mañjuṣa.
- II: 50      In despair, I cry out for help to  
              The protector, Avalokiteśvara,  
              Who acts compassionately and inerrantly,  
              Begging him to protect my vicious self.
- II:53      Now, because of what you said before,  
              Having experienced great terror,  
              I approach you with refuge so that you  
              Might quickly dispel my fear.

Moral development is hence a transformation of moral experience; a transition from a life conditioned by terror and unreason—albeit perhaps unconscious terror and unrecognized unreason—to a life conditioned by confidence and clarity; from a life constituted by phenomenological self-deception to a life constituted by introspective awareness; from a life in which vice is inevitable and taken to be unproblematic just because it is not recognized, or recognized *as* vice, to a life in which the cultivation of virtue is at the centre of one's consciousness.

## 5. Moral Phenomenology as Moral Theory in Buddhism

One might think that this rich moral phenomenology is an adjunct to explicit ethical theory, and search for the account of the right or the good, or of virtue or vice that underlies this account of the contrast between the experience of the morally immature and the morally mature agent. One would, however, look in vain. *How to Lead an Awakened Life* is a text on ethics; indeed, it is one of the most important Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical treatises, the central ethical treatise for the Tibetan tradition and indeed is firmly grounded in theory articulated in pre-Mahāyāna śrāvakayāna texts. Nonetheless, *How to Lead an Awakened Life* is exclusively devoted to an account of the cultivation of moral sensibility and moral experience. Let us explore some examples. Chapter V on maintaining awareness, opens with these verses:

- V: 1        One who wishes to protect his practice  
               Should be careful to protect his mind.  
               If one does not protect one's mind  
               It is impossible to protect one's practice.
- V: 2        The elephant of the mind  
               Causes much harm and degradation.  
               Wild, mad elephants  
               Do not cause so much harm.
- V: 3        Nonetheless, if the elephant of the mind  
               Is restrained by the rope of mindfulness,  
               Then all fear is banished,  
               And every virtue falls into our hands.

Maintaining the focus on the relationship between the dissipation of fear and moral development, Śāntideva argues that the cultivation of a moment-to-moment awareness of one's own cognitive and emotional states is central to leading an awakened life. The morally benighted are characterized by an inattention to their own mental lives (even if they may be obsessed with an idea of morality) ; awakening

consists in part in replacing that inattention with mindfulness. Later in the same chapter, Śāntideva emphasizes, using the metaphors of Buddhist hell imagery (including the notorious hideous women who appear in the trees) that our own suffering is entirely psychological, and that moral development is entirely mental cultivation:

- V: 7       Who so purposefully forged  
               The implements of sentient beings' hell?  
               Who constructed the floor of burning iron?  
               And whence have those women come?
- V: 8       The Sage has explained that  
               The vicious mind gives rise to all of these.  
               So, there is nothing whatever in the triple world  
               More frightening than the mind.

Perhaps the most widely studied and most beautiful chapter in *How to Lead an Awakened Life* is that on patience. In this chapter Śāntideva emphasizes the pervasiveness of anger and aversion in the morally immature state, and the enormous—though often unconscious—suffering they bring in train, feeding on a cycle linking anger to fear and aggression.<sup>7</sup> The predominance of these emotions prior to the cultivation of *bodhicitta* contrasts with the patience that characterizes awakened moral experience.

- VI: 1       All of the virtuous actions  
               Amassed over a thousand eons, such as  
               Giving alms and making offerings to the tathāgatas,  
               Are destroyed by a single instance of anger.
- VI: 2       There is no vice like aversion, and  
               There is no aescetic practice like patience.  
               Hence one should assiduously  
               Cultivate patience in a variety of ways.

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<sup>7</sup> The unwary Western reader might think that there is a confusion here between *emotional* immaturity and *ethical* immaturity. This thought should be resisted, as it rests on a presumption that our emotional life is independent of our moral life. It is central to Śāntideva's—and indeed, any Buddhist—conception of the domain of the moral that our emotions are morally significant and morally evaluable. Emotional immaturity is one dimension of moral immaturity; emotional maturity one dimension of moral maturity. (See Dreyfus 2002.)

