

Experience and Morality: Buddhist Ethics as Moral Phenomenology

by

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Chapter One: General Introduction

The Buddhist canon contains a substantial amount of material that treats the subject matter of ethics. Topics addressed in these texts include how we should live our lives, how we should treat others, classifications of right and wrong actions, and the articulation of virtues to be cultivated and vices to be avoided. The abundance of Buddhist material treating ethical issues even led O.H. de A. Wijesekera (1971) to make the grandiose claim, "It is universally recognized that Buddhism can claim to be the most ethical of all religio-philosophical systems of the world" (p. 49). Charles Goodman (2009) describes Buddhist ethics with its emphasis on non-violence and compassion as one of most appealing parts of the teachings of Buddhism. He writes, "Many people have drawn inspiration from Buddhism's emphasis on compassion, non-violence, and tolerance, its concern for animals, and its models of virtue and self-cultivation" (p. 1). Damien Keown (1992) even argues that Buddhism itself is foremost an ethical project: "Buddhism is a response to what is fundamentally an ethical problem—the perennial problem of the best kind of life for a man (sic) to lead" (p. 1).

It should be no surprise that ethics plays an important role in Buddhism, given its soteriological goal of an ideal state. Like many other religions, Buddhism calls for ethical conduct as a requirement for attaining its soteriological goal. The Buddhist canon includes extensive guidelines for conduct that foster the move from an ordinary state to an ideal state. Buddhist ethics, however, is not based on a theistic model: No omnipotent creator decrees what constitutes good and evil. Instead, I will argue that common themes underlying Buddhist ethical works are nested in the larger Buddhist project that sees suffering and its causes as the primary human existential problem. The distinction between good and bad, I will argue, depends entirely on the analysis of suffering and its causes. The Buddha explained in what Buddhists take to be

his first teaching upon attaining enlightenment that it is confusion about ourselves and the world we live in that causes us to suffer, and that only knowledge of the reality of our world removes this confusion and frees us from suffering. The good, I will argue, is linked with this knowledge; the Buddhist soteriological goal of liberation from suffering is achieved not through faith, but through reason. Liberation is not a reward for ethical conduct, but is, as I aim to demonstrate in the coming chapters, the state of the morally mature person who experiences the world mediated by an accurate metaphysical understanding.

Despite the extensive material treating ethical issues in Buddhist texts, there is no explicit Buddhist theoretical account of the nature and scope of ethics such as those found in Western philosophical traditions. Harvey (2000) notes, "The schools of Buddhism have rich traditions of thought on ethics, though this is often scattered through a variety of works which also deal with other topics" (p. 1). It seems that Buddhist philosophers never formulated an explicit theory of meta-ethics. As Keown (1992) observes, "Ethics, as an independent philosophical discipline, has not attained in Buddhism the autonomy which it has in the west" (p. 1). Ethics as a branch of philosophy is not articulated in Buddhism. Ethical concepts such as good and evil, right, wrong, virtue, or moral choice are not critically examined. The lack of such philosophical reflection in the area of ethics alongside such deep philosophical interest by Buddhists in subjects such as epistemology and metaphysics has led Western scholars such as George Dreyfus (1995) to claim that ethical concepts were viewed as not philosophically interesting by Buddhist scholars (p. 30). However, this need not be the case. As Garfield (2015) has argued, the lack of theoretical systematization in Buddhist ethics may be due to Buddhist recognition of the complexity of moral life and moral assessment due to their being located in the intricate network of cause and results explained in the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) (p. 279).

The fact that Buddhism does not have an explicitly articulated theory of meta-ethics has led Western scholars to propose various approaches to the study of Buddhist ethics. The Western study of Buddhist ethics has come a long way since 1992 when Keown called Buddhist ethics an academic backwater, stating that "only recently have the signs appeared that this neglect is to be remedied and the initiative has not come from Buddhist studies but from the emerging and yet ill-defined area of the comparative study of religious ethics" (p. 2-3). Keown (1992) further comments, "Of the small number of scholars who have studied the subject few have put forward detailed hypotheses as to the formal structure of Buddhist ethics" (p. 11). By 2000, however, Harvey observed, "Buddhist ethics as a field of academic study in the West is not new, but in recent years has experienced a considerable expansion, as seen, for example in the very successful Internet *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*" (p. 1).

Western scholars have now expended considerable effort seeking to understand which type of Western ethical theory best characterizes Buddhist ethics. In making a case for this approach to the study of Buddhist ethics, Charles Goodman (2008) insists that a fruitful dialogue between East and West on the subject of ethics will be very difficult "unless we Westerners can find some way of understanding, in our terms, what kind of ethical theory Buddhism might involve" (p. 17). Goodman (2009) further asserts, "Buddhist texts have much to contribute to the conversation of contemporary ethics: but they can only make those contributions if the values and forms of moral reasoning they exhibit can somehow be connected with the way philosophers discuss ethics today" (p. 4). This prevailing attitude has resulted in an ongoing debate in secondary scholarship concerning the Western ethical system with which Buddhist ethics best conforms and discussions on whether Buddhist ethics should be classified as a kind of virtue ethics or as a type of consequentialism.

In earlier secondary literature, Buddhist ethics was commonly read as classical utilitarianism, a meeting of utilitarianism and hedonism. For example, C. A. F. R. Davids (1974, 1976) views Buddhists as hedonists and, together with Kalupahana, holds Buddhist morality to be utilitarian. As I will show, a great many scholars still consider Buddhist ethics to be consequentialist but regard it as universalist, or utilitarian, understanding it to take into consideration the well-being of not only the agent, but all those affected by the action. For a system of ethics to be universalist, it has to regard an action as morally right if and only if, from among the actions available to the agent, it is the one that maximizes overall happiness. Goodman (2009), Williams (1998), Siderits (2000), and Clayton (2009) turn primarily to Śāntideva's works to support their arguments that Mahāyāna ethics is a type of universalist consequentialism. They argue that Buddhist ethics, like universalist consequentialism, is primarily concerned with the consequences of actions and their impacts on the welfare of all sentient beings.

An alternate approach to Buddhist ethics, one that highlights the psychological domain, is represented in the work of such scholars as Cooper and James (2005), Finnigan and Tanaka (2011), Keown (1992), and Tillemans (2008), who have argued that Buddhist ethics is best thought of as a type of virtue ethics. Theorists who advocate a virtue ethics approach to Buddhist ethics also note that a virtue construal accounts for why we do not find in Buddhist texts the kind of hypothetical thought experiments or artificial ethical conundrums the likes of which many analytical philosophers utilize in order to test the limits of their ethical rules, for Buddhist ethicists were not attempting to isolate some objective discoverable moral truth separate from human nature, but to understand ethics in a broader sense as an elucidation of what constitutes a life well lived. Keown, in particular, draws mainly on the Pāli literature to argue

that Buddhist ethics has much in common with Aristotelian virtue ethics, contending that what is important in Buddhist ethics is the cultivation of good character traits.

There is certainly benefit in comparing different ethical systems, and Buddhist and Western ethical systems no doubt have much to offer each other. I will argue, however, that to force Buddhist ethics into a Western doctrinal box inhibits our understanding of Buddhist ethics by de-contextualizing and even overlooking Buddhism's most important ethical concepts. In particular, I aim to challenge the assumption that Buddhist ethics should be classified as either as a kind of virtue ethics or as a type of consequentialism. Through an examination of the reasons that have led recent scholars to deem Buddhist ethics as an instance of one of these two Western ethical systems, I will argue that referencing a list of attributes distinguishing two competing Western ethical systems is an ineffective method for understanding Buddhist ethics. I will instead demonstrate that if Buddhist ethical texts are read on their own terms, instead of consequentialism or virtue ethics, we find common threads indicating a unique moral perspective that prioritizes mental states and is primarily concerned with a transformation of the way the agent engages with the world.

Roy Perrett (1987) already recognizes that the familiar Western ethical oppositions such as those between egoism and altruism, and intentionalism and consequentialism, do not feature in Buddhist ethics (p. 71). Garfield (2011) also endorses the study of Buddhist ethics on its own terms as a unique system, arguing that it is "a symptom of a dangerous hermeneutic temptation to force Buddhist ethics into a Western mould" (p. 2). He asserts that doing so misses the essential point that Buddhist ethics is primarily a kind of moral phenomenology. Drawing on Śāntideva's classic Mahāyāna Buddhist treatise *How to Lead an Awakened Life (Bodhicarāvātāra)*, Garfield (2011) notes that Śāntideva does not ask "what our duties are, nor what actions are

recommended, nor what the relation is between good and our actions" (p.23), but instead gives an account of how the practice of Mahāyāna ethics is related with a transformation of one's experience in the world. This shift in the discussion treating Buddhist ethics moves away from the narrow focus of determining which normative ethical theory best describes the doctrine of karma towards a consideration of how Buddhist ethics fits within the broader Buddhist philosophical project of finding a solution to suffering.

We can then organize these competing theories of the structure of Buddhist ethics into three main camps. The first two identify Buddhist ethics with various forms of Western ethical theory: either as a form of consequentialism or as a type of virtue ethics. The third, reading Buddhism on its own terms, asserts that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a unique kind of moral phenomenology. This third way of approaching Buddhist ethics was first put forward by Garfield (2011). In the coming chapters, I will argue that when Buddhist ethics is critically examined independently of the confines of the parameters of a familiar normative ethical theory, common ethical concerns emerge that indicate that Buddhist ethics in general might be best understood as a kind of moral phenomenology, being primarily concerned with the way we experience the world and with effecting a transformation in this experience.

I suggest that understanding Buddhist ethical traditions in this way with an appreciation for their common phenomenological approach has much to contribute to contemporary conversations on ethics. Bringing Buddhist ethics into contemporary discussions on ethics first requires a more complete picture of Buddhist moral perspectives that focus on the nature of experience rather than human happiness or our actions and their consequences. A common theme that runs through Buddhist ethical writings is the notion that the way we experience the world is the foundation for moral concerns. On this account, the moral problem is the fact that we are

ordinarily confused about the nature of the world and our place in it, which leads to a life characterized by the experience of suffering and vice. The moral solution, then, is the removal of this confusion through the development of a metaphysically accurate understanding of the world and our place in it, which transforms the way we experience the world in such a way that frees us from suffering, promotes virtues, and brings us to a morally mature state. For this reason, Buddhist ethicists express concern with how we experience ourselves in relation to the world and others.

1.1 Methodology and Sources

Buddhism has a rich and complicated tradition with many diverse schools of thought, so it would be a naïve disservice to the tradition to seek to represent Buddhist ethics as a univocal entity. I will include sources from the Theravāda tradition such as Buddhagosa and non-Mahāyāna texts like Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmakośa)*, and I suggest that much of my argument could be generally applied across Buddhist traditions. Nonetheless, my argument is primarily intended to represent what the 14th Dalai Lama has come to call the Nālandā tradition, referring to the important Indian Buddhist masters, including Vasubandhu and Asaṅga and focusing primarily on the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka tradition of Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva, which was also taken up in Tibet.

I suggest that by analyzing Buddhist ethical texts on their own terms rather than through a comparative lens, it is possible to articulate with a degree of confidence the moral framework that underlies the normative ethics described extensively in Buddhist texts. My strategy for drawing out this framework begins with an examination of the Buddhist psychological treatises that outline the topography of the mind and the nature of experience. The sources for this component of the inquiry will include representatives from the Pāli and Sanskrit

traditions of Indian Buddhism, such as the psychological treatises of the fifth century Theravāda scholar Buddhaghosa of the Pāli tradition, and the fourth century scholars Vasubandhu and Asaṅga of the Sanskrit tradition.

There are two main reasons that I am drawing on non-Mahāyāna sources for this section despite my greater emphasis on Indian Mahāyāna sources. The first is that much of the discussion in the secondary literature on Buddhist ethics has focused on the Pāli tradition, so it is important to address this discussion at least in general terms. The second is that since this section treats the psychological aspects of Abhidharma treatises, and there are close parallels among the Abhidharma works across the Sanskrit and Pāli traditions, one can make larger observations that apply trans-traditionally in this context. In this section, I will also draw on Tibetan explanations of psychology, particularly in texts from the mind training (*blo sbyong*) genre, which further develop the Indian Mahāyāna ethical concepts.

An examination of these works will reveal the Buddhist psychological account of the fundamental components of experience and the way in which our mental activities play a role in constructing our experience. Importantly, these texts also place explicit ethical values on the mental processes that play this fundamental role in molding experience. As an example of the way in which the key psychological components of ascertainment (*samjñā*) and feeling (*vedanā*) are critical to Buddhist moral phenomenology, I will discuss an example of a Buddhist ethical practice, that of equanimity, which demonstrates (1) the role that mental processes play in constructing our experience, (2) the way in which this construction is ethically significant, and (3) the potential to transform the way in which mental processes construct our experience. In this discussion, I will draw on the Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhist works of Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) and Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887).

I will then examine how Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist works in particular, growing naturally out of this psychological foundation, prioritize mental states in their treatment of ethics. I will rely specifically on the Perfection of Wisdom literature (*prajñāpāramitā*) and the ethical works of Āryadeva (third century C.E.), Candrakīrti (seventh century), and Śāntideva (eighth century), all of which call for a transformation in vision as the moral solution, a transformation from the confusion that characterizes the morally immature state prone to vice, to a metaphysically accurate understanding that characterizes the morally mature state inclined toward virtue.

1.1.1 Avoiding Two Methodological Extremes: Globalized Descriptions and Radical Particularism

One of the aims of this dissertation is to challenge the claim that Buddhist ethics is best understood through a Western ethical categorization. Others, like Charles Hallisey and Maria Heim, have also criticized the idea that Theravāda Buddhist ethics can be understood in terms of a formal western ethical category. Heim likens this approach to the study of Buddhist ethics to “archeological projects,” noting with skepticism that, “These excavations unearth structures apparent to modern scholars but that have somehow managed to elude even the most systematic of Buddhist thinkers” (2014, p. 222). Hallisey argues that any attempt to uncover the existing moral theory with which Buddhist ethics accords is misguided, not because it represents its own unique moral theory, but because, he contends, there is no Buddhist ethical theory to be categorized. He says,

I think we need to determine first whether “What is the family of ethical theory to which Buddhism belongs?” is the best question. In other words, are we so sure that we should begin our investigations into Buddhist ethics assuming a generic answer to this question?—namely that Buddhists have an as-yet-unknown moral theory, one which both defines the fundamental principles of Buddhist morality and establishes the authority of those principles. (1996, p. 35)

Hallisey emphasizes the pluralistic reality of Buddhist traditions, and on these grounds he expresses a suspicion of globalized or general descriptions. Hallisey goes on to conclude that there is no single Buddhist moral theory. He argues that Buddhists “approached their ethical concerns without any ethical theory at all,” exhibiting a kind of ethical particularism (1996, p. 37).¹ As Schilbrack has pointed out in his response to Hallisey, it is unclear if Hallisey means to say that Buddhism has no moral theory, many competing moral theories, or merely one moral theory, namely ethical particularism (1997, p. 100).

Hallisey begins his argument for understanding Theravāda Buddhist ethics as a kind of moral particularism by suggesting a parallel between the epistemological problem of the criteria for knowledge and the problem of criteria for ethical knowledge. Chisholm (1982) introduces a modern iteration of the problem of the criteria of knowledge turning on two pairs of questions which may be phrased in meta-epistemological or epistemological terms as follows: (1) What can we know, or what is true? (2) What are the criteria for knowledge, or how do we tell which propositions are true? Answering the first question requires already having answered the second, since we cannot recognize an instance of knowledge without a set of identifying criteria. Yet answering the second requires already having answered the first, since we cannot extract criteria for knowledge without any instances of knowledge from which to extrapolate. In addition to skepticism, Chisholm posits two possible responses to this problem: (1) the methodist response takes it to be possible to answer the second question without having already answered the first, and (2) the particularist response takes it to be possible to answer the first question without having already answered the second. Chisholm suggests that both of these responses to the problem of the criteria entail begging the question.

¹ For other examples of interpretations of Buddhist ethics as a kind of moral particularism, see Barnhart (2012) and Bartholomeusz (2002).

Hallisey argues that “most studies of Buddhist ethics” have taken something similar to a methodist approach, “assuming that only by theoretically knowing the criteria for ethical knowledge can we recognize any particular instance of morality as such” (1996, p. 38). Conversely, particularism in the context of moral knowledge would mean assuming that only by theoretically recognizing any particular instance of morality as such can we know the criteria for ethical knowledge. Shifting from the discussion of the study of Buddhist ethics to Buddhist ethics proper, Hallisey then claims that Theravāda Buddhists approach ethics in a particularist manner, which would suggest the position that one can know what is the moral action in a given situation without first having any criteria for judging what is a moral action. He draws parallels between Theravāda Buddhist ethics and contemporary moral particularism of *prima facie* duties, as espoused by W. D. Ross and Jonathan Dancy (1991).

As support for this interpretation, Hallisey cites stories from the commentarial tradition on the *Maṅgalasutta*, a text which consists of a list of thirty-eight instances of auspiciousness, and which Hallisey describes as a list of *prima facie* duties. The commentaries on this work cited by Hallisey, such as the *Lamp on the Meaning of Auspiciousness*, instantiate the list of occasionally conflicting moral duties (1996, p. 39, 42). He cites the fact that certain principles are conflicting as evidence for the argument that Theravāda Buddhist ethics accords with moral particularism in that principles are context-dependent in their applicability as reasons for action. The moral agent, then, must assess each particular situation in order to judge which principle might rightly indicate the appropriate moral act.

On this account, moral judgment is not founded on criteria, but is developed through experience, or through vicarious experience by hearing stories of correct moral action, “allowing us to recognize a *prima facie duty*” (1996, p. 42). This is because moral particularism is founded

on epistemological holism, which recognizes the complexity of the interconnected causes and conditions of each particular situation, which must be assessed as a unique whole within experience. Although this does not entail that there are no moral principles at all, on this account, there are no absolute moral principles that apply universally.²

Hallisey's argument looks problematic owing to a tension between particularism as a response to the problem of criteria for (moral) knowledge and his account of Theravāda Buddhist ethics as a kind of moral particularism.³ This is because particularism as a response to the problem of criteria suggests that we *can* arrive at a set of criteria for judging what is true (or good) through starting out with particular instances of such knowledge. Yet, Hallisey argues that the outcome of interpreting Theravāda Buddhist ethics as a kind of moral particularism is that there are no such criteria *at all* (1996, p. 41). He paints a radically particularist picture in which the Theravāda Buddhist moral agent may develop some kind of moral judgment based solely on hearing a litany of stories against the backdrop of a relativist and contingent list of occasionally conflicting moral principles. The question remains of *how* the moral agent knows which

² There are, of course, more and less radical accounts of moral particularism. For instance, in "Particularity and Principle: The Structure of Moral Knowledge," Garfield argues for a more moderate conception of moral particularism than does Dancy, who refuses the inclusion of any moral rules at all or the possibility of universalizing any moral claims, a view Garfield describes as "rule nihilism" stemming from a variety of ontological particularism (2000:181). Instead, Garfield argues for a kind of epistemological particularism, which understands moral knowledge to involve the ascertainment of rules, but which conceives this ascertainment in particular terms. Garfield's epistemological moral particularism provides a convincing account of how we in fact go about learning the moral norms of our respective cultures and learn to make moral judgments in accordance with them, but even this more moderate version of moral particularism, as Garfield would surely agree, is not an appropriate description of Buddhist ethics.

³ For other critical assessments of a moral particularist interpretation of Buddhist ethics, see Gowan (2015), Keown (2013), Schilbrack (1997), and Vélez de Cea (2004).

principle to follow based on the particular context. This account seems all the more to demand some kind of guiding criteria or underlying moral theory.

I agree with Hallisey that Buddhist ethics is *not* best thought of as adhering to a set of absolute moral principles and that the incredible diversity of Buddhist traditions should be understood in its plurality. I also agree that the attempt to force Buddhist ethics into the interpretive box of a Western ethical system is misguided, obscuring the possibilities for both learning *about* and learning *from* Buddhist ethics. Yet to dissolve Buddhist ethical thought into a sea of particulars unmoored from any underlying moral theory is, I suggest, the opposite extreme on the spectrum of interpretive approaches, and one which equally obscures the possibilities for both learning *about* and learning *from* Buddhist ethics. Moreover, as with any tradition taken up by scholarly inquiry, the simple fact that Buddhism is not a monolith does not automatically deem an inquiry into its general form and common features methodologically flawed or fruitless. While it is naive and unhelpful to make globalized claims about some fictional monolithic Buddhism or Buddhist ethics, I suggest that in the study of Buddhist ethics, it is helpful and even imperative to seek out common threads within the particulars of the various Buddhist traditions that point to underlying moral theories and ethical priorities helping to guide the moral agent in making moral judgments.

When it comes to methodology, I disagree with Hallisey's claim that "the study of ethics in Theravāda Buddhism is best pursued historically" (1996, p. 42). My aim here is not to undertake a historic study of particular instances of Buddhist ethics in action, but a philosophical inquiry into what might be common forms and themes that run through the works of important Buddhist ethical thinkers. Identifying these commonalities, I argue, will help one navigate Buddhist ethical thought in a way that might provide a point of contact with Buddhism for

comparative philosophy, allowing us to not only learn about, but also learn *from* or think *with* Buddhist ethical writings.

Many others, such as Keown (1992), Schilbrack (1997), Williams (1998), Siderits (2000), Cooper and James (2005), Tillemans (2008), Goodman (2009), Finnigan (2011), Carpenter (2015), Garfield (2015), Gowans (2015), etc., agree that it is worthwhile inquiring into the general forms of Buddhist ethics. It is with these scholars and their conversations in the field of Buddhist philosophy and comparative philosophy that I wish to engage. For this reason, this dissertation is intentionally weighted towards a more philosophical approach rather than a historical study of particulars. Moreover, I do not think that the more general philosophical approach is at odds with the historical study of the particular, with its recognition of Buddhist pluralism. The idea that there might be central themes that commonly run through Buddhist ethical thought represents an appreciation of the fact that there are similarities as well as differences across traditions, thinkers, times, and places. It does not necessitate that we see Buddhist ethics as a single entity, but allows for the recognition of multiple theories that share common threads.

What I hope to contribute to the conversation on Buddhist ethics and comparative ethics are arguments that lend support to the idea that Buddhist ethical writings share central themes and that when these themes are appreciated, Buddhist ethics can better engage in not only comparative ethics, but also has something to add to the contemporary discussion on ethics. I suggest that if one undertakes the inquiry into Buddhist ethics on its own terms without the preconceived western ethical categories, one does indeed discover a common theme that might be counted as constituting the criteria for moral knowledge, helping the Buddhist moral agent navigate the complexity of distinct particular contexts and the list of occasionally confusing and

conflicting moral principles. This common thread, I will argue, is the priority given to phenomenological properties, or the accompanying mental state, associated with an act.

My claim is that a central and common thread carried through Buddhist writing on ethics is a concern with the mental sphere, and in particular the understanding that for an action to be considered good, the accompanying mental state must be associated with certain phenomenological aspects. Put another way, Buddhist ethicists share a concern for *what it is like* when you engage in a moral act. I am not arguing that the requisite phenomenal qualities themselves are the same for all Buddhist ethicists. For example, I will argue that the Buddhist ethicists from the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka tradition, such as Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva, informed by the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras and the middle way philosophy of Nāgārjuna, are specifically interested in the way we see ourselves, our actions, and others during moral acts. However, this is not to say all Buddhist ethicists emphasize these same phenomenal properties. While the Mādhyamika ethicists might consider the act of giving to be good only if the agent is not essentializing themselves as the giver, the act of giving, or the receiver, other Buddhist ethicists might instead consider the act of giving to be good as long as it is not accompanied by the mental properties of stinginess or regret. What is shared, though, is a concern for the first person experience of the moral act.

To be clear, my claim that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a type of moral phenomenology is not a claim that there is a single Buddhist moral theory that, although unarticulated, was shared by Buddhist ethicists for the last 2,500 years. I'm also not claiming that the Buddhist ethicists that I cite are a representative sample of such a single ethical system. Instead, what I claim is that there are common themes that run through the works of Buddhist ethicists and that understanding these themes gives us a way to not only better understand

“Buddhist ethics,” but also to allow for this tradition to better engage in and contribute to contemporary conversations in ethics.

1.1.2 A Note on the Use of the Term “Moral Phenomenology”

Phenomenology has come to mean many different things since Edmund Husserl initiated it as a philosophical discipline with his groundbreaking work, *Logical Investigations* (1900-01). From the beginning of this movement, each of the major modern European phenomenologists (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty), has approached phenomenology with a distinct methodology. Their respective methodologies are sometimes at odds with one another. Husserl, for instance, insists on bracketing the external world; Heidegger, in urging his hermeneutical approach, rejects that bracketing. Moreover, the subject matter regarded as falling in the domain of phenomenology is wide-ranging, including a variety of types of experience, such as memory, imagination, emotion, perception, thought, the intentional structure of consciousness, accounts of spatial awareness, the experience of the flow of time, intention in action, etc.

When I use the term “phenomenology” to characterize certain Buddhist philosophical approaches, I do not intend to suggest that any particular Buddhist phenomenologist adopts a specific *European* phenomenological approach, or to indicate the system of one particular phenomenologist. My aim in this study is to approach Buddhist thinkers on their own terms and not through a Western philosophical lens. Guided by this approach, I use the term “phenomenology” to refer to an approach to philosophy characterized by an emphasis on the first person experience. My aim is not to reframe Buddhist philosophy in terms of the Western phenomenological tradition, but to identify the emphasis on both the first person account of moral experience and the transformation of experience that are emphasized by Buddhist thinkers, and in particular Buddhist ethical thinkers.

Just as in Western philosophical traditions prior to the formal inception of phenomenology as a philosophical discipline, a number of different philosophers engaged in what would now be described as phenomenological inquiry, similarly, in the Buddhist tradition, although there is no exact term in Sanskrit, Pāli, Tibetan, etc. that corresponds to “phenomenology,” there is nonetheless a rich history of first person examination of the features of experience. This concern with the mental properties of experience is apparent in the abundance of detailed first person accounts of meditative states.

In particular, the Yogācāra Buddhist philosophical system has been characterized as a kind of phenomenology by contemporary scholars such as Lusthaus (2002) and Garfield (2015). Lusthaus comments on the Yogācāra system as follows:

Buddhism has focused on issues of cognition, psychology, epistemology, soterics and ethics. Dharmas are factors of experience, or the phenomena which constitute experience. Therefore the investigation of dharmas can be called “Buddhist phenomenology.” [T]he affinities between Buddhist phenomenologists and Western phenomenologists are at times striking. (2002, p. 4)

Garfield highlights the Yogācāra account of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*) as an example of a Buddhist phenomenological approach that treats the structure of subjectivity (2015, pp. 186-193).

A phenomenological approach is also evident in Buddhist Abhidharma/Abhidhamma literature, which gives first person descriptive accounts of different mental experiences. Nyanaponika describes this approach as “a rigorous phenomenology that disposes of the notion that any kind of static unity or underlying substance can be traced in the mind” (2015, p. 5). He writes,

Let us make a rough division of philosophy into phenomenology and ontology, and briefly characterize them as follows: Phenomenology deals, as the name implies, with “phenomena,” that is, with the world of internal and external experience. Ontology, or metaphysics, inquires into the existence and nature of an essence, or ultimate principle,

underlying the phenomenal world... The Abhidhamma doubtlessly belongs to the first of these two divisions of philosophy, that is, to phenomenology. (2015, pp. 19-20)

Nyanaponika is careful to point out that despite the fact that the Abhidhamma literature uses a phenomenological methodology, it does result in specific ontological assertions. He says,

The penetrative phenomenological investigation undertaken in the Abhidhamma makes a definite and valuable contribution to ontological problems, that is, to the search for an abiding essence in reality. The Abhidhamma philosophy shows clearly and irrefutably where such an alleged essence can never be found, namely, anywhere in the world of the five aggregates (*khandha*)... It is true that these ontological results of the Abhidhamma are “merely negative,” but they certainly represent more substantial and consequential contributions to the ontological problem than the “positive” assertions of many metaphysical systems, indulging in unprovable or fallacious conceptual speculations. (2015, pp. 20-21)

Maria Heim, in the context of her treatment of moral agency and intention (*cetanā*) in early Buddhist sources, describes the Abhidhamma literature as not only phenomenological in methodology, but also as an account of a complex *moral* phenomenology. Heim says, “Texts that richly describe moral phenomenology, chiefly the Abhidhamma literature, have been largely sidelined in current Theravāda studies” (2014, p. 2). I agree with Heim that the Abhidhamma texts both exemplify the engagement of Buddhist thinkers in a phenomenological methodology, and also that the ethical emphasis in these texts qualifies them as incorporating a type of moral phenomenology.

In claiming that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a type of moral phenomenology, I use the term “moral phenomenology” to refer to the way Buddhist ethical thinkers emphasize the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life. Just as a phenomenological methodology can be seen as a consistent and important thread that runs through Buddhist Abhidharma literature, I argue that there is also a phenomenological emphasis that runs through Buddhist ethical texts themselves, especially those ethical writers from the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka tradition.

I do not simply claim that Buddhist ethical texts emphasize the psychological domain. I aim to demonstrate that the concerns of Buddhist ethicists go beyond the psychological mechanics of moral decisions (in which a third person description would be sufficient) to a concern for the first-person experiential aspects of moral experience. Moreover, I do not simply argue that Buddhist ethicists draw on introspection to give descriptions of moral states, but that moral development is explained and moral experience is evaluated in terms of the phenomenological properties that characterize the mental states associated with moral actions.

The idea that an action is considered good only if the accompanying mental state is associated with certain phenomenological properties is exemplified in a number of Buddhist texts that explain what makes generosity praiseworthy. We can see this even in the Pāli *sūttas* of early Buddhism. For example, the *Numerated Discourses (Aṅguttaranikāya)* gives the following description for how one ought to be generous:

And how is a family man accomplished in generosity? Here, Vyagghapajja, a family man dwells at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment, one devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing. In this way a family man is accomplished in generosity. (AN 8:54; IV 281–85; trans. Bikkhu Bodhi, 2005, p. 126)

Here, in describing what makes generosity good, the mental realm is prioritized. In order for an act of giving to qualify as a moral deed the primary concern is that the act of giving not be accompanied by the experience of stinginess, but with the experience of delight.

My claim is not that all Buddhist ethicists, across traditions, emphasize the *same* phenomenal properties, but that there is a shared central concern for the first person experience of the moral act. For example, in the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra*, a later Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom *sūtra*, we see a concern with a different set of phenomenological properties in discussions of the moral act of generosity. The *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* reads,

However, a bodhisattva should not give a gift while fixing on an object, Subhūti. He should not give a gift while fixing on anything. He should not give a gift while fixing on physical forms. He should not give a gift while fixing on sounds, smells, tastes or objects of touch, or on dharmas. For this is the way, Subhūti, a bodhisattva should give a gift, so that he does not fix on the idea of the distinctive features (of any object). Why is that? Subhūti, it is not easy to take the measure of the quantity of merit, Subhūti, of the bodhisattva who gives without fixation. (trans. Harrison, 2006, p. 143)

While the *sutta* passage cited above emphasizes that giving ought to be accompanied by delight rather than stinginess, this Perfection of Wisdom *sūtra* passage emphasizes a concern with the way in which the bodhisattva experiences objects such as the gift. In particular, the bodhisattva should experience the gift without hypostatization. What is shared is an emphasis on the mental experience associated with the act of giving, or on *what it is like* to engage in giving, and it is the appropriate subjective experience that constitutes the prescriptive element qualifying the act as good. The moral emphasis on the phenomenal properties of how the agent experiences an object that is observed in the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras* is also taken up and developed by later Buddhist ethicists from the Mahāyāna Madhyamaka tradition, such as Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva, who were informed both by the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras* and the middle way philosophy of Nāgārjuna. These authors are interested in the way we experience ourselves, our actions, and others during moral acts, specifically placing a higher moral value on those deeds wherein the moral agent does not experience herself, the patient of act, or action itself as having an essence (*svabhāva*). In these later Mahāyāna ethical writings on generosity, we consistently see an emphasis *not* on the obvious utilitarian value of the act of giving, but rather on the mental experience associated with the act of giving. For example, Śāntideva describes what qualifies generosity as having been perfected, he says,

If one perfected generosity only upon having eliminated poverty from the world, then since there are destitute people in the world even now, how could the previous Protectors have perfected it?

The perfection of generosity is stated as the thought to give to all beings the entirety of one's possessions together with one's karmic fruit. Thus, it is simply a state of mind. (V: 9-10)⁴

It is clear here that generosity is perfected not through the success of the result of the action, but through the mental state with which the generous act is associated. Garfield has demonstrated how, in *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, Śāntideva presents contrasting phenomenologies, comparing phenomenology of a neophyte bodhisattva's act of generosity with that of a more cultivated bodhisattva (2011, p. 343). Śāntideva describes the neophyte bodhisattva's generosity in Chapter Three as focused on depersonalizing the agent's motivations, whereas he describes the generosity of a more developed bodhisattva in Chapter Ten as depersonalizing even his own state of being (2011, p. 343). Garfield argues that we can read *How to Lead an Awakened Life* as a "treatise on the distinction between the phenomenologies of benighted and of awakened moral consciousness" (2011:335). Garfield explains that for Śāntideva, "The task of leading an awakened life – a morally desirable life – is the task of transforming our phenomenology" (2011, p. 356).

I contend that there is an important link between the elements of moral phenomenology that Heim sees in the Abhidamma/Abhidharma texts and those that Garfield identifies in Śāntideva's work. I suggest that if we look at the most basic level of experience as described in the Buddhist Abhidharma texts in light of later Buddhist ethical writings, we find evidence for a moral phenomenology that goes beyond the explicit characterization of mental functions as

⁴ *adaridraṃ jagat kṛtvā dānapāramitā yadi | jagaddaridraṃ adyāpi sā katham pūrvatāyinām*
 ||V:9|| *phalena saha sarvasvatyāgacittā jane 'khile | dānapāramitā proktā tasmāt sā cittam eva*
tu ||V:10|| *gal te 'gro ba dbul bor nas // sbyin pa'i pha rol phyin yin na // da rung 'gro bkren yod*
na sngon // skyob pa ji ltar pha rol phyin // bdog pa thams cad 'bras bcas te // skye bo kun la
btang sems kyis // sbyin pa'i pha rol phyin gsungs te // de ltas de ni sems nyid do // (Toh. 3871, 10b).

having a moral tone based on certain phenomenological criteria. The always operative (*sarvatra-ga*) fundamental building blocks of each moment of experience described in the Abhidharma literature, such as feeling (*vedanā*), ascertainment (*saṃjñā*), and intention (*cetanā*), are of particular ethical significance. Importantly, it is frequently these always operative mental activities that are the phenomenological properties emphasized by Buddhist ethical texts in assessing the moral value of an act. Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical texts in particular stress how we think about and feel towards ourselves, others, and the world; consequently, it is the character of these phenomenological properties accompanying an action that determine whether or not the deed is praiseworthy.

Beyond assessing the moral value of individual actions based on their associated phenomenological properties, I will further argue that Buddhist ethical texts present moral development as a transformation of phenomenology at this fundamental level of experience. This is reflected in Buddhist ethical exercises that work to influence the way we experience the world through a transformation of these same basic components of experience, like feeling and ascertainment. It is, then, the character of these fundamental phenomenal building blocks of experience that not only condition the moral value of actions, but that also serve to differentiate the experience of the moral mature and morally immature.

In sum, my primary claim concerns writers in the Mahāyāna Mādhyamaka text tradition—in particular Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva—who inherited both the Abhidharma literature of authors like Vasubandhu and Asaṅga and the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras*, with both collections of writings influencing the resulting ethical accounts that, I argue, are best described as a kind of moral phenomenology. From the Abhidharma tradition was inherited an ethical emphasis on the basic building blocks of experience in the form of the

five always operative mental activities. From the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras* was inherited an ethical emphasis on the metaphysical way the agent “sees” or understands herself, her action, and the patient of her actions. It is this unique kind of moral phenomenology evidenced in the writings of these Mādhyamika ethicists that I primarily seek to characterize in this thesis. Moreover, as I will argue, this concern with the phenomenological properties qualifying the moral value of both action and agent is a central and consistent thread running throughout Buddhist ethical writings, and it is for these reasons that I claim that Buddhist ethics may best be described as a type of moral phenomenology.

1.2 Outline of Chapters

This dissertation comprises two main sections. The first section, comprising Chapters 2 and 3, addresses the methodological problems with seeking to understand Buddhist ethics through categorizing it into a Western ethical system. Since Buddhist ethics has often been interpreted as either a type of consequentialism or a type of virtue ethics, Chapter 2 is devoted to addressing the problems with a consequentialist reading of Buddhist ethics, and Chapter 3 to highlighting the structural differences that inhibit a faithful reading of Buddhist ethics as a type of virtue ethics. In the second section, consisting of Chapters 4 and 5, I argue that when Buddhist ethical writings are considered on their own terms, there emerges a recurrent and dominant emphasis on the phenomenology of moral acts. Chapter 4 draws on Buddhist psychological texts to elucidate the Buddhist explanation of the foundational components of experience and the way in which these are ethically significant. Chapter 5 looks at Buddhist ethical texts to demonstrate that mental states are prioritized in ethical discussions and that both the Buddhist moral problem and moral solution pertain to the way we see and experience the world.

Since Goodman has argued most extensively that Buddhist ethics is best understood as a kind of universalist consequentialism, Chapter 2 begins with an examination of Goodman's methodology and arguments. Goodman identifies an agent-neutral approach as the central characteristic of a consequentialist ethical system, the characteristic that differentiates it from systems of virtue ethics, which are agent-relative. He interprets themes within Buddhist texts such as the promotion of self-sacrifice and the dedication of merit as evidence of the agent neutral approach of a consequentialist ethical system. I aim to demonstrate that these examples should be read as moral instructions for the agent's motivational state rather than evidence supporting that Buddhist ethics is a type of consequentialism. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate that Goodman's methodology of confining the inquiry into Buddhist ethics to its categorization as one of two Western ethical systems based on the criteria of Western ethical thought limits the possibility for a comprehensive understanding of Buddhist ethics.

I then turn to arguments made by Goodman, Williams, and Siderits specifically in regard to Śāntideva. These scholars each contend that Śāntideva's metaphysical position commits him to a universalist consequentialist ethics and point to his discussion of the ethical meditative practice of equalizing and exchanging self and other in Chapter 8 of *How to Lead an Awakened Life* as evidence. I will contest the claim that the Buddhist doctrine of selflessness entails the agent neutrality that characterizes consequentialism. I will argue that Śāntideva's use of the metaphysical doctrine of selflessness within an ethical context does not aim to demonstrate a moral obligation based on agent neutrality, and thus is not a form of consequentialism. Instead, I will argue that he uses it to effect a psychological shift in the agent for the purposes of moral development.

I argue that, in Chapter 8, Śāntideva is simply pointing out the irrationality of distinguishing pains based on their owners, together with the possibility for taking on the concerns of others as our own, because of the malleable boundaries of the conception of identity. I contend that, in this section of his treatise, Śāntideva is instructing the practitioner to harness the powerful psychological forces that already exist within our experience, such as the aversion to our own pain or attachment to our future selves, and extend their scope through expanding the conception of self, transforming our experience and moral conduct from one motivated by self-concern to one centered on concern for others.

After arguing that the emphasis on the mental domain of the agent fatally undermines a consequentialist interpretation of Buddhist ethics, in Chapter 3, I address the virtue ethics interpretation. While it might seem that an emphasis on the mental states of the agent could accord with a form of virtue ethics, I argue that there are structural differences between the two systems that preclude this classification. It is Keown who offers the most detailed account of this position, so using his arguments I engage in a comparative analysis of the structures of virtue ethics and Buddhist ethics. I identify five critical structural features of virtue ethics and argue that they do not characterize Buddhist ethics. I will argue that neither the Buddhist account of the relationship between virtues and nirvana nor the Buddhist explanation of moral choice and agency are consistent with a virtue ethics.

In the second section, I begin the inquiry into Buddhist ethical writings on their own terms. To argue that moral phenomenology is foundational to Buddhist ethical thought, in Chapter 4, I turn first to the Buddhist psychological treatises of Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Buddhaghosa, highlighting the fundamental mental processes that shape experience with the

intention of demonstrating that these Buddhist psychology texts provide the foundation for understanding that the way we construct our experience of the world is ethically significant.

In Chapter 5, I turn to Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical texts to demonstrate how this psychological foundation is used in these texts in the formulation of a moral phenomenology. I use primarily the works of Āryadeva and Śāntideva; I call attention to the fact that these texts prioritize mental states in their ethical discussions and present a division of two types of moral perception: the confused way of seeing the world that is characterized by vice and the accurate way of seeing the world that characterizes virtue. These texts identify the moral problem with confusion about reality, and the moral solution as a transformation of the way we experience the world through the cultivation of a metaphysically accurate understanding. In the final stage of making the case for moral phenomenology as central to Buddhist ethical thought, I turn to the *Prajñāparamitā* literature, focusing on the *Heart Sūtra* and *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* to demonstrate that in these *sūtras* we can find the seeds of the ethical system of Āryadeva and Śāntideva since they also stress the importance of a transformation of vision as the basis of ethical activity.

Chapter Two: Buddhist Ethics and Consequentialism

Many Western philosophers examining Buddhist ethics, particularly when considering Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics, have argued that Buddhist ethics is a type of universalist consequentialism. Goodman (2009), Williams (1998), and Siderits (2000) each argue that Buddhist ethics, like universalist consequentialism, is primarily concerned with the consequences of actions, especially the impact of actions on the welfare of all sentient beings. In this chapter, I will explain and examine the argument that Buddhist ethics is a type of universalist consequentialism, and I will challenge the interpretation of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics as a type of consequentialism. In particular, I will demonstrate that a consequentialist reading of Śāntideva's *Guide to Awakened Living* obscures the unique features of his ethical system. When read on its own terms, the unique ethical system that begins to emerge is one that prioritizes mental states and is primarily concerned with a transformation of the way the agent engages with the world.

2.1 Goodman's Account

In *Consequences of Compassion*, Goodman (2009) argues that if the Buddha himself, or important historical Buddhist ethicists such as Buddhaghosa, Asaṅga, or Śāntideva, were somehow able to engage in dialogue with contemporary Western philosophers on moral theory, then they would endorse the views of those Western thinkers who put forward a type of universal consequentialism (p. 4). He approaches Buddhist ethics by first partitioning the space of possibilities into virtue ethics or consequentialism, and then proposing a set of criteria to distinguish consequentialism from virtue ethics, arguing that these criteria force Buddhist thinkers into the consequentialist camp (p. 90). In examining Goodman's approach, I aim to demonstrate that this methodology of assessing Buddhist ethics based on the criteria which

distinguish Western ethical systems impedes from the outset the possibility of a complete and accurate understanding of the structure of Buddhist ethics.⁵

Goodman (2009) focuses on the difference between the agent-neutral approach of universal consequentialism and the agent-relative approach of virtue ethics as the key criteria for determining with which of these ethical theories Buddhist ethics is to be identified. Agent-relative approaches distinguish between different agents and their associated aims, while agent-neutral approaches assign common ethical aims to all agents. In an agent-neutral approach, it is not important who performs or receives the benefit of a particular action, but that the benefit itself is maximized. In making his argument for Buddhist ethics to be understood as a type of consequentialism, Goodman emphasizes the fact that the agent-neutral approach of universalist consequentialism sometimes calls for demanding actions, like that of self-sacrifice or neglecting loved ones in order to increase the overall welfare of many. With this in mind, Goodman is interested in seeking out instances in which Buddhist ethicists express an agent-neutral approach and the accompanying signs of demanding actions as evidence that Buddhist ethical theory is not a virtue theory, but a universalist consequentialist theory.

2.1.1 Theravāda Ethics and Rule-Consequentialism

Goodman (2009) begins his argument that Buddhist ethics is a form of consequentialism by challenging the view that Theravāda ethics is best thought of as a type virtue ethics, a view made popular by the influential work of Damien Keown. Goodman argues that the ethical view of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, a tradition he takes to represent a continuation of early Buddhist thought, is closer to consequentialism than virtue ethics (p. 47). In particular, he first

⁵ For alternative critiques of Goodman's consequentialist interpretation of Buddhist ethics, see for example, Garfield (2011), Gowan (2015, pp. 129-137), Harvey (2000, p. 50), and Todd (2013, pp. 32-33).

argues that the doctrine of karma provides evidence that the Theravāda tradition defines actions as right or wrong in dependence upon their consequences. He then argues that Theravāda Buddhists, like proponents of universalist versions of consequentialism, take into consideration the welfare of all beings, and that this is evidenced in their meditative instructions on the need for the development of the four divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*), which are compassion (*karuṇā*), love (*mettā*), joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Goodman then argues that it is in the later Mahāyāna tradition that the consequentialist-like features found in early Buddhist traditions develop into an explicit consequentialist ethical position. My critique of Goodman's position focuses primarily on his interpretation of Mahāyāna sources; however, I will first address some of the problems with considering early Buddhist ethical concepts as consequentialist.

There are two obvious objections to understanding Theravāda Buddhist ethics as a type of consequentialism, and it is in response to these objections that Goodman provides a detailed account of the way in which he understands Buddhist ethics to conform to a consequentialist model. He concedes that if Theravāda Buddhist ethics is a form of consequentialism, then it has to be an indirect form, and one that considers virtues to be an important part of the welfare that is to be maximized.

The two possible objections to regarding Theravāda ethics as a type of universalist consequentialism to which Goodman responds are: (1) Theravāda ethics does not explicitly deal with the resolution of conflicts. A common feature of many universalist consequentialist ethical theories is concern with determining the best course of action in situations where the needs of one group of people are incompatible with the well-being of another group of people. If Theravāda ethics is indeed a form of universalist consequentialism, then one may question why we do not see discussions addressing these kinds of moral dilemmas in Theravāda ethical texts.

(2) One may object that Theravāda ethics is not a form of consequentialism because it prioritizes the observance of vows over concern for the consequences of actions. This means, for example, that a Theravādin monastic should follow the rule of not lying regardless of the possible outcome, even if that means that telling the truth might result in an innocent person losing her life.

Goodman defends his position from the first objection, the concern that Buddhist ethics is unlike universalist consequentialist ethics because it does not deal with conflicts of interest, by arguing that well-being in Theravāda ethics has two components: it includes not only worldly happiness, but also virtues. Goodman (2009) uses the term “character consequentialism” to refer to this two-fold theory of well-being (p. 70). He argues that since virtues can be personally cultivated without others incurring an expense, conflicts of interest are less of an issue than with theories that describe a type of welfare that relies on a limited or shared resource. Goodman explains, “If we interpret the Theravāda as regarding virtue as the primary component of well-being, we can explain the fact that their formulations of consequentialism seem not to address the issue of conflicts of interest” (p. 49). In trying to distinguish Buddhist ethics from a form of virtue ethics, Goodman is still forced to acknowledge and account for the emphasis on virtues in Buddhist ethical texts. This seems to be an inconvenience incorporated into the system. The question remains open as to why Buddhist ethics is consequentialist rather than a form of virtue ethics.

Goodman’s response to the second objection, that Theravāda ethics is not consequentialist, since it prioritizes adherence to vows over consequences, is to argue that even though Theravāda ethics is not a direct form of consequentialism, it is nonetheless an indirect form of consequentialism. He further characterizes Theravāda ethics as a type of rule

consequentialism. He grants that Theravāda ethicists prescribe a set of inflexible rules, but asserts that these rules are justified in terms of the consequences of following them. This, he suggests, “explains both the insistence on following the rules no matter what and the scriptural statements that those who practice Buddhism are practicing for the many” (Goodman, 2009, p. 59). I find Goodman’s response to this objection unconvincing, and I will analyze and critique this position below.

In summary, Goodman argues that Theravāda ethics is not a form of virtue ethics, but is instead a form of consequentialism, albeit an indirect one, and that it is universalist in part because it includes virtues such as love and compassion in the good that is to be maximized. Goodman (2009) claims, Theravāda ethics is a “form of rule-consequentialism, with a well-being that counts both happiness and virtue as intrinsically good” (p. 69). As evidence for his position, Goodman appeals to accounts of self-sacrifice and other moral demands found in Buddhist ethical texts.

My critique of Goodman’s position will first focus on the problems I see with interpreting Theravāda ethics as rule-consequentialism and then move to an analysis of those accounts of self-sacrifice and moral demands that Goodman cites. Rather than being a form of consequentialism, I will argue that the moral focus of Theravāda ethics is on the mental domain, and that this focus is taken up and fully developed in Mahāyāna ethics into a type of moral phenomenology. I will also argue that this reading has been overlooked because of the problematic methodology of considering Buddhist ethics under the constraints of classifying it either as a kind of virtue ethics or consequentialism.

Goodman's argument that Buddhist ethics is a form of consequentialism, and that Theravāda ethics is an indirect form of consequentialism, is based on an explanation of karma as

found in the Pāli canon. According to the Buddhist doctrine of karma, actions that bring about harm result in future pain for the agent, and actions that bring about benefit result in future pleasure for the agent. Since the former are considered unwholesome actions and the latter wholesome actions, Goodman (2009) argues that Buddhist ethicists, like consequentialists, take consequences as the criteria for determining the moral value of an action (p. 48).

If Goodman were correct, we would expect to see evidence that actions described as good and bad are assessed solely by their consequences. However, when we look at the explanation of karma in the Pāli canon, we see that that the most important ethical considerations are not the consequences of the action, but instead the moral psychology of the agent at the time of engaging in the action. Praise or blame is attributed to agents based on their motivation and not based on the outcomes of their actions. When discussions of karma do turn to the consequences of actions, the focus is not on the immediate results of the action, but on the later “karmic” result for the agent. If this is an example of consequentialist ethics, then it is an egoistic version rather than universal welfare that Goodman asserts the Theravāda Buddhist promotes. For Goodman’s argument to succeed, he has to clearly demonstrate that the action is judged as good or bad depending on the karmic outcome of the action, and that the operation of karma is not such that the outcome is positive based on the action being accompanied by a good intention.

Goodman cannot do so: the moral evaluations in Buddhist texts explain that karma is not unidirectional.⁶ For the consequentialist, an action is judged right or wrong solely in virtue of the result; the intention with which the act is undertaken is irrelevant to the moral assessment of the action. The Buddhist explanation of karma, on the other hand, demonstrates that intention is an essential component of Buddhist moral assessment. Karma is equated not only with action,

⁶ See, for instance, Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, IV.9.

but also with the intention that motivates these actions.⁷ For example, if the action were undertaken with a positive motivation, then, according to the doctrine of karma, the result would have some positive aspect. If Euthyphro were a Buddhist, Socrates may well have asked him whether actions are right due to their good outcomes or whether outcomes are good due to right actions. While a consequentialist would stress that an action is judged right only due to its outcome being good, Buddhist ethicists also stress that an action is good because of its associated wholesome mental states, such as intention. Moreover, Buddhist ethicists also claim that it is *because* the action is right that a good karmic outcome results.

Theravādin Buddhists, for whom the Pāli canon represents the authentic teachings of the Buddha, are characterized by their valuing a strict adherence to monastic discipline and their emphasis on personal liberation from samsara as the goal of practice. These values, Goodman concedes, indicate a different ethical structure than that of typical consequentialism. Goodman (2009) acknowledges that there are "important aspects of the moral outlook of Theravādins that seem to be clearly non-consequentialist. For many Theravādins, the precepts are absolute rules that must not be broken even to prevent terrible consequences. For example, the tradition tells us that Saints, who perfectly exemplify Theravādin moral ideals, would never kill any sentient being, whether person or animal, under any circumstances" (p. 56). Goodman explains this prioritizing of adherence to vows over consequences by suggesting that Theravāda ethics is an indirect form of consequentialism, which he describes as rule-consequentialism. He describes rule-consequentialism as follows:

⁷ See, for instance, Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, IV.1: The variety of the world arises from action (*karma*). Karma is intention (*cetanā*) and what it produces. Intention (*cetanā*) is mental action: it engenders bodily and vocal actions. (IV.1) *Las las 'jig rten sna tshogs skyes, de ni sems pa dang des byas/ sems pa yid kyi las yin no, des bskyed lus dang ngag gi las/* (D4089: 10b).

the way to determine what to do involves first ascertaining the set of rules that, if everyone followed them, would produce the best overall consequences. Since these rules, if they were obeyed, would achieve the maximum welfare of all, they are the true principles of morality. We might argue, then, that the criterion for determining the rightness of actions should appeal to these rules, and therefore should depend only indirectly on consequences. If we adopt this suggestion, we become rule-consequentialists. (p. 28)

Goodman suggests that Theravāda monastic rules are justified in terms of the consequences that generally follow from those actions, and not only personal consequences, but also the consequences for others. Goodman writes, "Such a theory could explain both the insistence on following the rules no matter what and the scriptural statements that those who practice Buddhism are practicing for the benefit of the many" (p. 59).

If Goodman's claim that Theravāda ethics is best thought of as rule consequentialism were correct, we should be able to find within Theravāda ethics the important structural components that make an ethical system rule consequentialist. For an ethical system to be rule-consequentialist, it must (1) comprise rules or ethical guidelines that are accepted because of their consequences, (2) what is morally wrong must be determined either directly by these rules (strict) or indirectly through the consequences of not following the rules (partial). The fact that Theravāda Buddhists refer to a set of rules when making moral decisions, or that the moral standing of a Theravādin is assessed in part by how well he or she follows a set of rules, is not sufficient to establish that Theravāda is rule-consequentialist.

There is, however, no evidence to suggest that the ethical guidelines set forth in the Pāli literature of the Theravāda texts were selected only because of their consequences, or that moral wrongness is determined by these rules. Theravāda monks follow the vināya rules not because of concerns about consequences, but in virtue of the importance of adherence to vows regardless of the consequences of their actions. Their mental training focuses on self-cultivation, the

elimination of destructive emotions, and the development of positive mental states, rather than the increase of a universal good. Moreover, while the success of rule-consequentialism is premised on some degree of universal adherence in order to produce the best consequences, the Theravāda monastic vows are not intended to be universally followed, and are able to fulfill their purpose of supporting individual liberation even if only one person follows them.

2.1.2 Self-sacrifice as Moral Development

Goodman (2009) argues that one of the features that distinguish virtue ethics from consequentialism is that in consequentialism, an action can be right even though it is harmful to one's own flourishing, while in virtue ethics there is a close connection between virtuous actions and the agent's own well-being (p. 42). Consequentialist theories are agent-neutral, meaning that there is no distinction made between one's own welfare and the welfare of others. For this reason, consequentialism can be extremely demanding, at times even calling for self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. Goodman argues that since self-sacrifice inhibits the further development of the agent, it is at odds with the agent-relative approach of virtue ethics. He cites passages from Buddhist texts in which the act of self-sacrifice is explained as morally praiseworthy, arguing that this reveals that Buddhist ethicists prioritize universalist moral considerations at the expense of self-concern, and for this reason they should be considered consequentialists.

Goodman refers to a well-known Jātaka tale, an account of one of the Buddha's previous lives, in which he, as a bodhisattva, sacrifices his own body, so that a starving tigress would not eat her cubs. Goodman (2009) describes the ethical message of this tale as "foreign to common-sense moral thought," but "quite similar to the very demanding character of universalist consequentialism" (p. 52). He concludes that only "consequentialism shares both the noble altruism and the frightening extremism of Buddhist ethics" (p. 52).

From the general perspective of Western ethical thought, the fact that an ethical theory requires an agent to sacrifice himself indicates that the system prioritizes some good or value above the moral development of the agent, since an act of self-sacrifice entails the end of that agent's moral development. This, however, is not a compelling means for evaluating a Buddhist ethical system, since according to the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, an act of self-sacrifice does not result in the end of an agent's moral development, and could even contribute to it. Self-sacrifice and self-cultivation are not necessarily inconsistent in Buddhist ethical systems. In this Jātaka tale the Bodhisattva even comments that the act of sacrificing his body “might also thereby fulfill my dream of some day being of help to others... and so come closer to perfect enlightenment” (trans. Khoroché, 1989, p.8). We therefore cannot use instances of self-sacrifice to infer that a Buddhist ethical system is closer to universalist consequentialism than to ethical systems that promote personal cultivation, such as virtue ethics. Indeed, to argue that this Jātaka tale is an example of consequentialist ethics because it overlooks the moral development of the agent is to miss the context of the Jātaka tales as a whole; these stories describe how the Buddha progressed throughout his previous lives towards ethical maturity.

The Jātaka tale of the starving tigress is not only a story of self-sacrifice for the good of others, but also a story of personal cultivation. The bodhisattva gives multiple reasons for undertaking his act of self-sacrifice beyond the direct benefit to the tigress and her cubs, saying, “I cannot be happy as long as there is someone who is not happy” (trans. Khoroché, 1989, p.7). In reference to his decision to sacrifice his body to the tigress, he says, “this would be an example to those who strive for the good of the world, an encouragement to those who falter, a delight to those who are practiced in charity, a powerful attraction to noble hearts... It would

inspire faith in those who follow the better way” (trans. Khoroché, 1989, p. 8). Thus the bodhisattva shows consideration for his own and others’ mental states in undertaking this action.

One of the lessons of this Jātaka tale of the starving tigress is to give insight into what it is like to be a bodhisattva, in particular, what it is like to be a bodhisattva encountering a suffering and desperate mother. The selfless compassion of a bodhisattva is being contrasted with the ordinary self-cherishing attitude that prioritizes one's own life over that of others. The bodhisattva is described as unconcerned for self-preservation, not even experiencing fear for his own life upon seeing the tigress. Instead he is described as being moved by incredible compassion at her distress:

The Bodhisattva remained calm at the sight of her, but compassion for another creature in distress made him shake like Himalaya in an earthquake. [17] It is remarkable how the compassionate put a brave face on things when they themselves are in dire trouble—but tremble at others’ distress, however slight. (trans. Khoroché, 1989, p. 7)

While the motherly love of the tigress is described as overcome by concern for self-preservation:

Starvation forces this beast to break the laws of affection. Here she is, ready to devour her own offspring. [19] Oh! How fierce is the instinct for self-preservation, such that a mother can be willing to eat her own young. (trans. Khoroché, 1989, p. 7)

These are two distinct ways of experiencing and acting in the world. The attitude of self-cherishing is even capable of overpowering motherly love when personal survival is threatened, while the selfless compassion of a bodhisattva may lead one to give up one's own life. These contrasted states represent two different moral phenomenologies, one that is characterized by care and the lack of self-concern, and the other characterized by intense self-grasping. These two moral phenomenologies are expressed in behavior in very different ways: the tigress is prepared to kill her cubs to save her own life, while the bodhisattva is willing to give up his life to save the tigress and cubs.

Goodman argues that we can read this narrative as indicating consequentialist ethics because the act required of the bodhisattva is very demanding; but we find no description of the bodhisattva struggling to fulfill a moral obligation. Instead, the bodhisattva is described as calm upon first seeing the tigress and as joyful when arriving at the decision to offer his body:

On making this decision to be of use to another creature, though it cost him his life, he felt a surge of joy, then astounded even the calm minds of the gods by hurling himself down. (trans. Khoroché, 1989, p. 8)

At every point in this story there is a description of the bodhisattva's mental experience: he is described as fearless when encountering the tigress, compassionate in response to her suffering, and joyful upon deciding to offer his flesh to her. Moreover, the story does not contain any uniquely consequentialist reasoning for why a bodhisattva should sacrifice himself for the tiger cubs. We might ask whether there are a certain number of cubs for whom the bodhisattva should not sacrifice himself. For example, if there were only one cub, we might question whether or not it would still be right for the bodhisattva to sacrifice himself, for surely a bodhisattva's life is of greater benefit to the world than a single cub's life.

Moreover, the story is not telling us that if we see a starving tigress about to eat her cubs, we ought to offer our body to the tigress. Instead, it describes how the morally mature engage with the world in a different way than the morally immature, and also how this looks in the world. A bodhisattva experiences the world influenced by compassion and the understanding of selflessness, and this perspective when expressed in the world may look as if it is terribly demanding. A moral action that is not demanding for the morally mature might be very demanding from the perspective of the morally immature, since their inner life is still dominated by self-grasping. In fact, in this story, the bodhisattva is said to be travelling with a disciple whom he sends away because he knows that the disciple would not understand the act of self-

sacrifice. This certainly undermines any universalist reading of this story, and, in particular, Goodman's.

Sacrificing one's body might ordinarily be considered "foreign to common-sense moral thought," or an example of "frightening extremism." For the bodhisattva, however, this act is neither demanding nor extreme; instead, it is a natural response generated from the compassionate and selfless way he experiences the situation. Importantly, the bodhisattva does not give up his life based on some moral obligation or calculation of benefits and harms, as we might find were he a consequentialist.

Moreover, there is no indication in this Jātaka tale that there is some universal good that the bodhisattva should promote above his own moral development. There is also no mention of balancing, in which a single bodhisattva's life is judged to be of lesser value than a number of cubs. What makes this act right is not its consequences, but that it was undertaken without self-cherishing and conjoined with compassion.

Goodman finds another example of self-sacrifice in Śāntideva's text, *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, citing it as evidence for a consequentialist reading of Śāntideva's ethical philosophy: "See, I give up without regret my bodies, my pleasures, and my good acquired in all three times, to accomplish good for every being" (III:10, as cited by Goodman, 2009, p. 90). Goodman argues that, in this verse, since Śāntideva is prepared to sacrifice all his possessions and even his life for the welfare of all others, he is demonstrating a consequentialist ethical approach by prioritizing universalist moral considerations over self concern. Goodman (2009) likens this passage to the act-consequentialist approach of Peter Singer who "insists on the supreme moral significance of altruistic self-sacrifice" (p. 90). Goodman concludes that Śāntideva's endorsement of altruistic self-sacrifice is clear textual evidence of his commitment to

universalist moral concerns, which leaves no room for the agent's future moral development, and so Śāntideva's ethics cannot be an agent-relative virtue ethics.

Goodman (2008) claims, "If we find a thinker presenting an ethical position that is extremely demanding, then this is evidence that we are dealing with a form of consequentialism" (p. 20). But this argument is unsound: extreme demands do not make a theory consequentialist. Deontological theories of ethics such as Kant's can be extremely demanding, although these demands are not derived from prioritizing the consequences of actions. For Kant, actions that are mandatory on consequentialist grounds may well be morally forbidden, such as killing one innocent person to save many. Reasons, for Kant, are the ultimate source for moral direction and the duties derived from reason cannot be sacrificed in order to bring about desired consequences.

To arrive at a duty based on reason requires that maxims be universalized. This, along with a commitment that humanity never be used as a means, may result in even more demanding moral dictates than those delivered by consequentialism. For instance, when a consequentialist might be required to lie in order to save the lives of others, the deontologist might have a duty to tell the truth. As Goodman (2009) himself notes,

For, Kant, we may never violate the formula of humanity, no matter how severe the consequences of following it would be. Thus Kant notoriously claims that if a murderer came to my door and asks the whereabouts of my friends, intending to find him and kill him, it would be wrong for me to answer with a lie. (p. 35)

Consequentialist and deontological systems of ethics might both at times be demanding, and while there are very clear differences between the two, these differences are not marked by the degree to which they are demanding. Hence, to argue that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist simply because it is demanding is patently unsound.

Moreover, consequentialism is not the only ethical system in which an act of self-sacrifice might be required. Aristotle's virtue ethics, for example, values courage in battle as a

virtue, and this, when exercised, might result in the agent's death. In verse ten cited above Śāntideva uses the plural term, "bodies," indicating that when a bodhisattva gives away his body, he does so with the doctrine of future lives in mind. For a Buddhist, self-sacrifice does not necessitate the end of the development of the moral agent, but on the contrary this act of generosity supports further moral development.

The position of Śāntideva on the sacrifice of the body is clarified in his only other extant text, the *Compendium of Teachings (Śikṣāsamuccaya)*. When discussing this topic, he incorporates a large section from the *Vajradhvaja Sūtra*, and we find that the moral emphasis is on the internal mental state of the agent rather than the resulting benefit for the recipient:

Thus, indeed, is the Bodhisattva, giving himself for service, having a mind humble and attentive for those who ask, having a mind to rest on as upon a carpet, with attention fixed on supporting all unhappiness like the earth, with mind devoted to unwearied service for all creatures... sacrificing ears and nose to suitors who ask it... He becomes unangered in mind, unoffended, not vexed, with mind absorbed in magnanimity, with mind partaking of the Buddha's race, with the chain of his thought unwavering in nature, full of strength and power, with mind not fixed upon his body... finding pleasure in renunciation, by sacrificing hand and foot... by the fact of not being troubled by suffering, by ability to take pleasure in the giving; with the restraint that consists in pure thought... has a mind delighting in wisdom... agreeable, pleased, delighted, joyful, friendly, happy, contented, and becoming joyful pleased and content... without expecting the reward of merit... not regarding his own body because of unconquerable joy and contentment, offering the blood from his own body... Thus he with nature content and satisfied... even when he sacrifices only a nail from his own flesh with the thought, 'This is applied to the root of good,' thus renounces his own body. (Bendall and Rouse, 1990. pp. 25-29)

Here the justification for giving away one's body is not based on the objective calculations of consequences arrived by an agent-neutral approach such as consequentialism. Instead, when discussing the bodhisattva's self-sacrifice, the Buddha continually emphasizes the mind and mental states associated with the action of giving away one's body. He describes an advanced moral state, one that the bodhisattva must aspire to and develop.

The ethical emphasis on the mental domain rather than consequences is also apparent in *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, when Śāntideva explains that a person should not engage in activities that are so demanding that they might later be regretted. Instead, he advises that aspiring bodhisattvas start at their current moral capacity and gradually strengthen it. He writes,

At the beginning, the Guide enjoins the giving of vegetables and so forth. After having habituated this, one may later gradually give away even one's own flesh.

Whenever the mentality has arisen of regarding one's body just like vegetables, and so forth, at that time, what difficulty could there be in giving away of one's flesh? (VII: 25-26)⁸

These verses do not concern what is given or the benefit that the recipient might gain from the various acts of generosity. In fact, the recipient earns no mention at all. Instead, the primary concern is the agent's mental state associated with the act of giving, in particular, that the agent not experience regret at the time of giving.

This is clearly not the agent-neutral account of consequentialism, which would require that the course of action that maximizes overall welfare be followed, and should not be delayed for individual concerns. Śāntideva is not describing the pursuit of maximizing welfare, but is offering an account of the first person experience of the moral act. Here, moral development is not merely improvement in the types of objects given, nor does it necessarily involve a progressively greater level of hardship or inner struggle. The gradual transformation of the agent whereby generosity becomes a natural expression of one's engagement in the world is the principal goal. When Śāntideva considers the moral value of a particular act, his primary

⁸ *ādaḥ śākādidāne 'pi niyojayati nāyakaḥ | tat karoti kramāt paścād yat svamāṃsāny api tyajet ||VII: 25|| yadā śākeṣv iva prajñā svamāṃse 'py upajāyate | māṃsāsthi tyajatas tasya tadā kiṃ nāma duḥkaram ||VII: 26|| tshod ma la sogs sbyin pa la 'ang // 'dren pas thog mar sbyor bar mdzad // de la goms nas phyi nas ni // rim gyis rang gi sha yang gtong // gang tshe rang gi lus la ni // tshod sogs lta bu 'i blo skyes pa // de tshe sha la sogs gtong ba // de la dka' ba ci zhig yod // (Toh. 3871, 21a).*

concern is the mental status of the agent, something that is irrelevant for and does not feature in the calculations of act-consequentialism.

This emphasis on the mental domain is fundamental to Śāntideva's account of Buddhist ethics. To exclude this aspect is to misrepresent his ethical system. This is evident in Śāntideva's definition of key moral terms and concepts. For instance, his ethical emphasis on mental states is explicit in the way he defines the perfection of generosity (*dānapāramitā*):

If one perfected generosity only upon having eliminated poverty from the world, then since there are destitute people in the world even now, how could the previous Protectors have perfected it?

The perfection of generosity is stated as the thought to give to all beings the entirety of one's possessions together with one's karmic fruit. Thus, it is simply a state of mind. (V: 9-10)⁹

Here again, the focus is not on external consequences, but on a transformation of the internal experience of the agent in a way that also transforms one's experience of the world. Similarly, Śāntideva defines the perfection of moral discipline (*śīlapāramitā*) as a mental state:

Where could fish and so forth be taken such that they would not be killed? But when one has obtained the thought to cease [killing and so forth], that is considered the perfection of moral discipline. (V: 11)¹⁰

This idea that the transformation of mind supersedes external deeds and consequences is central to Śāntideva's ethics and is captured in his famed metaphor:

How could one possibly find enough leather to cover the earth? Yet, with just the leather on the soles of one's shoes, it is as if the entire earth were covered.

⁹ *adaridraṃ jagat kṛtvā dānapāramitā yadi | jagaddaridraṃ adyāpi sā kathāṃ pūrvatāyinām*
 ||V:9|| *phalena saha sarvasvatyāgacittājjane 'khile | dānapāramitā proktā tasmāt sā cittaṃ eva tu*
 ||V:10|| *gal te 'gro ba dbul bor nas // sbyin pa'i pha rol phyin yin na // da rung 'gro bkren yod na sngon //*
skyob pa ji ltar pha rol phyin // bdog pa thams cad 'bras bcas te // sbye bo kun la btang sems kyis // sbyin
pa'i pha rol phyin gsungs te // de ltas de ni sems nyid do // (Toh. 3871, 10b).

¹⁰ *matsyādayaḥ kva nīyantāṃ mārayeyaṃ yato na tān | labdhe viraticitte tu śīlapāramitā matā* ||V:
 11|| *nya la sogs pa gang zhig tu // de dag gsod mi 'gyur bar bskrad // spong ba'i sems ni thob pa las //*
tshul khriṃs pha rol phyin par bshad // (Toh. 3871, 10b).

Likewise, although I cannot restrain the course of external affairs, I can restrain my own mind. What need would there then be to restrain anything else? (V: 13-14)¹¹

Whenever Śāntideva discusses morality, as seen in these verses on guarding ethical conduct and developing virtues, at the heart of the discussion is the content of the agent's mental experience, and when he addresses moral development, he describes a transformation of the agent's experience of the world. Whenever we see Buddhist texts promoting demanding actions, as in the early Buddhist Jātaka tales and Śāntideva's advices, we see that the focus is on the inner life of the agent rather than the causes. Goodman also cites the Buddhist practice of the transfer of merit (*pariṇāmanā*) as evidence of the demanding actions required in consequentialist ethical systems; so next I will demonstrate that in the case of this practice, too, the emphasis is not on consequences, but on the moral phenomenology of the agent.

2.1.3 Dedication: Transference or Transformation?

As evidence of consequentialism, Goodman draws from Śāntideva's dedicatory verses not only examples of demanding activities such as self-sacrifice, but also the activity of the dedication of merit. *Pariṇāmanā* is a concept in Buddhist Mahāyāna texts which is usually translated as "merit transfer" or "dedication of merit."¹² It refers to the wish that others receive the benefit of one's own accumulated merit (*puṇya*). Goodman (2009) argues that Śāntideva's invocation of *pariṇāmanā* undermines a eudaimonist interpretation of Śāntideva's ethics, and is instead an example of one of the major characteristics of utilitarian consequentialism, the

¹¹ *bhūmiṃ chādayitum sarvāṃ kutaś carma bhaviṣyati | upānaccarmamātreṇa channā bhavati medinī* ||V:13|| *bāhyā bhāvā mayā tadvac chakyā vārayitum na hi | svacittam vārayiṣyāmi kiṃ mamānyair nivāritaiḥ* ||V:14|| *sa stengs 'di dag kos g.yogs su // de snyed ko bas ga la lang // lham mthil tsam gyi ko bas ni // sa stengs thams cad g.yogs dang 'dra // de bzhin phyi rol dños po yang // bdag gis phyir bzlog mi lang gi // bdag gi sems 'di phyir bzlog bya 'i // gzhan rnams bzlog go ci zhig dgos //* (Toh. 3871, 10b).

¹² For a discussion on the development of *pariṇāmanā* and its relation to Theravada Buddhism, see Clayton, 2006, p. 81.

balancing of one's own interest against the interests of others in the pursuit of maximizing the good (p. 92).

In making his argument that merit transfer is evidence for a consequentialist reading of Śāntideva's ethics, Goodman quotes from chapter three of Śāntideva's *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, which treats the topics of merit accumulation and generosity:

May I avert the pain of hunger and thirst with showers of food and drink. May I become both drink and food in the intermediate aeons of famine.

May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings. May I wait upon them with various forms of offering.

See, I give up without regret my bodies, my pleasures, and my good acquired in all three times, to accomplish good for every being. (III:8-10, as cited in Goodman, 2009, p. 90)¹³

Goodman suggests that these verses on dedicating merit provide evidence of promoting others' well being above one's own and the type of demands that the universalist consequentialist approach may require of the agent. In III:10, Śāntideva specifically refers to giving up his good (*punya*), which Goodman interprets as the bodhisattva intending to actually transfer his merit to others, something that might not fit neatly into an ethical system that promotes the well being or experiential development of the agent. I will argue that these dedicatory verses do not imply a belief in actual merit transfer, but instead represent an aspirational state of mind to be cultivated by the bodhisattva.

An obvious objection to this reading of Śāntideva as consequentialist based on his account of merit transfer is that the notion that someone could *actually* transfer his or her accumulated merit to another contravenes the traditional Buddhist understanding of the operation

¹³ From Crosby and Skilton's translation of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (1995, p. 20). Note that there is a difference in the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions of this text. In the Tibetan, the verses cited here are 9, 10, and 11, while in the Sanskrit they are 8, 9, and 10.

of karma. Udbhaṭasiddhasvāmin's *Praise of the Exalted One (Viśeṣastava)* (which opens the Tibetan Tengyur) states,

The brahmins say that virtue and sin may transfer to others – like giving and receiving a gift. You [O Buddha] taught that what one has done does not perish and that one does not meet with the effects of what one has not done.¹⁴

The Buddha criticized the brahmins of his time who made a living based on the belief that they could perform ceremonies on the behalf of others, thereby increasing others' merit and providing them benefit. As the following quote from the *King of Concentration Sūtra (Samādhirāja Sūtra)* indicates, the Buddha taught that a person can only experience the results of his or her own actions: “Further, once you have committed an action, you will experience its effect; And you will not experience the effects of what others have done.”¹⁵ Śāntideva was well aware of this sūtra and of the standard Buddhist position on karma as non-transferrable.¹⁶ It is improbable then, that in his dedicatory verses of *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, Śāntideva is contending that others can actually receive his merit or that he could truly take on the suffering of the world. A literal understanding of merit transfer is all the more unlikely given the wording of III:10 wherein Śāntideva wishes to transfer his merit of the three times. Clearly, this must be read as an aspiration, since future merit is non-existent. Moreover, if Śāntideva had intended these statements literally, this would imply that he thought that all the previous and current Buddhas and bodhisattvas had failed in this endeavor of the transfer of their presumably limitless merit since the suffering of beings persists. Instead, for Buddhist, merit accumulation and moral development is the agent's responsibility. It is not something that can be bestowed on someone like a boon.

¹⁴ As cited in Tsongkhapa, 2000, p. 214.

¹⁵ As cited in Tsongkhapa, 2000, p. 214.

¹⁶ Śāntideva cites a story from the *Samādhirāja Sūtra* in Chapter Eight, verse 106 of his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in addition to referencing the sūtra twenty times in his *Śikṣasamuccaya*.

Clayton (2005) has explained that in Śāntideva's *Compendium of Teachings*, the function of the transfer of merit is to protect the merit. She explains that in this text, Śāntideva lays out a nine-fold process, wherein the three tasks of guarding, purifying, and cultivating (*rakṣā, śuddhi, vardhana*), are each applied to three phenomena, the body, possessions, and merit (*ātmabhāva, bhoga, śubha*) (p. 2). Interestingly, the three phenomena mentioned here are also the three items that Śāntideva dedicates in III:10 of his *How to Lead an Awakened Life* discussed above.¹⁷

Clayton explains that the way that a bodhisattva guards his or her own merit is through the mental aspiration of dedicating it to others. She argues,

It is also evident that for Śāntideva the essence of protecting (*rakṣā*) *puṇya* is *bodhipariṇāmanā*, the transference of merit—the fortunate results of one's deeds—to all beings, for the sake of their awakening (158.6; BR 156). Since the motive behind an act determines to a large extent the amount of karmic benefit that arises, naturally if the motive is to give the benefits to others, the karmic fortune will be “protected.” (p. 3)

The fact that Śāntideva regards the mental aspiration of the "transfer of merit" as a way of guarding one's own merit indicates that he does not have in mind a literal transfer of merit in these dedicatory verses. Not only is dedication of merit not considered a literal transfer of merit, but *pariṇāmanā* as an aspiration is actually a means by which one increases the karmic benefit to oneself.

Another way to interpret *pariṇāmanā* is that a bodhisattva aspiring for awakening is instructed to imagine giving away the merit gained from his good deeds – not in the hope that it will somehow ripens for another, but so that the bodhisattva does not develop attachment to the gains that the merit might bring for himself. In this way the merit is protected from ripening as worldly pleasure via craving, and instead contributes to the bodhisattva's development of non-attachment and compassion. For both the *Compendium of Teachings* and *How to Lead an*

¹⁷ Clayton translates *ātmabhāva, bhoga, śubha* as respectively "one's self," "one's possessions," and "one's welfare." Here I have used the common translation for *ātmabhāva* as "body" and *śubha* as "merit."

Awakened Life, the culmination of the explanation of the bodhisattva's path is a chapter on the dedication of merit, suggesting that the achievement of such a mental state plays an important role in the fulfillment of the bodhisattva path.

The notion that the dedication and protection of merit are an experiential transformation of the way the agent approaches acting in the world rather than an actual exchange or transference of merit from the bodhisattva to another finds support in Nagao's work on the etymology of the Sanskrit word *pariṇāmanā* and the Tibetan equivalent *sngo ba*. Nagao (1991) explains that the verbal root from which this noun derives "pari √ṇam means 'to bend,' 'to change,' 'to develop,' 'to become ripe,' and so forth when used in an intransitive sense," and the Tibetan equivalent for this verbal form, '*gyur ba*, also suggests an act of transformation (p. 83). He notes that the nominal form *pariṇāmanā* is translated in Tibetan as *sngo ba*, which is interpreted, "*yid kyis mos pa byed pa*," referring to the mind making an aspiration or wish (p. 83). Taking this into account, although the common translation into English has been dedication or transfer of merit, Nagao postulates that translators have been "influenced by the Chinese translation and thus diverged from the fundamental meanings that are given in dictionaries" (p. 84). The dedication of merit, *pariṇāmanā*, represents more an aspiration than a giving away, and in this way is best understood as mental activity of the agent. The dedication of merit is a moral practice *now*, rather than a hope to be moral in the future.

If we look back at the dedication verses that Goodman quotes (III: 8-10) in context, we find that immediately after making these dedications, Śāntideva describes *bodhicitta*, the bodhisattva's motivational state (III: 22-24).¹⁸ This context suggests that the previous dedication verses were aspirations developed as part of the process of generating this particular mental state.

¹⁸ These verses in Chapter Three became an important part of a ceremony in Tibetan Buddhism focused on generating this moral state called the awakened mind.

Śāntideva then describes strengthening this mental state by contemplating that "Today my life has (borne) fruit... I've been born into the family of the Buddha," and by making a commitment that this mental state shall guide all his future actions (III: 26).¹⁹ Seen within the larger logic of the chapter, these dedications are not a description of the actual transfer of merit, but of the development of the motivational state of a bodhisattva.

In the verses III: 8-10 quoted by Goodman, Śāntideva's dedication is personal. He writes in the first person, clearly expressing an aspiration rather than a call to action. This aspiration represents the motivational state with which a bodhisattva should approach the world, and it is designed to reinforce positive mental states such as compassion and generosity rather than negative ones such as selfishness and greed. Goodman acknowledges that his interpretation of Śāntideva's dedication as a transference of merit contradicts the traditional view of karma, however, he contends that to read these dedication verses in this traditional way is incorrect. To demonstrate why such a reading of Śāntideva is mistaken, he quotes the following dedicatory verses from Chapter Ten:

Through my merit may all those in any of the directions suffering distress in body or mind find oceans of happiness and delight.

By this merit of mine may all beings without exception desist from every evil deed and always act skillfully. (X: 2-3, as cited in Goodman, 2008, p. 23)²⁰

These verses, he suggests, are indications that when Śāntideva is describing the act of dedication, what he has in mind is that his own merit be transferred to others so that they benefit. Any doubt that this is the case, he maintains, should be alleviated by the final verse in this chapter, a verse he describes as driving this point home "like a sledge hammer":

¹⁹ Trans. Batchelor, 1999.

²⁰ From Crosby and Skilton's translation of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (1995, 138, 141).

Whatever suffering is in store for the world, may it all ripen in me. May the world find happiness through the pure deeds of the Bodhisattvas. (X: 56, as cited in Goodman, 2008, p. 23).²¹

Goodman argues that this verse provides clear evidence that Śāntideva places the welfare of all sentient beings above the welfare and also the development of the agent. There is not, that I am aware of, a Buddhist account that treats *pariṇāmanā* as an actual transfer of merit; but even if we were to accept that this is actually the intention of these verses, and that Śāntideva places the benefit of others ahead of himself, receiving a transfer of demerit, this still falls short of demonstrating a universalist consequentialist approach because it is agent-relative rather than agent-neutral. Who experiences suffering counts. There is again no mention of reducing the total amount of suffering. Here, Śāntideva is not describing a case of balancing by taking on a small amount of suffering in order to ensure the removal of some greater amount of suffering. Śāntideva is not proposing an agent-neutral perspective in which those who have the capacity for taking on more suffering ought to take on the suffering of others who would experience the pain more intensely. Instead, Śāntideva is resolving to take on the suffering, so that others are relieved of it. The amount of suffering remains the same.

Garfield offers an alternate reading to Goodman of the dedication of merit in Chapters Three and Ten, explaining them to be descriptions of moral states. He comments that "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" (Garfield, 2011, p. 3). To completely appreciate Garfield's observation requires an understanding of the structure of the text, and to this end the first verse of Chapter Nine is pivotal. Śāntideva writes,

The Sage taught all of these matters
For the sake of wisdom.

²¹ From Crosby and Skilton's translation of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (1995, 143).

Therefore, if one wishes to avoid suffering,
 And to attain peace, one should cultivate wisdom.
 (IX: 1, as cited in Garfield, 2011, p. 21)

Garfield, comparing the dedicatory verses in Chapters Three and Ten, observes that there is a shift in the emphasis away from the agent precipitated by the development of wisdom. He notes that in the verses from Chapter Three, "the generosity [Śāntideva] imagines cultivating involves depersonalizing his own motivations and developing a commitment to benefit all beings in direct material ways," while in Chapter Ten, "Śāntideva is now depersonalizing not only his ends, but his own state of being" (p. 9-10). Garfield frames this experiential shift with the two types of bodhicitta, aspirational bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta. He notes, "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" (p. 11).

The more explicit focus in the verses from Chapter Ten on a transformation of the world rather than of the person, then, is not further evidence that the dedications in Chapter Three should be read as consequentialist as Goodman would argue, but instead as a contrast between two moral states demonstrating the morally transformative power that the realization of wisdom has upon the agent. What Goodman sees as evidence of consequentialism is rather a description of the depersonalization of the moral experience. Śāntideva emphasizes not the consequences of actions, but the first person experience of engaging in ethical activity. Aspirations themselves become a practice of ethics because they are actively transforming the moral experience. Understanding moral development as a transformation of one's engagement with the world serves as the foundation for building a structure of Śāntideva's moral theory.

These verses on dedication, therefore, do not show that Śāntideva is consequentialist; given that the traditional account of the transfer of merit is a figurative aspiration, these verses should be read as describing a motivational state that functions to counteract selfishness. The aspiration is extreme not because of an ethical approach that is agent-neutral, but because it is designed to counteract selfishness which is ordinarily pervasive and powerful. The dedication of merit is an example of a means of transforming the view of self and self-grasping, a transformation which is at the heart of Śāntideva's ethics. The practice of dedication supports the development of wisdom in an aspiring bodhisattva, and then becomes the spontaneous ethical expression of a bodhisattva who has realized wisdom. Later in chapter five, I further examine Śāntideva's view on merit in the context of the accumulation of merit and his concept of the field of merit (*puṇya kṣetra*). It is evident, I will argue, that for Śāntideva the concept of merit – whether the dedication of merit or the accumulation of merit – primarily pertains to the mental state, and in particular to the attitude of the agent. For Śāntideva, ethical value resides in the mental domain, in any physical or verbal action itself or their consequences.

So far, I have responded to arguments that cite particular Buddhist ethical practices as evidence for the assertion that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist. I have demonstrated that none of them are sound. Instead, the ethical concern in these practices is primarily with the mental domain and in particular with how one takes up the world. Another prominent argument for Buddhist ethics as consequentialist focuses on the Buddhist metaphysical position that there is no self. The understanding of the ontology of agents and its relation to action theory is of course relevant to ethics, and modern scholars have reasoned that the Buddhist metaphysical position of selflessness forces Buddhist ethics to conform to a consequentialist approach. In the next section, I will examine a number of those arguments, aiming to demonstrate instead that the

Buddhist metaphysical position does not commit Buddhism to a consequentialist ethical position, but instead highlights the relationship between epistemology and Buddhist moral phenomenology.