- VI: 3        When the thorn of aversion sticks in the heart,  
              The mind finds no peace,  
              Nor can it achieve happiness or joy.  
              Sleep does not come, and one's strength ebbs away.

The account of the development of moral consciousness continues with an examination of the role of enthusiasm. Once again, the story of ethical growth is told not in terms of obligations or actions, but in terms of the development of character, which in turn is analyzed experientially.

- VII: 1        Thus, after patience one should cultivate enthusiasm.  
              For awakening depends on enthusiasm.  
              Just as without wind nothing moves,  
              Virtue cannot arise without enthusiasm.
- VII: 2        What is enthusiasm? It is determination to attain virtue.  
              What should we call its opposite?  
              It is to cling to the base,  
              To deprecate oneself and one's tradition.
- VII: 8        I have not completed this;  
              I have just started this, but it remains half done.  
              When death suddenly arrives,  
              I will think, "Alas, I am defeated!"
- VII: 27       When vices are abandoned, there is no more suffering.  
              If one is wise, one is without sorrow.  
              For mistaken conception and vice  
              Are what harm mind and body.

The final two chapters of *How to Lead an Awakened Life* address the more directly cognitive aspects of the awakened moral life, those concerned with establishing how to *see* reality properly. Meditation is central to Śāntideva's account, for it is through meditation that one embeds discursive knowledge into one's character. In the following three verses he focuses on various aspects of attachment, its consequences, and how to relinquish it. The first of these considers the impact of the understanding of impermanence on the release from attachment to others, and the development of

equanimity; the second addresses attachment to self, and once again, its connection to fear; the third emphasizes more graphically the role of meditation in reconstructing not our behavior or sense of duty, but our way of seeing the world.

VIII: 5     What impermanent being  
              Attaches himself to what impermanent being?  
              For sadly, he will not see her  
              For thousands of lifetimes.

VIII: 17    If one thinks such thoughts as  
              “I am very rich and respected,  
              And many people like me,”  
              When death approaches, fear will arise.

VIII: 52    If you do not lust for the impure,  
              Why do you repeatedly embrace another  
              Who is only flesh-smear'd bones  
              Bound together with sinew?

Finally, in the chapter on wisdom, Śāntideva emphasizes both the importance of a deep understanding of metaphysics for moral life, and, more specifically, the fact that the relevant metaphysical view is the Madhyamaka view according to which all phenomena are empty of essence, interdependent, and have only conventional identities. It is important to note here not just that Śāntideva recommends this metaphysical position as the foundation of awakened life and morality, but, especially in the context of the preceding chapter, that it is a foundation for such a life precisely because once internalized, this view (and for Śāntideva *only* this view) transforms one's very experience both of the external world and of oneself, generating a metaphysical *vision* that enables a moral *engagement*, thus enabling engaged *bodhicitta*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Of course this means that it is not as easy as it sounds to attain moral perfection. Perfect compassion requires perfect wisdom. Nonetheless, this does not mean that it is impossible to cultivate *any* virtue: the cultivation even of mundane compassion increases wisdom; the cultivation of even a basic understanding of emptiness increases compassion.



- IX: 1       The Sage taught all of these matters  
              For the sake of wisdom.  
              Therefore, if one wishes to avoid suffering,  
              And to attain peace, one should cultivate wisdom.
- IX: 48       Without an understanding of emptiness  
              A mental state that has ceased will arise once again,  
              Just as when one engages in non-conceptual meditation.  
              Therefore, one should meditate on emptiness.
- IX: 77       Pride, which is the cause of suffering,  
              Increases due to delusion regarding the self.  
              Since from one, the other necessarily follows,  
              Meditation on selflessness is supreme.