2.2 An Approach to Compassion: Metaphysical or Psychological?

Goodman, Williams, and Siderits all argue not only that Śāntideva is in fact committed to universalist consequentialism, but also that Śāntideva's metaphysical position *commits* him to a universalist consequentialist ethics rather than a type of virtue ethics. I will first consider Goodman's argument and then turn to that of Williams.

Goodman (2008) contends that commitment to the personal development emphasized in virtue ethics is inconsistent with the Buddhist metaphysical position, whose most important tenet is the rejection of the existence of self, and that a commitment to universalist consequentialism follows from the doctrine of selflessness. He sees an agent-neutral approach represented in *How to Lead an Awakened Life* when Śāntideva argues for not distinguishing between oneself and other on the grounds of selflessness.

Goodman draws on the work of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, in which a metaphysical position, one that critically deconstructs the notion of personal identity, is used to support an agent-neutral and consequentialist view towards ethics. Parfit's reductionist views of person and their implications for ethics, Goodman suggests, look strikingly similar to Śāntideva's introduction of the Buddhist concept of no-self (*anātman*) into the moral discussion. Goodman (2008) claims, "In both cases, the author starts with a view that is a version of the no-self doctrine, and attempts to use this view to defend an ethics of self-sacrifice for the good of all sentient beings" (p. 24).

Goodman argues that the position of no-self entails the agent-neutrality of consequentialism, since it involves the commitment to seeing the divisions between ourselves and others as no more significant than the difference between our present and future selves. Parfit, based on his metaphysical position that questions the significance of the idea of persons and the divisions between them, argues that the irrationality of participating in actions that benefit me in the short term but hurt me in the long term equally applies to participating in actions that benefit myself but are harmful to others. Śāntideva says something similar in the eighth chapter of his *How to Lead an Awakened Life*:

If I give them no protection because their suffering does not afflict me,
why do I protect my body against future suffering when it does not afflict me?

If you think it is for the person who has the pain to guard against it,
a pain in the foot is not of the hand, so why is the one protected by the other?
(VIII: 97, 99, as cited in Goodman, 2008, p. 24)²²

Here Śāntideva gives two arguments to undermine our resistance to helping others, one spatial and the other temporal. He asks, if the reason for not protecting others from pain is because I do not feel their pain, then why do I work against my future suffering, since the present "I" does not experience it? The spatial argument is similar, asking, why does the hand help the foot when it is the foot's pain, not the hand's? Śāntideva is not invoking the doctrine of selflessness in order to argue that it is irrational to distinguish between self and other; this passage is not meant to convey an ethical imperative based on a metaphysical premise, but to point out the inconsistency in our approach to ours and others' pain.

Śāntideva does not question the rationality of the distinction between self and other, but rather the significance of the distinction. There is a distinction between the hand and foot, but that distinction is not significant when the hand relieves the foot's pain. Similarly, Śāntideva

²² From Crosby and Skilton's translation of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (1995, p. 96).

does not argue that there is no distinction between self and other, but that the distinction is not significant when considering whether or not to help others in pain.

Śāntideva points out that the experience of a distinction between ourselves and others arises from our strong identification with such things as our bodies and future selves. It is this identification that demarcates our circumference of concern. He suggests that our identification with things is not fixed but expandable. His point is not that we should act without selfishness because there is no metaphysical difference between self and other. Instead, he maintains that through identifying more closely with others by, for example, relating to them on the level that they also want happiness and don't want suffering, we could naturally become less selfish.

Śāntideva emphasizes the expandability of one's circumference of concern. If Śāntideva's audience had been broader than a gathering of monks, he may well have argued that although mothers and babies are distinct persons, the maternal instinct to protect one's child is an example of an experiential extension of the conception of self to include another. Śāntideva asserts that it is possible to identify with all beings, similar to the way that a mother includes her child within her identity. In this way we can overcome the personal selfishness that he believes is the cause for our disturbing mental states such as greed, pride, and jealousy, and instead cultivate wholesome mental states such as generosity, love, and compassion.

While Goodman's metaphysical argument for consequentialism is secondary to and merely supportive of his arguments based on demanding moral obligations and agent neutrality, Williams' arguments that Buddhist ethics is consequentialist focus primarily on Śāntideva's text, and, in particular, on how his metaphysical position leads directly to ethical consequentialism. I will now turn to these arguments to demonstrate that a close reading of Śāntideva's text reinforces my assertion above that Śāntideva's ethical concern is the agent's moral psychology,

and that the goal of Śāntideva's metaphysical arguments is to transform the how the agent sees the world, rather than to provide the rationale for a demanding moral obligation.

2.3 The status of persons and its implications for Śāntideva's ethics

In this section, I examine verses from the *Guide to Awakened Living* in which Śāntideva encourages people to act to remove others' suffering based on an examination of pains and their owners. Williams and Siderits provide interpretations of these verses that present Śāntideva as promoting the agent neutral approach that characterizes universalist consequentialism. I will argue that an agent neutral ethical position need not follow from Śāntideva's use of the doctrine of selflessness; instead, Śāntideva is emphasizing the importance of the agent in terms of his or her attitude towards others. I will demonstrate that a close reading of these verses reveals Śāntideva to be contrasting two particular outlooks on the world, one that is characterized by selfishness and confusion and the other that is characterized by compassion. This investigation will give further insight into how Śāntideva's ethics is primarily concerned with the way we perceive the world rather than with the consequences of our actions.

Williams (1998) has suggested that Śāntideva, based on his metaphysical position which rejects the existence of a self (*ātman*), is committed to consequentialism. Williams claims that Śāntideva argues that the "ought" of unselfishness follows from the "is" of no-self, an inference that Williams finds incoherent. He refers to the following argument that Śāntideva makes in Chapter Eight of *How to Lead an Awakened Life*,

A continuant and a collective--such as a [caste] row (*pañkti*) or an army--are fictions (*mṛṣā*). The one of whom there is pain (*duḥkha*) does not exist. Therefore of whom will there be ownership of that?

Pains without an owner are all indeed without distinction because of its quality as pain indeed it is to be prevented. What limitation can be made there?

If one asks why pain is to be prevented (Tib.: 'pain of all is to be prevented'), it is [accepted] (Skt.: 'by all') without dispute /If it is to be prevented, all also is thus. If not, oneself also is like (other beings). (VIII: 101-103, as cited in Williams, 1998, pp. 105-6)

Śāntideva's argument, according to Williams, seems to go like this:

- (i) the person who is thought to have pain is a fiction similar to an aggregate that is formed from a collection of parts or a continuum of moments.
- (ii) Pains, therefore, cannot be distinguished among based upon their owners.
- (iii) This then undermines the notion that my pains alone should be removed because they hurt me.
- (iv) The only justification for removing pains then is because they hurt.
- (v) All pains should be removed because they all hurt.

Williams (1998) calls this position the "universal thesis," and he sees this as Śāntideva's attempt "to move directly from wisdom--insight into how things are--to morality through rational consistency, an argument directly from the Buddhist ontological insight to altruism" (p. 107). However, he believes that the argument for Śāntideva's "universal thesis" is logically inconsistent, and that it is a "triumph of rhetoric over reason," being as "noble as it is incoherent" (p. 107). He goes so far as to say that Śāntideva's "argument is fatal to the Buddhist path and to the bodhisattva's project of concern for others" (p. 107).

Williams offers two different readings of premise (i): we can understand persons as fictions to mean that either persons do not exist at all, or that they exist only conventionally. Williams sees either reading as problematic for Śāntideva. If we read premise (i) as negating only a real person and so allowing a person to exist conventionally, then Williams believes that – consequence (ii) – pains are indistinguishable based upon owners, does not follow, and then the argument for compassion does not work. Williams (1998) argues that to assert a conventional

self allows one to make a distinction between different selves and such a distinction, albeit a conventional distinction, provides a basis for someone to prioritize the needs of oneself above those of others, and thus is a basis for selfishness, not compassion (p. 110)

For Śāntideva's argument to succeed, Williams argues, we must read Śāntideva in premise (i) to assert the complete non-existence of persons. It would then follow that (ii) pains are indistinguishable based upon owners. However, this reading, as Williams points out, would place Śāntideva at odds with fundamental Buddhist doctrines such as karma and rebirth that require persons to exist conventionally. It also carries the added difficulty of explaining how subjectless pains and their removal could be meaningful.

This dilemma proposed by Williams hinges on how to best understand the notion of "fiction" (*mṛṣā*) in the first premise. The first horn of the dilemma requires that we understand fiction to mean conventionally existent, while the second horn of the dilemma takes it to mean non-existent. Williams has argued that for Śāntideva's argument to work, persons, owners of pains, must be completely non-existent. I will argue that Śāntideva's metaphysical position is clearly one that endorses a conventionally existent person, but that this is not fatal for the argument. This is because premise (ii) requires revision: Śāntideva does not propose that we *cannot* distinguish pains based on their owners, but instead that we *should not* distinguish pains based on their owners.

When Śāntideva describes owners of pains in the verses above, he does not describe them as non-existent, but uses the Sanskrit term "*mṛṣā*," which Williams translates as fictions, but might also be translated as "false" or "misleading." This latter translation captures the epistemological connotation of the argument. Śāntideva uses this term "*mṛṣā*" six other times in this text, and it is clear from these occurrences that he intends this term not to signify non-

existent things, but to describe all ordinary phenomena from persons to pains.²³ For example, it is evident from verse six of Chapter Nine that he considers both objects of thought as well as objects of sense perception to be false (*mṛṣā*). Śāntideva states, “Even perception such as that of form [is established] through consensus, not from a valid source of knowledge. It is false just like the consensus that [sees] pure things and the like in impure things” (IX: 6).²⁴ Here Śāntideva describes even the perception of visual objects as "*mṛṣā*," so obviously this term is not meant to signify an ontological distinction between real perceptual things and unreal conceptual things. So, in what sense does "*mṛṣā*" signify false, if not in the sense of real and unreal? In the above verse, Śāntideva explains that perceptions such as those of visual forms are *mṛṣā* in the sense that they are not based upon a valid source of knowledge. When Śāntideva refers to a "valid source of knowledge" (*pramāṇa*) here, he is using it in a narrow sense to refer to the perspective of a correct metaphysical understanding, one that sees all things including persons and pains to be empty of any essence. Since these objects are misapprehended to have an essence, Śāntideva considers the perception of them to be false (*mṛṣā*). It is in this way that both pains and persons are false, or to use Williams' language, fictions.

For Śāntideva, simply because all ordinary phenomena are fictional in this sense does not mean that they do not exist. Śāntideva follows the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, metaphysical view of Nāgārjuna who in his most important metaphysical text, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)*, classifies deceptive phenomena (*moṣadharmā*) as *mṛṣā* and describes those deceptive things not as non-existent, but as compounded phenomena (*saṃskāra*) (XIII: 1). For Nāgārjuna, ordinary phenomena like people and pains are not non-

²³ See *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, II:12, IX:6, IX:89, IX:139, IX:140, IX:141.

²⁴ *pratyakṣamāpi rūpādi prasiddhyā na pramāṇataḥ | aśucyādiṣu śucyādiprasiddhiriva sā mṛṣā* ||IX: 6|| *gzugs sogs mngon sum nyid kyang ni // grags pas yin gyi tshad mas min // de ni mi gtsang la sogs la // gtsang sogs grags pa bzhin du brdzun* // (Toh. 3871, 31a).

existent, but exist in dependence upon their parts and causes. They are described as false (*mr̥ṣa*) because, although existing dependently, they appear to exist independently (XIII: 2). Clearly, Nāgārjuna regards these false phenomena as existent in some way, for otherwise it would be meaningless to describe them as deceptive. Candrakīrti also describes ordinary phenomena as false. In the sixth chapter of his *Entering the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvātāra)*, a commentary on Nāgārjuna's *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, he explains that all phenomena bear two realities (Tib. *bden pa gnyis*, San. *satyadvaya*), and that other than the ultimate reality, emptiness of essence, all phenomena although conventionally real, are seen in a false way. Again, the point here is not only metaphysical, but also epistemological. Candrakīrti explains that things seen in a false way are divided by the world into existent and non-existent things (VI: 24). For Mādhyamikas such as Śāntideva, Nāgārjuna, and Candrakīrti, all ordinary things, including people and pains, are seen in a false way but this does not amount to their non-existence.

To interpret Śāntideva as committed to a view in which there are not even conventional persons forces him into an extreme of nihilism that in other parts of his text he is careful to avoid.²⁵ While it is meaningless to talk about the characteristics of non-existent things, such as the size of a rabbit's horn, we can, however, coherently speak of the conventional criteria of things such as armies and persons. For example, we can talk about the size of an army and the length of a row. Although they are constructions, they exist and are meaningful; they have properties and perform functions. For Śāntideva, we can talk intelligently about owners of sensations; however, I will argue below that Śāntideva's point here is that simply because we *can*

²⁵ For example, in IX: 10: "Even an illusion will arise for as long as its collection of conditions remains. How could it be that sentient beings exist truly merely in virtue of the fact that they remain longer." *yāvat pratyayasāmagrī tāvan māyāpi vartate | dīrghasamtānamātreṇa katham sattvo 'sti satyataḥ* ||IX: 10|| *ji srid rkyen rnams 'tshogs gyur pa // de srid sgyu ma 'ang 'byung bar 'gyur // rgyun ring tsam gyis ji ltar na // sems can bden par yod pa yin* // (Toh. 3871, 31a).

distinguish between pains based on their owners does not give us a rational basis for prioritizing our own pains over others'. First I will evaluate Siderits' proposed solution to Williams' dilemma.

Siderits (2000) disagrees with Williams, arguing that we can understand that the fictional person in premise (i) does not deny the conventional existence of persons and still arrive at premise (ii), that pains are indistinguishable. To do this, he argues, requires reading Śāntideva as making an ontological distinction between persons and pains. Siderits claims, "What Śāntideva's argument does require is that pains also be ultimately real, but that persons are not" (p. 419). Siderits further proposes the Buddhist reductionist position that what is ultimately true is "completely impersonal: one can only speak of skandhas (or better yet, dharmas), not of the persons who are thought to 'have' these bodily and mental states" (p. 414). While persons do not exist ultimately, pains, he argues, do, and since persons only exist conventionally, then, from an ultimate perspective, pains are not distinguishable based on their owners. Siderits states, "There is, ultimately, no one who suffers; there is just suffering, associated with this and that psychophysical element, occurring in this and that causal series" (p. 415). He contends that the person who has pain only conventionally exists based upon the real existence of subjectless pains.

If we accept that ultimate pains are bad and should be removed, Siderits argues, then persons, although not ultimately existent, are still a useful convention which can affect the ultimate level, the level that presumably counts, to reduce pain. Siderits (2000) claims that, the thinking of "I" is just a "useful device for realizing the ultimate (impersonal) goal of maximizing overall welfare" (p. 416). Although ultimately there is no one suffering, the convention of person helps to achieve the minimizing of suffering, since it is instrumental in the lessening of

pain in distinct causal series. Importantly, although the convention "person" functions to eliminate pain in a distinct causal series, from the ultimate perspective, the idea of "my pain" is meaningless. What is important is not whose pain is removed but how much total pain is reduced.

Siderits argues that in Chapter Eight, Śāntideva recognizes that the me-convention can be improved upon so as to reduce the total amount of pain in the world. This is a consequentialist reading of Śāntideva. Here pains ultimately exist and an increase in well-being means the reduction of the total amount of pains in the world. Siderits (2000) sees Śāntideva arguing that, "[i]t would be rational to persist in the practice of privileging self-interested concern only if it could be shown that this practice results in less overall suffering than any other" (p. 416). Siderits understands Śāntideva to be positing a better way to think about persons so as to maximize overall utility. That better way is the bodhisattva path, one which takes on the responsibility to remove not just one's own pains, but all pains.

If the me-construction is adjusted so that it identifies with and takes on the responsibility of removing others' pains, then this will result in a reduction of the amount of ultimately existent pains in the world. Having made this argument, Śāntideva gives mental exercises, so that practitioners might improve their me-construction and develop the bodhisattva's attitude. Siderits (2000) explains, "just as the child can learn to identify with past and future elements in a causal series—to anticipate that future pain, to feel shame at that past action—so the aspirant to enlightenment can learn to identify with suffering occurring in distinct causal series" (p. 415). Siderits's account, while allowing for a conventional agent, still makes the case for a consequentialist reading on the grounds that the agent is of only instrumental value, since the moral significance of the agent derives from its usefulness in maximizing the good, which is the

reduction of real pains in the world. In making his case for a consequentialist reading of Śāntideva, Siderits attributes positions to Śāntideva that seem to contradict the positions he takes up in other parts of his text. While William's consequentialist reading of Śāntideva requires that he reject persons even conventionally, Siderits requires Śāntideva to posit real pains. I will argue that Śāntideva does not make such an ontological distinction between pains and persons, and I will demonstrate that Śāntideva focuses primarily on mental states rather than consequences, and that my reading has the advantage of being consistent with the metaphysical views Śāntideva expresses in the rest of his text.

Siderits' reading of Śāntideva, like those of Goodman and Williams discussed above, overlooks the primarily phenomenological concerns with which Śāntideva is occupied. In doing so, Siderits reads Śāntideva as asserting pains to be ultimately existent, and consequently concludes that pains and persons exist on different ontological levels. This focus on consequences and pains misses Śāntideva's main point, which is a phenomenological description of the mistaken way in which we think about ourselves and the irrational self-biases that this wrong thinking generates.

Both Siderits' argument and William's first argument require that pains are real in a way that persons are not. They both necessitate a scenario in which pains and selves occupy different ontological levels. Contrary to these interpretations, Śāntideva never argues that while selves are unreal, free floating pains exist. To do this would require Śāntideva to take up an Abhidharmika spin on the two truths. In the Abhidharma presentation, selves are fictionally existent wholes imputed on their really existent parts of body, consciousness, feeling, and other mental factors. For them, selves and pains are placed in ontologically different categories. Selves are fictions while pains are real.

To read Śāntideva as asserting an Abhidharmika ontology, however, is incorrect. His metaphysical position is outlined in Chapter Nine, and it is clear that Śāntideva holds the Madhyamaka position articulated by Nāgārjuna (and as interpreted by Candrakīrti) that all existent phenomena are on the same ontological level. Sensations such as pain are fictions just like selves. Further, Śāntideva in Chapter Nine explicitly argues that pains could not ultimately exist and also that subjectless pains are meaningless. He says,

If suffering ultimately existed, then why does it not disturb those who are delighted? If pleasure [ultimately existed], then why do delicacies not delight those who are overwhelmed by sorrow?

If that were not experienced due to being overpowered by something stronger, how could anything that is not in the nature of experience be a feeling? (IX: 89-90)²⁶

Śāntideva does not draw the ontological distinction between pains and persons that Siderits' argument requires of him. In the above verses, Śāntideva argues against the idea of free-floating or essentially existent pains. He uses the familiar Madhyamaka position that if things such as pains existed by way of their own essence, then they would never end, something that is contrary to our everyday experience. He also argues that the very nature of pain requires that it be experienced by someone. Siderits might argue here that Śāntideva's explanation is true conventionally but not ultimately; however, such an argument requires Śāntideva to accept subjectless pains ultimately, a position for which there is no textual evidence.

This then brings us back to Williams' charge that to posit a conventional self gives us a reason to be selfish and undermines any argument that one should be compassionate. Williams' concern is that positing even a conventional self allows one to discriminate between self and

²⁶ *yady asti duḥkhaṃ tattvena prahr̥ṣṭān kiṃ na bādhatē | śokādyārtāya mṛṣṭādi sukhaṃ cet kiṃ na rocate*
 ||IX: 89|| *balīyasābhibhūtatvād yadi tan nānubhūyate | vedanātvam̐ katham̐ tasya yasya nānubhavātmātā*
 ||IX: 90|| *sdug bsngal de nyid du yod na // ci ste rab dga' la mi gnod // bde na mya ngan gdung sogs la //*
zhim sogs ci ste dga' mi byed // tobs dang ldan pas zil mnan phyir // gal te de myong ma yin na // gang
zhig nyams myong bdag nyid min // de ni tshor ba ji ltar yin // (Toh. 3871, 34a).

other and, therefore, provides a foundation for selfishness. It is precisely this position, however, at which these very verses in Chapter Eight of Śāntideva's text take aim. Śāntideva is not arguing that because selves exist conventionally selfishness is *impossible*, but that it is *irrational*. His assertion is that neither the conventional existence of selves nor the personal experience of pains is a justification for selfishness.

To appreciate Śāntideva's argument, we must distinguish the kinds of rationales that people use to justify prioritizing their own pains from the actual reasons that they prioritize their pain. In Chapter Eight of his text, Śāntideva is responding to an opponent whose rationale for prioritizing his own pain ahead of others' is that he experiences his own pain, but does not experience the pain of others (VIII:97). Śāntideva's response to this argument is to then question the reason why the present self should be concerned with the future self's pains, since the present self will not experience the future self's pain. Having pointed out the inconsistency in the opponent's rationale for prioritizing his own pain, Śāntideva suggests that the real reason that one prioritizes one's own pain is not the immediacy of the pain, but the grasping to self.

He then turns his attention to the way we think about ourselves. The way we think about ourselves plays an important role in how we prioritize which pains are to be removed. We might think that we should prioritize our own pain because it is personal and immediate, but we also prioritize the pains of a future self above other pains even though they are neither personal to nor necessarily immediate to our present self. This is because we prioritize pains based on the concept of the continuation of self. The actual reason we choose to remove only some pains and not others, Śāntideva argues, is not because pain is personal and immediate, but due to the way we identify "me." He then argues that there is no metaphysical obstacle to my having the same concern for others that I have for my future self.

Śāntideva thinks that removing pains because they hurt is a good idea. However, he believes limiting the removal of pains to specific pains, such as "my" pains, is arbitrary and not justified. The notion that my pain is more significant than anyone else's requires justification. For Śāntideva, this notion is without logical basis and is irrational. The idea that the experiencer of the pain has a responsibility to remove his own pain seems, *prima facie*, reasonable, and accords with our natural responses. Śāntideva uses this instinct to then argue that we have a responsibility to remove all pains.

This might appear to be a stretch of logic, for it seems natural to question why I should remove others' pains if I do not experience them myself. Yet Śāntideva asks us a different question: why should it be morally right to prioritize my own pain? In asking this, he questions the idea that moral responsibility should take such a narrow personal perspective of what is good for me. The idea that we have a moral responsibility for only our own pain also runs counter to our commonsense notion of moral responsibility. For example, one would not ignore a child in distress on the grounds that I don't experience the child's pain. Śāntideva argues suffering should be a motivator for action regardless of whose pain it is.

Śāntideva's presentation of moral responsibility is founded on two concepts: (1) interdependence and (2) the rejection of an independent and fixed self. The first is an appreciation of the interdependence that pervades the world in which we live, and the second underpins the Buddhist idea that the egoistic perspective ultimately leads us to suffer. It is based on this view that Śāntideva challenges both the sentiment that it is morally right to prioritize my pains above others, and also the efficacy of self-interest to remove suffering. Since there is no rational basis for prioritizing one's own pain, and no metaphysical obstacle to concern for the

pain of others, then, if we think pain should be removed because it is unpleasant, Śāntideva argues, there is no good reason not to work to remove all pains because all pains are unpleasant.

Let us now turn to a close reading of this section of Śāntideva's text with the aid of the Tibetan scholar, rGyal tshab Dar ma Rin chen's (1364-1432) commentary in order to gain a clear understanding of this argument. From the very beginning of these verses it is clear that Śāntideva is presenting a type of ethics that prioritizes mental states. This ethical advice is given in the form of meditation instruction:

Having considered the virtues of solitude in such ways as these, I will thoroughly pacify discursive thoughts and meditate on bodhicitta. (VIII: 89)²⁷

It is important to keep in mind that the verses to follow are advices on meditation, and that these meditations, since they are efforts at transforming the way one views and engages with the world, are themselves considered important ethical practices. At the heart of moral development for Śāntideva is the transformation of how we think about others and their pains. He continues,

I will strive first of all to meditate on the equality of oneself and others. Since we are alike when in our regard for pleasure and pain, I will protect all others just as I do myself. (VIII: 90)²⁸

The first instruction is aimed at developing a foundation for relating to all others in a more intimate way by reflecting on how all beings are similar to oneself in wanting to be free of suffering and not wanting happiness. Śāntideva, then questions the privileged place we give to our own suffering and happiness:

Although the body has many parts, being divided into the hands and so forth, in terms being something to be protected, it is like a single thing. Similarly, the variegated world of beings is the same in terms of having the nature of pleasure and pain. (VIII: 91)²⁹

²⁷ *evamādibhir ākārair vivekaguṇabhāvanāt | upasāntavitarkaḥ san bodhicittaṃ tu bhāvayet ||VIII: 89|| de la sogs pa'i rnam pa yis // dben pa'i yon tan bsam byas nas // rnam rtog nye bar zhi ba dang // byang chub sems ni bsgom par bya // (Toh. 3871, 27a).*

²⁸ *parātmāsamatām ādau bhāvayed evam ādarāt | samaduḥkhasukhāḥ sarve pālānīyā mayātmavat ||VIII: 90|| bdag dang gzhan du mnyam pa ni // dang po nyid du 'bad de bsgom // bde dang sdug bsngal mnyam pas na // thams cad bdag bzhin bsrung bar bya // (Toh. 3871, 27a).*

After having considered that all beings share the common experience of wanting happiness and not wanting suffering, Śāntideva suggests that on that basis, although others are distinct and many, we can conceive of ourselves and them as a whole, much in the same way that we conceive of the many and distinct parts of the body as a whole with which we identify. This notion calls for a dramatic shift in the way we experience ourselves and counters the exaggerated sense that we are the center of the universe. This shift presents a much more accurate representation of our place in the world.

At this point a natural objection arises that, since the nature of pain is personal and others' pains don't hurt me, and my pains don't hurt them, then it is incorrect to think of others' pains in the same way as I do of my own. This objection reads,

Even though my own suffering does not harm the bodies of others, nevertheless, that very suffering is unbearable for me due to attachment to self. (VIII:92)³⁰

Śāntideva challenges this objection, saying that whether or not a pain is considered mine is not based upon who experiences it, but on one's conception of self. Just because pain is personal does not mean that you cannot conceive of others' pains as your own. Śāntideva states,

Similarly, even though the suffering of others is not felt by me, nevertheless that suffering of theirs is unbearable due to attachment to self. (VIII:93)³¹

²⁹ *hastādibhedena bahuprakārah kāyo yathaikaḥ paripālanīyaḥ | tathā jagadbhinnaṃ abhinnaduḥkhasukhātmakaṃ sarvaṃ idaṃ tathāiva* ||VIII: 91|| *lag pa la sogs dbye ba rnam mang yang // yongs su bsrung bya 'i lus su gcig pa ltar // de bzhin 'gro ba tha dad bde sdug dag // thams cad bdag bzhin bde ba 'dod mnyam gcig //* (Toh. 3871, 27a). I have followed the Sanskrit in my translation; however, the Tibetan differs particularly in the last half of the verse, which reads, “Likewise, the all beings, distinct in their pleasures and pains, are all one in terms of equally wishing for happiness, just like me.”

³⁰ *yady apy anyeṣu deheṣu madduḥkhaṃ na prabādhate | tathāpi tadduḥkhaṃ eva mamātmāsnehaduḥsaham* ||VIII: 92|| *gal te bdag gi sdug bsngal gyis // gzhan gyi lus la mi gnod pa // de lta 'ang de bdag sdug bsngal de // bdag tu zhen pas mi bzod nyid //* (Toh. 3871, 27a).

³¹ *tathā yady apy asaṃvedyam anyad duḥkhaṃ mayātmanā | tathāpi tasya tadduḥkhaṃ ātmasnehena duḥsaham* ||93|| *de bzhin gzhan gyi sdug bsngal dag // bdag la 'bab par mi 'gyur yang // de lta 'ang de bdag sdug bsngal de // bdag tu zhen pas bzod par dka' //* (Toh. 3871, 27a).

Śāntideva maintains that the main reason we find our pain alone unbearable is due to our habit of grasping to self. However, if we become accustomed to considering others as ourselves, even though their suffering may not strike us personally, we will feel it too as unbearable and as ours to remove:

The suffering of others should be dispelled by me simply because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. The benefit of others too should be carried out by me, simply because they are sentient beings, just as I am a sentient being. (VIII: 94)³²

Śāntideva will argue that since our conception of self is arbitrary, then there is no rational foundation for the removal of only "my" pains. If we wish to remove our pains because they are unpleasant, since all pains are unpleasant we should then work to remove all pains. When rGyal tshab provides his commentary on this verse, he makes two arguments:

[Locus (*dharmīn*)] Consider the suffering of others:
 [Probandum (*sādhyadharmā*)] I should dispel it
 [Reason (*hetu*)] because it is suffering.
 [Example (*dr̥ṣṭāta*)] For example it is like the pain I experience.
 I should accomplish the benefit and happiness for others
 Because others are (also) sentient beings
 For example, it is like the way I accomplish comfort for my own body.³³

Here, Śāntideva's argument is presented in the traditional Indian logical form. The locus of the argument is the suffering of others. Of this subject, it is predicated that it is something that I should dispel. The reason given is that the suffering of others is in fact suffering. If the argument stopped here, it might be less persuasive. Simply because the suffering of others is suffering, not only is it the case that it should be dispelled, but I should be the one to dispel it.

³² *mayānyadduḥkhaṃ hantavyaṃ duḥkhatvād ātmaḥkḥavat | anugrāhyā mayānye 'pi sattvatvād ātmasattvavat ||94|| bdag gis gzhan gyi sdug bsngal bsal // sdug bsngal yin phyir bdag sdug bzhin // bdag gis gzhan la phan par bya // sems can yin phyir bdag lus bzhin // (Toh. 3871, 27a).*

³³ *sems can gzhan gyi sdug bsngal chos can/ bdag gis bsal bar rigs te sdug bsngal yin pa'i phyir/ dper nad bdag gi sdug bsngal bzhin no/ bdag gis gzhan la phan pa dang bde ba bsgrub par bya rigs te/ sems can pha rol po sems can yin pa'i phyir/ dper na bdag gi lus la bde ba bsgrub pa bzhin no/ (101a)*

In order to convince the reader that this is so, rGyal tshab cites Śāntideva's example that the suffering of others is like the pain that I myself experience. This example personalizes the pain of others, bringing it by analogy into one's first person experience. Just as we can immediately sense that we should work to dispel our own suffering simply because it is suffering, likewise, the pain of others is also suffering, and on that ground alone, we should work to dispel it. Similarly, we should also work for others' happiness just as we work for our own happiness. Śāntideva continues to challenge the notion that for some reason our own pain and happiness is special:

Given that the happiness of myself and others is held equally dear, what is so special about mine that strive for my happiness alone?

Given that the suffering of both myself and others is dreaded and not held dear, what is so special about mine that I protect myself but not others? (VIII: 95-96)³⁴

Śāntideva questions the legitimacy of working to remove our own suffering alone. Simply because we grasp to a self in a certain way does not deem our own pain to be somehow qualitatively more significant than the suffering of others. rGyal tshab in his commentary on this verse drives Śāntideva's point home by asking rhetorically, "What is the justification [for egoism]? It is unreasonable to strive for my happiness alone and not to strive for the happiness of others."³⁵ Śāntideva here is directing his criticism not at some philosophical standpoint, but at the way in which we usually engage with the world. Śāntideva acknowledges that we have this natural experience of prioritizing our own pains, and he is questioning its validity. Śāntideva

³⁴ *yadā mama pareṣāṃ ca tulyam eva sukhaṃ priyam | tadātmanaḥ ko viśeṣo yenātraiva sukhodyamaḥ* ||VIII: 95|| *yadā mama pareṣāṃ ca bhayaṃ duḥkhaṃ ca na priyam | tadātmanaḥ ko viśeṣo yat taṃ rakṣāmi netaram* ||VIII: 96|| *gang tshes bdag dang gzhan gnyi ga // bde ba 'dod du mtshungs pa la // bdag dang khyad par ci yod na // gang phyir bdag gcig bde bar brtson // gang tshes bdag dan gzan gnyi ga // sdug bsngal mi 'dod mtshungs pa la // bdag dang khyad par ci yod na // gang phyir gzhan min bdag srung byed* // (Toh. 3871, 27a).

³⁵ *rgyu mthsan gang gi phyir na bdag gcig bu bed bar brtson par byed cing bzhan gyi bde ba la mi brtson pa mi rigs so / (101a-b)*

points out that this feeling is not a rational position, and simply because something comes naturally to us does not make it right. Often we rationalize prioritizing our own concerns based upon ownership and responsibility. Since I own my own pain, I am responsible for the removal of my pain. Since others own their pains, they are responsible for the removal of their pains. Here, ownership is related to the subjective experience of pain. We have a sense of ownership of mental events because we experience them.

Śāntideva next demonstrates the arbitrary nature of grasping to self and shows how this undermines any argument that attempts to legitimize prioritizing one's own pain simply because pain is personal.

If I do not protect [others] since I am not troubled by their suffering, then why do I protect myself from future suffering which does not [presently] trouble me?

This notion that, “At that [future] time also, it will be the same me,” is false, since it is one person who dies and quite another who is born.

If one thinks, “Suffering is to be protected from only by he who possesses it,” then since the suffering of the foot does not belong to the hand, why should that one be protected by the other?

If it is said that although that is unsuitable, in this case it occurs due to the conception of self, then with whatever strength one has, whatever is unsuitable should be dispelled, both for oneself and others. (VIII: 97-100)³⁶

Śāntideva further responds to the assertion that one's own suffering is special because this suffering is personal, by pointing out that if one accepts this position, then it would be incorrect

³⁶ *tadduḥkhena na me bādhet yato yadi na rakṣyate | nāgāmikāyaduḥkhān me bādhā tat kena rakṣyate* ||VIII: 97|| *aham eva tadāpīti mithyeyaṃ pratikalpanā | anya eva mṛto yasmād anya eva prajāyate* ||VIII: 98|| *yadi yasyaiva yad duḥkhaṃ rakṣyaṃ tasyaiva tan matam | pādaduḥkhaṃ na hastasya kasmāt tat tena rakṣyate* ||VIII: 99|| *ayuktam api ced etad ahaṃkārāt pravartate | yad ayuktam nivartyaṃ tat svam anyaca yathābalaṃ* ||VIII: 100|| *gal te de la sdug bsngal bas // bdag la mi gnod phyir mi bsrung // ma 'ongs pa yi sdug bsñal yang // gnod mi byed na de ci bsrung // bdag gis de ni myong snyam pa'i // rnam par rtog de log pa ste // 'di ltar shi ba'ang gzhan nyid la // skye ba yang ni gzhan nyid yin // gang tshe gang gi sdug bsngal gang // de ni de nyid kyis bsrungs na // rkyang pa'i sdug bsngal lag pas min // ci phyir des ni de bsrung bya // gal te rigs pa min yang 'dir // bdag tu 'dzin pas 'jug ce na // bdag gzhan mi rigs gang yin te // ci nus par ni spang bya nyid // (Toh. 3871, 27a-27b).*

to protect oneself from future pain, or for the hand to protect the foot. Śāntideva does not appeal to an ontological distinction between pains and persons to make his point, but appeals to common sense. rGyal tshab adds that prioritizing ones own pains "is very unreasonable. It would follow that it would be illogical to accumulate wealth during one's youth out of concern for the arising of suffering in old age."³⁷ Śāntideva explains that it is because of grasping to a conception of self that we work to alleviate future suffering. He refutes the notion that simply because two people are distinct entities, it is incorrect to maintain that either is obliged to remove the suffering of the other. Thinking of yourself in a certain way is not a justification for selfishness. That the self exists conventionally means that it is possible to extend our concern for ourselves to include others. It is because others and their pains exist conventionally that it makes sense to endeavor to remove their pains just as we do our own. rGyal tshab comments here that, "The grasping to the self of person is mistaken with respect to the referent object and produces all devastation."³⁸

Śāntideva is challenging the fundamental justification of prioritizing our own pains and our own welfare morally. The objection is that we should prioritize our own pains because we are the ones that experience them, but we do not experience the pains of others. Śāntideva argues that this is not the actual reason that we prioritize our pains and suggests that we emphasize our pains based on an internal bias in the way we view ourselves. Since it is our conception of a fixed separation between self and other that is the foundation for our selfishness, an understanding of selflessness provides insight into this bias of self over other, and reveals how it is possible to think of others as oneself. Śāntideva explains,

³⁷ *de ni ches mi rigs te rgas pa'i tshe sdug bsngal byung dogs nas gzhon pa'i tshe nor gsog pa dang/ ...'bad par mi rigs par thal/* (101b).

³⁸ *gang zag gi bdag tu 'dzin pa zhen yul la 'khrul zhing des phung khrol thams cad bskyed pa'i phyir ro /* (102a).

The continuum [of consciousness] and collection [of aggregates] are false like a row, an army, and so forth. The possessor of suffering does not exist. Thus, who will take ownership of it?

All sufferings are in fact non-distinct in virtue of the fact that they are ownerless. It is only because of the fact that it is suffering that it should be removed. What is the use of any restriction in this regard? (VIII: 101-102)³⁹

It is here, Williams maintains, that Śāntideva's argument only works if he asserts the nihilistic position of the total non-existence of persons. When Śāntideva says, "there being no (inherent) owner of suffering, there can be no distinction at all between (that of myself and others)," Williams (1998) reads him as arguing from the premise that there is no self whatsoever, to the conclusion that we cannot discriminate among pains (p. 106). If Williams is correct that Śāntideva is indeed arguing here that because we cannot distinguish between pains based on their owners, then all pains should be removed, then Śāntideva's system does seem to resemble the agent neutral approach of universalist consequentialism. As I have demonstrated above, however, Śāntideva does in fact assert that selves, just like pains, exist conventionally. The inference is hence instead from the premise that selves only exist conventionally to the conclusion that any discrimination among pains is merely conventional.

The assumption that there is necessarily a fundamental conflict between one's own interest and the interest of others ignores the fact that one's own welfare is dependent on others' welfare. Goodman has pointed out that Buddhist ethical literature rarely examines the competition that arises out of limited resources. He is right, and this is not because Buddhist ethicists such as Śāntideva were oblivious to these kinds of concerns. Their efforts are simply

³⁹ *saṃtānaḥ samudāyaś ca pañktisenādivan mṛṣā | yasya duḥkhaṃ sa nāsty asmāt kasya tat svaṃ bhaviṣyati* ||VIII: 101|| *asvāmikāni duḥkhāni sarvāṇy evāviśeṣataḥ | duḥkhatvād eva vāryāṇi niyamas tatra kiṃ kṛtaḥ* ||VIII: 102|| *rgyud dang tshogs zhes bya ba ni // phreng ba dmag la sogs bzhin brdzun // sdug bsngal can gang de med pa // des 'di su zhig spang bar 'gyur // sdug bsngal bdag po med par ni // thams cad bye brag med pa nyid // sdug bsngal yin phyir de bsal bya // nges pas der ni ci zhig bya //* (Toh. 3871, 27b).

directed towards what they see as a more pervasive moral concern, the confused belief that my own welfare is more important than someone else's welfare. The seemingly natural self-centered notion that I am the most important person in the room is a product of a mistaken view of the world. It is this confused self-interest that, far from helping us to remove our pain, engenders desire, aversion, and fear all of which according to Buddhism bring about our further suffering.

Śāntideva is not moving from metaphysics to obligation, but from metaphysics to phenomenology. The discussion of metaphysics is relevant because it informs the phenomenological experience of self and other. Here Śāntideva is not calling on emptiness as if to invoke some demanding ethical imperative that exists beyond the conventional. For Śāntideva, the work of ethics is done at the conventional level. Śāntideva is also not, as Williams suggests, arguing for the "ought" of compassion because of the "is" of selflessness; instead, he is arguing against the assumption that the rationality of selfishness follows from the existence of a conventional self. Śāntideva's point is not that we can't distinguish among the owners of pains, but that the distinction should not be significant for a bodhisattva who understands that pain is bad, and that it is bad no matter whose it is. The mention of metaphysical topics here serves not to propose the non-existence of selves, but to demonstrate there is no impossible metaphysical gap that we are being asked to jump when we try to experience others' pains as our own. He argues that we should eliminate all pain because it is experienced as unpleasant.

Here, the understanding of selflessness is explained so that bodhisattvas might transform the way they see themselves, that their concept of self rather than excluding others includes them. The understanding of the ultimate does not negate the conventional, but instead offers insight into the way the conventional has previously been misunderstood. This transformation of

the way the bodhisattva sees the conventional world has real ethical implications. It is an understanding of the emptiness of conventionalities that deconstructs the artificial boundary between myself and others, and provides the foundation for ethical practices such as compassion.

There *is* a distinction between self and other, and it exists conventionally, not essentially. It is on that basis of an understanding of emptiness of self that the significance of the distinction is being questioned, not its existence. Significance is a subjective psychological factor that has implications for the identification of self. For example, when I consider an object such as a car as very significant, then the significance of the difference between myself and the car is diminished, and I begin identifying with the car strongly. I appropriate it as mine, and even the "mine" and "me" start to blur, so that when someone hits my car, I say that he ran into to "me." When Śāntideva asks, in what way can pains be limited, he is asking why, since we can identify with other objects such as possessions, we cannot do the same thing with other people and their suffering. Śāntideva appeals to our innate empathy and says that simply because they suffer, we should give others significance. This attitude should reduce the importance of the difference between myself and others, so that we can identify with them more closely and naturally wish to remove their suffering.

We do not have to understand Śāntideva either to be denying the existence of a conventional self or to be positing the existence of some ultimate pain. Instead, we can read Śāntideva as recognizing powerful motivations that exist within our experience, such as the aversion to our own pain, or attachment to our future selves. He not only questions the justification for selfish motivations, but also aids us in harnessing these powerful forces by providing tools to extend the scope of these emotions, transforming our experience and moral conduct from one motivated by self-concern to one centered on concern for others. This

technique addresses our disturbing emotions not by repressing them, but by disarming them through extending their scope.

As further evidence of the centrality of moral phenomenology in Buddhist ethical writings, we find ethical practices involving meditational devices that provide powerful counters to the experiential products of an incorrect view of reality. The practices used to develop bodhicitta and the Tibetan *blo sbyong* instructions used to stabilize it often take extreme positions to counter our deluded self-importance. Meditations on the idea that all beings have been our mother or that our sense of self might extend to include others are not employed to provide a rational argument concerning reality, but to transform our experience and reshape the way that we engage with the world. Interestingly, although the metaphysical validity of the instructions may at times be called into question, the experiential results of the practice bring us closer to a correct view of the way things are, and thereby to a more morally mature place. Buddhist ethical texts are best read as instructions through which to effect psychological changes in the reader, changes that are ethically significant. This reading of Śāntideva does not require us to distort his metaphysical assertions about persons and pains, a problem that arises when trying to understand Śāntideva's ethics as a form of consequentialism. Reading Śāntideva on his own terms enables an appreciation of his ethical system as one with a unique structure differentiating it from any standard western ethical system. It is a system that is primarily concerned with the way we perceive the world, wherein the morally immature are characterized by confusion about the status of self and its place in the world, and the morally mature are characterized by an accurate vision of themselves and their relation to the world.

In this chapter, I have examined and responded to two different types of arguments for the claim that Buddhist ethics is a form of consequentialism. To the argument that Śāntideva's

metaphysics implies a consequentialist ethical system, I responded by explaining that his arguments are not meant to provide a metaphysical foundation for ethics, but instead highlight how epistemological errors – specifically confusion about ourselves in relation to the world and the causes for happiness and suffering – lead to immoral states. The other main argument addressed in this chapter surveyed Buddhist ethical literature for examples of demanding activities and indications that Buddhist ethics is agent-neutral and is, therefore, *not* a type of virtue ethics, but a form of consequentialism. I have instead argued that when Buddhist ethical texts are read on their own terms, without the presupposition that Buddhist ethics should conform to either a virtue ethics or consequentialist ethical system, it is apparent that the primary moral concern in Buddhist ethics is not the consequences of actions, but the mental domain of the agent. In the next chapter, I will argue that although Buddhist ethical writings focus on the mental domain, they do not reveal an ethical structure that is compatible with the structure of virtue ethics. This will then lay the foundation for the last two chapters, in which I will make a case for the centrality of moral phenomenology to Buddhist ethical thought.

Chapter Three: Buddhist Ethics and Virtue Ethics

In the previous chapter, I argued that to interpret Buddhist ethics as consequentialist neglects the psychological domain that is emphasized as central in Buddhist ethical treatises. An alternate approach to Buddhist ethics, one that highlights the psychological domain, is represented in the work of such scholars as Keown (1992), Cooper and James (2005), Tillemans (2012), Finnigan (2011), and Carpenter (2015), who have argued that Buddhist ethics is best thought of as a type of virtue ethics. I agree that an accurate account of Buddhist ethics needs to move beyond a mere descriptive treatment of karma and its consequences, and the egoistic pursuit of merit. Buddhist ethics should not be reduced to a set of strategies conceived by Buddhist thinkers for the purpose of constraining selfishness. Rather, it emphasizes and includes a rich account of the development of virtues such as patience, love, and compassion. Nonetheless, I will argue in this chapter that a virtue ethics account of Buddhist ethics also misconstrues its structure. I will further argue that the relationship between virtues and nirvana, and the explanation of moral choice and what constitutes a moral agent in Buddhism are distinct from those presented by virtue ethics.

Since Keown has given the most detailed argument for Buddhist ethics as a kind of virtue ethics, and since he uses Aristotelian virtue ethics in making his case for this claim, I will first provide a broad outline of the main concepts and structure of Aristotle's virtue ethics. I will then assess his arguments in which he makes the case for Buddhist analogues to the key features of Aristotle's virtue ethics, and I will argue that Buddhist ethics ultimately lacks these fundamental features. I will also analyze Buddhist ethics in light of the critical structural features of virtue ethics more broadly to demonstrate that it also does not qualify as some non-Aristotelian variety

of virtue ethics.⁴⁰ In doing so, I will argue that Buddhist ethicists are not primarily occupied with the cultivation of virtues and their relationship with leading a good life, but that the aim of Buddhist ethical practice is to effect a transformation in how we see the world.

3.1 A Brief Account of the Structure of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

The structure of virtue ethics can be elucidated by attention to Aristotle's theory. The Aristotelian structure has the following characteristics:

- (1) It maintains that there is a highest good.
- (2) It describes the content of this highest good by way of the function argument and looks to human nature to determine the human function.
- (3) It gives an account of virtues, which are necessary for a person to function well.
- (4) These virtues are classified into the two categories of moral virtues and intellectual virtues.
- (5) Finally, these virtues together with moral strength explain moral agency.

3.1.1 The Highest Good

According to Aristotelian virtue ethics, although our actions are varied, there is a highest good to which we all aim. Aristotle initiates his ethical examination with the observation that our "every action and decision, seems to seek some good" (trans. 1992, p. 1, 1094a1-3). Aristotle refers to this highest good as *eudaemonia*. What qualifies *eudaemonia* as a highest good is that it is final (*teleion*) and self-sufficient (*autarkēs*) (1097b 14-20). That *eudaemonia* is final signifies that it is not a means to some other goal, but is an end in itself. It is desirable for its own sake alone. For example, Aristotle notes that wealth clearly is not the highest good since

⁴⁰ For alternative critiques of Keown's virtue ethics interpretation of Buddhist ethics, see for example, Garfield (2011), Goodman (2009, pp. 54-55, pp. 65-67), Gowan (2015, pp. 138-146), Harvey (2000, p. 50), Siderits (2003), and Todd (2013, pp. 30-37).

it is only useful as a means for some other end (1096a5). In fact, Aristotle also argues that everything else is desirable for the sake of *eudaemonia*. That *eudaemonia* is self-sufficient means that it is complete, being deficient in nothing. There is nothing that could be added to this highest good that could make it better. For example, Aristotle argues that a life filled with pleasure does not constitute *eudaemonia* since such a life could be improved upon and made more desirable through, for example, adding wisdom (1172b23–35).

All systems of virtue ethics share the understanding that not only do virtues play a central role in morality, but also that there is necessarily a specific conceptual link between *eudaemonia*, or its equivalent, and virtues. Based on verses in Nāgārjuna's *Garland of Jewels (Ratnāvalī)*, Carpenter (2015) argues for a form of Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics, in which there are two ends and two means to these ends. Carpenter argues that Nāgārjuna, like Plato and, in some readings, Aristotle, refocuses our ordinary conception of happiness as the fulfillment of desires, towards a new conception of happiness, that of well-being, which is achieved through faith in virtuous living. Then, after having reformed our idea of happiness, Nāgārjuna promotes a further higher or final good, liberation, which is achieved through wisdom. Carpenter draws a link between the two ends in such a manner that virtuous living becomes a means for liberation. The challenge for Carpenter in demonstrating that Madhyamaka Buddhist ethics is a form of virtue ethics is to demonstrate that for Nāgārjuna virtuous living as a means to liberation is not merely instrumental, but a constitutive means to liberation. Similarly, Keown argues that *eudaemonia* is functionally and conceptually equivalent to *nirvana*, so the challenge for Keown is to demonstrate a similar structural link between *nirvana* and virtues. For Aristotle, the link between virtues and *eudaemonia* is provided by his function argument, to which we will now turn.

3.1.2 The Function Argument

We now have a preliminary definition for *eudaemonia*: it is a state that is final and self-sufficient, meaning that it is desirable for its own sake and lacking nothing. However, this does not tell us about the content of *eudaemonia*. Aristotle utilizes a function argument to clarify those types of actions that may be considered good actions. This argument contends that what makes a thing good is that it performs its function (*ergon*) well. For example, a knife can be considered a good knife if it cuts well. Knives and all other things perform their functions well by virtue of possessing certain qualities. In the case of a knife, the property of sharpness is what enables it to cut well. These characteristics that enable a thing to perform its function well are called virtues. On this reading, then, virtues are not necessarily moral, but instead are that which enables excellence in activity.

Following the function argument, then, the highest good of persons is closely related to how well they perform their function. Aristotle states,

For just as the goodness and performance of a flute player, a sculptor, or any kind of expert, and generally of anyone who fulfills some action, are thought to reside in his proper function, so the goodness and performance of man would seem to reside in whatever is his proper function. (trans. 1992, p. 16, 1098a25-30).

The answer to what might be the function of a person, Aristotle suggests, can be ascertained by understanding the unique characteristics that distinguish humans (1097b20). Aristotle's understanding of human biology divides the person into physical and mental parts. The mental part, the soul, can be understood in a simplified manner to consist of emotions and rationality. This division becomes important for Aristotle, who suggests that we must have virtues relating to both the emotional and rational parts of the soul. Importantly, from among these parts of the

soul, what distinguishes one as a human being, Aristotle argues, is the ability to be rational (1098a1-5). Since the unique characteristic that distinguishes us as persons is reasoning, it then follows that for Aristotle the function of human beings is related to rationality. Aristotle is careful to add here that we are not talking about the mere possession of rationality, but the performance of rational activity (1098a5). The function of a person, then, is the activity of the rational part of the soul, and since to function well is enabled by specific virtues, *eudaemonia*, the highest good, is further described as activity guided by reason and in accord with virtues (1098a15, *EE* II.1, 1219a38-9).

Importantly, for Buddhist ethics to be a type of virtue ethics, it need not agree with Aristotle about the content of *eudaemonia*. Buddhists might reject that the unique characteristics that distinguish humans might inform us about what it is to live a good life. For example, it might be insight into the causes of suffering that Buddhists rely on to inform what it means to live well. Keown argues that like Aristotle, Buddhists look to human nature to understand what it is to live a good life. For Buddhists, he argues, this means looking in particular to the Abhidharma theory of dharmas. In doing so, Keown maintains that within this theory of dharmas there is an equivalent concept to the Aristotelian notion of virtue. In order to assess this claim, we will turn in the next section to an explanation of Aristotle's account of virtue.

3.1.3 Virtues

Virtues as described by Aristotle are the characteristics that cause persons to perform their function well and which render a person good. Aristotle says,

It must, then be remarked that every virtue or excellence, (1) renders good the thing itself of which it is the excellence, and (2) causes it to perform its function well. For example, the excellence of the eye makes both the eye and its function good, for good sight is due to the excellence of the eye... Now, if this is true of all things, the virtue or excellence of man, too will be a characteristic which makes

him a good man, and which causes him to perform his function well. (1106a10-20)

For Aristotle, there are two different categories of virtue related to the two aspects of the soul mentioned earlier. Intellectual virtues concern the rational part of the soul, and moral virtues concern the emotional part of the soul. For action to be constitutive of the final good, then, it must accord with both moral and intellectual virtues.

3.1.4 Moral Virtues and Intellectual Virtues

3.1.4.1 Moral virtues.

Moral virtues are those virtues related to emotion; however, an important characteristic of virtues for Aristotle is that they are not the emotions (*pathos*) themselves, nor are they the capacities (*dunamis*) for emotions. Instead, moral virtues are states or dispositions (*hexis*). Aristotle's argument for this distinction is that emotions are usually unintentional, passive rather than active, and so they are not the objects of praise (1113b3-5a3). Similarly, merely having the capacity or potential to be generous is also not what is praiseworthy. In saying that virtues are dispositions, it is evident that not all dispositions are virtues. Aristotle describes moral virtues as dispositions toward appropriate emotions, and it is these that are praiseworthy (1105b25-6, 1106a1-5).

The appropriateness of emotion and action is explained by the doctrine of the mean (*mesotēs*). Aristotle explains that the appropriateness of emotions and moral activities is similar to skill in crafts, in which excesses and deficiencies are avoided, and that skill in choosing the mean represents good work. The doctrine of the mean explains that excess and deficiency in emotions and actions are related to vice, and that the good lies in the mean between excess and deficiency. Aristotle states, "some vices exceed and others fall short of what is required in emotion and action, whereas virtue finds and chooses the median" (1992, 1107a5). Moral virtues

are more than knowledge of a skill since they deal with emotion, but they are similar in that virtue in both domains tends towards the mean. Aristotle says that to "experience all this [emotion] at the right time, towards the right objects, towards the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner—that is the median and the best course, the course that is a mark of virtue" (1106b5-20). Each moral virtue then has its own specific domain. For example, generosity has to do with giving money or gifts, and it is the mean that lies between the deficiency of stinginess and the excess of wastefulness (1107b10-11).

3.1.4.2 Practical wisdom.

To live well, according to theories of virtue ethics, requires that we develop dispositions through habits, so that our emotional aspect is guided by reason such that we are directed towards emotions and actions that are not excessive or deficient, but which represent a mean relative to us. However, while moral virtues are dispositions towards particular ends, they do not actually inform us of the methods to achieve those ends. For example, a good person might wish to be generous in a certain situation rather than being stingy or wasteful; however, this disposition does not guide the person with respect to the best amount to give. It also does not indicate an effective way to go about giving. These types of calculations involve not the emotional part of the soul, but the rational part of the soul, and so fall outside of the domain of moral virtues.

The knowledge that guides us in how we should go about achieving good actions comes out of deliberation by the rational part of the soul. It is good deliberation with respect to these ends that Aristotle calls practical wisdom (*phronesis*). According to virtue ethics, practical wisdom is a crucial element required of a person in order to be completely virtuous. Aristotle says, "It is impossible to be good in the full sense of the word without practical wisdom or to be

a man of practical wisdom without moral excellence or virtue" (trans. 1992, 1144b30-35). So while a good person might wish to be generous, a virtuous person additionally knows how to go about being generous in an effective way due to correct deliberation. A completely virtuous person, then, has virtues of both the emotional and rational part of the soul, and these virtues are joined to guide action in a way that accords with living well.

3.1.5 Choice and Moral Strength

The product of deliberation is choice (*prohairesis*), the decision to do something here and now to achieve the determined end (1113a 2-5). Aristotle explains, "We may define choice as a deliberate desire for things that are within our power: we arrive at a decision on the basis of deliberation, and then let deliberation guide our desire" (1113a10). The outcome of deliberation guided by practical wisdom is good choice. Aristotle recognizes that actions are initiated by choice and that moral action is the product of good choice. He says, "We may thus conclude that virtue or excellence is a characteristic involving choice, and that it consists in observing the mean... a mean that is defined by rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it" (1106b35). A virtuous person, then, is someone whose emotional and rational elements are in harmony, and who is thereby able to direct action in an appropriate and effective way. Of course, a person's emotional and rational aspects might work in harmony towards some negative end, and this would be a case of vice, the moral opposite of virtue. However, a complete account of virtue ethics requires a more nuanced description of the moral states of an agent than just virtue and vice, and this calls for the consideration of moral strength and moral weakness.

People are often emotionally pulled to do something that in some way they understand should not be done, or are emotionally reluctant to do something that they know they should do.

Aristotle's explanation of the mutual influence between knowledge and emotions is complex, however, he recognizes that there is often a tension between the emotion and rational parts of the soul. This, he explains, might be due to the intensity of excessive or deficient emotion overpowering the inchoate habits of the morally immature, or because such emotion temporarily incapacitates reason. A particular concern of virtue ethics, then, is the occurrence of occasions when emotion improperly deviates from the mean, and unlike in the case of vice, this inappropriate emotion is necessarily recognized by the rational aspect. In the case of a morally strong person (*enkrateia*), not only is excessive emotion recognized, it is resisted, and the person abides by the strength of the rational. In the case of morally weak persons (*akrasia*), they are overcome by the power of the emotion, so the rational yields to the emotional, and even though they know they should not pursue the action, they nevertheless do so (1146b20).

Moral strength is not a moral virtue like self-control, since it is not a state in which the emotion aims at a mean. A person who is morally strong is so because of resisting emotional excessiveness and deficiency, while the moral virtue of self-control is a state which emotionally aims for the mean with regard to a bodily pleasure. For a morally strong person, there is necessarily tension between the emotions and the rational, but for a person of self-control, what one desires to do is in accord with what one knows to be right.

The moral status of a person in virtue ethics is indicated by emotions, rationality, and action. Action is directed by choice, and choice is guided by emotion and reason. While moral virtues and practical wisdom guide action, in cases of emotional pull from what is right, when reason and emotions are in conflict, it is moral strength that is required as a counterforce to excessive or deficient emotion to ensure that activity accords with reason. Moral strength, then,

is an important third component in addition to moral virtues and practical wisdom in describing the moral agent in virtue ethics.

This discussion of Aristotelian virtue and moral choice identifies the three components to the structure of any virtue ethics system: *eudaemonia*, moral virtues, and practical wisdom. According to any system of virtue ethics, virtues play a central role in morality, and *eudaemonia*, or human flourishing, is a life lived in accordance with these virtues. These virtues are considered dispositions to act in certain ways. Moreover, a life fully constituted by virtue is informed by practical wisdom, a moral maturity that comes from lived experience and enables one to act effectively in a moral way. For Buddhist ethics to be a kind of virtue ethics, it must have an equivalent to *eudaemonia* that is made good through being constituted of some Buddhist equivalents of virtues and practical wisdom. Next we will examine Keown's argument that the Buddhist explanation of mental dharmas provides equivalents of virtues and practical wisdom that constitute the Buddhist highest good, nirvana.

3.2 Comparing the Structure of Buddhist Ethics with the Structure of Virtues Ethics

If Buddhist ethics is a type of virtue ethics, then we should be able to find within Buddhism these main features of the structure of virtue ethics as just outlined:

- (i) We would expect to find a Buddhist account of a highest good that is explained in terms of what it means for a person to lead a life well lived. The content of this life well lived should be described in terms of the function of a person, which reflects the Buddhist understanding of what is unique and distinctive about being a person.
- (ii) If Buddhist ethics is in fact a type virtue ethics, then an account of virtues must be a central component of this system, presented as properties that enable a person to function well.

(iii) We should further expect to find an explanation of a number of moral virtues described as necessary dispositions that ensure that our emotions are appropriately guided towards a mean.

(iv) A place of importance should also be provided to a type of correct deliberation that enables us to know how to achieve our moral ends.

(v) If Buddhist ethics is indeed representative of virtue ethics, then Buddhist ethical texts should give accounts of the moral agent that place importance on the themes of choice and moral strength in relation to action.

I will argue that Buddhist ethics does not have these fundamental structural characteristics. Of course, I am not arguing that Buddhist ethics would need to be descriptively the same as Aristotelian ethics to qualify as a type of virtue ethics. Certainly, Buddhist ethics could maintain the structure and relation of a virtue ethics system while having very different versions of a highest good and moral virtues due to a distinct understanding of human nature, the human function, and so forth. Instead, I aim to demonstrate that although Keown and others have theorized Buddhist parallels for virtue ethics concepts of *arete* (virtue), *phronesis* (practical wisdom), and *eudaimonia*, even if these Buddhist parallel notions were appropriate equivalents, the structural relationship between these concepts does not correspond to a system of virtue ethics.

In his book *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Keown offers (1992) the most detailed argument for understanding Buddhist ethics as a type of virtue ethics. He contends that, "Aristotelianism provides a useful Western analogue which will be of use in elucidating the foundations and conceptual structure of Buddhist ethics" (p. 196). In comparing the structure of virtue ethics with Buddhist ethics, I will respond to Keown's two main arguments for their

resemblance. In the first argument, Keown equates nirvana with eudaemonia, maintaining that both are described as highest goods, and that the nature of their relationship with moral and intellectual virtues is similar. His second argument equates the Buddhist concept of *cetanā* with the Aristotelian concept of *prohairesis*, and on that basis Keown argues that moral choice in Buddhism operates the same way as in systems of virtue ethics.

3.2.1 Describing the Highest Good: Nirvana, *Eudaemonia*, and 3.2.2 A Person's Function

Let us first turn to Keown's argument based on the similarities between nirvana and *eudaemonia*. Keown (2009) claims, "*eudaemonia* and nirvana are functionally and conceptually related in that both constitute that goal, end and summum bonum of human endeavor" (p. 195). As explained in (i), for nirvana and *eudaemonia* to be conceptually and functionally related in a way that demonstrates Buddhism to be a type of virtue ethics requires a clear structural link between the highest good and virtues.

Keown argues that both nirvana and *eudaemonia* can be characterized as final and self-sufficient. Keown (1992) writes,

Whatever else nirvana is, it is indisputably the summum bonum of Buddhism and may be characterized, like eudaimonia... (a) it is desired for its own sake; (b) everything else that is desired is desired for the sake of it; (c) it is never chosen for the sake of anything else. (p. 199)

Surely the goals of many religious systems could be described in such a way as to qualify as a highest good in this sense. For the purposes of a virtue theory, what is distinctive about the Aristotelian description of the highest good is not that it is a final and self-sufficient end, but that it is an expression of the human function, and further that it is accompanied by certain elements that enable a person to function well, namely virtues. If nirvana is to be equated with *eudaemonia* in a way relevant to supporting the claim that Buddhist ethics is a species of virtue ethics, it needs to be demonstrated that it has a similar relationship to virtues.

Eudaemonia is described as activity in accord with a function that relates to what is distinctive about being human (1098a15, *EE* II.1, 1219a38-9). Nirvana, however, is never described as an activity, much less an activity relating to what is unique about being human. It is described in terms of a negation, the absence of suffering and its cause. The Buddha equated nirvana with the third noble truth, cessation, which he described in his first teaching as follows: "Now this, Bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainders fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance of it" (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1844). Here nirvana is not described in terms of the function of a person, and, more importantly, there is no mention of it being constituted by virtues to qualify it as a life well lived. Instead, it is described as a total and permanent cessation of suffering and its causes. In the Pāli canon, the Buddha is recorded asking his student Sāriputta,

"Friend Sāriputta, it is said, 'Nibbāna, Nibbāna.' What now is Nibbāna?"

"The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this, friend, is called Nibbāna." (Bodhi, 2005, p. 1294; SN 38:1; IV 251–52).

Moreover, nirvana is not described in terms of virtues either emotional or rational but is described as unconditioned. The Buddha explains,

"Monks, I will teach you the unconditioned and the path leading to the unconditioned. Listen... And what, monks, is the unconditioned? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this is called the unconditioned... And what, monks, is the destination? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion: this is called the destination" (Bodhi, 2005, p. 364; SN 43:1–44, combined; IV 359–73).

It is clear that nirvana is not an activity, but is a state consistently described in negative terms as a lack of suffering and the causes that lead to suffering. Here there is the mention of the absence of vice, but there is no description of a conceptual link between virtue and nirvana.

Keown (1992) finds such descriptions of nirvana to be unproblematic. He points out that the Buddha continued to engage in ethical practices after his awakening and is described not only as intellectually perfect but also morally perfect (p. 114). While it is true that, having achieved enlightenment, the Buddha continued to engage in many activities including eating, sleeping, and so on, this does not mean that nirvana can be considered a type of activity. Importantly, the fact that the Buddha is described as having engaged in activities while in the state of nirvana does not imply a necessary relationship between nirvana and virtues. These activities, and specifically virtues, are not necessary constituents of nirvana. Nirvana is described as uncompounded and permanent, so it would be strange to characterize nirvana by these mundane activities simply because they happen to accompany it. Nirvana is the mere absence of suffering; it is a state that may be accompanied by moral acts, but should not be equated with them.

Moreover, Keown is referring to the first of two types of nirvana, nirvana with remainder. Nirvana with remainder refers to an *arhant* who has eliminated the causes of future suffering but still possesses a body and the other four aggregates. The second type of nirvana, nirvana without remainder, occurs when the *arhant* passes. It is the second type of nirvana, not the first type, that represents the final goal of the Buddhist path. So the nirvana Keown is referring to could not be the highest good as it is not final (*teleion*).

In order to provide a link between virtues and nirvana, Keown turns to the Buddhist account of mental dharmas. He argues that the Buddhist understanding of the mental elements of human nature can be reduced to two basic components: the emotional and the rational, and so that the Buddhist account has the same form as the Aristotelian. He claims that nirvana represents the perfection of these two aspects. Keown writes,

The goal or terminus of human perfection described as *eudaemonia* or nirvana is conceived of as embracing a bilateral perfection. The parameters of the goal are determined by the facts of human nature and its potential for development. (p. 195)

Here, Keown argues that the highest good in Buddhism appeals to human nature to determine its content, and is thus similar in nature to the Aristotelian account. Although Keown attempts to relate the highest good in Buddhism to human nature, his account is nevertheless devoid of the most important feature found in the Aristotelian presentation of the human good: an account of human function based on the unique characteristics that distinguish humans. The reason for Aristotle's examination of human nature in book one of *Nicomachean Ethics* is that he believes the unique and distinguishing properties of human nature can inform us about the human function, which he equates with the human good. However, the uniqueness of human function is not relevant to the Buddhist goal. The absence of suffering is not related to the distinctive feature of a person or any form of sentience. The highest good in Buddhism is the same for all creatures. Actually, for Buddhists to be born is to suffer, so nirvana constitutes the complete opposite of the distinguishing feature of ordinary existence. While Aristotelian ethics describes the final good in terms of action and function in an attempt to describe what it is to live well, the Buddhist ethical approach attempts to solve the problem of suffering. The solution to the problem of suffering requires an investigation into the causes of suffering and how to remove it rather than an investigation into the unique qualities and function of a person. For this reason, nirvana is described in these terms: the absence of the suffering and its causes, ignorance and craving.

Although Keown focuses on the Theravāda tradition, it might be thought that the Mahāyāna goal of Buddhahood, rather than the nirvana of an *arhat*, provides a better analogue to *eudaemonia*, since Buddhahood is described not only as a freedom from suffering, but also in

positive moral terms. While this might offer a solution to the present problem relating to activity, it does so only to present those in favor of a virtue ethics reading of Buddhist ethics with a different but equally problematic obstacle. As I have explained, for Aristotle the highest good is necessarily a final good. It could be argued that Mahāyāna Buddhahood is not a final good since Mahāyāna enlightenment is desirable for the sake of another goal, the elimination of the suffering of all beings.

Moreover, like nirvana, Mahāyāna enlightenment is unrelated to the distinctive features of humans and, as will be discussed next, the virtues that are associated with Mahāyāna enlightenment are unrelated to the function of humans. Finally, as will be discussed in later chapters, virtues in Mahāyāna Buddhism are not considered good unless they are accompanied by a particular way of taking up the world, a correct metaphysical view. Part of my argument for Buddhist ethics being a kind of moral phenomenology rather than a kind of virtue ethics, is that this view of the world precedes excellent virtue, and that this virtue is contingent upon this correct metaphysical view, and does not constitute it.

Carpenter (2015) argues that Nāgārjuna provides us with two ends: happiness reconceived as well-being, which is gained through good conduct, and liberation, the highest end, which is gained through wisdom and which is a sufficient means. However, by pursuing well-being through good conduct, one naturally comes to the wisdom required of the highest end. Pursuing happiness leads to the highest good. Carpenter observes,

This gradual leading from one [i.e., well-being] into the other [i.e., liberation]... is possible because the normative ground all along—for which pleasures and pains are to be pursued and avoided, and when; for which behaviors are to be encouraged or repudiated; for what is *good practice* consists in—is determined from the first by whatever it is that beings situated as we are need to do in order to be led to wisdom, and to a desire for definite goodness itself. In this sense the two ends are not independent, but rather related, and the one dependent upon the other. (p. 39)

Carpenter understands the wisdom that leads to liberation as the ultimate good in virtue of which other virtues are made good. On this reading, virtuous actions may lead us to the final good, but it is not the virtues that make the final end good. Instead, it is the final end that makes virtues good. I suggest that this reading of Nāgārjuna's ethics is moving in the direction of an appreciation of the centrality of moral phenomenology to Mahāyāna ethics because it understands wisdom, a metaphysically accurate way of seeing the world, to be the ultimate good. In Chapter Five, I will argue that Mahāyāna ethics is best conceived of as a kind of moral phenomenology, by drawing on the ethical writings of two other Mādhyamika thinkers, Āryadeva and Śāntideva, and also the Perfection of Wisdom literature, which is regarded as the primary source for Nāgārjuna's philosophical position.

3.2.3 Aristotelian Virtues and Buddhist Virtues

Keown (1992) argues that not only do Buddhist ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics share a commitment to life aiming at a highest good, they also have a common program for the "furtherance of human potential through the medium of certain practices known as virtues" (p. 193). He relates Buddhist virtues to Aristotelian virtues as follows: "The Abhidharma ethical classifications are readily intelligible in terms of one of the oldest and most influential concepts in Western ethics - the concept of a virtue" (p. 59). Keown argues that,

the *Abhidharma* posits two classes of mental forces which produce either defilement or purification of the mind. I described these forces as virtues and vices in accordance with Western ethical terminology since they perform a similar role in respect of promoting or inhibiting the attainment of the final good. (p. 81-82)

We must ask, however, whether or not these qualities are virtues in the Aristotelian sense. I have argued that Keown's claim that nirvana is a highest good in the Aristotelian sense is incorrect because it does not provide a clear explanation of the highest good in terms of function, which is

the distinguishing feature of the human good in Aristotelian ethics. It also follows that if the highest good in Buddhism is not related to function, then its account of virtues must also diverge from an Aristotelian account of virtues, which specifically defines them as properties that enable excellent functioning. Moreover, for Buddhist ethics to be considered a kind of virtue ethics, these mental qualities described in the Abhidharma literature need to characterize human flourishing.

The foundation of Buddhist psychology is the theory of dharmas as found in the Abhidharma texts, the most important of which in the Sanskrit tradition are Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmakośa)* and Asaṅga's *Compendium of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmasamuccaya)*. The Abhidharma theory of dharmas endeavors to give a complete account of mental functions, and included among the typical classification of 51 mental functions are lists of positive and negative mental qualities. It is true that fundamental to Buddhist ethics is the removal of dysfunctional mental processes (*kleśa*) from one's mental continuum (*santāna*) and the cultivation of positive ones. This process of elimination and cultivation when complete results in the achievement of the final state, that of a Buddha, an agent described as complete in virtue and without vice at all. These are, however, virtues only in the general sense that they represent a positive moral condition. They are not virtues in the specific sense utilized by Aristotle to refer to particular dispositions that enable excellence in rational activity.

If Buddhist ethics is in fact a type Aristotelian virtue ethics, we should expect to find an explanation of a number of moral virtues described as necessary dispositions guided by right reason which ensure that our emotions are appropriately guided towards a mean. Yet the positive mental events discussed in the Abhidharma literature are neither described as states of

character, nor are they said to be necessarily guided by correct reason. Rather than dispositions, these mental events presented in the Abhidharma literature are described as closer to impulses.⁴¹

Moreover, the positive mental events outlined in the Abhidharma literature are not dispositions that aim towards a mean between excess and deficiency. These mental events are often described in terms of an absence of something. For example, non-delusion (*amoha*) is listed as a virtue, and it would be strange to suggest that there could be an excess of non-delusion that should be avoided. Another virtue is non-hatred (*adveṣa*), and again, for Buddhists, since hatred is grounded in confusion, to say that this virtue stands between an excess and deficiency of an absence of hatred would be absurd. When Buddhist texts describe virtues such as love, compassion, and joy in a positive way, it is often advised to cultivate them immeasurably (*apramāṇa*).

That Buddhist virtues do not correspond to Aristotelian virtues does not disqualify Buddhist ethics from being a different kind of virtue ethics. Yet, when it comes to virtues, the reason that Buddhist ethics is incompatible with any system of virtue ethics is that Buddhist virtues do not have the conceptual relation with the Buddhist idea of what it is to lead an excellent life that is necessary for such ethical systems. The reason that this is the case will now be explained.

The Abhidharma discusses the dharmas in the context of the Buddhist understanding of dependent arising. Buddhist psychological texts describe a complex web of interdependent mental functions, some of which are described as virtuous, some as vicious, and others as morally neutral. While the Buddhist ethical project aims at the cultivation of positive mental activities and the elimination of negative mental activities, it does so based on the premise that it

⁴¹ It might be argued that the seeds of these mental events (*vāsanā*, *bag chags*) could be thought of as states, however, being potentials they resemble capacities more than virtues.

is a misunderstanding of the nature of ourselves and our relationship to the world that gives rise to negative mental activities, and a correct understanding of ourselves and our place in the world that gives rise to positive mental activities. For this reason, Buddhist ethical writings express a central concern with the correction of the mistaken way in which we see ourselves in relation to others instead of the direct cultivation of virtues.

In Buddhist traditions, moral cultivation is aimed foremost at a transformation of the way we see the world rather than the cultivation of virtues. This sets Buddhist ethics apart from virtue ethics. In virtue ethics, the primary focus is on dispositions to act. A person's character is admired if he or she is consistently moved by virtuous impulses and if the person knows how to act on those impulses. While virtues are important in Buddhist ethics, the main focus is not on the dispositions to act, but on the dispositions to perceive. Individuals are admired because their actions are guided by an accurate view of the world and their place in it. Just as Buddhist ethics' recognition of the moral importance of the consequences of acts does not make it consequentialist, the fact that we can find an emphasis on virtues does not make Buddhist ethics *areteic*. Nor does the fact that the goal of Buddhism is a state of perfect virtue make it so.

Another necessary attribute of virtues in Aristotelian ethics is that they not only enable excellence of function, but that they themselves are also constitutive of the highest goal. An *areteic* ethics is distinguished by its commitment to the constitution of the final goal by a life lived in accordance with virtues. Keown (1992) explains,

What is distinctive about the virtues is that they participate in and constitute the end... The virtues are the means to the gradual realization of the end through the incarnation of the end in the present. (p. 194)

Keown further argues that the nature of the relationship between nirvana and virtue is Aristotelian since it is through the medium of virtues that the two aspects of human nature are

transformed into their perfected state, nirvana. Since for virtue ethics, the relationship between virtues and the perfected end must be constitutive rather than contingent, a virtue ethics reading of Buddhist ethics must view moral virtues on the path to be not merely instrumental, but rather directly participatory in the resultant state of nirvana.

The case for Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics, therefore, rests on the claim that moral virtues are qualitatively equivalent at both the causal and resultant state. Indeed, this is what Keown (1992) asserts when he writes, "The difference between the Buddha's perfection and that of someone still following the Path – profound though it may appear – is only one of degree" (p. 113). Although it is certainly the case that moral virtues are necessarily present at the stage of the path and also at the resultant state of Buddhahood, it is not the case that they are qualitatively the same. To reduce the distinction to one of degree misconstrues the role of wisdom in the Buddhist account of moral choice, and also overlooks the fundamental Buddhist soteriological differentiation between ordinary and awakened experience. A Buddha has moral virtues, to be sure, but a Buddha's moral virtues are spontaneous and need not be arrived at through deliberation or to be supported by mindfulness and introspection like the virtues of those on the path. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, Mahāyāna ethical writers such as Śāntideva do not consider a virtue such as generosity to be perfected unless it is accompanied by a correct metaphysical outlook.

3.2.4 Moral Choice and *Cetanā*

If Buddhist ethics is a type of virtue ethics, it should accord importance to deliberation as a means to coming to know how to achieve our moral ends. Keown (1992) acknowledges that Buddhism does not have a precise explanation for moral choice, but suggests that a version of Buddhist moral choice can be "fabricated" by "depicting the faculties of Buddhist psyche in

terms of the Aristotelian framework" (pp. 210-211). It is certainly a setback for a virtue ethics interpretation of Buddhist ethics that such central components of the system as choice and moral strength should need to be "fabricated." That we can engage in the exercise of construing the terms of one system to accord with aspects of another system is scarcely evidence that the former system is a version of the latter. Nonetheless, Keown has faith that this project provides insight into an unexpressed but implicit aspect of Buddhist ethics from his understanding that the Buddhist concept of *cetanā*, is very close to choice in Aristotelian ethics, *prohairesis* (p. 213). This argument is important to Keown because he is arguing that Buddhist ethics is a type of virtue ethics because nirvana, the highest good in Buddhism is constituted by the perfection of both the rational and emotional parts of human nature.

Keown (1992) assigns Buddhist concepts to the Aristotelian categories, and then gives an account of moral choice in Buddhism by way of the Aristotelian model. He identifies feelings (*vedanā*) with appetite (*ores*), and explains that feelings give rise to impulses to act, which then bring about deliberation. While acknowledging that "Buddhism has no single term which is the equivalent of *phronesis*," Keown equates *sañña* with reason (*dianoia, logos*) from which the functional equivalents of deliberation and practical wisdom can be derived (p. 211). In this process of deliberation, reason is said to evaluate the non-rational drives inspired by feelings with regards to ends. The outcome of this deliberation, the meeting of reason and emotion, results in choice, a decision to engage in some kind of action to achieve a particular end. Here Keown identifies choice (*prohairesis*) with the Buddhist concept of *cetanā*, usually translated as "intention." I will now examine these Buddhist concepts to argue that they don't do the work required of them to map onto an Aristotelian ethical structure.

Keown (1992) seeks to understand the Buddhist notion of *cetanā* in terms of the Aristotelian faculty of moral choice, or *prohairesis*. He writes,

Cetanā is very much like *prohairesis* and stands at the crossroads of reason and emotion... *cetanā* is best pictured as a matrix in which the push and pull of the rational and emotional aspects of the psyche are funneled in the direction of moral choice. (p. 213)

Keown translates *cetanā* as choice and argues that it is the outcome of the process of reasoning which takes in the situation at hand, reflects upon it, and comes to an intellectual resolution to bring about the end (pp. 212-213). However, the function of *cetanā* as described in Buddhist psychological text is quite unlike the function of *prohairesis* as described by Aristotle. *Cetanā* is not described as a choice based on rational evaluation, but is more accurately thought of as an impulse that directs the mind towards a certain object. In his *Examination of the Five Aggregates (Pañcaskandhakaparakarāṇa)*, Vasubandhu defines *cetanā* as follows: “What is *cetanā*? It is mental action, which impels the mind towards good qualities, flaws, and that which is neither” (trans. Anacker, 2005, p. 67). In the *Compendium of Higher Knowledge*, Asaṅga gives another definition of *cetanā*:

What is intention (*cetanā*)? It is construction by the mind, mental action. It has the function of applying the mind to virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral [objects].⁴²

Here, there is no mention of beliefs or desires, nor is *cetanā* described as a product of rational deliberation; instead, it is depicted as a component of experience that directs other mental activities towards a particular object. *Cetanā* directs the mind towards a given object, but is not necessarily the result of choosing one thing over another, and it is also not concerned with means to determined ends. *Cetanā* is often motivated by desire or aversion towards a given object, without any rational deliberation interceding.

⁴² *sems pa gang zhe na/ sems mngon par 'du byed pa yid kyi las te/ dge ba dang mi dge ba dang lung du ma bstan pa rnams la sems 'jug par byed pa'i las can no/ (Abhidharmasamuccaya, D4049, 48a-48b).*

While choice is something that we voluntarily engage in on specific occasions, *cetanā* accompanies the mind in every moment and is considered involuntary. For example, even in the moment we fall asleep, a mental event not usually associated with an intentional act, *cetanā* plays an important role as our mind's withdrawal from attending to the external world. While for Aristotle, *prohairesis* is denied to animals and even children, for Buddhists, *cetanā* is an important component of every moment of experience for every sentient being. In his *Commentary on the Thirty Verses (Triṃśikābhāṣya)*, Sthiramati (6th century), comments on the role of *cetanā* in the shaping of consciousness, describing it as the activity of setting the mind in motion. He describes *cetanā* as the mental activity whose presence causes the mind to flow toward an object, like the movement of iron filings caused by a magnet.⁴³ Buddhist psychology explains consciousness as intentional; to be aware is to have an object of awareness, and to have an object of awareness requires *cetanā* whose function both directs the mind towards the object and shapes the experience of the object. The Buddhist account of *cetanā* demonstrates that it is not a suitable parallel for Aristotle's moral choice, which mediates between the push and pull of the rational and emotional aspects of the psyche.

For Aristotle moral choice (*prohairesis*) is the outcome correct deliberation. Correct deliberation requires the faculty of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) which is initiated by desire, evaluates them against moral goals, and selects right means towards these good ends. If Buddhist ethics is indeed a form of virtue ethics, we would expect to see a Buddhist equivalent of practical wisdom outlined in Buddhist psychological texts and its central role in moral choice explained in Buddhist ethical texts. However, we find neither. While *prohairesis* guided by practical wisdom brings about right action, there is no textual evidence to suggest

43. *cetanā cittābhisamskāro manasaś ceṣṭā yasyām satyām ālambanaṃ prati cetasaḥ praspanḍa iva bhavaty ayaskāntavaśād ayahpraspanḍavat* / (Buescher, 2007, p. 58).

that *cetanā* provides a necessary intermediary link between right reasoning and right action in Buddhism. *Cetanā* is not described as specifically related to intellectual virtues that choose a best course of action or moral virtues that regulate emotion.

Keown (1992) also attempts to draw a parallel between *cetanā* and *prohairesis* by arguing that *cetanā* too is a fusion of two complimentary processes, one cognitive and the other affective. Keown imputes to Buddhist psychology a division between the rational and affective domains by invoking the two mental functions of *samjñā* (ascertainment, *sañña* in Pāli) and *vedanā* (feeling). He suggests that, "it may be helpful to regard the categories of *sañña* and *vedanā* respectively as denoting the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of psychic life" (p. 67). Keown further identifies two sets of three mental functions from the Buddhist psychology literature, which he describes as "twin intellectual and emotional operations," which are "complementary process fused in *cetanā*" (p. 211). He identifies the affective faculties as courage (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), and desire (*chanda*), which initiate the impetus to act. The implementation of this impetus then depends upon the cognitive aspect of *cetanā*, which he describes a three stage process of (1) attention to the matter at hand (*vitakka*), (2) leading to reflection (*vicāra*), and (3) ending in a resolution or decision (*adhimokkha*).

However, it is not as though courage, joy, and desire are regarded in Buddhist psychology as having a special link with feeling (*vedanā*), or attention, reflection, and resolution with ascertainment (*samjñā*). This is an arbitrary cherry picking of mental factors from the traditional list of 51 and forcing the intellectual-emotional framework of Aristotle onto Buddhist psychology. In Buddhist psychology, there is no Buddhist categorizing of mental acts into emotional and intellectual; *samjñā* and *vedanā* do not serve as categories dividing operations of the mind, but are themselves just two mental events among many.