Taking the treatise in this way allows us much better to understand the place of the ninth chapter in the text. Its presence and form are puzzling at first. Most of the rest of the text addresses issues immediately recognizable as ethical, such as generosity, patience, etc. And most of the rest of the text is written in a direct, accessible poetic style. And the rest of the text speaks quite directly, without the scholastic device of an interlocutor to whose arguments the text responds. The ninth chapter, on the other hand, is concerned with difficult questions in metaphysics and ethics, such as the ultimate nature of all phenomena, the relationship between the way things appear and the way they are, the question of the relation between mind and the external world, and about whether consciousness is necessarily reflexive—issues not so obviously ethical. Its verses are difficult, highly abstract, and often written in a formal scholastic debate style. It is very difficult to parse, let alone to understand, without a good commentary. One might even reasonably suspect that it is a late graft.

The present reading, however, shows why this excursion into abstract metaphysics and epistemology is so important to Śāntideva, and why it occurs at the conclusion of the treatise. It is a central theme of *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, as it is a central theme of the Buddhist diagnosis of the existential problem of suffering generally, that suffering and the egocentric tendencies it generates and which in turn perpetuate it, are grounded in a fundamental confusion about the nature of reality—

taking what is in fact interdependent, impermanent and essenceless, on both the subjective and objective side—to be independent, enduring, and substantial. This attitude, Śāntideva urges, is not the result of careful metaphysical reflection, but an innate cognitive instinct. A truly awakened life requires its extirpation. This extirpation requires philosophical reflection, but such reflection is not sufficient, given the depth of the cognitive set.<sup>9</sup> Even receptivity to that argument requires the cultivation of a moral sensibility that loosens the attachment and aversion implicated with the metaphysical error. But meditative practice is also necessary, in order that reflective thought can become a spontaneous cognitive set, a way of *being in the world*, rather than a way of *thinking about the world*, in which we experience ourselves and all around us as we are, interdependent, impermanent, insubstantial.<sup>10</sup>

This transformation of vision, and consequent transformation of mode of being, even though it is cast in *How to Lead an Awakened Life* as a direct understanding of ultimate reality, and an understanding of the relation between this ultimate reality and conventional reality, amounts not to seeing *behind* a world of illusion, but rather to coming to see a world about which we are naturally deceived just as it is, not being taken in by the cognitive habits that issue in that deception. For this reason, just as the historical Buddha, in the presentation of the eightfold path at Sarnath, emphasized that one's view of the nature of reality is a moral matter, Śāntideva, in his analysis of an awakened life, urges that our metaphysics and epistemology is central to our moral lives.

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<sup>9</sup> A mere addition of insight to injury, as a psychoanalyst friend of mine used to say about some cognitive therapies

<sup>10</sup> Once again, the fact that meditative practice may be necessary to achieve virtuoso ethical status, this does not mean that meditation is the *sine qua non* of any moral progress.

## 6. A Distinctive View of Moral Life

This whirlwind tour through *How to Lead an Awakened Life* of course cannot do justice to the richness of Śāntideva's insight and moral thought. On the other hand, I hope that it convinces the reader that in Śāntideva's account of Buddhist ethics we find a distinctive approach to ethical thought, a perspective not available in mainstream Western ethical thought. When Śāntideva asks about moral life, he asks not what our duties are, nor what actions are recommended, nor what the relation is between the good and our actions, nor even what would make us individually happy. Instead, he starts with a problem that is to be solved—that of the ubiquity of suffering—and the standard Buddhist diagnosis of that problem in terms of attachment and aversion rooted in fundamental ontological confusion. He asks how to solve that problem.

His solution is distinctive in that it develops a deeper diagnosis of the problem through an analysis of our own experience of ourselves and of our place in the world. It seeks the solution to this problem not—at least not directly—in a transformation of the world, or even of our conduct, but rather in a transformation of that experience. The task of leading an awakened life—a morally desirable life—is the task of transforming our phenomenology. It may be tempting either to force this account into a familiar Western form, or even just to graft it on to one, as the phenomenological adjunct to a more familiar meta-ethical account. I suggest that we resist that temptation, and open ourselves to the possibility of a very different way of understanding ethical aspiration and engagement—the path of the bodhisattva.

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