Moreover, like *cetanā*, both *samjñā* and *vedanā* are considered to be operating in every moment. It is true that *samjñā* and *vedanā* are featured as prominent in Buddhist psychology, but their importance is derived not from their being components of moral choice, but from their fundamental role in shaping each moment of experience. In Buddhist psychology, *samjñā* refers to ascertainment rather than a type of rational deliberation. In the *Compendium of Higher Knowledge*, Asaṅga defines ascertainment:

What is the defining characteristic of ascertainment (*samjñā*, 'du shes)? [Its] characteristic is recognizing upon assembling. [It is an] entity which apprehends signs and apprehends marks in accordance with which [one] assigns designations to objects of vision, hearing, differentiation, and consciousness.⁴⁴

Samjñā is not described as evaluating two options like rational deliberation, but as functioning to identify an object and categorize it based on its unique characteristics. *Samjñā* allows us to distinguish between objects, and also associates them with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings. When we become aware of an object, we identify it and also experience a feeling associated with it. Feeling (*vedanā*) refers to the simple experience of something as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Vasubandhu defines feeling in the *Examination of the Five Aggregates* as follows: “What are feelings? They are experiences, and are of three kinds: pleasure, pain, and that which is neither pleasure nor pain” (trans. Anacker, 2005, p. 66). Pleasant and unpleasant feelings function to give rise to the mental factors of desire and aversion respectively, giving feeling an important role in our intentions and actions. One important distinction to make is that while in Western psychology the words feeling and emotion are sometimes used interchangeably, in Buddhism feeling is narrowly defined, forming its own separate category, and is differentiated from mental states that would normally fall into the Western category of

⁴⁴ /'du shes kyi mtshan nyid ci zhe na/ 'dus te shes par byed pa'i mtshan nyid de/ mtshan mar 'dzin par dang/ bkra bar 'dzin pa'i ngo bo gang gis ji ltar mthong ba dang thos pa dang bye brag phyed pa dang/ rnam par shes pa'i don rnams la tha snyad 'dogs pa'o/ (*Abhidharmasamuccaya*, D4049, 45b).

emotion. The results of virtuous and non-virtuous actions are pleasant and unpleasant feelings respectively, which function to give rise to the mental events of desire and aversion. This gives feeling an important role in our subsequent intentions and actions. Feeling works not against, but in tandem with ascertainment.

If an object is accompanied by a pleasant feeling, our minds are attracted towards the object, and it is identified by ascertainment as a pleasant object. Regarding it as a pleasant object, we develop desire for it, based upon which we may engage in negative activities in order to acquire it. Similarly, with regards to objects experienced and associated with unpleasant feelings and identified as unpleasant objects, we may engage in negative activities to avoid them. The moral problem for Buddhist ethicists is that ascertainment and feeling both are founded on confusion with regard to the world and our place in it. If this confusion is addressed, then ascertainment and feelings are accorded with what we might think of as moral mental functions such as generosity. Thus, what is needed is not a type of practical reasoning that evaluates emotions, but a wisdom that removes metaphysical confusion about our self in the world and thus supports positive mental states both emotional and cognitive.

Keown (1992) argues that in Buddhist ethics both moral and intellectual virtues constitute nirvana, the Buddhist perfected state. This would give him the necessary link between virtues and nirvana that would be required for Buddhist ethics to conform to the structure of virtue ethics. He also argues that moral choice in Buddhist ethics is similar to that in Aristotelian ethics as further evidence for Buddhist ethics as a type of virtue ethics. As explained above, however, the Aristotelian explanation of moral choice is not transferable to the Buddhist psychological account. Moreover, we do not find in Buddhist ethical thought a structure that accords with that of virtue ethics. It is a correct metaphysical view that constitutes nirvana. Positive mental

activities are a product of this correct metaphysical view; however, they are not constitutive of nirvana. Buddhist ethical texts prioritizes the transformation of the way we see the world over virtues, and it is this correct metaphysical view that is the defining characteristic of the Buddhist moral state, not virtues.

There is a final important structural difference between Buddhist ethics and virtue ethics in relation to the fundamental problem of moral choice. As discussed above, for Aristotle, the moral problem can be described as a tension between emotion and reason. Emotion challenges reason to direct the course of an agent's action, and moral agents are assessed in terms of their strength of reason to overcome this counterforce of emotion. A moral self is a person who is able to do what accords with reason. Those who are unable through reason to counter the force of emotion fall into vice. The moral solution, then, is to develop strength of will, so that emotional responses are managed and circumstantially appropriate.

Once again, in this account we see the central role of virtues in Aristotle's ethical account. If Buddhist ethics is also a system of virtue ethics, we would expect to see a similar description of how the cultivation of dispositions to act is the solution to vice. Instead, the response to vice in Buddhist ethical texts involves an investigation into whether one is seeing the situation correctly. For example, in his *Guide to Awakened Living*, Śāntideva's strategy for overcoming anger is to examine the nature of its causes. He says,

If the nature of the foolish is to cause harm to others, my anger toward them is not appropriate, just as [it would be inappropriate to have anger] toward fire for its nature of burning. (VI.39)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *yadī svabhāvo bālānām paropadravakāritā | teṣu kopo na yukto me yathāgnau dahanātmake ||VI.39|| gal te gzhan la 'tshē byed pa // byis pa rnam s kyi rang bzhin ni // de la khro ba mi rigs te // sreg pa'i rang bzhin me bkon 'dra // (Toh.3871, 16a).*

Here, Śāntideva explains that we can and should eliminate anger not through the cultivation of virtue, but through an adjustment in how we perceive the person who is the object of our anger. This adjustment is effected through an inquiry into the nature of the person.

While the emotional-rational division is a fundamental framework in systems of virtue ethics, one of the distinctive features of Buddhist psychology is that there is no category termed "emotion." This is quite striking, given the importance placed on categorizing mental states by Buddhist philosophers, as evidenced by the comprehensive lists found in the Abhidharma literature. In fact, despite the frequent appearance of the English term "destructive emotion" in works treating Buddhist psychology, there is no Sanskrit or Tibetan word that corresponds directly to the word "emotion." The fact that such an important category for Western psychology is altogether missing from Buddhist descriptions of the topography of mental events points to an important difference in the approaches of Buddhist and Western psychology towards the mind.

Of course, Buddhists psychological texts do recognize mental states such as happiness, sadness, compassion, and anger, etc.; however, they understand their nature and function in a very different way, a way that does not lead to them being categorized as distinct from other mental functions that Western psychology might consider cognitive. This different perspective can be appreciated by comparing the etymologies of the Sanskrit term *karuṇā* with the etymology of the English term it is most commonly translated as, "compassion," which would be regarded as an emotional virtue in a system of virtue ethics.

The term "compassion" comes from Latin and is a combination of the prefix "com-" (an archaic form of the preposition and affix *cum* which means "with") and "passion" (which is derived from the stem *patī*, meaning to suffer or endure). When combined, they have the sense of "to suffer together with." The meaning and etymology of compassion is also related to the

noun "patient," meaning one who suffers.⁴⁶ The word compassion, then, has the sense not of something we do or engage in, but something that happens to us. As mentioned, the Western category of emotion includes mental states that are often conceived of as having the potential to overcome our power of will. By contrast, the Sanskrit term *karuṇā*, although translated as compassion, carries a very different sense than the passivity connoted by the English term compassion. *Karuṇā* comes from the root *kr* whose primary meaning is, "to do, to make, produce, cause, engage in," conveying a distinctly active sense. In fact, one of the meanings of *karuṇā* is "an action, holy work."⁴⁷ So, while a system of virtue ethics views emotions as passive in the sense of happening to us, or overcoming us and requiring mediation by practical wisdom, Buddhist psychology understands these same mental events to be active states, with the wholesome ones to be intentionally cultivated.

It is important to note as well that the term *kleśa*, often translated as "passion" or "destructive emotion," has a very different sense than these English words connote. In the *Treasury of Higher Knowledge*, under the category of *kleśa*, Vasubandhu places certain mental states that in the West might be considered emotions, such as covetousness (*abhidhyālu*) and ill-will (*vyāpanna-citta*), but he also includes some that would instead be considered cognitive, such as wrong view (*mithyā-drṣṭi*).

Rather than a distinction between emotive and cognitive states, Buddhist psychological texts divide the mental world at the most basic level into those mental functions that contribute to ordinary experience and suffering, and those that contribute to awakened experience and happiness. In these two categories of positive and negative mental states, no distinction is made

⁴⁶ See: Brown (2002) *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, also: Eric Partridge (1966) *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*.

⁴⁷ See the neuter form of the word in *Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 2008, p. 255 and pp. 300-301.

between cognitive and emotive. For example, under the positive mental functions, we find faith, embarrassment, and shame, grouped together with effort, conscientiousness, and non-ignorance. In the category of the primary negative mental states, we find desire, anger, and pride, grouped together with ignorance, doubt, and wrong views. Negative states are experienced as unpleasant or lead to unpleasant experiences; positive states are either experienced as pleasant or lead to pleasant experiences. They are all considered mental actions, and as such they are morally significant. The Buddhist practice and its goal is to eliminate those mental states that fall into the negative category and to cultivate those that fall into the positive category.

The moral problem for Buddhists is not a tension between emotional demands and rational knowledge. Where Aristotle sees moral tension, the Buddha sees an important interdependent relationship between the way we understand the world and the way we experience it. The moral problem in Buddhism, then, is that viewing the world in an inaccurate way cultivates negative mental states, which not only feel bad and encourage harmful actions, but also reinforce the wrong views that originally fostered them. Central to the way we see the world is how we see ourselves in it as agents, the topic to which we will now turn.

3.2.5 The Moral Agent

In virtue ethics, the account of moral choice provides the foundation for the account of moral agency. Since the virtue ethics account of moral choice does not find a parallel in Buddhist ethics, the account of the moral agent also differs. The moral agent in virtue ethics is described in relation to the choices she or he makes. Because of this, ideas like moral strength and practical wisdom, which are less emphasized in Buddhist ethical texts, are central to the ethical discussion on moral persons in virtue ethics. Instead, the Buddhist ethical framework begins with the understanding that virtue and vice arise from an accurate and inaccurate view of

the world, respectively. Thinking about ourselves in an incorrect way leads to a self-centered view that encourages vice. The solution for dealing with vice is not to rely on moral strength and correct deliberation, but is a correction in the way we think and, therefore, feel about ourselves and those we encounter. It is the moral agent's view of the world that is of primary importance in Buddhist ethical writings.

The moral tension for Buddhists is better described as a tension between two experiential states, those with inaccurate views described as ordinary experience and those with accurate views described as awakened experience. Viewing the world in an inaccurate way leads to negative mental states, which not only feel unpleasant, but which also reinforce the wrong views that originally fostered them. The Buddhist moral solution, then, is the development of wisdom, which undermines confusion about the world and engenders positive mental states. This wisdom (*prajñā*) that is so important in the Buddhist resolution of the moral problem is more closely related to *sophia*, a concept that plays a lesser role in the Aristotelian model of moral choice. For a system of ethics that understands virtues to play a central role in morality, the knowledge of how to act in accord with those virtues in a particular situation is more useful than knowledge of metaphysical facts. However, in Buddhist ethical thought, according to which the confusion about the ontological status of oneself and others constitutes the primary moral problem, such practical knowledge is less useful, while knowledge of metaphysical facts is essential to the moral solution.

While the Aristotelian model of moral choice prioritizes practical wisdom over theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), the transformation of vision so important in Buddhist ethics is brought about by a metaphysically accurate wisdom. In Buddhism, excellence is not achieved through virtues that regulate the rational and emotional parts of ourselves, but through awareness

of the unconscious drivers such as confusion, fear, and selfishness that bring about unpleasant mental experiences which constitute our continued suffering. Moral agents too are described quite differently. They are not evaluated by way of their moral choices or strength of will, but with respect to their metaphysical perspectives. In Buddhism, an inaccurate view of the world accompanies vice while an accurate view of the world accompanies virtue and is what makes someone praiseworthy.

Buddhist ethics as moral transformation derives from the insight found in the Four Noble Truths, that the cause of suffering and its solution are based on the interdependent relationship between confusion, the experience of negative mental states, and action. For Buddhists, then, common Western ethical concerns, such as determining the morally preferred action, defining duties, and describing welfare, all become secondary concerns. As Carpenter (2015) notes, “liberating insight remains the ultimate good by which the goodness of practices and dispositions is measured” (p. 40). The primary concern is not with dispositions to act, but with a type of phenomenology; what it means to become ethical is the development of a more accurate metaphysical vision of the world, so as to bring about positive mental states and actualize awakened experience.

Conclusion

In response to Keown, I have argued that Buddhist ethics is structurally incompatible with Aristotelian virtue ethics. Yet one may object that for Buddhist ethics to be a form of virtue ethics, it need not take the form of ethics that Aristotle outlined. Still, even modern versions of virtue ethics, which differ considerable from Aristotle’s version, emphasize the relationships between virtue, practical wisdom, and some equivalent to *eudemonia*. As I have argued, Buddhist ethics is not primarily occupied with an investigation into virtues and how they

constitute human flourishing. Virtues ground the structure of virtue ethics, yet Buddhist ethics is grounded not in virtues, but in a concern for the accuracy with which we view ourselves in relation to the world. The moral problem in Buddhism is not some failure to live in accordance with virtue, but is a confused way of seeing the world and our place in it.

Buddhist accounts of morality and psychology emphasize the importance of specific mental activities in contributing to how we come to perceive our world, and, importantly, how we incorrectly superimpose exaggerated qualities onto objects and events. Ordinary suffering experience is conditioned by a wrong way of thinking about ourselves and the world, such as regarding impermanent things as permanent, considering dependently existent things to exist essentially, and not understanding the destructive nature of unhealthy mental states. By contrast, awakened experience can be described as an insight into the nature of ourselves and the world. This insight is an accurate experiential understanding of phenomena, including a recognition of their qualities of impermanence and selflessness, and also awareness of the destructive nature of unhealthy emotions.

It is true that virtues arise from seeing the world in a correct way, but the transformation of vision emphasized in Buddhist ethical writings is not good because of its relationship with virtues; it is good because it is metaphysically accurate. It is this moral outlook, not virtues, that is emphasized as foremost in Buddhist ethics, and this is why Buddhist ethical thought is more accurately understood as a kind of moral phenomenology rather than as a form of virtue ethics. I will argue that evidence for this position can be found explicitly in the Mahāyāna text tradition, in which virtues such as generosity are not considered perfected until they are accompanied with a correct metaphysical view.

In the next two chapters, I will argue that it is our view of the world that constitutes the good in Buddhism. First, I will explain how many of the mental activities identified by Keown as morally significant, such as *cetanā*, feeling, and ascertainment are indeed morally relevant, but their moral relevance is unrelated to regulating virtues. Instead, an understanding of the way they function together supports a reading of Buddhist ethics as a kind of moral phenomenology. This is because they play an important role in how we take up the world.

Chapter Four:

Buddhist Theories of Perception and Experience and their Relation to Ethics

In this chapter, I provide an account of the basic structure of experience as described in the Buddhist psychological texts of Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Buddhaghosa, which I propose provide the first step in appreciating Buddhism's unique approach to ethics – an approach distinguished by its phenomenological emphasis. I have argued that, although the immediate consequences of our actions are important considerations in Buddhist ethical writings, they are not the primary concern, and because of this, it is a mistake to consider Buddhist ethics to be a type of consequentialism. I have also argued that, although the primary concern in Buddhist ethical writings is the mental aspect of the agent, Buddhist psychology and ethical thought markedly differ from the structure of virtue ethics.

The moral tension in Buddhist ethical writings is best described as a tension between two experiential states as opposed to the regulation of the rational and emotional parts of ourselves. Moreover, the moral solution relies on the relationship between how we understand the world and the way we experience it, rather than the development of moral strength or practical wisdom. Having thus differentiated Buddhist ethics from consequentialism and virtue ethics approaches, the central claim in this chapter is that fundamental and unique to Buddhist ethics is the moral emphasis it places on the cognitive manner with which agents take up their world: how they perceive themselves, others, and events.

I will first argue that for Buddhists, perception is not a passive process; instead, it is *always* accompanied by other mental activity, which makes it part of an active interpretive process. I will then argue that this interpretive function is morally significant. Agents perceive the same persons, objects, and events in often drastically divergent ways. Whether we see

someone as a friend, an enemy, or a stranger, I will argue, is ethically significant according to Buddhist moral theories. I will also argue that the way a person engages with the world determines the moral status of that individual. A morally mature person sees the world in a specific way.

4.1 Two Perspectives on Perception: Buddhist Psychology and Buddhist Epistemology

Several of the most important treatises on Buddhist psychology were written in the fourth century. In the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition, two of the most influential authors of this era were Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, while around this same time Buddhaghosa left a profound mark on the Pāli tradition. Each of these three Buddhist philosophers played a significant role in shaping the Buddhist literary landscape, and most notable here is that each wrote influential treatises treating psychology, outlining the various types of mental actions and their functions.

The Abhidharma project of these Buddhist philosophers was an attempt to systematize the array of diverse teachings of the Buddha found in the collection of *sūtras* into a single coherent presentation. The methodology employed was to assemble key concepts into common categories and explicate their definitions and functions. There are many ways one might construct and organize the type of lists (*mātrkā*) found in the Abhidharma texts, and the choices these authors made in terms of what they chose to include as well as the relationships between categories that they chose to emphasize can tell us as much about their philosophical views as the actual content of the lists.

At first glance, these texts might seem to be primarily concerned with reducing phenomena to their essential components, so as to produce a type of ontological hierarchy. On closer inspection, however, we find that these texts provide much more than a system of metaphysical classification. Abhidharma texts categorize and describe the complex relationships

among mental phenomena, showing particular concern with assigning each mental phenomenon a moral value, even when that moral value is determined to be neutral. With this in mind, we can understand that these texts were produced with the intention of not only providing metaphysical knowledge, but also offering psychological and moral insights.

The concepts defined in these texts would become foundational not only to those Buddhist philosophers who emphasized psychologically based systems, such as Sthiramati and Dharmapāla, but also to the founders of the Buddhist epistemological tradition, such as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, who developed their system based upon important Abhidharmic terms, such as *svlakṣaṇa* (specifically characterized) and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* (generally characterized), which became fundamental in differentiating sources of knowledge.

While the psychological and epistemological treatises all address the mind and perception, they diverge in their perspective, emphasis, and agenda in discussing this domain. The epistemological texts are concerned with developing a shared vocabulary for resolving epistemological and metaphysical disagreements by describing the mechanics of perception and inference, and also determining valid sources of knowledge. By contrast, the psychological texts of Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Buddhaghosa emphasize the mapping of the mind and contextualize different mental states and mental activities within a soteriological framework. For these earlier authors, the primary intent in describing mental actions and their functions was to explicate how they contribute to or alleviate suffering. To this end, instead of deriving an explanation of the structure of the mind from an established metaphysical position, these texts take a phenomenological approach, often describing the various mental events and their functions from the perspective of first person experience.

In this chapter, I will be drawing primarily on the Buddhist psychological texts rather than those of the epistemological tradition, since it is the Buddhist psychological treatises that are explicitly ethical. Their ethical account is linked with a first person account of mental activity. They outline the basic structure of experience wherein perception is clearly explained as an active rather than passive process. These texts offer a description of an experience of that mental activity, not merely a technical account. They explain not only what the mental event is like, but what it is like for the experiencer.

For instance, when describing pride or joy, the subject matter is the *experience* of pride and joy, or as Nagel might put it, "what is it like" to be prideful or joyful? To give just a few examples, when Asaṅga explains pride (*māna, nga rgyal*) in his *Compendium of Higher Knowledge*, he describes it as an experience of the "inflation (*khengs pa*) of the mind."⁴⁸ When he explains the experience of sleep he describes it as a withdrawal (*sdud pa*) of the mind and categorizes it as a type of dullness.⁴⁹ Here, Asaṅga clearly describes mental events not only as actions, but also speaks from an experiential perspective. Vasubandhu takes a similar experientially descriptive approach, and when discussing the different kinds of mental events in the *Examination of the Five Aggregates*, for example, he describes the mental event of constructive effort (*vīrya, brtson 'grus*) as a mind that is delighted (*spro ba*) with respect to virtue.⁵⁰ He describes equanimity (*upekṣā, btang snyoms*) as an evenness (*mnyam pa nyid*) of mind, remaining in a natural and effortless state.⁵¹ This type of phenomenological emphasis has a long history in Buddhism, tracing all the way back to the Buddha's description of experience as suffering (*duḥkha*).

⁴⁸ *jig tshogs la lta ba la brten nas sems khengs pa* (D4049: 49a).

⁴⁹ *sems sdud pa gti mug gi char gtogs pa* (D4049:52a).

⁵⁰ *gde ba la sems mngon par spro ba'o* (D4059:13a).

⁵¹ *sems mnyam pa nyid dang / sems rnal du 'dug pa dang / sems lhun gyis grub pa yang thob pa* (D4049: 12B).

While Dignāga, the founder of Buddhist epistemology, describes perception simply as "that which is free from conceptualization (*kalpanā*),"⁵² and maintains that perception takes only real particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*) as its object, from the perspective of the Buddhist psychological texts, such an explanation is merely a theoretical distinction since we never actually have an experience of sense data alone. Instead, perception is always accompanied by other mental activities that shape the context of our experience. We never experience raw sensations in isolation, and there is never a moment in which experience is characterized by a completely objective representation of the specific characteristics of a given phenomenon.

Candrakīrti criticizes the Logicians' description of perception (*pratyakṣa*) because it strays from that of worldly convention, since such analysis of a sense object perceived devoid of conception is not found in ordinary experience.⁵³ To take perception and isolate it from other mental actions, such as feeling, is to venture into the realm of the purely hypothetical. Perception is complemented by memories of past experience, regrets, feelings, interests, hopes, and desires. These mental activities influence the way in which we intend different properties of the object, and in doing so, shape the way we see persons, objects, and events. From this perspective, seeing should not be thought of as the eye passively receiving whatever it comes into contact with, like a mirror reflecting whatever happens to be in front of it. Instead, seeing is enriched experience influenced by our emotions and other cognitive capacities. Perception is part of an interpretive process, and is just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle that makes up experience.

I will next argue that the way in which we perceive matters morally, through an explanation of how the basic structure of experience includes a number of mental activities

⁵² *Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1.3c: *pratyakṣam kalpanāpoḍham*. See reconstruction of Chapter One of the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* by Steinkellner, 2005, p. 2.

⁵³ See *Prasannapadā*, Ruegg, 2002, pp. 119-30.

operating simultaneously. These include functions such as categorization and affective valence, which make the very act of perception morally significant.

4.2 The Basic Structure of Experience: A Buddhist Perspective

The Buddhist psychological texts outline in intricate detail the important mental components of experience, explicating a range of different mental activities that together provide a topological description of our experience.⁵⁴ In his *Compendium of Higher Knowledge*, Asaṅga outlines 51 important mental activities, and this same list of 51 is provided by Vasubandhu, with some changes to the order and definitions, in his *Examination of the Five Aggregates*.⁵⁵ Here, these mental actions are classified into six groups:

1. Five Constantly Operative Mental Processes (*sarvatra-ga, kun 'gro*)
2. Five Determined Mental Processes (*viniyata, yul nges*)
3. Eleven Constructive Mental Processes (*kuśula, dge ba*)
4. Six Main Destructive Mental Processes (*mūlakleśa, rtsa nyon*)
5. Twenty Secondary Destructive Mental Processes (*upakleśa, nye nyon*)
6. Four Variable Mental Processes (*aniyata gzhan 'gyur*)

It is the first group, the constantly operative mental processes, that is of particular importance for the present discussion on the basic structure of experience. This list outlines the five types of mental activity that accompany every moment of awareness, which are the building blocks of experience. In his *Examination of the Five Aggregates*, after enumerating 51 mental activities,

⁵⁴ Not included in these lists are mental activities that were to become important to Mahāyāna schools such as generosity (*sbyin-pa*), ethical discipline (*tshul-khrims*), patience (*bzod-pa*), love (*byams-pa*), and compassion (*snying-rje*).

⁵⁵ In the *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu provides a similar list of mental activities, but includes only forty-six. In the Theravāda system, the *Abhidhammattha-sangaha* by Anuraddha also outlines fifty-one subsidiary awarenesses.

Vasubandhu explains that the first five "are always active,"⁵⁶ and identifies the five constantly operative mental processes as: (1) feeling (*vedanā, tshor ba*), (2) ascertainment (*saṃjñā, 'du shes*), (3) intention (*cetanā, sems pa*), (4) contact (*sparsā, reg pa*), and (5) attention (*manaskāra, yid la byed pa*).⁵⁷ Asaṅga provides the same list of five in his *Compendium of Higher Knowledge*,⁵⁸ and the *Enumeration of Phenomena (Dhammasaṅgaṇi)*, a foundational Abhidharma text found in the Pāli Canon, also gives a similar list of five mental activities that always accompany consciousness.⁵⁹

These five constantly operative mental processes provide us with the basic description of experience. In Vasubandhu's *Thirty Verses (Triṃśikā)*, he specifically highlights how these five mental activities accompany all types of awareness, stating that while each apprehension of the six types of objects (visible, auditory, tactile, olfactory, taste, and mental) may be associated with a variety of different mental activities, they are *always* accompanied by the five constantly operative mental processes (7- 8ab).⁶⁰ In his commentary on these lines, Sthiramati adds that "The five dharmas of contact, attention, and so forth, accompany all moments of mind, and thus they are constantly operative."⁶¹ Not only do the constantly operative mental processes accompany all types of awareness, but they are also present regardless of the subtlety of mind.

⁵⁶ Shastri, 1955: *eteśāṃ pañca sarvatragāḥ* (29); D4059: *de rnam las lnga ni kun tu 'gro ba'o'* (12b)

⁵⁷ In his *Abhidharmakośa* Vasubandhu gives a list of ten constantly operative mental processes, however this is not his own position, but is according to the Vaibhāṣika text tradition.

⁵⁸ See Boin-Webb, 2001, p. 75.

⁵⁹ The first four in this list are the same as found in Vasubandhu and Asaṅga's lists; however, here rather than attention (*manaskāra*), the fifth mental activity, is listed as conscious awareness (*citta*). Heim notes that in the Pāli tradition the list later expanded to also include attention, vitality, and oneness of mind. See Heim, 2014, p. 92.

⁶⁰ *yatrajastanmayairanyaiḥ sparśādyaiścārhatō na tat / na nirodhasamāpattau mārge lokottare na ca // Tvḥ_7 // dvitīyah pariṇāmo 'yaṃ tṛtīyah ṣaḍvidhasya yā /*

⁶¹ *te punaḥ sparśamanaskārādayaḥ pañca dharmāḥ sarvacittam anugacchantīti sarvatragāḥ |*. (Tvbh, Buescher 2007: 72).

In verse three of the *Thirty Verses*, Vasubandhu explains that these five mental activities are required even for very subtle states in which awareness is not fully conscious. He states,

Its appropriations, states, and perceptions are not fully conscious,
Yet it is still always connected with contact, attention, knowledge, ascertainment, and
directing thought.(3) (trans. Anacker 2005, p. 186)⁶²

In his commentary on this verse, Sthiramati notes that here "knowledge" refers to feeling, and adds that the term "always" refers to the fact that for as long as there is ordinary existence (specifically here he mentions as long as the store-consciousness exists), it is connected with these constantly operative mental processes.⁶³

It is clear, then, that for these Buddhist psychologists, these five mental activities are essential properties of awareness, and without all five, experience would be incomplete. These constantly operative mental processes provide us with the basic structure of experience, and a detailed understanding of this structure, I suggest, is crucial for Buddhist ethics. An appreciation of how contact, feeling, ascertainment, intention, and attention operate to create our experience of the world reveals how the way we take up the world is central to Buddhist ethical practice. How Buddhists explain the intentional and subjective nature of awareness and its ethical implications will now be explained in further detail as we examine each of these mental activities.

4.2.1 Contact

Contact (*sparśa*, *reg pa*) is an important component of perceptual etiology in Indian philosophy. For an object to be taken up as the content of a perception, there needs to be a causal link between that object and the sense faculty; this causal link is termed "contact" (*sparśa*, *reg pa*). In Buddhist psychological texts, contact is explained as the coming together of an

⁶² *asaṃviditakopādīsthānavijñaptikañ ca tat | sadā sparśamanaskāravitsaṃjñācetanānvitam | 3* (Tvbh Buescher 2007, p. 54)

⁶³ Buescher, 2007, p. 10.

object (*artha, yul*), sense faculty (*indriya, dbang po*), and consciousness (*viññāna, rnam shes*). Although described as a "meeting," there is a causal relation at work, with the meeting of the object and the sense faculty, giving rise to consciousness in the following moment. This explanation raises some interesting questions and themes that will continue throughout this discussion on the basic structure of Buddhist experience. For example, contact is said to be always operative, and yet in this explanation, it would seem that there is contact only when a sense faculty interacts with an object that is present. What role, then, does contact play in hallucination or perceptual illusions?

We might also wonder about the relationship between contact, memory, and perception. For example, from past experience, I know that roses are fragrant; so, whenever I see a rose, even though it may be too far away to smell, part of the content of that experience of perceiving the rose has to do with its fragrance. In this example, the content having to do with fragrance cannot come from contact with the present object but must be derived from recollection of a previous contact event. The causes of perception, such as that of a rose or a perceptual illusion, appear to be much more complex than merely the meeting of a sense object and sense faculty. A more complete picture of the causes for perception will emerge from the progressive explanation of the other four constantly operative mental processes and their interaction. At this point in the discussion, it is important to note that contact does not refer merely to the interaction between a sense faculty and an object, but also refers to the mental event that arises from the meeting. It is not simply the enabling conditions for consciousness, but rather a mental activity in and of itself. In his *Examination of the Five Aggregates*, Vasubandhu says,

And what is *contact*? It is the *distinguishing* which comes after the three (sense-organ, object-of-sense, and corresponding consciousness) have met together.” (trans. Anacker, 2005, p. 67, emphasis added)

The inclusion of contact as one of the constantly operating mental activities indicates a recognition both that perception is causally produced and that consciousness has an intentional structure. Contact provides the foundation for the Buddhist understanding that our experience of the world is causally produced, constructed by a complex and interdependent array of mental functions. It is important to note that in this explanation of the causes for perception, there is no requirement for an agent that perceives, and the ethical implication of this type of “agentless perception” will be taken up later in Chapter Five. At this point we will continue to examine the structure of the experience that arises with contact. The basic description of consciousness given by the Buddha in the sūtras as clear and knowing (*gsal zhing rig pa*) explains that consciousness involves subjective awareness and is always directed towards an object.⁶⁴ Here, clarity refers to the mind's ability to take an object, and knowing represents the mind's subjective quality. To be a mind is to be aware, and to be aware is to be aware of something. It is this psychological structure of knowing (*rig pa*) and clarity (*gsal*), representation and subjectivity, that grounds the mental activities central to Buddhist moral phenomenology. This basic aspect of knowing is fundamental for the mental activity of ascertainment, and the subjective aspect that is engendered by contact is important as a basis for feeling. In his *Commentary on the Thirty Verses*, Sthiramati explains that contact's "action is to serve as support for feeling."⁶⁵ We will now turn to investigating these mental activities to highlight their role in Buddhist moral phenomenology starting with feeling.

⁶⁴ See, for example, the *Sutra of the Questions of Vimalaprabha* (*Vimalaprabha-pariprcchā sūtra*)

⁶⁵ Sanskrit: *sparsaḥ... vedanā samñisrayadāna-karmanah* / (Buescher, 2007, p. 9); Tibetan: *reg pa... tshor ba'i rten byed pa'i las can no* / (Toh. 4064: 150B); See also Vinitadeva's *Triṃśikāṭikā: reg pa ni tshor ba'i rten gyi dngos par 'gyur te / 'di ni 'di'i las so* / (Toh. 4070: 17A).

4.2.2 Feeling

Another inextricable aspect of experience is feeling (*vedanā, tshor ba*). In Buddhist texts, feeling is commonly described as an experience (*anubhava, nyams su myong*). Commenting on the *Thirty Verses*, Sthiramati states, "Feeling has experience as its essential nature."⁶⁶ Here, feeling does not refer merely to physical sensations,⁶⁷ or to moods such as excitement or boredom. Instead, it refers primarily to an active way of relating to objects. Feeling here refers to the affect with which we take up an object. Buddhist psychologists identified affect as an important component of every experience. As we experience things, we have a positive, neutral, or negative valence in conjunction with our experience of objects. To experience the world is not simply to capture a representation of it, but to relate to it in some way, to feel something associated with what we perceive. Buddhist psychologists, such as Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, often use movement as a device to give phenomenological accounts. For example, a positive valence is explained as attraction towards an object of experience, whereas negative valence is explained as wanting distance from an object of experience. Feeling is ethically significant because it provides the underpinnings for the mental activities of desire and hatred, two of the three "poisons" that are said to motivate immoral action and cause suffering.

Vasubandhu defines feeling in his *Examination of the Five Aggregates* as follows:

What are feelings? They are experiences, and are of three kinds: pleasure, pain, and that which is neither pleasure nor pain" (trans. Anacker, 2005, p. 66).⁶⁸

In his definitions of pleasure and pain, Vasubandhu describes feeling as an internal relationship between subject and object. Feeling is explained as a type of mental posturing either towards an

⁶⁶ Sanskrit: *vedanā anubhavasvabhāvā* | (Buescher, 2007, p. 10); Tibetan: *tshor ba ni myong ba'i rang bzhin no* (Toh. 4064: 151A).

⁶⁷ That Buddhists conceive of feeling as not necessarily related to the body or form is apparent from Buddhist cosmology, which includes formless realm beings who also have feeling related only to thought.

⁶⁸ *atha vedanā salakṣaṇaprabhedā vedanā katamā / trividho 'nubhavaḥ / sukhaḥ duḥkhaḥ aduḥkhāsukhaśca // 20 //*.

object or away from the object. Pleasure (*sukha*) is described by Vasubandhu in this same text as something that a person wants to experience again after it has ended, while pain is something that a person wants to separate from once it has arisen.⁶⁹ A neutral feeling (*aduḥkhasukha*) is obviously not an experience of nothing, nor is it a type of mental numbness; rather, it is a way of experiencing an object in which we are not concerned with whether or not the experience continues. Although feeling is generally categorized in these three ways, it actually refers to a spectrum of experience from pain to pleasure with neutral feeling as the midpoint along the spectrum of feeling.

The Buddhist understanding of feeling is not a passive experience, a type of mental state that overcomes us. Instead, it is said to arise through its own power (*rang stobs kyis*). Feeling causes us to act, in that we pursue things based on pleasant feelings, and avoid other things due to unpleasant feelings. This has broad ethical implications. In the first turning of the wheel, the Buddha said that the cause of suffering is acting out of craving, and, as Śāntideva tells us, "craving has its cause in feeling" (IX.47).⁷⁰ It would be wrong to interpret the Buddhist description of feeling as simply a response to the characteristics of the object of experience. Although feeling arises based on contact with a particular object, and although we crave objects that we associate with pleasant feelings and wish to avoid objects that we associate with unpleasant feelings, Vasubandhu describes the pleasantness or unpleasantness of feeling as determined by *karma*, and not by the characteristics of the object. Feeling is a way of taking up an object that has more to do with our own psychology than with the characteristics of objects. In his commentary to Vasubandhu's *Thirty Verses*, Stthiramati states, "Experience is that by which individuals experience the ripening of the result of virtuous and non-virtuous action

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Sanskrit: *vedanāpratyaḃyā trṣṇā vedanaiṣām ca vidyate*

(*karma*).”⁷¹ To say that feelings arise from karma is a recognition that one object may give rise to a range of different feelings in dependence upon the subject. Different people at different times in different contexts may experience an object in very different ways. Rather than experiencing a particular property of the object, feeling might best be thought of as a particular way of intending an object. As Geshe Rabten (1992) explains,

Pleasure and pain are not the objects of feeling. They are the feeling or experience itself. Thus they are the nature of consciousness and arise in dependence upon the mind's coming into contact with its various objects. Feeling is therefore the inherent quality of experience present in every mental state. (p. 110)

The objects of the world are given to us accompanied by a certain feeling; however, this feeling, while arising from contact with the object, is not an external feature of the object with which we are engaged. Feeling is not created through the passive reception of information from an external world. Rather, feeling is a mental activity that intermingles with perceptions to give us our experience of the world. Feeling helps to give meaning to an object. What it is like to perceive a friend is experientially different from what it is like to perceive an enemy, and Buddhist ethical texts describe this experiential difference as a closeness that we feel with friends and a distance that we feel with strangers and enemies. Although this distinction is described in terms of distance, it is not something that we can account for in objective, measurable terms. Such an experience of closeness and distance is indicative of a phenomenological account.

Feeling has a particularly close relationship with ascertainment (*saṃjñā*) in producing our perceptions; before moving on to this next mental activity, it is useful to understand the mutual influence these two activities have on each other. For instance, when ascertaining that a particular car is "my car," there is a range of feelings that can color it, from the pleasant feeling

⁷¹ Sanskrit: *śubhāśubhānām karmaṇām phalavipākam pratyānubhavanti anenety anubhavaḥ* | (Buescher, 2007, p. 54); Tibetan: *las dge ba dang, mi dge ba rnam kyi 'bras bu rnam par smin pa 'dir myong bar byed pas myong ba* (Toh. 4064: 151A)

of "my new car" to the very different experience of "my car after it has been badly damaged in an accident." The interdependent relationship between ascertainment and feeling, and their important roles in influencing how we perceive our world is perspicuously demonstrated by a variety of neurological disorders called delusional misidentification disorders. Perception can be understood as based not only on the identification of physical features, but also on an affective quality that the person feels towards the person or thing. This is evidenced in the Capgras delusion and the Fregoli delusion, in which the affective and cognitive aspects of recognition are respectively inhibited.

The Capgras delusion in which the affective aspect of recognition is inhibited was identified by Capgras and Reboul-Lachaux. This delusion demonstrates the problems that arise when the aspect of feeling, here an experience of closeness, is absent when encountering someone we know well. The Capgras delusion was originally referred to as the "L'illusion des sosies," since the person affected by the neurological disorder believes that someone close to them, such as a spouse, parent, or close friend, has been replaced with a double, an impostor. The afflicted person would admit that the "impostor" looked identical to their close acquaintance and even acted the same, that they had the same mannerisms and also used the same language. Such an individual, however, would insist that there was something different about the person in question, and that the person simply did not *feel* like their acquaintance and must therefore be an impostor.

Ramachandran (1998) and later Young (2008) studied cases of Capgras delusion and demonstrated that, while people who are shown a picture of someone close to them, such as their mother, will generally exhibit a strong galvanic skin response (GSR), which is used to measure an affective response, those with Capgras syndrome, show very little change in GSR. In other

words, they were able to identify the person as looking like someone they were close to, but they showed little of the emotional response normally associated with seeing a close acquaintance. These cases highlight the importance of a feeling of closeness or familiarity, which accompanies the physical identification of a close acquaintance. Without the "right" feeling, the person is identifiable but not recognizable. Although the world is understood through ascertaining the characteristics of things, equally important is the way we understand the world through how we feel about that which we encounter.

We also find the opposite case wherein some individuals possess an affective response toward someone, a sense of familiarity, but are unable to identify the person. Patients with this disorder, known as prosopagnosia, are unable to identify what should be familiar faces, although they exhibit a strong galvanic skin response indicating a semblance of recognition on an emotional level (Bauer, 1984). A more extreme example of an affective recognition without identification is the Fregoli delusion, also known as a delusion of doubles. Individuals with Fregoli delusion experience a strong emotional reaction to strangers (Mojtabai, 1994). While they cannot identify the person, they have a strong sense that they know them. This leads to the delusion in which the individual believes that a single person takes on a variety of appearances or disguises. These cases demonstrate the cognitive dissonance that can arise when the two different aspects of perception, cognitive and affective, are not in accord. Moreover, they highlight the important role that both ascertainment and feeling play in how we make sense of the world.

4.2.3 Ascertainment

Samjñā ('du shes), sometimes problematically translated as discrimination, perception, or cognition,⁷² is perhaps best understood as ascertainment, a specific type of mental activity that assigns meaning (*tha snyad 'dogs pa*) to a particular object through apprehending ('dzin pa) the identifying characteristics (*nimitta, mtshan ma*) of that object.⁷³ It is involved in all moments of consciousness, whether conceptual or non-conceptual, correct or mistaken, and it forms the basis for higher levels of mental activity that assign names, compare, identify, and categorize objects.⁷⁴ Sthiramati, in his commentary on the *Examination of the Five Aggregates*, explains that to apprehend identifying characteristic means to discern, for example, that something is blue or yellow.⁷⁵ In his *Commentary on the Treasury of Higher Knowledge (Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya)*, Vasubandhu explains that ascertainment apprehends not only basic qualities such as blue or yellow, but also relative qualities such as long or short, and classifications such as female or male, friend or enemy, and so on.⁷⁶ In this section, I will lay the foundation for an argument that ascertainment is ethically significant because the way we think about the world has moral implications.

Ascertainment and feeling are identified as two of the most important mental activities that determine the quality of our experience. They are considered so important in the Buddhist understanding of the components and influencers of experience that, when Buddhist psychological treatises explain the mental domain, they separate these two mental activities and

⁷² *Samjñā*, 'du shes, is translated as perception by Boin-Webb (2001, p. 1), cognition by Anacker (2005, p. 65), discrimination by Hopkins (1996, p. 239), and sensation by Guenter (2011, p. 39).

⁷³ In the case of conceptual consciousness which does not have *mtshan-nyid*, the outstanding feature (*bkra-ba*) of the appearing object is what is distinguished.

⁷⁴ During the time of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, the complex Buddhist theory of conception and how we distinguish different objects *apoha / gzhan-sel* had not yet been put forward and as such should not be confused with this explanation of distinguishing.

⁷⁵ See Engle, 2009, p. 271.

⁷⁶ Commenting on *Abhidharmakośa* I.14c2-d.

give them their own classification as two of the five *skandhas*, the divisions of all conditioned phenomena. The reason for this, Vasubandhu explains in the *Commentary on the Treasury of Higher Knowledge*, is that feeling and ascertainment are identified as the main causes for the unsatisfactory nature of ordinary experience (*saṃsāra*) and for the “two roots of dispute,” since feeling causes clinging to desires (*kāma-adhyavasāna*) and ascertainment brings about clinging to wrong views (*dr̥ṣṭi-adhyavasāna*).⁷⁷ In the last section, we dealt with how feeling was the basis for craving, and now we turn to the way in which ascertainment is a cause for wrong views.

Perceiving the world involves the process of giving meaning to it. Ascertainment is not only representation, but also identification. As Vasubandhu mentions, we not only discern blue and yellow, but also long and short, friend and enemy. We assign subjective values to objects, and then define them by this subjective evaluation. For example, when we say, “the movie was long,” or “time flew,” ascertainment gives objects a sense of time and space that transcends any objective measurement.

The process of assigning meaning to things is an important component of the way we experience them. It is not only that we superimpose meaning onto experience, but that to experience is to make meaning. In making meaning, ascertainment often instills in our experience misinformation and certain biases, of which we are often unaware. These biases influence our actions which has obvious moral significance for Buddhists, who understand that a misunderstanding of the things and events in one's world leads to harmful behavior. Here, harmful behavior refers to actions that create suffering for ourselves and others in the future. Often in Buddhist texts, cognitions are described as valid (*pramāṇa*, *tshad ma*) or invalid. It might seem strange to describe a cognition in this way; however, it refers to the reliability of the cognition, in terms of it creating more or less confusion.

⁷⁷ See *Abhidharmakośa* I.21 and commentary.

Buddhist texts are filled with references to mirages and illusions to demonstrate how we often misapprehend our world and how this confusion is the cause of much of our suffering. As Jan Westerhoff (2010) explains,

The Buddhist texts state that there is a close connection between the existence of illusion and the existence of suffering. According to the Buddhist worldview, the existence of suffering is neither a necessary feature of the world nor the consequence of a specific fact about the past (such as the fall of Adam), but is rather due to an intellectual error that is mistaken about the way things exist. (p. 7)

Optical illusions, being perceptual rather than conceptual, illustrate quite well how ascertainment is a fundamental component in shaping and sometimes distorting our world at a perceptual level.

As mentioned, ascertainment is the mental action of assigning meaning to an object through apprehending its identifying characteristics; the Zollner Illusion below simulates the struggle of ascertainment to experience the given stimuli in a meaningful way:

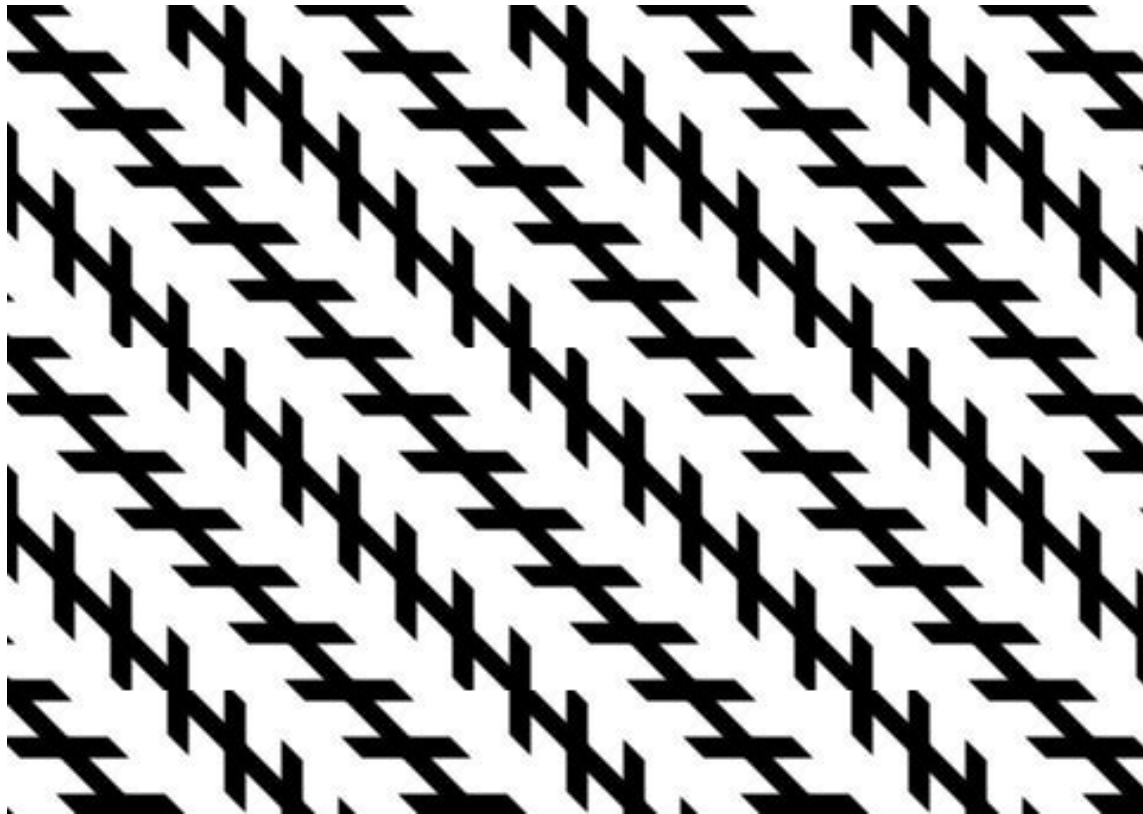


Figure 1. Zollner Illusion

This illusion also demonstrates the anticipation that accompanies perception. Here, the mind expects to make sense of the stimulus, and the unsuccessful struggle to do so creates an uncomfortable experience. This uncomfortable experience might make us averse to the object and look away, or we might look even harder at the object to attempt to discern why these parallel lines appear otherwise. Here, we see the interaction between ascertainment and feeling at work to produce action in response to the stimulus.

Ascertainment not only interprets, but also constructs, as it tries to make sense of the world, which is demonstrated by another optical illusion, the Hermann Grid Illusion:

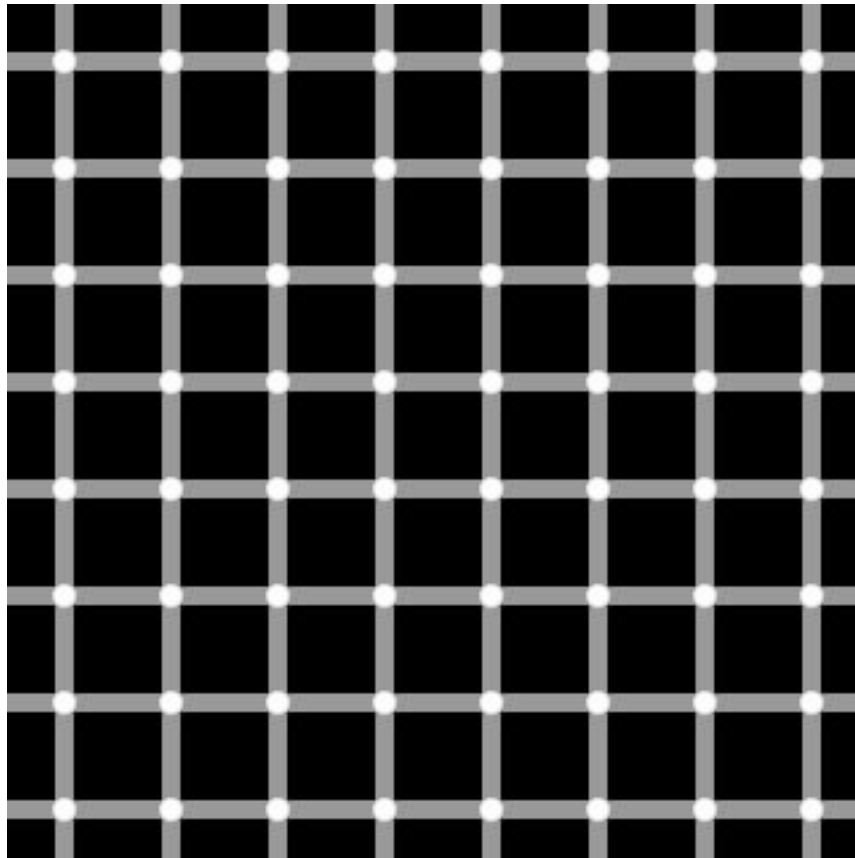


Figure 2. Hermann Grid Illusion.

Here the dots at the center of each intersection seem to shift between white and black, demonstrating that sometimes, through trying to make sense of an object, the act of ascertainment causes us to see things that are not there. This also has obvious implications for actions taken on the basis of such ascertainment. The Buddhist teachings are grounded in the principle that suffering is rooted in a mistaken experience of the world. They emphasize that our suffering is largely the result of the maladjusted constructive efforts on the part of our perception. We suffer, and we cause suffering to others because we relate to the world based upon the distorted perspective we bring to it. As we try to make sense of the world with conceptual constructs, we fall for the illusions created by our own hypostatization.

As Sponberg (1985) notes, Mādhyamika scholars such as Candrakīrti are fond of recounting a discussion between the Buddha and a disciple regarding how to deal with desire towards an illusory woman (p. 23). The discussion comes from the *Dr̥dhādhyāṣayaparipṛccha Sūtra*, wherein the Buddha describes a scenario in which a man attends a magic show. At the show the magician conjures an apparition of a beautiful woman for whom the spectating man begins to develop desire. The man, concerned about the arising of desire in his mind, decides to leave the show and contemplate the impurity of that woman.

The Buddha then queries his student, "Now what do you think, O Son of Good Family, has that man done the right thing, or has he done the wrong thing?" (Sponberg, 1985, p. 23). The answer would appear to be quite obvious. As noted earlier in the section on feeling, one of the first teachings the Buddha gave was that suffering arises from craving. To remove oneself from the conditions that give rise to craving and make efforts to develop an opposing emotion is the type of response we might expect from a monk or dedicated Buddhist layperson. However, the student responds, "Lord, anyone who contemplates the impurity of a nonexistent woman... has

done the wrong thing" (Sponberg, 1985, p. 23). The Buddha sanctions his answer, saying, "O Son of Good Family, in this [same way] whatever monk or nun, or layman or laywoman contemplates the impurity of an entity that has never arisen and never existed... has made a similar [mistake]. I would not say that such a foolish person is practicing the path" (Sponberg, 1985, p. 23).

The above discussion indicates that merely analyzing the surface level content of an appearance is not that helpful for resolving the harmful emotions associated with them. While it is true that Buddhist philosophers such as Śāntideva have instructed monks to meditate on the "impurities" of the female form so as to lessen desire, this is understood as only a temporary solution. To wrestle with the appearance of an attractive woman as if to manhandle it into the appearance of an unattractive woman is considered not only difficult but largely unproductive work. It is similar to staring at one of the perceptual illusions illustrated above, concentrating on all the different elements, in the hope that the illusion will go away.

The Buddha points out that this attempt at a solution, an analysis of the object's characteristics, approaches the problem from the wrong side. For instance, if we approach a perceptual illusion, such as a mirage, not through analyzing the content of the appearance, but by understanding how it is constructed, appreciating that the appearance of water is actually due to the play of light, then this dramatically changes our experience of the phenomenon and also our actions in relation to it. Similarly, the understanding that the content of our experiences is not a mirror representation of an external world, but rather is constructed in part due to mental events such as feelings, memories, desires, etc., can influence the manner in which we engage with the world. The solution, however, is not simply an intellectual correction; additional information alone will not resolve the problem, since the error is not purely intellectual.

It is important to distinguish between an intellectual insight and an experiential insight into the way appearances are misleading. The intellectual understanding of the mechanics of perception alone is not enough for a complete transformation of a person's experience. As Westerhoff (2010) points out,

The mere intellectual insight into its falsity does not mean that the illusion goes away... an illusion is not something that does not exist, but something that is not what it seems... The aim of the Buddhist enterprise is therefore not just to show that all things are like illusions because the way they appear is different from the way they are. Its aim is to bring about a complete change in how we perceive and conceptualize phenomena. In this way ignorance is cleared away and, one hopes, suffering will completely disappear. (pp. 7-8)

The content of our experiences, although constructed, does exist. Understanding that these things are constructed does not instantly undermine their misleading appearance. It is less like the explanation of a card trick, which instantly dispels the mystique of the trick, and more like an explanation of a rainbow as light refracting through water droplets – the rainbow still remains after the explanation. An intellectual solution only takes us so far, for, as Śāntideva reminds us, even magicians sometimes fall in love with their illusions.⁷⁸

In order to transform the way we see the world, it is said that we must understand not only intellectually or theoretically the degree to which the mind constructs our world, but experientially, in real time, from a first person perspective. It is held that this phenomenological perspective has the power to fundamentally transform the content of our experience. How might this work? Here, the explanation differs from the example of a perceptual illusion. Perceptual illusions, like mirages, derive their misleading appearance from particular external circumstances. As mentioned, knowledge of these causal factors usually does not change their appearance. For example, the two lines in the Muller Lyer Illusion (below) look to have different lengths even after we know they are equal in length.

⁷⁸ See *Guide to Awakened Living*, IX:30-31.

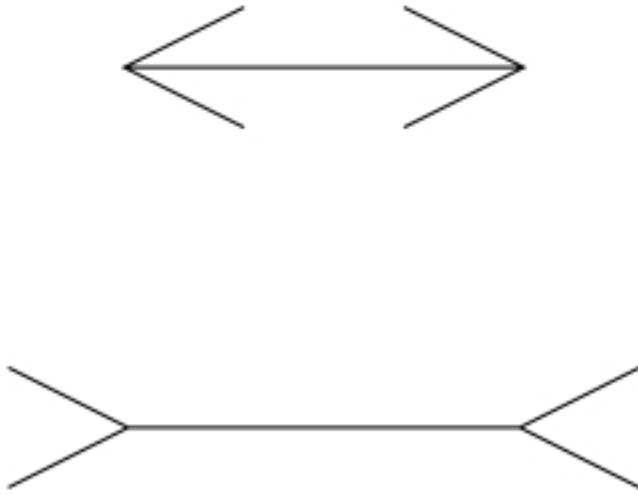


Figure 3. Muller Lyer Illusion.

However, a considerable part of our experience that is determined by the constructing mental factors, such as feeling and ascertainment, contains a certain plasticity that allows for the transformation of the way they appear simply through familiarization with their constructed nature.

The continual reflection on the constructed condition of a certain phenomenon affects those very mental conditions responsible for the constructed experience, and, in doing so, changes the way in which that particular object appears to us. For instance, familiarization with how certain feelings, such as aversion, are in part responsible for the experience of someone as an "enemy" can actually lead to a change in the way you feel towards that person and thereby transform your experience of him, quite possibly in such a way that you no longer experience him as an enemy.

This analysis in terms of illusion is not a rejection of an external world, but an understanding that our experiences of the world are largely constructed. The experience of friends, family, and strangers is intimately connected with our feelings, ascertainment, and many other mental factors, and in a very real way these objects of our experience can themselves be transformed through the knowledge of their constructed nature. The development of an experiential rather than intellectual insight into the constructed nature of our experience is achieved partly through the work of meditation, which could be described as a training or familiarization in this different way of seeing. It is this transformation of vision, then, that guides our actions of speech and body.

Even though this understanding of ascertainment demonstrates the way in which much of our experience is constructed, the fact that it is a construction does not necessarily mean that it should be discounted. The perception of a friend is a construction; however, this does not mean that we do not have friends. Actually, ascertainment has the potential to not only distort the way we see the world, but also to serve as an aid for arriving at the correct view. In fact, it is ascertainment that is utilized by Buddhists along with mindfulness and introspection to counteract perceptual biases.

On a practical level, ascertainment is a necessary part of life. When we see a car, for example, we might additionally see it as an expedient means of transportation, or in another context we might see a car as something in our way, blocking the road, and if we own the particular car, we will "see" the car as "my car." Our ascertainment is often influenced by context, past history, our desires, and our fears, which, while beneficial in some cases, can also lead to distortions. The larger problem is not that we make distinctions, but that we confuse the generalizations we ascertain with actual qualities of the object. The subjective and relational

constructions such as friend and enemy, or long and short, are taken as absolute characteristics of the object, and this wrong view is considered to be a source of our dissatisfaction and suffering.

The important Tibetan Mahāyāna ethical text, *The Thirty-seven Practices of a Bodhisattva* (*Rgyal sras lag len so bdun ma*) highlights how ascertainment has an ethical value.

In verse fifteen, Thogmay Sangpo says,

Even if in the midst of a crowd of people,
Someone exposes your faults and insults you,
Through the ascertainment of that person as a virtuous friend,
Respectfully pay homage; this is the practice of a Child of the Victor. (Verse 15)⁷⁹

Here, what is emphasized is not physical restraint, but mental activity. This verse demonstrates the potential to exercise a particular kind of ascertainment and directly relates this specific type of ascertainment to a certain level of moral development, that of the bodhisattva. The way you "see," or ascertain a person is not only considered ethical activity, but it is also descriptive of the ethical status of the moral agent. The possibility for the transformation of the way we ascertain people and events is at the heart of Buddhist moral development.

4.2.4 *Cetanā*

Cetanā has often been translated as volition or intention; however, the use of *cetanā* in Buddhist texts has a much larger semantic range than the term "intention" as used by a modern Western philosopher. In particular, when Buddhist texts describe *cetanā*, there is no mention of beliefs or desires, nor is it described as a product of rational deliberation; instead, it is depicted as constructing experiences through arranging and directing other mental activities towards a particular object. Moreover *cetanā*, as one of the constantly operative mental processes, is always present and has an important function during mental states which modern philosophers or psychologists would consider unintentional. For example, even at the moment we

⁷⁹ 'gro mang 'dus pa'i dbus su 'ga' zhig gis / mtshang nas 'brus shing tshig ngan smra na yang / de la dge ba'i bshes kyi 'du shes kyis / gus par 'dud pa rgyal sras lag len yin /.

unintentionally fall asleep, the mental activity of *cetanā* is operating, directing the mind towards the state of sleep.

The question of an accurate translation for *cetanā* has been a matter of contention for some time. Herbert Günther (2011) has taken issue with the translation of *cetanā* by "volition," since volition to him suggests only a choice to do something. He maintains that such a translation overlooks the fact that *cetanā* both arouses and *sustains* activity. Such a translation, Günther insists, does not convey the sense of drive, the impetus to put the choice into effect implied by *cetanā*, and he comments that,

the translation of *cetanā* by 'volition,' is against all evidence and has probably been adopted only on account of the fact that the translators of the Abhidharma texts did not understand these texts, and also did not know the meaning of the English word volition... [Volition] rarely suggests the determination to put one's decision or choice into effect. Volition is thus the very reverse of *cetanā* which everywhere is said to put something into effect. (pp. 43-44)

Recently, Karin Meyers (2010) has suggested that, rather than intention, "an intending" is a preferable translation for *cetanā*. She argues and, I think, with good merit that intention is not something one has, but something one does, and that "intending" better captures the verbal connotation of *cetanā*. Meyers describes *cetanā* as "a mental activity directed towards an object or end and so is something like an intention or, more precisely, 'an intending'" (p. 139). While this captures the directing nature of *cetanā*, it still does not represent its constructive nature. We should also not confuse *cetanā* with intention in the sense of choice, will, or a motivational state. Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Buddhaghosa clearly differentiate *cetanā* from mental activity that is a determined decision, based on belief and desire, to participate in a specific activity. They give a separate classification to this type of mental activity, called *chanda*. In his *Compendium of Higher Knowledge*, Asaṅga defines *chanda* as follows: "What is *chanda*? It is the desire-to-do (*karṭṛ-kāmatā*) which is in direct relation to the desired object. Its function consists of giving

a basis to vigor” (trans. Boin-Webb, 2001, p. 9). *Chanda* (*'dun pa* in Tibetan) refers to a mental effort and is also often translated as intention. Since *chanda* is related to desire and also an effort to engage in action, it seems more closely aligned with the modern use of the term intention than the definitions given for *cetanā*. *Chanda* refers to the *striving* after a particular object, whereas *cetanā* refers to the directed movement of the mind and functions to give cognition its intentional nature. Vasubandhu defines *chanda* as "a desire for action,"⁸⁰ highlighting its motivational character, and considers it to be present only at certain times rather than always operating like *cetanā*. This is consistent with a typical Western understanding of intention as a variable mental function.⁸¹

While *chanda* is episodic, *cetanā* accompanies every moment of experience. *Cetanā* is equally present at times when we have a strong sense of purpose in the activities we are undertaking as well as at times of inadvertent action. Moreover, Buddhist psychological treatises make no mention of different levels of intensity of *cetanā*. Just as *cetanā* is present when someone murders motivated by a strong passion, it is equally in attendance when someone accidentally kills a stranger in a car accident. Certainly, for Buddhists, there is an ethical difference between these cases, and an important part of this difference has to do with motivation.

If asked what the motivation of a murderer was, we would not answer by referencing *cetanā* alone. Instead, we might question whether the motive was rooted in anger or jealousy. In identifying the motivation, it is sufficient to say anger (*khong khro*) or jealousy (*phrag dog*),

⁸⁰ *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya: cchandaḥ kartṛkāmātā /*

⁸¹ Indicating the importance of *chanda* in Buddhist thought, Vasubandhu includes it in the *Abhidharmakośa* as the fourth of ten constantly operative mental processes, according to the Vaibhāṣika perspective. This is a variation from his presentations of five such mental actions which exclude *chanda*. *Abhidharmakośa* II.24: *vedanā cetanā saṃjñā cchandaḥ sparśo matiḥ smrṭiḥ | manaskāro'dhimokṣaśca samādhiḥ sarvacetasi ||24||*

since in Buddhist psychology these emotions are viewed less like passions that overcome us and more as actions in which we participate. *Cetanā* is clearly distinguished from the harmful mental activities, such as jealousy and anger, which in Buddhist psychology are accompanied by *cetanā*, but are distinct from it. We might still ask whether something was done on purpose or not, as in the examples above, in which the murderer had intent to kill, while the person responsible for the car accident did not. As discussed above, however, this idea of acting with purpose is a more apt description of *chanda* than *cetanā*.

There is a subtle distinction that can be made among events based on *cetanā*. Imagine that John lives on the top floor of a ten-story apartment building, and one day, without realizing it, he knocks a potted plant off his balcony, and it falls, hitting someone on the head, and kills them. Here, there was clearly no motivation to act violently, such as anger, and John being oblivious to all these events, of course, did not have intent or make an effort (*chanda*) to knock down the plant. At all times, *cetanā* is directing the movement of John's mind, yet his mental activity was never directed towards either the potted plant or the person who was killed. In this way, we can say that there is no mental karma accumulated with respect to these objects. There is still physical action, which is directly connected to the potted plant; however, this then becomes a question of whether or not physical karma would arise from this situation.

Cetanā is given a moral tone in Buddhist texts. The moral significance of *cetanā* includes not only its work of directing our physical and verbal action, but also its function of directing and organizing all our mental activities. Vasubandhu begins his discussion on karma in his *Treasury of Higher Knowledge* by explaining that *cetanā* is a type of karma, in that it directs our actions and influences the way we experience the world. The opening lines of the fourth chapter of the *Treasury of Higher Knowledge* read,

The variety of the world arises from action (*karma*). [Action (*karma*)] is *cetanā* and what it produces. *Cetanā* is mental action: it engenders bodily and vocal actions. (IV.1)⁸²

Here, Vasubadhu clearly explains that *cetanā* is a type of karma and that its moral importance pertains to how our experience of the world is affected by action. From this verse, however, *cetanā* has been misunderstood to have an ethical value derived from the assumption that *cetanā* here refers to a type of motivation for actions of body and speech that resembles a decision or choice among a number of alternative actions. This implies that since we choose our actions, we are morally responsible for those actions we undertake. Moreover, it assumes that somehow karma is sensitive to this special relationship between voluntariness and moral responsibility, and it follows that this sensitivity is an important factor in determining the quality of the karmic ripening (*vipāka*) or karmic fruit (*phala*). However, as has already been discussed, such a determination based on a belief and desire is a more suitable account of *chanda* than *cetanā*.

The impulse that directs the mind towards an object and the sense of "movement" of the mind is referred to as *cetanā*. Based on feeling, we have an impulse to mentally "move" towards those objects that we associate with pleasant feelings and away from those objects that we associate with unpleasant feelings. The idea that the mind moves is a common theme in Buddhist theories of cognition. In fact, the "all going" or "going everywhere" is the direct translation of the Sanskrit *sarvaga* and Tibetan *kun 'gro*, which is the name given by Vasubandhu in his *Examination of the Five Aggregates* to these constantly operative mental processes that attend every moment of awareness.

This description of mental activity as a type of movement is reflected in Sanskrit terminology. For example, among the definitions of the verb root \sqrt{gam} which generally means "to go," one also finds meanings pertaining to movement of the mind, such as "to think of" and

⁸² *las las 'jig rten sna tshogs skyes, de ni sems pa dang des byas/ sems pa yid kyi las yin no, des bskyed lus dang ngag gi las/* (Toh. 4089: 10b).

"to remember," and when used explicitly with reference to the mind it can also mean, "to observe," or "to perceive" (Apte, 1965, p. 648; Monier Williams, 2002, p. 347). Moreover, the past passive participle form of this root, *gata*, commonly means "known" or "understood" (Apte, 1965, p. 648; Monier Williams, 2002, p. 347). The mind "moving" from one life to another is of course a fundamental part of the Buddhist notion of rebirth.

In his *Examination of the Five Aggregates*, Vasubandhu defines *cetanā* as follows: "What is *cetanā*? It is mental action, which impels the mind towards good qualities, flaws, and that which is neither" (trans. Anacker, 2005, p. 67). *Cetanā* is clearly explained here as an activity. The mind moving from one object to another is considered a type of mental action; however, the activity of *cetanā* is understood to be much more than directing the mind from one object to another. As it directs the mind towards an object, it also arranges the other mental activities in relation to that object and in doing so shapes the experience of attending to this object. This constructive function of *cetanā* missing in Vasubandhu's definition is filled out by Asaṅga's explanation of *cetanā* in his *Abhidharmasamuccaya* as follows: "What is intention (*cetanā*)? It is construction by the mind, mental action. It has the function of applying the mind to virtuous, non-virtuous, or neutral [objects]."⁸³ Asaṅga describes *cetanā* as mental action (*manaskara*) and also as construction by the mind (*cittābhisamkāra*) (trans. Boin-Webb, 2001, p. 8). The mind is directed by *cetanā* to its object, which may be virtuous (*kuśala, dge ba*), non-virtuous (*akuśala, mi dge ba*), or neutral. Put simply, wherever we go physically influences our experience;

83. *sems pa gang zhe na/ sems mngon par 'du byed pa yid kyi las te/ dge ba dang mi dge ba dang lung du ma bstan pa rnam la sems 'jug par byed pa'i las can no/(D4049, 48a-b)*. In the context of defining the aggregate of compositional factors, Asaṅga further comments: "The six groups of volition (*cetanā*): volition aroused by contact with the eye, volitions aroused by contact with the ear, nose, tongue, body and mental organ, by means of which one aims for a good state, one aims for impurity or one aims for the discrimination of states (*avastābheda*)" (p. 8).

likewise, wherever our mind goes and whatever objects it interacts with play a role in shaping our experience.

The constructing function of *cetanā* is also emphasized by Buddhaghosa who, in his commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, defines *cetanā* as follows:

Cetanā is what intends (*cetayati*), which means that it puts together (*abhisandahati*) with itself its accompanying factors as objects. Its characteristic is what is intended (*cetayita*), which means that its characteristic is its nature of intention (*cetanābhāva*). Its function is accumulating (*āyūhana*). (trans. Heim, 2014, p. 103)

Cetanā need not be thought of as a choice in order to understand how it figures in ethical theory. Commenting on Buddhaghosa's position, Heim (2014) argues, "Moral agency is not a choice or decision but a moment when our minds put together and arrange our mental factors to experience the world in the particular and distinctive ways that we do" (p. 83). We should think of *cetanā* not as a result of a deliberation, or as a preference to act in a specific way, but as a mental activity that is interdependent with other mental activities and which coordinates and directs these other mental factors, which then results in our distinctive experience of the world. It is for this reason that *cetanā* plays a central role in the treatment of Buddhist ethical concepts like karma.

The moral significance of *cetanā* is linked with that of the mental activities of feeling and ascertainment. These three mental activities work together to direct our attention towards or away from objects of our experience, and they are also responsible for engaging the other variable mental activities. Just as contact supports the four other constantly operating mental activities, *cetanā* supports the other 50 mental activities, and in doing so, coordinates the construction of our experience. The moral valence accorded *cetanā* is, therefore, derived not only from its directing capacity, but also from its role in constructing our experience of our world. Heim (2014) explains,

cetanā is a factor of the mind that coordinates, rallies, and marshals other factors to produce the objects of conscious awareness and thus generate action in the world... [*Cetanā*] produces its object by its own work, which means that through its activity this property of the mind makes the objects of our experience. (p. 105)

Buddhaghosa explains *cetanā* to be like a landowner who takes 55 other workers, representing the other mental factors, and then coordinates their workers as well as working alongside them.⁸⁴ How we mentally orient ourselves in the world influences how we experience it and then also what we go on to say and do. Peter Harvey (2000) describes this relationship between karma and the world as follows:

Out of the mass of sense-data, one only ever gets 'edited highlights' of what lies around one. Some people tend to notice pleasant things, while others tend to notice unpleasant things; these differences are said to be due to karma. (p. 23)

As noted in the previous chapter, in his *Commentary on the Thirty Verses*, Sthiramati explains how *cetanā* shapes our experience through an analogy of the pull of a magnet on iron filings. He says, “*Cetanā* is that movement of the thought which shapes the mind. When this is present, thought flows toward an object, just as iron is pulled towards a magnet.”⁸⁵ Here, Sthiramati describes *cetanā* not as an underlying motive or agenda that directs physical action, but as a movement of the mind towards an object which leads other mental activities to engage with a particular object simply because they accompany this directed thought. It is similar to how the movement of a body of water in a river carries debris and other objects. Also, just as the directional flow of the river is determined not only by the force of the body of water, but also by many conditions such as the lay of the land, similarly, although *cetanā* is described as guiding other mental activities, the direction of *cetanā* can also be influenced by these mental activities, including, for example, feeling and ascertainment. There are also certain mental activities that

⁸⁴ For more on this simile see Heim (2014, p. 104).

⁸⁵ *cetanā cittābhisamkāro manasaś ceṣṭā yasyām satyām ālambanaṃ prati cetasaḥ praspanḍa iva bhavaty ayaskāntavaśād ayaḥpraspanḍavat* /. (Buescher, 2007, p. 58).

work against the directional current of *cetanā*, which can co-opt it. These mental activities, such as mindfulness and introspection, become important in Buddhist ethical practice, including meditation and they will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

In *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, Śāntideva highlights the importance of the mental activities that accompany an act in determining the moral status of the agent: “‘If I give it away, then what will I have to enjoy?’ This thinking concerned for oneself is the way of ghosts. ‘If I enjoy this, then what will I have to give?’ This thinking concerned for others is the way of gods” (VIII.125).⁸⁶ Here, Śāntideva does not emphasize the acts of giving and consuming themselves, but rather the experience, and particularly the feelings, associated with the acts. The moral status of the agent here is represented by the form of birth, birth as a god representing a higher moral status than birth as ghost. Śāntideva does not make his case for morality based upon obligations or by referencing the collection of merit. Instead, he directly relates the experiential aspect of these actions with ways of taking up the world, which have obvious moral overtones.

Cetanā helps construct our experience through directing our attention towards objects as well as through recruiting other mental activities to engage with the object. It is morally significant given its fundamental role in determining how we engage the world, which in turn determines our actions. The way we perceive a beggar in the street matters morally because it influences our mental and physical responses, which can be compassionate, indifferent, or averse.

4.2.5 Attention

⁸⁶ *yadi dāsyāmi kiṃ bhokṣya ity ātmārthe piśācatā | yadi bhokṣye kiṃ dadāmīti parārthe devarājatā*
 ||125|| *gal te byin na ci spyad ces // bdag don sems pa 'dre yi tshul // gal te spyad na ci sbyin ces // gzhan*
don sems pa lha yi chos // (Toh. 3871, 28b).

While *cetanā* orients our mind towards a general object, it is the mental action of attention (*manaskara, yid la byed pa*) that directs the mind towards a specific object. In his *Examination of the Five Aggregates*, Vasubandhu defines attention as follows: “And what is mental attention? It is the entering into done by a *citta*” (trans. Anacker, 2005, p. 67). Attention works in tandem with ascertainment and acts like the focus of a camera, accounting for the different levels of intensity with which we can take up an object. Attention also apprehends and holds the mind on a specific object, and is the basis of memory as well as the important meditation tools of mindfulness and recollection. So, here attention functions less like a laser pointer directing us to some important point in a projected presentation and more like the focus of a camera. Right now, as you read these words, although you might be aware of your surroundings without relying on previous memories, your description of your surroundings would be quite vague. By contrast, you could give a much more descriptive account of the paper and the words you are reading.

That attention also acts as a filter of information is powerfully demonstrated by the "invisible gorilla" selective attention test in which, by directing their attention to the number of times a person in white passes a basketball, many people miss the person dressed in a black gorilla suit walking past in plain sight (Simons & Chabris, 1999). Where we place our attention is morally significant because, while *cetanā* generally directs our experiential focus, it is attention that specifically focuses on particular objects and their characteristics. For example, when we meet or think of someone, it is attention that determines the characteristics we choose to focus on and those that we choose to ignore. In this way attention works with ascertainment and feeling, and given the constructive nature of those mental activities, what we attend to are not only objective characteristics of an object.

Mistaking constructed qualities for objective characteristics of objects is an important part of the confusion that defines the immoral state in Buddhist thought. How we direct our attention has a significant impact on the content and quality of our experience, and, if phenomenology is central to Buddhist ethical thought, then how attention operates is ethically significant. Not only is the way we direct out attention morally significant, but it is also something over which we can gain control. We now turn to a discussion of examples of Buddhist ethical practices to demonstrate ways in which Buddhist moral practice aims to influence these mental factors in order to transform the way we see and engage with the world.

4.3 The Application of Psychological Building Blocks of Experience in Buddhist Ethical Practice

The ethical significance of the way that these five mental processes contribute to constructing our experience of the world is exemplified in the way in which we categorize other people into the three divisions of friends, enemies, and strangers. I will now examine an ethical exercise that is used in Buddhist practice to deconstruct the way we categorize people, which makes explicit the link between Buddhist psychology and Buddhist ethics. This exercise reveals not only the confused way in which, according to Buddhist ethicists, we ordinarily conceive of others, but also offers an alternative way of engaging with the world that is founded upon an accurate understanding of our relations with others, which in turn provides a stable basis for the development of wholesome qualities. Moreover, this Buddhist ethical practice of transforming the way we see and experience the world provides evidence that phenomenology is central to Buddhist ethical thought.

We think about others in a number of ways. Some people we consider as good, some as bad, and others as innocuous. We regard some people as helpful, some as hindrances, and as

others as neither. We also think of some people as friends, some as enemies, and others as strangers. These ways of classifying the people in our lives appear closely connected to the characteristics that we believe define these people. We would like to believe that our judgments of others are founded not on our subjective feelings, but on some objective characteristics that we take the person to possess. To have our assessment of others founded upon subjective states, such as feelings, might imply that these assessments are irrational and unstable. For example, we justify our classification of John as a bad person not because of the way he makes us feel, but because we view him as possessing certain vices. Similarly, our friends are friends, it would seem, because of certain natures they have, or because of certain positive qualities they possess. We might also reference the negative qualities we assign to others in order to justify why we consider certain people enemies. And, strangers are strangers, it would seem, simply because we have yet to come to know their natures so as to categorize them as a friend or an enemy.

Buddhist psychological texts, such as those of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga, maintain that our attitudes towards others are colored by a particular type of confusion in which we mistake the things that we bring to our experience for things that are given to it. From a Buddhist perspective, the concepts such as friends, enemies, and strangers are not viewed as categories to which people are assigned based on their characteristics, like the biological classification of species based on their unique features. Instead, these concepts are understood as embedded in the way we experience the world. They are the result of the way we interpret and feel about the temporary situations in which we find ourselves. As discussed above, according to a Buddhist perspective, both feeling and ascertainment play fundamental roles in the construction of experience.

Importantly, we can influence these psychological factors, and we see this at work in Buddhist ethical practices. The aim of these ethical practices is not explicitly the cultivation of virtues, but the cultivation of an accurate way of experiencing the world. Buddhist ethicists understand that seeing the world accurately is morally significant; for example, accurately understanding the nature of our relationship with others, whether a person is our friend or enemy, depends primarily on circumstances rather than the person's qualities is morally significant. This knowledge changes the way we are in the world.

Buddhist ethical practices recommended in the writings of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist writers such as Śāntideva and Kamalaśīla, as well as later Tibetan authors such Tsongkhapa and Patrul Rinpoche, lead one to scrutinize the accuracy and reliability of one's attitudes and feelings towards others. It is suggested that important ethical insights arise from these investigations and that these insights can change the way in which we see the world and relate to others, bringing about a more morally mature state. As an example, I will focus on the practice called seven-step cause and effect method for developing bodhicitta (*rgyu 'bras man ngag bdun*) and, in particular, the first of the seven steps, the practice of developing immeasurable equanimity (*apramāṇpekṣā, tsad med btang snyoms*).⁸⁷ This practice looks specifically at the way we think and feel about

⁸⁷ Equanimity (*upekṣā, btang nyoms*) is an important ethical quality comprising a number of different mental activities and practices. First, there is the equanimity of feeling (*vedanopekṣā, tsor ba btang nyoms*): this refers to the neutral feeling, a point between pleasant and unpleasant feeling, that was described in the previous chapter. Then there is equanimity the mental factor (*samskāropekṣā, 'du byed btang nyoms*) described in the psychological texts as an evenness of mind important for developing high levels of concentration in meditation. Here, we are talking about immeasurable equanimity. There is an immeasurable equanimity included in the practice of the four immeasurables (*catvāri brahmavihārāḥ, tshangs gnas bzhi*) in which an attitude that wishes all others to be free from attachment and hatred is cultivated. The immeasurable equanimity developed in this exercise is a similar attitude, but in this case the quality of overcoming attachment and hatred towards others is developed within ourselves. Equanimity, in the end, is the overcoming of egocentricity in experience, the development of an open attitude towards others, independent of how their welfare or woe affects our narrow self-interest.

others and examines the causes of these thoughts and feelings in order to transform the way we perceive others.

The meditation for developing immeasurable equanimity is a foundational ethical exercise in which one analyzes the attitudes and feelings held with respect to friends, enemies, and strangers. This analysis forms the preliminary practice for the seven-step cause and effect method for developing bodhicitta. As Kamalaśīla explains in his *Stages of Meditation (Bhāvanākrama)*,

From living beings' viewpoint, all equally want happiness and do not want suffering. Therefore, it is inappropriate to hold some close and to help them, while keeping others at a distance and harming or not helping them... From my viewpoint, if I have continuously been reborn since beginningless time, all beings have been my friends hundreds of times. To whom should I be attached? To whom should I be hostile?⁸⁸

Here, the practitioner begins by considering how, from the perspective of others, oneself and others are equal in not desiring suffering and in desiring happiness. Next, one contemplates the way in which the categorizing of different people and the feelings connected with these categories of friend and enemy is arbitrary, given the continually changing nature of relationships.

Similarly, the seven-step cause and effect method for developing bodhicitta begins with the practitioner calling to mind three different people in his life: a friend, an enemy, and a stranger.⁸⁹ Here, the idea is to work with real feelings, and the practitioner is asked to bring to mind actual people in his life rather than a fictional person. The aim at this initial point is to

⁸⁸ As cited in Tsongkhapa, 2004, p. 37.

⁸⁹ Within the different Buddhist traditions, there are slight variations in this exercise. For example, the Nyingma Teacher Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887) instructs us to first think about an enemy, then a stranger, and finally a friend. The Gelug teacher Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) instructs us to first think of a stranger, then a friend, and then finally of an enemy. According to another oral tradition, it is suggested that we bring to mind all three individuals simultaneously. In all these cases the point of the exercise is the same: the goal is to notice and then examine the feelings that arise in relation to the three different classifications of persons.

simply notice the feelings that arise in relation to the three different classifications of persons. There is a qualitative difference between the experience associated with the perception of a friend and that of an enemy. The practitioner becomes familiar with the feeling of aversion that arises in relation to an enemy, the feeling of attachment that arises in relation to a friend, and the feeling of indifference that arises in relation to a stranger. Here the practitioner's goal is to observe the changes in the quality of experience that are the result of changes in classifications made by ascertainment. As discussed above, we ordinarily categorize people on the basis of the characteristics we attribute to them. Here, the practitioner is guided away from this habitual pattern and shifts his awareness away from a connection between classification and characteristic to classification and feeling. The focus is on the feeling that arises in relation to a particular category of person.

The next step in this exercise is to examine these feelings, focusing in particular on their causes. This formula, in which one trains first in developing a clear and stable perception of the object of examination before analyzing it, is a common feature of these ethical exercises and Buddhist meditation in general. When thinking of an enemy, one is instructed to notice the aversion that arises, and then also to investigate the causes for that aversion. Here, again the emphasis is not on the causes for the classification, but the causes for the feeling. When thinking of a friend, one is instructed to notice the attachment that arises. One is then asked to investigate the causes for that attachment. Similarly, when thinking of a stranger, one is instructed to notice the feeling of indifference that arises, and in turn investigate its causes.

In this exercise, we are not asked to justify our attitudes, but to connect these attitudes with feelings and then examine the feelings. We focus on the feelings not to justify them, but to appreciate how these feelings arise. The way we feel and ascertain can tell us more about

ourselves than the object. Buddhist philosophers stress that the categorization of friends, enemies, and strangers tells us less about what the other person is "really" like and more about the circumstances in which we have found ourselves in relation to another. The experience of a person under the category of friend, enemy, or stranger derives not from actual characteristics of the person, but from the perceiver's desire, hatred, and ignorance respectively.

It does not appear to be a coincidence that when we see a friend, we often feel joy, or that when we happen to encounter a rival, we might feel dread. These external events and internal feelings seem causally related. It is this intuition, that people possess certain natures that mysteriously have the power from afar to produce specific feelings within us, that the insights produced from this examination aim to counteract. Buddhist ethicists explain that upon closer examination of her feelings, the practitioner will discover that those feelings are not the direct result of encountering a person with certain enduring characteristics, but instead come about primarily because of the way we interpret the temporary circumstances in which we find ourselves in relation to others.

The way we think about someone influences how we feel toward them, but the way we feel towards someone also influences the way we think about them. By failing to understand the mutually reinforcing relationship between the way we interpret circumstances and the feelings that result from these circumstances, we experience confusion masquerading as an accurate representation of the world. The method to unravel this confusion is to identify and test the assumptions that inform the way we think and feel towards others to see if they are accurate and reliable. For example, upon investigation, we find that we sometimes consider our feelings to be passively arising within us based upon contact with the characteristics of others; yet we also have an intuition that feelings are subjective and that we should not justify our categorization of

people based on our feelings towards them. These Buddhist ethical examinations are structured not only to reveal this confusion, but also to guide us out of this confusion towards a more accurate understanding of the relationship between our feelings and the way we construct our experience of the world. In moving from a state of confusion to a state of clarity, we move from an unethical state to an ethical state.

The final step in this ethical exercise is to examine and familiarize oneself with the nature of these relationships. In this part of the exercise, one attempts not only to develop an understanding of how his or her feelings arise, or how they relate to our ascertainments, but also to understand the nature of one's relationships with others. The nature of our relationships with others is impermanent and uncertain because these relationships are contingent upon circumstances. Friends become enemies, enemies becomes friends, and strangers can become either. When introducing this part of the exercise, Tsongkhapa (2004) instructs the practitioner as follows:

Take the example of your enemy becoming a friend. At first, when you heard even the name of your enemy, fear arose. Later you were reconciled and became such close friends that when this new friend was absent you were very unhappy. This reversal resulted from familiarizing your mind with a new attitude. (p. 52)

Tsongkhapa notes here that one's relationships with others often change and that this comes about through familiarization with a new attitude. This change in attitude is determined by the change in situation, rather than a change in some inherent characteristics of the other person. If one understands that given different circumstances an enemy may become a friend, this changes the way of conceiving one's relationship with this person. Familiarization with this exercise provides the practitioner with a new perspective, one in which he accurately understands that one's attitudes towards others are not based upon some inherent and stable qualities that others possess, but are dependent upon temporary circumstances and events.

This understanding also transforms the way one views these relationships: instead of conceiving of relationships as permanent and founded upon fixed qualities one has ascribed to a person, one understands the nature of these relationships as impermanent, and as arising based on a flux of many causes and conditions. When one's interpretation of what it is to have an enemy or a friend is transformed, the resulting feelings are also transformed. This demonstrates how insight into the nature of one's relationships provides a different vantage point from which to view and relate with the world.

This is not only a more accurate view of the world; it is also a view of the world that provides a basis for the development of moral qualities. Tsongkhapa (2004) asserts that familiarizing oneself with a more accurate perspective of one's relationship with others has an important moral dimension. He says, "think about how friends and enemies can quickly change. By thinking this way, stop both hostility and attachment" (p. 37). Patrul Rinpoche (1998) also states, "It is only because we take these fleeting perceptions of 'friend' and 'enemy' as real that we accumulate negative actions through attachment and hatred" (p. 197). Here, Patrul Rinpoche directly relates an inaccurate way of seeing with an immoral state. Since confusion with regard to the nature of these relationships is responsible for negative mental activities, clearing away this confusion lays the foundation for more positive mental activities.

An understanding of the nature of these relationships enables the clearing away of the confusion that is responsible for the biased way in which we treat friends, enemies, and strangers, and this transformation in turn changes our experience from one characterized by attachment and aversion to one that is even-minded. Tsongkhapa (2004) describes immeasurable equanimity as "being even-minded yourself after you have become free of attachment and hostility toward living beings" (p. 36). It is this even-mindedness that provides a foundation for

the development of unbiased positive qualities and ethical action. When love and compassion are built upon the foundation of the even-mindedness of immeasurable equanimity, they are said to be more stable and unbiased in the sense of favoring certain people over others. The purpose of the development of immeasurable equanimity is to provide an even foundation for the development of positive qualities like love and compassion.

The morally immature, confused about the nature of their relations with others, impute a world which is fixedly divided between friends and enemies upon a world of constantly changing circumstances. This distorted attitude engages the mental activities of attachment and aversion, which favor some people and ignore others. Moreover, the morally immature develop expectations for someone labeled as a friend, for instance, to always faithfully fulfill that role, and when this does not happen, disappointment ensues. The superimposition of these fixed categories blinds such persons to the actual nature of their relational circumstances, leading them to believe that what is impermanent is enduring, so that they are surprised when things change. Instead of correcting their understanding of the nature of relationships when someone regarded as a friend becomes an enemy, the morally immature attempt to come to terms with this change by adding more superimposition. Instead of recognizing the temporary nature of relationships, they instead believe that the person's qualities have changed and re-engage with this person in a different but equally mistaken way.

The morally mature person, understanding that the designations "friend" and "enemy" are dependent upon temporary circumstance, does not let these designations dictate her relationships with others. Patrul Rinpoche (1998) points out that "the great beings of the past whose lives we can read about, consider all friends and enemies as the same" (p. 198).⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that

⁹⁰ Patrul Rinpoche (1998) in his text *Words of My Perfect Teacher* explains the etymology of the Tibetan Tang nyom as follows: "Impartiality (tang nyom in Tibetan) means giving up (tang) our hatred for

Patrul Rinpoche does not say that the sign of the morally mature is that they have no friends or enemies. The point is that even though they may have friends and enemies, the morally mature do not single out friends for favor or exclude enemies. As Tsongkhapa (2004) points out,

In this context your contemplation requires you to make the distinction between friend and enemy. It is not the notion of friend or enemy that you need to stop but the bias that comes from attachment and hostility, which are based on the reason that some people are your friends and others your enemies. (p. 37)

The aim of this exercise is not to be friendless. The goal is to transform the way we experience friends, enemies, and strangers, so that we correct the cognitive bias that favors some people over others. This provides the foundation for developing stable, positive qualities and clears the way for an unbiased way of engaging with others.

The morally mature state is not a passive state withdrawn from the world. Aversion and desire are not the only ways of actively engaging with others. The morally mature not only disengage from unhealthy ways of relating to others, but also reengage with the world in a constructive way based on an accurate understanding of the nature of one's relationships. The morally mature person relates to others based not on temporary circumstances, but on an understanding of the human condition, in particular, the characteristic the Buddha first pointed out, that life is suffering. Specifically, in Buddhist Mahāyāna practice, the understanding that others are suffering just like oneself directs the way in which one engages with others.

Kamalaśīla provides an approach for developing this moral attitude in his *Stages of Meditation*:

From living beings' viewpoint, all equally want happiness and do not want suffering. Therefore, it is inappropriate to hold some close and to help them, while keeping others at a distance and harming or not helping them.⁹¹

enemies and infatuation with friends, and having an even-minded (nyom) attitude towards all beings, free of attachment to those close to us and aversion for those who are distant" (p. 196).

⁹¹ As cited in Tsongkhapa, 2004, p. 300

From this perspective, we relate to others not as a source of our own happiness or suffering, but with a fellow feeling based on the common ground of enduring the suffering condition. This engenders a close bond that applies equally to all others, and this bond is grounded in equanimity.⁹²

Conclusion

When Buddhist philosophers like Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Buddhaghosa provide us with lists of different categories of mental phenomena, it would be a mistake to consider them to be merely organizing and classifying. It is significant that these philosophers listed and categorized over 50 different kinds of mental action and then commented on the moral tone of each of them. This categorization tells us something about the way these philosophers thought about ethics; their ethical focus was primarily directed toward the mental sphere, and how mental actions shape our experience of the world. If we understand these lists as an outcome of both a phenomenological and ethical inquiry, then we can appreciate how a list of five mental activities grouped together because they are always present provides an account of the basic structure of experience and how this is ethically significant.

Buddhist psychological theory recognizes that there can be no experience without contact, feeling, ascertainment, intention, and attention. The function of contact is not simply to provide the impetus for bare sensory perception, but to provide the ground for feeling. Feeling gives experience an affective dimension. Every moment of experience is colored as pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant, which gives rise to the most basic form of psychological motivations described in Buddhist texts as the movement of the mind to or away from objects. That we are attracted to some things and repulsed by others things has obvious implications for Buddhist

⁹² Since Buddhas do not suffer, it is clear that this type of ethical practice is representative of the path and not the result of Buddhist practice.

action theory and ethics. These feelings are not simply reactions to pre-existing characteristics; they help form and are formed by ascertainment. Ascertainment, the way we think about objects, involves a process of interpretation and classification. The way we think about objects and the way we feel about the contents of our experience affects where we place out intention and attention. These five mental activities form the foundation of experience, which determines how we engage in the world. Perception is inextricably linked with these five mental activities, which are both active and interpretive. These mental activities shape the quality of our experience, so that we perceive friends, strangers, and enemies, as opposed to merely shapes and colors, or generic persons. In this way, the mental domain is described not only as subjective and intentional, but also as morally significant.

Chapter Five: Buddhist Moral Phenomenology

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that in the Buddhist psychological treatises of authors such as Vasubhandu and Asaṅga, when mental states are presented, they are always assigned an ethical value, whether positive, negative, or neutral. In this chapter, we will turn to Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical writings, in particular, to the works of two of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism's most important ethical thinkers, Āryadeva and Śāntideva. An examination of the ethical system represented in these works, together with the larger Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptural tradition of the *Prajñāparamitā* literature, will reveal that the first person experience of the moral act is prioritized in such a way that Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics is best conceived as a type of moral phenomenology.

I will first outline the way in which Āryadeva, in his *400 Stanzas*, positions the correct view of the world as the foundation for his Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. In his account, seeing the world in an accurate way characterizes the experience of the morally mature. To this end, Āryadeva maintains that confusion pervades vice, and, conversely, a correct view undermines vice and accords with virtue. Moreover, in his discussion of the vices related to confusion, he identifies these primarily with mental states. Having identified the moral problem as confusion, I will then look to both Āryadeva's and Candrakīrti's treatment of the primacy of mental states as the determinant of moral significance. They make clear that it is the mental state accompanying any action that determines its ethical value; moreover, it is the unique mental state of a bodhisattva that combines wisdom that correctly understands the nature of reality with the motivational component of compassion, which is the defining characteristic of excellent virtue. Following this, I will turn to Śāntideva's *How to Lead an Awakened Life* to highlight how he too prioritizes the mental state of the agent as the determinant of the moral value of an action. Here,

I will discuss his reinterpretation of the notion of a field of merit whereby he devalues the object or recipient of actions, and even the actions themselves in determining moral significance, instead prioritizing the mental attitude of the agent.

Having laid the groundwork of identifying the fundamental moral problem of confusion and isolated the mental domain of the agent as the primary determinant of the moral value of actions, I will then turn to the moral solution: experiencing the world informed by accurate metaphysical knowledge. Since confusion is the mental state that pervades and fosters vice, both the epistemological and moral antidote is wisdom, accurate metaphysical knowledge. This understanding of a transformation of view as the moral solution for these Mahāyāna ethical writers will be explored on the basis of the writings of both Āryadeva and Śāntideva.

In order to provide further evidence that the ethical program of the Mādhyamika Mahāyāna authors highlighted here may be understood as a type of moral phenomenology, I will survey the moral language utilized in their works. First, I will highlight how the language they use to speak of the morally mature and the morally immature is aligned with labels signifying intellectual or mental development, whereby the morally mature are referred to as wise and the morally immature as foolish, or childish. I will then engage in a more general survey of these works to demonstrate the consistent alignment of important Buddhist ethical terms with mental states. In my final stage of exploring this strand of Buddhist ethics as moral phenomenology, I will look to the *Perfection of Wisdom sūtras*, which were paramount sources for Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva. Here, I will demonstrate that the *Heart Sūtra* and *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* in particular provide evidence of the seeds of the ethical system of these later writers, consistently prioritizing view and mental states in the context of ethical action.

5.1 The Foundation of a Phenomenological Ethics: How Confusion Pervades Vice

While Śāntideva's *How to Lead an Awakened Life* is well-known as one of Mahāyāna Buddhism's most prominent ethical texts, Āryadeva's *400 Stanzas* (*Catuḥśatakaśāstra*) is best known as a commentary on Nāgārjuna's seminal Madhyamaka treatise *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. Yet, Āryadeva's treatise, like Śāntideva's, is also a guide for how to live an awakened life. This is indicated in the title of Candrakīrti's commentary on the work, *Commentary on the 400 Stanzas on the Yogic Deeds of a Bodhisattva* (*Bodhisattvayogācāra-catuḥśatakaṭīkā*). According to Candrakīrti, the *400 Stanzas* can be divided into two sections, the first eight chapters treating the subject of purification, and the last eight chapters addressing the subject the of essencelessness of phenomena.⁹³ These first eight chapters deal explicitly with ethical material and demonstrate that Āryadeva's primary ethical concern is the mental domain, specifically, how we see the world.

The first four chapters set out the basis of Āryadeva's ethical program. As Candrakīrti explains, these chapters take up the nature of worldly things.⁹⁴ In particular, Āryadeva focuses on how an ordinary person misperceives the nature of the things of the world and the ethical implications of this. Here, he addresses four ways of misunderstanding ourselves and the world,

⁹³ The [first] eight [chapters] treat the subject of purification. After that, the next eight demonstrate the subject of the essencelessness of phenomena. That is the summarized meaning of the *Four Hundred Stanzas*.

de la rab tu byed pa dngabargyad pa yongs su sbyong ba'i rab tu byed pa'o / de'i 'og tu rab tu byed pa brgyad kyis chos rnam kyī rang bzhin med pa nyid bstan to zhes bya ba ni bstan bcos bzhi brgya pa'i bsdu pa'i don to / (Toh. 3865, 31a-31b).

⁹⁴ Of these [sixteen chapters], the subject explained by the first four is the way in which worldly things exist.

de la rab tu byed pa dang po bzhis ni 'jig rten pa'i dngos po ji ltar gnas pa yongs su gsal bar bya ste/ (Toh. 3865, 31a).

which are known as the four illusions (*viparyāsa*), or four confusions: (1) conceiving impermanent things as permanent, (2) conceiving unpleasant things as pleasurable, (3) conceiving impure things as pure, (4) and conceiving what is selfless to have a self. These four confusions are found in Abhidharma literature and correspond closely with the well-known three characteristics of existence (*trilakṣaṇa*): that things are impermanent (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*), and selfless (*anātman*). These four ways of misunderstanding ourselves and the world, characterize the experience of the ethically immature. Their relationship to vice, together with the means to correct them, are respectively addressed in these first four chapters.

According to Āryadeva, it is confusion that is the fundamental cause of suffering, afflictive mental states, and immoral actions. In each of these first four chapters, Āryadeva explains how the mistaken perspective engenders vice, and how upon reflection we will come to understand our error and adjust our way of taking up the world, which will bring us to a morally mature state. As Tom Tillemans (2012) explains, “[Āryadeva and Candrakīrti] try to show that the world’s superficial attitudes on these matters are in conflict with its deep-seated intuitions – if the world reflected, it would recognize the four illusions as indeed illusions” (p. 365). In the first chapter, having described the problem of viewing impermanent things as permanent, specifically with regard to one’s own life, Āryadeva explains the absurdity of our sense of immortality and attachment to this life. He concludes the chapter by describing the experience of one who has corrected this misunderstanding, linking it to the abandonment of the vice of attachment. Āryadeva writes,

Whoever has the certainty in the thought ‘I will die,’ since that person completely renounces attachment, how could they fear even death itself? (25)⁹⁵

⁹⁵ *bdag ni 'chi'o snyam sems pa // gang la nges par yod gyur pa // de ni chags pa yongs btang phyir // 'chi bdag la yang ga la 'jigs //* (Toh. 3846, 2b-3a)

It may seem surprising that insight into our own impermanence is said to lessen attachment to the self rather than increase it; attachment, however, is grounded in the confusion of conceiving any object of attachment to be permanent. With the mistaken view of something as permanent comes the expectation that it will endure. When that object is ascertained as pleasing, then with the expectation that it will endure comes attachment to it remaining as such. Yet, when that object's impermanent nature is understood, this realization undermines any expectation that it will endure and, thus, eliminates the basis for attachment to it. For this reason, Āryadeva suggests that understanding our own impermanence brings to light the irrationality of attachment to a permanent self that does not exist.

Freedom from attachment leads naturally to freedom from fear, since the object we may previously have been attached to and thus feared to lose – a permanent self – has been understood not to exist. The mental states of non-attachment and fearlessness characterize the morally mature, who possess this variety of correct view regarding impermanence. Conversely, the morally immature are characterized by the vice of attachment, which is intertwined with the incorrect vision of impermanent things as permanent.

In the second chapter, Āryadeva describes the confusion of conceiving a source of suffering to be a source of pleasure. He moves from discussing the impermanence of one's own life to how we perceive our own body. He takes aim at the way we see this impermanent body as a source of physical pleasure. Here, he demonstrates that impermanent things cannot be a genuine and lasting source of pleasure, and to see them that way is not only incorrect, but a source of vice. Because it is impermanent, the body is not merely inadequate as a source of pleasure, but is actually in the nature of disintegration and suffering. Āryadeva concludes this chapter by stating that whatever is impermanent is a source of suffering:

Impermanent things are definitely harmful, and whatever is harmful is not pleasurable. Therefore, everything that is impermanent is called suffering. (50)⁹⁶

Here, Āryadeva highlights the vulnerability of things brought about through causes, whose impermanent nature necessitates their disintegration, which is experienced as suffering.

Having deconstructed our misconception of permanence and pleasure in the previous chapter, in the third chapter, Āryadeva addresses the misconception that impure things are pure. Now, he moves from our own body to objects toward which we have desire, such as other people's bodies. Conceiving other objects, which are impermanent and in the nature of suffering, as pure and worthy of our desire, is identified a third type of mistaken view. He argues that, upon reflection, we will see that the “purity” of desired objects is our own mental construction and not the nature of these objects. This is demonstrated by the fact that the morally mature are free of desire toward these same objects:

Whatever object with respect to which one develops freedom from desire, it is inappropriate to call that pure. There exists no object whatsoever that is truly the cause of desire. (74)⁹⁷

In this verse, Āryadeva emphasizes that desire consists in a misunderstanding of an object's nature as being pure.

In the fourth chapter, Āryadeva moves from objects of desire to the self, addressing the misconception that grasps to a self, to “I” and “mine.” He specifically links this type of confusion which does not understand selflessness with the mental state of pride:

What supreme person in existence becomes arrogant with the thought of “I” and “mine”? Since all objects belong equally to all embodied beings. (76)⁹⁸

⁹⁶ *mi rtag pa la nges par gnod // gang la gnod yod de bde min // de phyir mi rtag gang yin pa // thams cad sdug bsngal zhes byar 'gyur // (Toh. 3846, 4a).*

⁹⁷ *gang du 'dod chags bral skye ba // de gtsang zhes byar mi rigs la // nges par 'dod chags rgyur gyur ba'i // dngos de gang na'ang yod ma yin // (Toh. 3846, 4b-5a).*

⁹⁸ *bdag gam bdag gi snyam dregs pa // srid par dam pa su la 'gyur // gang phyir lus can thams cad la // yul rnams thams cad mtshungs phyir ro // (Toh. 3846, 5a).*

Throughout this chapter, Āryadeva explains that by correcting the misconception that grasps at a self and through understanding selflessness, one arrives at a more accurate understanding of ourselves whereby vices such as pride are undermined.

In these opening chapters, Āryadeva lays the conceptual groundwork for an ethics that focuses on the mental domain by explaining four important characteristics of things that the morally immature incorrectly perceive:

In summary—impermanence, uncleanness, suffering, and selflessness—All four of these occur within a single thing. (75)⁹⁹

In ordinary experience, these four qualities are misperceived as permanent, pure, pleasurable, and essentially existent. These four misperceptions are the source of vices such as fear, attachment, desire, and pride. According to Āryadeva, it is through correcting this confusion that one overcomes vice:

Just as tactile sensation pervades the body, confusion pervades all [afflicted mental states]. Thus, through overcoming confusion, all mental afflictions are also overcome. (135)¹⁰⁰

Developing an experience characterized by the correct view of things as impermanent, painful, impure, and selfless is the antidote to the four confusions. With this verse, Āryadeva emphasizes that it is the confusion pervading the emotions, and not the emotions themselves, that is the fundamental ethical problem. Based on confusion with regard to the four qualities of things discussed by Āryadeva in these first four chapters, one's experience is not a true representation of the external world, but rather a constructive interpretation that builds in at the ground level one's feelings and discriminative biases, which then influence one's actions. The fact that this process is not immediately apparent has caused Buddhist ethicists like Āryadeva to describe our

⁹⁹ *mdor na mi rtag mi gtsang dang // sdug bsngal ba dang bdag med ces // bya ba bzhi po thams cad ni // gcig nyid la ni srid par 'gyur // (Toh. 3846, 5a).*

¹⁰⁰ *lus la lus dbang ji bzhin du // gti mug kun la gnas gyur te // de phyir nyon mongs thams cad kyang // gti mug bcom pas bcom par 'gyur // (Toh. 3846, 7b).*

existence as fundamentally confused, and the fact that this confusion is responsible for destructive emotions has led them to consider it an ethical issue.

5.2 Mental States as the Determinant of Virtue and Vice

Having explained the moral problem as experience characterized by a wrong way of seeing the world in the first four chapters of his *400 Stanzas*, in the fifth chapter entitled “Bodhisattva Deeds” (*byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa*), Āryadeva looks at what distinguishes the experience of the morally mature from those of the morally immature. This distinction is not based on their respective actions, but on their respective mental states. Within the first few verses of this chapter, Āryadeva states,

When the mind is unrealized, any merit (*bsod nams*) from deeds of going and so forth is not seen. Therefore with respect to all actions, the mind should be established as primary. (104)¹⁰¹

Here, Āryadeva prioritizes the state of mind (*sems*) over physical actions in relation to merit. In commenting on this verse, Candrakīrti explains that for any action of body, speech, or mind, it is the mental state associated with it that determines the moral quality:

When such a mind is unrealized, for actions of going, coming, rising, walking, speaking, making fire offerings, and so forth, one’s merit or non-merit becomes non-merit alone. If one undertakes actions such as going for the sake of engaging in the act of killing, then going and so forth become non-meritorious; but if one undertakes [an action] for the sake of abandoning [killing], then that action becomes meritorious. When one undertakes [an action] with just a [neutral] mind, at that time, [the action] becomes neutral. Since it is like this, therefore, for other actions too the mind is established as primary, because it is precisely that mind that determines the nature of the motivated physical, verbal, and mental actions.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *sems ma rtogs pa 'gro sogs la // gang phyir bsod nams la sogs pa // ma mthong de phyir las kun la // yid ni don por bsgrub par bya //* (Toh. 3846, 6a).

¹⁰² *sems ji lta ba ma rtogs par 'gro ba dang 'ong ba dang langs pa dang 'chag pa dang / smra ba dang sbyin sreg la sogs pa'i bya ba dag la rang gi bsod nams sam / bsod nams ma yin pa yod pa ma yin pa kho*

In this passage, when Candrakīrti states, “If one undertakes actions such as going for the sake of engaging in the act of killing, then going and so forth become non-meritorious,” he does not say that the ethical nature of going is determined by whether or not the act of killing is carried out, but that its ethical nature is determined by its being associated with a *mind* directed towards the act of killing. Moreover, he makes the point that even the ethical status of mental actions is determined by the associated mental state. In doing so, he makes an important distinction between the mind or mental state (*sems*), and mental actions (*yid kyi las*). Thus, it is not that mental activities of any kind are prioritized over physical and verbal actions; instead, it is the associated mental state that is the determinant of the moral value of actions.

Candrakīrti further explains that, when one has realized the morally mature mental state (*sems*) that conjoins compassion and wisdom that is not confused about the nature of things, the ensuing physical, verbal, and mental actions become beneficial and thus meritorious:

When it is like that, then for the awakened (*tathāgata*) mental continuum, which has conjoined the method of great compassion and non-dual stainless wisdom, the causes for harm without exception cease, and being always gracious, one will not engage in what is harmful to living beings... Therefore, when the mind is unrealized, actions which are meritorious, and so forth, do not become established. With regard to this, it is said, “If the mind is extremely pure, actions become very pure. Therefore, the skillful ones perform actions with a pure mind.”¹⁰³

na ste / gal te 'gro ba la sogs pa de srog gcod pa rdzogs par bya ba'i phyir brtsams na ni / de'i tshe 'gro ba la sogs pa de bsod nams ma yin par 'gyur la / 'on te de spang ba'i don du rtsom na ni / de'i tshe de las bsod nams su 'gyur ro / gang gi tshe de tsam gyi sems pas rtsom na ni de'i tshe lung du ma bstan par 'gyur ro // gang gi phyir 'di de lta yin pa de'i phyir las gzhan dag la yang yid gtso bor rnam par gzhang ste / sems ji lta ba bzhin du des 'phangs pa'i lus dang ngag dang yid kyi las rnam kyi rang gi ngo bo rnam par 'jog pa'i phyir ro // (Toh.3865, 92b-93a).

¹⁰³ *gang gi tshe 'di de lta yin pa de'i tshe de bzhin gshogs pa thugs kyi rgyud thugs rje chen po'i thabs dang / gnyis su med pa'i ye shes dri ma med pa dang rjes su 'brel pa / don ma yin pa'i rgyu ma lus pa gcod cing kun nas mdzes pa rnam la 'gro ba'i don ma yin pa la 'jug pa dogs par mi bya'o /... de'i phyir sems ma rtogs par bsod nams la sogs pa'i las rnam rnam par gzhang par mi 'gyur ro // 'dir bshad pa / gal te sems rab dang 'gyur na // las rnam shin tu dang bar 'gyur // de yi phyir na mkhas pa yis // sems dag pa yis las rnam bya / (Toh. 3865, 93a).*

Here, Candrakīrti highlights the incompatibility of virtuous mental states and harmful actions. To be an ethical person is identified with having a mental state that is incompatible with “engaging in what is harmful to living beings.” He identifies the ideal virtuous mental state as having two components, one that is motivational, great compassion, and the other that is an accurate way of seeing the world, wisdom. When these two mental components have been realized, all actions become virtuous merely through association with this “pure” mind. Conversely, when such a mental state has not been realized, Candrakīrti states that even meritorious actions are not completely established as virtue due to their not being conjoined with a “pure” mind.

In other words, if the accompanying mental state of any action is motivated by self-interest rather than altruism, or the person views the world in a metaphysically inaccurate way, then any associated action is not fully established as virtuous. This account is not consequentialist: this way of taking up the world is good not because of the virtues or actions that naturally arise out of it, but rather because it is metaphysically and epistemologically correct. This is also not a virtue ethics account because the relevant virtues are dependent upon, rather than constitutive of, the primary good, which is the correct metaphysical view of oneself and the world.

According to Āryadeva, it is not only for neutral actions such as coming and going, that the associated mental state determines the moral value of the act. In the next verse, he stresses that the associated mental state determines the moral value of *all* actions, whether one might ordinarily assign them a value of virtuous or non-virtuous:

For bodhisattvas, due to their attitude, every [action] whether virtuous or even if non-virtuous, becomes excellent virtue, because they control their minds. (105)¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *bsam pas byang chub sems dpa' la // dge 'am 'on te mi dge rung // thams cad dge legs nyid 'gyur te // gang phyir yid de'i dbang gyur phyir //* (Toh. 3846, 6a).

The difference between this ethical system and consequentialism is made clear when Āryadeva draws a distinction between virtue (*dge ba*) and excellent virtue (*dge legs*). An action might be considered virtuous, but without the appropriate accompanying mental state, it does not qualify as excellent virtue. Yet, if the appropriate mental state is conjoined with the action, Āryadeva states that even “non-virtuous” actions can become excellent virtue. Excellent virtue is not characterized by a type of action or by its consequence, but by the *simultaneous* associated mental state unique to a bodhisattva.

Commenting on this verse, Candrakīrti contrasts the standard explanation of virtue and non-virtue as specific actions leading to the ripening of pleasant or unpleasant karmic results, with the understanding of genuine, or excellent virtue, whose defining characteristic is not reliant upon its karmic consequence but its unique mental state:

As for non-virtue, it is due to having the ripening of suffering and lower rebirths that it is non-virtue. Even though virtue consists in having the result of the ripening of happiness and pleasant rebirth, because the sufferings of birth, old age, death, and so forth [still] occur, it is not excellent virtue (*dge legs*). For bodhisattvas who have mastered their minds, any of these two kinds of actions [i.e., virtuous and non-virtuous] that are not excellent virtue, *become* excellent virtue, and [excellent virtue] is established as the cause for reversing the cycle of ordinary existence. As for the worldly, since their minds are untamed, and since [actions] rely on the mind, they will engage [in actions] with just this [untamed] mind, but since bodhisattvas have control over their minds, all the movements of their body, speech, and mind become of a single nature as excellent virtue.¹⁰⁵

According to Candrakīrti, ordinary virtue and non-virtue are defined primarily by their results.

This may sound consequentialist, but it is not: excellent virtue is defined by a particular state of

¹⁰⁵ *mi dge ba ni sdug bsngal dang ngan song gi rnam par smin pa can yin pa nyid kyi phyir mi dge ba'o // dge ba yang bde ba dang bde 'gro'i rnam par smin pa'i 'bras bu can yin du zin kyang skye ba dang / rga ba dang 'chi ba la sogs pa'i sdug bsngal sgrub par byed pa nyid kyi phyir na dge legs ma yin no // dge legs ma yin pa'i las gnyis po 'di thams cad ni byang chub sems dpa' sems la dbang thob pa rnams la dge legs nyid du 'gyur te / skye ba can rnams kyi 'khor ba ldog pa'i rgyur gnas so zhes bya ba'i don to / 'jig rten ni sems ma dul ba nyid kyi phyir sems la rag las pa na / sems ji lta ba bzhin du 'jug gi / byang chub sems dpa' rnams ni sems dbang du gyur pas / de dag gi lus dang ngag dang yid kyi g.yo ba thams cad dge legs su ro gcig pa nyid du 'gyur ro / (Toh. 3865, 93a-93b).*

mind and is characterized by the fact that it does *not* result in causes for future samsaric existence. Moreover, as Candrakīrti says, all actions associated with such a mental state are of a “single essence.” Excellent virtue is not qualitatively distinguished based on greater or lesser actions. Rather, excellent virtue is qualified by its unique associated mental state alone, regardless of the accompanying action.

Āryadeva goes on to criticize the view of ethical actions as transactional and as having their moral value determined by the result:

It is reproachable to regard taking and giving to be like trade, thinking, “A great result will arise from the giving of this gift.” (120)¹⁰⁶

It is clear here that Āryadeva’s moral emphasis is not on the personal consequences of one’s actions. Even the concern for such consequences he regards as reproachable. A bodhisattva does not engage in activities for future personal gain. The mental state that is concerned about one’s own future circumstances is contrary to the mental state that Āryadeva has described as qualifying deeds as excellent virtue. This mental state is grounded in an accurate metaphysical view and is concerned with others rather than oneself.

5.3 Re-envisioning Merit and the Field of Merit

In Theravāda ethics, although there is much emphasis placed on phenomenology in terms of the primacy mind and mental states in the Abhidhamma literature, the topic of karmic causes and effects might be read as consequentialist, as mentioned above in the discussion of Goodman’s interpretation. In chapter 2, I argued that Theravāda ethics need not be interpreted as consequentialist. In the Mahāyāna ethical writings, such as those of Śāntideva, an explicit treatment of karmic cause and effect in phenomenological terms, leaves little room for a consequentialist reading. Śāntideva’s moral emphasis on the phenomenological is particularly

¹⁰⁶ *'dir byin pa yi sbyin pa las // 'bras bu chen po 'byung 'gyur zhes // len dang yongs su gtong ba ni // tshong spogs bzhin du smad par 'gyur //* (Toh. 3846, 6b).

evident in the way he reinterprets Buddhist notions of merit, merit accumulation, and the field of merit (*puṇya kṣetra*), to which we will now turn. Here, we will see that Śāntideva's ethical reasoning is not utilitarian. His moral concern is neither with determining the best recipient of an action so as to maximize a future karmic result nor with the best kind of action to perform. We can describe Śāntideva's ethics as a kind of moral phenomenology because his moral explanations focus on the way one should take up the world perceptually and affectively. This differentiates his ethics from virtue ethics: in virtue ethics, one cultivates a disposition to *act*; in a moral phenomenology, one cultivates a disposition to *see*.

In the general Theravāda understanding, merit accumulation is focused, in particular, on the act of giving – with the object, or recipient being the monastic community. As Harvey (2000) explains,

The primary ethical activity which a Buddhist learns to develop is giving or generosity, *dāna*, which forms a basis for further moral and spiritual development... The key focus of giving is the monastic *Saṅgha*, or Community. (pp. 61-62)

Harvey (2013) presents the concept of a field of merit in relation to this model of merit accumulation as follows:

The *Saṅgha*, moreover, is a potent 'field of karmic fruitfulness' (S.v.343), so gifts 'planted' in it are seen as providing a good harvest of karmic fruitfulness for the donors. (pp. 267-268)

Brekke (1998) highlights other *sutta* sources from the Pāli cannon granting the *saṅgha* the status of a field of merit:

In the Pāṭika Suttanta the Buddha says that the Order should be respected and revered and given gifts and homage; it is the world's unsurpassed field of merit. Likewise, in the Saṃgīti Suttanta the Saṃgha is described as the world's unsurpassed field of merit. (p. 299)

An emphasis on the qualities of the recipient in merit accumulation is also highlighted in stories of the Avadānasataka collection. In these stories, Strong (1979) observes, "What is striking in

them is the apparent discrepancy between act and fruit” (p. 230), since what is given is often quite trivial when compared to the karmic results they yield. Strong recognizes that, together with the intention of giving, “much of the effectiveness of the act itself is related to the object of devotion toward which it is directed, the field of merit in which it is planted” (p. 233). On this account, then, it is the recipient of the gift who is an important determinant of the merit produced for the donor; thus, the higher the qualities possessed by the recipient, the greater the merit resulting from giving to them.

The *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha (Aṅguttara Nikāya)* states,

However, I say that what is given to one of virtuous behavior is more fruitful than [what is given] to an immoral person. And [the most worthy recipient] is one who has abandoned five factors and possesses five factors. (trans. Bodhi, 2012, 3:57, p. 255)

Bhikkhu Bodhi (2012) commenting on this passage says, “the merit gained by giving is proportional to the spiritual qualities of the recipients, and thus the noble persons, especially arahants, serve as the most fertile field of merit” (p. 38). He describes the direct proportionality between the amount of merit earned by the giver and the qualities of the receiver as follows,

By accepting the gifts of lay people, the monastics give them the opportunity to acquire merit. Since the volume of merit generated by the act of giving is considered to be proportional to the worthiness of the recipient, when the recipients are the Buddha and those following in his footsteps, the merit becomes immeasurable (see MN 142, not included in this anthology). For this reason, the *sāvakaśaṅgha*, the spiritual community of noble disciples, is called “the unsurpassed field of merit for the world” (*anuttaraṃ puñṇakhettaṃ lokassa*). Gifts to the Saṅgha, it is said, conduce to great blessings; they lead to one’s welfare and happiness for a long time and can bring rebirth in the heavenly worlds. (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005, pp. 152-153)

Brekke (1998) further explains, “For a gift to be efficient in terms of merit, the monks should first of all be of pure conduct. There is also the idea that the longer a person has been a monk, the greater is the merit produced from giving him alms” (p. 300). This understanding of the objects of actions, or recipients, as occupying points on a scale of more or less fertile fields of merit,

with the purest *saṅgha* at the peak, is summed up in the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (*Majjhima Nikaya*) as follows:

While a gift to an animal yields a hundred-fold, and to an unvirtuous human a thousandfold, one to an ordinary virtuous person yields a hundred thousandfold, and one to a spiritually Noble person has an immeasurable fruit. (vol. III, pp. 255–7, as cited in Harvey, 2000, p. 21)

On the Theravāda model, then, it is foremost the object and secondarily the action that are emphasized in merit accumulation. In sum, merit is produced by means of actions of generosity toward objects with superior qualities, like the *saṅgha*.

This emphasis on the qualities of the object, or field of merit, which Barbara Clayton (2006) terms a “hierarchy of karmic fruitfulness” (p. 109), is also taken up in Mahāyāna notions of merit accumulation. Clayton explains the hierarchy of karmic fruitfulness as follows:

the idea that there is a kind of ranking of beings according to the quantity of karmic fruitfulness (*puṇya*) associated with them. In the Mahāyāna such an idea is apparent in the fact that bodhisattvas are in a sense “worth more” because they are greater or better “fields of karmic fruitfulness” (*puṇya-kṣetra*) than other types of beings. (p. 109.)

Occupying the peak of this hierarchy of karmic fruitfulness are, as expected, those whose qualities are the greatest, Buddhas. Hence the Buddha field (*buddha-kṣetra*) is regarded as the most fruitful field, or object in reference to which one can “plant” one’s meritorious actions.

Śāntideva takes these familiar notions of merit accumulation and the hierarchy of karmic fruitfulness and reinterprets them based on a phenomenological understanding of merit and virtue, resulting in an upheaval in the hierarchy. Here, merit does not depend upon the greatness of the object toward which one acts. Instead, virtue consists in the way the agent sees the object and approaches the action. Moreover, Śāntideva redefines the greatness of the object in terms of how one views the object rather than the qualities that the object possesses. When virtue is understood in this way, then not only may Buddhas be sources of virtue, but ordinary sentient

beings may also be sources of virtue. Śāntideva says, “Hence, the Muni has said that the field of sentient beings is a Buddha-field” (VI.112ab).¹⁰⁷ On the basis of granting foremost ethical importance to the way the agent sees the object and approaches the act, Śāntideva makes the radical statement that ordinary sentient beings are a field or source of merit of *equal* weight to a Buddha field. Śāntideva justifies this position through an explanation of what actually qualifies as virtue, which he describes as what is praiseworthy, and also through redefining what actually qualifies something as a field of merit:

That which is praiseworthy is a loving thought, that is actually the greatness of sentient beings; whatever virtue comes from faith in the Buddha, that is actually the greatness of the Buddhas. (VI:115).¹⁰⁸

Here, Śāntideva clarifies that we should think about virtue and what is praiseworthy in terms of how we see others. We see other beings as an object of love and we see Buddha’s as objects of inspiration.

Prajñākaramati comments on this verse as follows:

One who remains in a loving mind towards living beings is honored by people; this is actually the greatness of this loving mind and of nothing else [i.e., it is not the qualities of living beings], which relies on oneself. Thus, having relied on the *tathāgatas*, whatever merit arises from the act of faith consists in one’s own mind. That is actually the unique greatness of the Conqueror, because nothing else possesses that kind of quality.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ *sattvaḥṣeṭraṃ jinaḥṣeṭramityato muninoditam* / VI.112ab.

de phyir sems can zhing dang ni // rgyal ba'i zhing zhes thub pas gsungs // (Toh. 3871, 19a).

Gyaltsab Je, commenting on this verse, suggests that here Śāntideva is referencing the following passage from the *Ārya-dharmasamgīti-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* (*Chos yang dag par sdus pa'i mdo*, H 239: vol. 65, 97b.7): *sems can gyi zhing ni sang rgyas kyi zhing ste / sangs rgyas kyi zhing de las sangs rgyas kyi chos rnams thob par 'gyur gyi / der ni log par sgrub par mi rigs so /*. “The field of sentient beings is a Buddha field. From the Buddha field, the qualities of a Buddha are obtained. Regarding that, it is unsuitable to establish the opposite.”

¹⁰⁸ *maitryāśayaś ca yatpūjyaḥ sattvamāhātmyam eva tat | buddhaprasādāḍ yatpuṇyam buddhamāhātmyam eva tat ||VI.115||*

byams sems ldan la mchod pa gang // de ni sems can che ba nyid // sangs rgyas dad pa'i bsod nams gang // de yang sangs rgyas che ba nyid // (Toh. 3871, 19a).

¹⁰⁹ *sattveṣu maitracittavihārī punaryatpūjyate janaiḥ, tattasyaiva maitryāśayasya pratyātmagataṃ māhātmyam nānyasya / tathā tathāgatamāhātmyamālambya svacittam prasādayato yatpuṇyam utpadyate, tadbhagavata eva māhātmyamasādhāraṇam, anyasya tathāvidhaguṇābhāvāt //* (Vaidya, 1960, p. 111). *byams sems zhes bya ba la sogs pa gsungs te / sems can rnams la byams pa'i sems su gnas pa la*

Here Prajñākaramati explains that it is the qualities of the mind, such as love and faith, and not the qualities of others towards whom one acts, whether ordinary people or even Buddhas, that determine moral significance. In this context, Buddhas are not great because of the qualities they possess, but because of the way we mentally approach them. Also, ordinary people, although lacking the same qualities as a Buddha, can be equally “great” if we regard them in a morally praiseworthy manner.

In the next verse, Śāntideva goes so far as to say that Buddhas and ordinary beings are equally great since they may both equally serve as an object with respect to which one may cultivate praiseworthy attitudes:

Living beings are equal with Conquerors in virtue of the fact that they both have a role in establishing enlightened qualities. (VI.116ab)¹¹⁰

Here, Śāntideva is not arguing that Buddhas and ordinary sentient beings themselves have equal moral standing. He makes this clear by saying, “But no [ordinary beings] are equal with Buddhas due to their share of an endless ocean of qualities” (VI.116cd).¹¹¹ This qualifier is consistent with Śāntideva’s moral emphasis on how one sees the world, since Buddhas view the world without the confusion that characterizes the experience of ordinary beings, and in this way are morally superior.

skye bo rnam kyis mchod pa gang yin pa de ni byams sems ldan pa de'i so so rang gi rnam pa'i che ba'i bdag nyid de gzhan gyis ni ma yin no // de bzhin du de bzhin gshegs pa la dmigs nas rang gi sems dad par byed pa'i bsod nams skye ba gang yin pa de ni bcom ldan 'das nyid kyi che ba'i bdag nyid thun mong ma yin pa ste / gzhan la rnam pa de lta bu'i yon tan med pa'i phyr ro / (Toh. 3872, 133a-133b).

¹¹⁰ *buddhadharmāgamāśena tasmāt sattvā jinaiḥ samāḥ |*

na tu buddhaiḥ samāḥ kecid anantāśair guṇārṇavaiḥ ||116||

sangs rgyas chos 'grub cha yod pa // des na de dag mnyam par 'dod // yon tan rgya mtsho mtha' yas pa'i // sangs rgyas rnam dang 'ga' mi mnyam // (Toh. 3871, 19a).

¹¹¹ *buddhadharmāgamāśena tasmāt sattvā jinaiḥ samāḥ |*

na tu buddhaiḥ samāḥ kecid anantāśair guṇārṇavaiḥ ||116||

sangs rgyas chos 'grub cha yod pa // des na de dag mnyam par 'dod // yon tan rgya mtsho mtha' yas pa'i // sangs rgyas rnam dang 'ga' mi mnyam // (Toh. 3871, 19a).

Clayton (2006) argues that the Buddhist idea of a hierarchy of karmic fruitfulness fits best with a utilitarian ethical system, since an ordering of the recipients of giving based on maximizing merit demonstrates an emphasis on the outcome of acts, and it is this hierarchy that directs ethical decisions:

In the idea that one should give to the Sangha rather than someone else because it will be more karmically “fruitful,” we seem to see an obvious example of utilitarian-style reasoning, because the principle seems to be that one should try to maximize the karmic benefits of one’s actions... This focus on the consequences of actions rather than the character of the agent, of course, does not fit well in a virtue tradition. (p. 111)

Yet, as evidenced in the verses cited above, Śāntideva’s ethical reasoning is not utilitarian. His presentation of merit and merit fields actually flattens the hierarchy of karmic fruitfulness. This is because Śāntideva’s moral concern is not with who might be the best recipient of an action, so as to maximize a future karmic result. Neither is he primarily concerned with the best type of action to perform. Instead, he is concerned with the right way to take up the world, with virtuous mental states such as love and faith. On this view, virtue is not dependent upon the qualities of the people with whom we come into contact, but consists in the mental attitude with which we engage others, how we *see* them.

5.4 Knowledge as the Moral Solution: A Transformation of View

Buddhist ethicists like Āryadeva and Śāntideva conceive of a perfectly ethical state in which, because of the way the morally mature experience the world, there is no tension between what one would like to do and what is right to do. The reason this is thought to be possible is because the source of any tension between how we would like to live and how we ought to live is characterized by the confusion with which ordinary people experience the world. As Āryadeva explains, this confusion is founded in a mistaken perception of things as permanent, pleasurable, pure, and having a self. By developing an experience characterized by accurate ascertainment of

things as impermanent, painful, impure, and selfless, confusion along with the vice that accompanies it, is eliminated. The Buddhist moral solution, then, is the elimination of unhealthy mental states through resolving the confusion that pervades them.

Like the moral problem, the Buddhist ethical solution is firmly grounded in the mental domain. The moral problem is not focused on actions and consequences, but on specific phenomenological properties that characterize our experience of the world. Buddhist ethicists like Āryadeva and Śāntideva point to knowledge that transforms the way we experience the world as the moral solution rather than a mental faculty like will. Buddhist moral development goes beyond mere restraint. Since the moral problem is a type of confusion rather than emotions, these Buddhist ethicists employ knowledge rather than will as their moral solution.

According to Āryadeva, since attachment is engendered by confusion, it should be resolved through knowledge. He explains that, for example, it is through knowledge of the nature of the body that one can remove attachment to it. He suggests that similar knowledge into the nature of phenomena could resolve all disturbing attitudes: “Having heard that the body has no good qualities, attachment does not remain long. By that very path, are all [mental afflictions] not also extinguished?” (199).¹¹² Having described the moral problem as confusion, Āryadeva explains that the solution to confusion is *seeing* dependent arising.

Just as tactile sensation pervades the body, confusion pervades all [afflicted mental states]. Thus, through overcoming confusion, all mental afflictions are also overcome.

And when one sees dependent arising, confusion will not occur. Thus, through all the effort made here, this very topic is to be explained. (135-136)¹¹³

¹¹² *lus la yon tan med thos nas // 'dod chags yun ring mi gnas te // lam de nyid kyis thams cad kyang // zad par 'gyur ba ma yin nam // (Toh. 3846, 10a).*

¹¹³ *lus la lus dbang ji bzhin du // gti mug kun la gnas gyur te // de phyir nyon mongs thams cad kyang // gti mug bcom pas bcom par 'gyur // rten cing 'brel par 'byung ba ni // mthong na gti mug 'byung mi 'gyur // de phyir 'bad pas kun gyis 'dir // gtam de kho na bsnyad par bya // (Toh. 3846, 7b).*

Āryadeva explains that his earlier presentation of afflicted mental states as being pervaded by confusion was necessary, so that he could explain how insight into dependent arising, meaning accurate knowledge of the status of things, could remove confusion and the vice that accompanies it.

The accurate knowledge required for this ethical transformation is not a type of knowledge in which one adjusts one's desires and aversions to be more "realistic." Nor is it a knowledge that helps one face suffering through understanding that one could not have done anything to avoid a certain misfortune. It is the type of knowledge that transforms the first-person experiential aspect of our moral life. The Buddhist ethical project does not merely aim for a state of equanimity in the face of the changing fortunes of one's life. The goal is not for a stoic-like attitude in which we accept that we have limited control over the physical world and strive to leverage the influence we do have over the mental domain. Instead, the knowledge required for ethical transformation must correct the mistaken beliefs responsible for the confusion that is the source of both epistemological error and immorality. This knowledge is not employed to cope with or accept the world, but to change the way we experience it. The solution is to see the world more accurately, so as to transcend the struggle in which there is a world with which one is in conflict, and which exerts power over one's mental life. The knowledge that that is responsible for this transformation cannot be merely intellectual, but must also be instrumental in shaping our experience.

Throughout the *Four Hundred Stanzas*, Āryadeva emphasizes that a transformation of vision is what brings one to a moral state:

If one sees correctly, the supreme state [is reached], and if one sees [correctly] even a little, good rebirths [are reached]. Thus, thinking of the inner nature, the wise person constantly engenders intelligence. (196)¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ *yang dag mthong na gnas mchog la // cung zad mthong na bzang 'gro ste // de phyir nang bdag bsam*

For Āryadeva, there is a link between correctly seeing the world, being wise, and leading a good life or living in a supreme state. The view is described as correct because it is based on the knowledge of the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of the things in the world:

Whoever comes to see existence as like a collection of machines and illusory beings, they, being deeply illuminated, will go to the supreme state. (174)¹¹⁵

Our ordinary perception of the world, including feelings and sensory data, is an expression of our state of confusion. All this portrays not only a partial, but also a distorted picture of the world, oneself, and one's place in it.

While the moral problem is described as misunderstanding and misperception, the moral solution is described as a correct way of seeing based on an accurate understanding of the nature of oneself and the other things in the world. This correct way of seeing dissolves the confusion responsible for our suffering and destructive mental states. Śāntideva states,

In order to overcome suffering and to obtain happiness, they wander aimlessly in vice; the entirety of the dharma, the secret of the mind, is not known by them. (V:17)¹¹⁶

For these reasons, a necessary component of Śāntideva's and Āryadeva's Buddhist ethical practice is the development of metaphysical knowledge and epistemic accuracy.

Moral development proceeds from one's view and is measured by how complete or incomplete that view is. According to Āryadeva:

First reverse that which is non-meritorious, then reverse the [conception grasping at] a self, and finally, reversing all [wrong] views – whoever knows this is a wise person. (190)¹¹⁷

pa la // mkhas pas rtag tu blo gros bskyed // (Toh. 3846, 10a).

¹¹⁵ *gang gis 'gro ba 'khrul 'khor gyi // tshogs 'dra sgyu ma'i skyes bu ltar // mthong par gyur pa de dag ches // gsal bar go 'phang dam par 'gro // (Toh. 3846, 9a).*

¹¹⁶ *duḥkhaṃ hantum sukhaṃ prāptum te bhramanti mudhāmbare | yair etad dharmasarvasvaṃ cittam guhyam na bhāvitam //*

gang gis chos kyi gtso bo mchog // sems kyi gsang 'di ma shes na // bde thob sdug bsngal gzhom 'dod kyang // de dag don med gyi nar 'khyam // (Toh. 3871, 10b)

¹¹⁷ *bsod nams min pa dang por bzlog // bar du bdag ni bzlog pa dang\ // phyi nas lta ba kun bzlog pa //*

To be intelligent in this context means to have insight into the nature of things, people, and events. Morally wise persons are not those who simply restrain themselves from engaging in wrong actions based on not wanting certain consequences; the morally wise person possesses a certain of view of herself and the world. This emphasis on the way one takes up the world is so important that Āryadeva makes the striking claim that,

It is preferable to slip even from ethics than from [correct] view in any way. Through ethics one goes to heaven; through view one goes to the highest state. (286)¹¹⁸

The reason for this emphasis on view over discipline is that the effort of discipline provides only a temporary moral solution, whereas an accurate understanding of the world removes wrong views entirely and brings about a stable moral state. Āryadeva further explains his reason for prioritizing view over discipline as follows:

When one correctly knows the abiding of consciousness and so forth [i.e. its arising, abiding, and perishing], mental afflictions will never remain in one's mind (150).¹¹⁹

He further states,

The matchless door to happiness, which is perilous for all wrong views, and is the object of all the Buddhas, that is called selflessness. (288)¹²⁰

These passages make it clear that the resolution to the confusion that engenders non-virtuous mental afflictions is the knowledge that transforms our view of the world so that it is accurate.

gang gis shes de mkhas pa yin // (Toh. 3846, 9b).

¹¹⁸ *śīlād api varam sramso na tu drṣṭeḥ katham cana / śīlena gamyate svargo drṣṭyā yāti param padam // (Tillemans 1990: 33).*

tshul khrims las ni nyams bla yi // lta las cis kyang ma yin te // tshul khrims kyis ni mtho ris 'gro // lta bas go 'phang mchog tu 'gyur // (Toh. 3846, 13b).

¹¹⁹ *gang gis rnam shes gnas la sogs // yang dag tu na rnam shes pa // de yod na ni nyon mongs rnams // nam yang blo gros la mi gnas // (Toh. 3846, 8a).*

¹²⁰ *advitīyaṃ śivadvāraṃ kudṛṣṭīnām bhayaṃkaram / viśayaḥ sarvabuddhānām iti nairātmyam ucyate // (Tillemans 1990: 39).*

zhi sgo gnyis pa med pa dang // lta ba ngan rnams 'jig byed cing // sangs rgyas kun gyi yul 'gyur la // bdag med ces ni bya bar brjod // (Toh. 3846, 13b).

This accurate view of the world is not only incompatible with vice, but also characterizes the experience of the morally mature. Once again, we see that, in contrast to virtue ethics, the moral solution lies in correct metaphysical knowledge about ourselves and the world rather than virtue, practical wisdom, and will, and, in contrast to consequentialism, the moral concern is with the mental state of the agent rather than the consequences of actions.

5.5 Moral Language

5.5.1 Moral Language and Knowledge

The fact that the experience of the morally mature is characterized by an accurate way of seeing the world, according to Mahāyāna Buddhist ethicists like Āryadeva and Śāntideva, is evident in their moral language, which demonstrates the relationship between their ethics and mental development. Both Śāntideva and Āryadeva refer to the morally immature as fools, or children (*bāla*), and the morally mature as intelligent and wise (*budhah*), which is related to their mental capacity in terms of the way they both see the world and work with mental states. For example, Śāntideva describes a wise person as someone who is able to effectively deal with disturbing emotions and who is able to maintain a mental state of undisturbed calmness:

Even when suffering, the intelligent (*budhah*) person would not allow the calmness of his mind to be disturbed, for, he is at war with mental afflictions, and when in battle pain is common” (VI.19).¹²¹

In addition to *budhah*, Śāntideva, also uses two other terms connoting a wise person who demonstrates moral maturity, *vidvan* and *prājñāḥ*. In the Tibetan translation of the text, all three terms referring to a wise person are represented simply by *mkhas pa*. Śāntideva states,

The world is not given up due to affection, desire for gain, and so forth. Therefore, in order to renounce this, the learned (*vidvan*) should reflect in this way. (VIII.3)¹²²

¹²¹ *duḥkhe 'pi naiva cittasya prasādam kṣobhayed budhaḥ | samgrāmo hi saha kleśair yuddhe ca sulabhā vyathā ||VI.19|| mkhas pas sdug bsngal byung yang ni // sems kyi rab dang rnyog mi bya // nyon mongs rnams dang g.yul 'gyed la // g.yul 'gyed tshe na gnod pa mang // (Toh.3871, 15a).*

And,

Therefore the wise person (*prājñah*) should not desire. It is from desire that fear arises, and [all objects of desire] naturally vanish. Having accomplished stability, consider this. (VIII.19)¹²³

Similarly, Āryadeva says in his concluding verse of the fourth chapter, which explains the method for abandoning self-grasping (*bdag tu 'dzin pa spang ba'i thabs bstan pa*):

As for pride engendered by power and riches, one should look at those whose worldly power is equal or superior to one's own; [such an attitude] does not remain in a pure heart. (100)¹²⁴

Commenting on this verse, Candrakīrti explains that one with a pure heart refers to a wise person who views others in an accurate way. He states, “If pride arises when others view you as supreme, due to not remaining in that state by means of viewing others, wise persons do not become arrogant.”¹²⁵ Here, Candrakīrti refers to those who are able to overcome pride due to power and wealth as wise, and explains that the wise are so because of the way they see others.

Just as the morally mature are referred to with words connoting someone with wisdom, Śāntideva describes the morally immature who engage in non-virtue as foolish or childlike. For instance, he states,

¹²² *snehān na tyajyate loko lābhādiṣu ca tṛṣṇayā |*
tasmād etat parityāge vidvān evaṃ vibhāvayet ||VIII.3||
chags pa'i phyir dang rnyed sogs la // sred pas 'jig rten mi spong ste // de bas 'di dag yongs spongs la //
mkhas pas 'di ltar dpyad par bya // (Toh.3871, 23b).

¹²³ *tasmāt prājño na tām icched icchāto jāyate bhayam |*
svayam eva ca yāty etad dhairyaṃ kṛtvā pratīkṣatām ||VIII.19||
de bas mkhas pas chags mi bya // chags pa las ni 'jigs pa skye // 'di dag rang bzhin 'dor 'gyur bas //
bstan par gyis te rab tu rtogs // (Toh.3871, 24a).

¹²⁴ *dbang phyug gis bskyed nga rgyal ni // mnyam dang khyad par 'phags pa yi // pha rol nus ldan blta*
bya ste // dam pa'i snying la mi gnas so // (Toh. 3846, 6a).

¹²⁵ *bdag nyid la gzhan pas mchog tu byung ba mthong ba na nga rgyal du 'gyur na/_de ni gzhan la bltas*
pas mi gnas pa'i phyir mkhas pa rnams rlom par mi 'gyur ro / (Toh. 3865, 88b).

If the nature of the foolish (*bāla*) is to cause harm to others, my anger (*kopaḥ*) toward them is not appropriate, just as [it would be inappropriate to have anger] toward fire for its nature of burning. (VI.39)¹²⁶

[I am] unperturbed by the contradictory desires of the childish, for this is due to the arising of their mental afflictions (*kleśa*); thus [I] am full of pity for them. (V.56)¹²⁷

Here, the fact that the morally immature cause harm to others is linked with both their ignorance, being termed as foolish, and with mental afflictions. Here Śāntideva's response to the morally immature is also a mental approach—rather than feeling angry towards them one should develop compassion for them.

Importantly, when describing the morally immature as childish, the reason is often indicated as their inability to perceive or see things in an accurate way. Āryadeva says,

For the wise, even higher rebirth produces fear equal to that of hell. At all times, it is rare for any state of worldly existence not to arouse fear in them.

Even if the childish came to know the suffering of cyclic existence in every respect, at that moment, their mind together with [their body] would completely fall apart. (164-165)¹²⁸

The reason for this moral distinction between the childish and the intelligent corresponds to their respective ways of experiencing the world. While the morally mature, or wise, take up the world with an understanding of the nature of suffering, the morally immature, or foolish, are largely unaware of their own suffering.

¹²⁶ *yadi svabhāvo bālānām paropadravakāritā |
teṣu kopo na yukto me yathāgnau dahanātmake ||VI.39||
gal te gzhan la 'tshē byed pa // byis pa rnams kyi rang bzhin ni // de la khro ba mi rigs te // sreg pa'i rang
bzhin me bkon 'dra // (Toh.3871, 16a).*

¹²⁷ *parasparaviruddhābhir bālecchābhir akheditam |
kleśotpādād idaṃ hy etad eṣām iti dayānvitam ||V.56||
phan tshun mi mthun byis pa yi // 'dod pa rnams kyi mi skyo zhing // nyon mongs skyes pa 'di dag gi //
sems 'di byung snyam brtser ldan dang // (Toh.3871, 12b).*

¹²⁸ *mkhas pa rnams la mtho ris kyang // dmyal ba dang mtshungs 'jigs skyed 'gyur // rnam pa kun tu
de rnams la // srid gang 'jigs pa mi skyed dkon // gal te byis pa'ang rnam kun tu // 'khor ba'i sdug bsngal
shes gyur na // skad cig de la sems dang ni // lhan cig gtan tu 'jig par 'gyur // (Toh. 3846, 8b).*

5.5.2 Moral Language and Mental States

In the ethical writings of Āryadeva and Śāntideva, a phenomenological approach to ethics is evidenced in the way they relate Buddhist moral terms to mental states. Both these writers consistently associate with mental states the full range of Buddhist moral terms, *puṇya* (*bsod nams*), *kuśalam* (*dge ba*), and *guṇaḥ* (*yon tan*) to convey a morally positive tone; they also employ their opposites, *pāpam* (*sdig*), *akuśalam* (*mi dge ba*), and *doṣa* (*skyon*), to convey a morally negative tone. To demonstrate this point, I will now examine the use of these moral terms primarily in Śāntideva's ethically focused Chapter Six, wherein the moral significance of nearly every appearance of these ethical terms is related to some mental aspect of the agent.

In the first two verses of Chapter Six, Śāntideva explains that good deeds, such as generosity, are incompatible with negative mental states, such as anger. He states that one of the most extraordinary virtuous activities is a mental state, patience. He further argues that the worst type of vice (*pāpam*) is also a mental state, hatred.

All these good deeds, like generosity and honoring the Sugatas, which have been performed throughout hundreds of eons—that is what anger destroys. (VI.1)¹²⁹

There is no vice (*pāpam*) like hatred, and no austerity (*tapas*) like patience. Thus, through making effort in various methods, one should meditate on patience. (VI.2)¹³⁰

Here, Śāntideva explains that negative mental states, such as anger, are incompatible with good deeds (*sucaritaṃ*), such as generosity. His advice for overcoming anger and hatred is to familiarize oneself with an opposing mental state, that of patience.

¹²⁹ *sarvam etat sucaritaṃ dānaṃ sugatapūjanam /*
ṛtaṃ kalpasahasrair yat pratighaḥ pratihanti tat // VI.1
bskal pa stong du bsags pa yi // sbyin dang bde gshegs mchod la sogs // legs sbyang gang yin de kun yang
// khong khro gcig gis 'joms par byed // (Toh.3871, 14b).

¹³⁰ *na ca dveśasamaṃ pāpaṃ na ca kṣāntisamaṃ tapaḥ /*
tasmātkṣāntiṃ prayatnena bhāvayed vividhairnayaiḥ // VI.2
zhe sdang lta bu'i sdig pa med // bzod pa lta bu'i dka' thub med // de bas bzod la nan tan du // sna
tshogs tshul du bsgom par bya // (Toh. 3871, 14b).

Śāntideva goes on in later verses of this chapter to utilize the two Sanskrit words most commonly indicating the concept of virtue, *kuśalam* and *punya*,¹³¹ and stresses their incompatibility with negative states of mind such as anger. He says,

Joy is not disturbed by me even due to the most undesired occurrences. When sorrowful, what is wished for cannot be enjoyed while virtue (*kuśalam*) is abandoned. (VI.9)¹³²

And,

How can one let virtues (*punya*), kindness, and one's own good qualities (*guṇa*) be obstructed? Let the acquirer not take possession—tell me, with what are you not angry? (VI.85)¹³³

In VI.9 Śāntideva stresses the importance of maintaining a positive mental state in the face of adversity since negative mental states and virtue are contrary. Śāntideva's position in VI.85 is even stronger, explaining that getting angry out of jealousy over others' possessions obstructs our virtue.

Śāntideva addresses the idea that when one is wealthy, one could do good in the world, and explains that virtue is not reliant upon physical actions or conditions, and that if to gain wealth we engage in mental afflictions, we are actually engaging in vice:

¹³¹ The etymology of the Pāli equivalents of *punya* (*bsod nams*) and *kuśalam* (*dge ba*), *kusala* and *puñña*, is discussed in the introduction. There is disagreement on whether these terms are two different perspectives on the same action or whether they refer to two differing types of actions. Keown (1992) takes the position that the terms refer to different aspects of the same action, that "every virtuous action is both *kusala* and *puñña*" (p. 123), while Vélez de Cea (2004) disagrees, arguing that they represent two different kinds of action (p. 130). He sees *puñña* as a more general term that describes actions based on their karmic significance while *kusala* is a more specifically Buddhist term and describes actions based on their soteriological significance. See the introduction for a more detailed treatment of their differences.

¹³² *atyaniṣṭāgamenāpi na kṣobhyā muditā mayā |*

daurmanasye 'pi nāstīṣṭam kuśalam tv avahīyate ||VI.9||

ci la bab kyang bdag gis ni // dga' ba' i yid ni dkrugs mi bya || mi dga' byas kyang 'dod mi 'grub // dge ba dag ni nyams par 'gyur // (Toh. 3871, 14b-15a).

¹³³ *kiṃ vārayatu puṇyāni prasannān svaguṇān atha |*

labhamāno na grhṇātu vada kena na kupyasi ||VI. 85||

bsod nams dang ni dad pa'am // rang gi yon tan ci phyir 'dor // rnyed pa gyur pa mi 'dzin pa // gang gis khro ba mi byed smros // (Toh. 3871, 18a).

One may say, "I can bring about the termination of vice (*pāpam*) and engage in virtue (*puṇya*) on account of a making a profitable living," but actually the termination of virtue and engaging in vice [will follow] on account of anger for the sake of profit. (VI.60)¹³⁴

Śāntideva makes the point that we should think of vice and virtue in terms of how we mentally approach our current situation and not as deeds we might undertake in the future. We should not think of virtue and vice merely as things we do, but also as mental attitudes.

Śāntideva continues his examination of the nature of merit through considering a scenario in which someone's efforts at doing good deeds are obstructed. He states,

My merit has been hindered by another," – anger is not appropriate in this case. Austerity is not the same as patience; surely this is an occasion for it. (VI.102)¹³⁵

If due to my own fault (*doṣeṇa*) I do not show patience now, here obstruction is done by me when the cause for virtue (*puṇya*) has come. (VI.103)¹³⁶

Śāntideva explains that no one can really obstruct virtue since it is determined by our own mental attitude. If one has patience with the obstructor, then one is engaging in virtue, and if one loses patience with that person, then one's mental attitude is the real obstruction to virtue. From this verse, it is clear that, according to Śāntideva, a moral agent cannot be associated with negative emotions.

Through this analysis of the use of moral terms in these Buddhist ethical texts, it is apparent that these Mahāyāna Buddhist accounts of mental states are not of mere psychological

¹³⁴ *pāpakṣayaṃ ca puṇyaṃ ca lābhāj jīvan karomi cet |
puṇyakṣayaś ca pāpaṃ ca lābhārthaṃ krudhyato nanu ||VI.60||
gal te rnyed pas gson gyur na // sdiḡ zad bsod nams bya zhe na // rnyed pa'i don du khros gyur na // bsod
nams zad sdiḡ mi 'gyur ram // (Toh. 3871, 17a).*

¹³⁵ *puṇyavighnaḥ kṛto 'nenety atra kopo na yujyate |
kṣāntyā samaṃ tapo nāsti nanv etat tad upasthitam ||VI.102||
'di ni bsod nams gegs byed ces // de la 'ang khro bar rigs min te // bzod mtshungs dka' thub yod min na //
de la bdag ni mi gnas sam // (Toh.3871, 18b).*

¹³⁶ *athāham ātmadoṣeṇa na karomi kṣamām iha |
mayaiivātra kṛto vighnaḥ puṇyahetāv upasthite ||VI.103||
gal te bdag ni rang skyon gyis // 'di la bzod pa mi byed na // bsod nams rgyu ni nyer gnas pa // 'di la bdag
gegs byed par zad // (Toh.3871, 18b).*

import, but are also morally significant. Śāntideva casts Buddhist moral concepts in terms of mental states. He explains the two types of bodhicitta as types of mind.¹³⁷ Of the six perfections, the first four, patience, generosity, morality, and effort, which have obvious ethical dimensions, are defined by Śāntideva as mental states. For example, he describes patience as refraining from getting angry, generosity as the unrestricted thought, or intention to give,¹³⁸ and he describes effort not as physical exertion, but as the mental state of joy directed towards what is virtuous.¹³⁹ The last two perfections, meditation and wisdom, obviously belong to the mental domain, and given the ethical emphasis placed on the development of knowledge, should also be considered ethical practices.

This moral emphasis on wisdom, or a correct metaphysical knowledge of ourselves and the world, clearly distinguishes Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics from virtue ethics. As discussed earlier, while virtue ethics does incorporate the notion of practical wisdom, it does not resemble the metaphysical knowledge required in a Buddhist ethical context. Moreover, the emphasis on the accuracy of the metaphysical view with which an act is undertaken as determining its moral value underscores a significant contrast with consequentialist ethical theories. This distinction is made clear in the *Perfection of Wisdom sūtras*, to which we will now turn.

5.6 The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras as a Precursor to Mahāyāna Buddhist Moral Phenomenology

Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva all had their metaphysical views shaped by the *Perfection of Wisdom sūtras*. Within these *sūtras*, we can also see the seeds of their Mahāyāna strand of Buddhist ethics as a type of moral phenomenology. The notion that one's view of the

¹³⁷ See *Guide to Awakened Living* I.15

¹³⁸ See *Guide to Awakened Living* V.10ab

¹³⁹ See *Guide to Awakened Living* VII.2a

world is the most important aspect of one's moral life is evident in the *Perfection of Wisdom sūtras*. For instance, in the *Heart Sūtra*,¹⁴⁰ when Śāriputra, inspired by the Buddha, asks the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara how best to practice, Avalokiteśvara gives a perhaps unexpected response. One might have expected that he first enumerate a path of practice such as that of the Noble Eight Fold Path (*āryāṣṭaṅgamārga*) or the Three Higher Trainings (*trīśikṣa*). Instead of emphasizing right action, right speech, moral conduct, or meditation, he advises that aspiring bodhisattvas should transform their vision in order to see the world in a correct way, a way that completely recasts every aspect of their experience. In so doing, Avalokiteśvara places Buddhist practice directly in the realm of phenomenology. He instructs,

Any son or daughter of good lineage who wishes to engage in the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom should view thus: look upon the five aggregates as empty of essence.¹⁴¹

In this passage, two Sanskrit verbs are employed in Avalokiteśvara's instruction that an aspiring bodhisattva should bring about a transformation of vision. The first is *vyavalokayitavyam*, translated here as "should view." This word derives from the verbal root "lok" which has the stative sense of "to see" or "to perceive," but here we find it in its causative form together with two verbal prefixes (*vi-* and *ava-*) which transform the meaning of this gerundive to carry the dynamic sense of "should be looked at," or "should be viewed." The second verb *samanupaśyati*, translated here as "look upon as," comes from the root *drś* and also has this same dynamic sense. What is significant about the use of dynamic verbs in Avalokiteśvara's

¹⁴⁰ Jan Nattier has argued that the Sanskrit *Heart Sūtra* is likely a back-translation from the Chinese. See Jan Nattier, "The Heart Sūtra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 15/2 (1992), 153-223. Even if the *Heart Sūtra* is an apocryphal Chinese text, nonetheless in the relevant respects under discussion here, its account matches the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* and other clearly Indic texts.

¹⁴¹ *yaḥ kaśchit kulaputro vā kuladuhitā vā gaṃbhīrāyām prajñāparamitāyaṃ caryāṃ cartukāmaḥ / tenaivaṃ vyavalokayitavyaṃ / pañca skandhāstāṃśca svabhāvaśūnyānsamanupaśyati sma* / (Vaidya, 1961).

instruction is that it implies that a transformation in vision is called for as intentional ethical activity.

In suggesting that we should regard all things as empty of essence, it is proposed that the way we view the world does not have to be passive, that it involves intentional activity, and that *seeing* the world in the right way is an important component of Buddhist practice. This is also evidenced in the description of the perfection of wisdom as a mind free from fear.

Avalokiteśvara states,

“Thus, Shariputra, since there is no attainment on the part of bodhisattvas, one who’s mind is without obscuration remains resting in the perfection of wisdom. On account of having a mind without obscuration, one without fear who has passed beyond error has reached the final end, nirvana.”¹⁴²

This instruction raises some questions for aspiring bodhisattvas. Is this a description of a moral state, free from fear, achievable only in meditation that requires withdrawal from the world or is this advice to be applied to practice in general? For example, how does this advice relate to the other perfections such as giving, patience, and enthusiasm? The *Heart Sūtra* does not explicitly answer these question; however, the relationship between the view expressed in the *Heart Sūtra* and these ethical concerns is clarified in the advice found in the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* (*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*).

Similar to the *Heart Sūtra*, the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* begins with a question on the best way to practice. This time, however, it is Subhūti who asks the question and the Buddha who responds. Subhūti asks, “How, Lord, should one who has set out on the bodhisattva path take his stand, how should he proceed, how should he control the mind?” (trans. Harrison, 2006, p. 142).

¹⁴² Translation based on the Sanskrit: *tasmācchāriputra aprāptitvena bodhisattvānām prajñāpāramitāmāsritya viharati cittāvaraṇaḥ| cittāvaraṇanāstitvād atrasto viparyāsātikrānto niṣṭhanirvāṇaḥ|*
shā ri'i bu / de lta bas na / byang chub sems dpa' rnam thob pa med pa'i phyir shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa la brten nas gnas te sems la sgrib pa med pas 'jigs pa med de / phyin ci log las shin tu 'das nas mya ngan las 'das pa'i mthar phyin to / (H 26: vol. 34, p. 260).

Notice that this question differs slightly from the one asked in the *Heart Sūtra*. Rather than asking how to begin practice, Subhūti is seeking advice for someone who has already set out on the path. The Buddha's response makes it clear that the view of selflessness is not a practice confined to the realm of meditation, but that it needs to be conjoined with the other activities of a bodhisattva. The Buddha states,

But after I have brought immeasurable living beings to final extinction in this way, no living being whatsoever has been brought to extinction. What is the reason for that? If, Subhūti, the idea of a living being occurs to a bodhisattva, he should not be called a bodhisattva. Why is that? Subhūti, anybody to whom the idea of a living being occurs, or the idea of a soul, or the idea of a person occurs, should not be called a bodhisattva. (trans. Harrison, 2006, p. 143)

Here, the Buddha emphasizes that not only are the intention and effort to liberate all beings important for a bodhisattva, but also that these actions must be conjoined with a view of the world that sees the selflessness of persons. This is the same view expressed in the *Heart Sūtra* as one that sees all phenomena as empty of essence. The view of selflessness articulated in the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* explicitly includes both persons and objects. He next discusses the view in relation to the act of giving, taking the discourse into familiar ethical territory:

However, a bodhisattva should not give a gift while fixing on an object, Subhūti. He should not give a gift while fixing on anything. He should not give a gift while fixing on physical forms. He should not give a gift while fixing on sounds, smells, tastes or objects of touch, or on *dharmas*. For this is the way, Subhūti, a bodhisattva should give a gift, so that he does not fix on the idea of the distinctive features (of any object). Why is that? Subhūti, it is not easy to take the measure of the quantity of merit, Subhūti, of the bodhisattva who gives without fixation. (trans. Harrison, 2006, p. 143)

Where the *Heart Sūtra* instructs that we should not view the world in a way in which we fix on forms, sounds, smells, tastes, objects of touch, or even objects of thought, the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* similarly describes a meaningful act of giving as one in which there is no “fixing on sounds, smells, tastes, or objects of touch or on *dharmas*.” The reference to generosity in this

passage makes it clear that the instruction pointing to a change in vision found in both of these *sūtras* is not only applicable to meditation, but must also be taken into ethical activity.

It is significant that generosity is taken up as one of the first ways of explaining the relationship between the transformation of vision and ethical activity. Generosity is one of the most important practices for a bodhisattva as the first of the six perfections that characterize the bodhisattva's path. Generosity is also an expression of the selfless attitude at the heart of the bodhisattva ideal, *bodhicitta*. This ideal involves the aspiration to forsake one's own liberation, instead aiming to become a Buddha who returns to help all beings. Here, we find something that would normally be regarded as a moral act, the quintessential act of a bodhisattva – that of giving – not qualifying as the act of a bodhisattva unless it is coupled with this accurate metaphysical vision. The Buddha's point here is that generosity is not the ethical activity of a bodhisattva unless it is free of the confusion of ordinary experience. This point is extended in the following passage:

Subhūti, one should regard a bodhisattva who has sunk to the level of objects and who gives a way a gift which has sunk to the level of objects as being like, say, a man who has been plunged into darkness. Subhūti, one should regard a bodhisattva who gives a gift which has not sunk to the level of objects as being like, say, a man endowed with sight, who would see shapes of various kinds when dawn breaks and the sun comes up. (trans. Harrison, 2006, p. 150)

Here, the phrase “sunk to the level of objects,” refers to the ordinary perspective that holds things to have essence. The contrast between the practice of generosity for those who have sunk to the level of objects with those who have *not* sunk to the level of objects, is illustrated through the imagery of light, dark, and a man endowed with sight, which not only allude to the metaphysical vision with which one is advised to take up the world, but which are also ethically suggestive.

Harvey (2000) has observed that in Buddhist texts, actions and their outcomes are often described as bright and dark depending upon whether or not they are harmful (p. 44). Adam

(2005) has also noted that the presence or absence of physical light indicates moral meanings in Buddhist works. His analysis of the Pāli terms *sukka* and *kaṇha* used in Buddhist texts to describe actions and results reinforces Harvey's work by pointing out that these words not only have the moral meaning of pure and impure, or good and evil, but also that of bright and dark, and white and black. Adam cites the *PTS Dictionary* which notes in the entry for *kaṇha*, "In general it is hard to separate the lit. and fig. meanings; an ethical implication is found in most cases" (p. 67). This supports the reading that the imagery of light and dark here is also ethically suggestive.

Adam (2005) suggests that the descriptions of brightness and darkness of an action can be understood more literally to refer to the "epistemic quality of the underlying mental state of the agent" (p. 67). According to this understanding, those mental factors that darken the mind have the effect of obscuring the mind's capacity to develop insight, and those that brighten the mind support the mind's capacity for insight (Adam, 2005, pp. 67-8). If we read the above passage from the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* with sensitivity to the ethical sentiment of the analogy, then we can start to understand that the suggestion that it is important that a bodhisattva take this specific vision into everyday action, and also that this is ethical advice. Later in the *sūtra*, it is explained that the view is considered morally significant since the actions that accompany it are founded upon a metaphysically accurate premise. The Buddha says, "As long as there is any distinctive feature there is falsehood, and as long as there is no distinctive feature there is no falsehood (trans. Harrison, 2006, p. 144). A view that fixes onto things holds to the real existence of their distinctive features (*svalakṣaṇa*). It is due to fixing on falsehood that one tends towards vice. To have a more accurate metaphysical view is to be free of falsehood and to be free of falsehood is

to be a moral self. The Buddha makes this point by telling the story of one of his former lives in which he was tortured by the king of Kāliṅga. The Buddha states,

When, Subhūti, King Kāliṅga cut off my limbs and extremities, I did not at that time have any idea of a self... If, Subhūti, I had had the idea of self at that time, I would also have had the idea of ill-will at that time. (trans. Harrison, 2006, pp. 149-50)

Here, the Buddha states that although being unjustly tortured, because of his metaphysical view – the view that realizes the selflessness of person - he did not develop ill-will. While this is certainly a discussion of ethics, the treatment of the topic does not center on the morally right course of action in response to torture. Rather, the discussion is phenomenological, with the Buddha offering a first person account conveying that his experience of no-self was incompatible with the experience of ill-will, and it is this that gives him the status of a moral agent.

This emphasis on selflessness raises a question about the status of agency and responsibility in Buddhist ethics. These verses from the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra* provide some insight into the Madhyamaka approach to agency. In the citation above describing the bodhisattva's activity of giving, there is no attempt to differentiate between types of giving based on the benefit accrued by the recipient, or to evaluate the moral status of the agent based on the consequences of the action. It might then be expected that the Buddha would make a distinction between agents based on their intention, perhaps judging an act's moral value based on whether or not the agent approached the act of giving with bodhicitta.

The advice here, however, is not explicitly concerned with the agent's intention or with allocating praise or blame. When Harrison (2006) gives the translation of the line above that reads, "Subhūti, a bodhisattva should give a gift, so that he does not fix on the idea of the distinctive features (of any object)," he notes that the use of the term *nimitta* for "distinctive features" could equally be read to mean "cause" or "reason" (p. 143). Given this, Harrison offers

another possible reading: “the bodhisattva’s giving is not based even on the idea of a motive (for giving), let alone any motive itself” (p. 143). This would indeed undermine a karmic transactional approach to the notion of merit accumulation, which has been used by consequentialist and virtue ethics interpretations of Buddhist ethics. Here, the bodhisattva does not engage in the act of giving as a type of motive-driven exchange in which she offers something positive in return for some benefit, not even for some type of soteriological momentum.

In either case, it is apparent in these verses that the act of giving here is not being evaluated based on either its consequence or the agent’s intention. Instead, it is presented as a first person description of the *experience* of giving, and what defines it as morally significant, and what is important about the agent’s role, is the particular vision with which the activity is undertaken. The moral concern here is clearly not agency; it is not who or why, but *how* that is emphasized. In a sense, the role of the agent is to get out of the way.

It is not that the consequences of actions and the intention with which they are undertaken are ethically irrelevant. Nor is this an argument that a correct metaphysical vision transforms *any* action into an ethical action. Stealing does not somehow become morally permissible through being conjoined with an accurate metaphysical view. Instead, the correct metaphysical view of the world is incompatible with the mental state that would motivate one to steal out of greed.

Because we ordinarily experience the world through fixing on the appearance of the essential existence of things, not only is this metaphysical view inaccurate, but it also inclines one towards vice. This is the primary moral problem. Its solution, then, is to develop a correct metaphysical view, so that the way one experiences the world becomes incompatible with vices

such as ill-will. It is for this reason that a Buddhist phenomenological approach to ethics suggests that the ability to view the world in an accurate way is more morally important than the consequences of our actions or even our intentions.

The development of an alternate and more accurate view of the world is the most important feature of agency for a Mahāyāna Buddhist, and is also what distinguishes the extraordinary agent (*ārya*, *‘phags pa*) from an ordinary agent (*prthagjana*, *so so kye bo*). What is ethically most important from this phenomenological perspective is neither duty nor the consequence of an action, but a moral perception and the moral responsiveness that this perspective engenders. The ideal of the importance of an accurate metaphysical perspective in ethical action is repeated throughout the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra*, with the Buddha continually comparing what would normally be considered Buddhist ethical activity with the view of the awakened perspective of an extraordinary agent, stating that the latter is even more meritorious:

“What do you think, Subhūti? If someone were to fill this trigalactic megagalactic world-system with the seven treasures and give it as a gift, then what do you think, Subhūti, would that gentleman or lady generate a lot of merit on that basis?”

Subhūti said, “A lot, Lord, a lot, Blessed One. That gentleman or lady would generate a lot of merit on that basis. Why is that, it is indeed, Lord, quantityless. For that reason the Realized One teaches that a quantity of merit is quantityless.” The Lord said, “If, however, some gentleman or lady were to fill this trigalactic megagalactic world-system with the seven treasures and give it as a gift, Subhūti, and if someone else were to do no more than learn just one four-lined verse from this round of teachings and teach and illuminate it for others, then the latter would on that basis generate a lot more merit, an immeasurable, incalculable amount. Why is that? Because it is from this, Subhūti, that the supreme and perfect awakening of the Realized Ones is born, it is from this that the Buddhas and Lords are born. What is the reason for that? The so-called ‘*dharmas* of a Buddha,’ Subhūti, are indeed devoid of any *dharmas* of a Buddha.” (trans. Harrison, 2006, p. 145)

As the Buddha suggests in the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra*, for activities such as generosity to be truly ethically efficacious, they must be supported by a correct perspective. In this way, Mahāyāna

Buddhist ethics is practiced as an acquisition of wisdom that, when internalized, brings about a transformation of the way one views both oneself and the world. This process fosters positive mental states and results in an intuitive and spontaneous positive engagement with the world.

From this brief survey of Prajñāparamitā literature, it is evident that the cultivation of an experience that is informed by a correct metaphysical view is paramount to Mahāyāna ethical practice. We have seen passages where the Buddha states that the merit associated with ethical acts, such as generosity, is determined by their being conjoined with a mental state that lacks a hypostatizing view of phenomena. This is certainly echoed in the passages discussed above of Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva, in which the mental state of the agent is regarded as the primary determinant of the moral value of an action. In particular, it parallels the notion that an act may qualify as excellent virtue only when conjoined with the bodhisattva's mental state that possesses wisdom. We can see a shared central concern for the first person experience of the moral act that runs through all these works, with specific phenomenological properties identified as qualifying the moral value of both action and agent. Finally, this literature clearly prioritizes mental states in general in expounding Mahāyāna ethical practice and providing early examples of the way in which Mahāyāna ethical practice may be conceived as a kind of moral phenomenology.

Conclusion

The subject matter of ethics figures prominently in Buddhist literature, with advice on how we should live our lives, how to engage in virtues and avoid vices, and how to work to remove the suffering of others. What is not found in Buddhist literature is an explicit theory of metaethics, an account of the nature of ethical concepts, and an articulation of how these concepts relate to each other to give an overall structure to Buddhist ethics. These types of metaethical questions, however, have become extremely important in Western philosophical traditions, not only for understanding more about the subject of ethics itself, but also for comparing different ethical systems. So, in order to understand what Buddhist ethical thought might contribute to contemporary discussions on ethics, it is useful to attempt to articulate the general forms and central themes common to Buddhist ethical writings. A natural place for Western philosophers to begin an examination of the structure of Buddhist ethics is to look at Western ethical systems to see if Buddhist ethics falls into one of these familiar categories.

Western interpreters commonly propose that the structure of Buddhist ethics follows one of two Western ethical theories. Some maintain that Buddhist ethics has a structure similar to consequentialism. They argue that Buddhist ethics, like universalist consequentialism, is primarily concerned with the consequences of actions and their impacts on the welfare of all sentient beings. Others argue that Buddhist ethics is a type of virtue ethics. They argue that Buddhist ethics, like virtue ethics, is primarily concerned with the cultivation of good character traits and that these traits or virtues constitute Buddhism's final good.

Those who promote the consequentialist interpretation of Buddhist ethics argue that Buddhist ethics shares the focus of universalist consequentialism on agent neutrality. This, they contend, explains the promotion of demanding activities such as self-sacrifice, the motivational

advice to eliminate the suffering of all beings (maximize overall happiness), and the metaphysical arguments for compassion found in Buddhist ethical texts.

Those who promote a virtue ethics interpretation of Buddhist ethics argue that this reading accounts for the emphasis that Buddhist ethics places on the agent, in particular, the emphasis on the mental state of the agent. For evidence of this, they point to directives in Buddhist texts to develop virtues, such as generosity and compassion, and to avoid vices, such as stinginess and anger, as well as the emphasis in Buddhist ethical writings on concern for the agent's motivation when engaging in actions.

The fact that the respective proponents of these competing accounts of Buddhist ethics find evidence for contrary structures—one that is agent relative and the other agent neutral—suggests that Buddhist ethics may have a completely unfamiliar structure. And while it is true that we can find similarities between Buddhist ethical writings and consequentialist and virtue ethics systems, this does not make Buddhist ethics one of these systems. Both these interpretations of Buddhist ethics have serious problems since there are central features of Buddhist ethical writings that preclude Buddhist ethics in general from being classified either as a consequentialist ethical system or as a type of virtue ethics.

First, Buddhist ethics is not a type of consequentialism, because for a system of ethics to be consequentialist, it requires that the moral standing of an action be judged solely upon the consequences that follow from it. Buddhist ethicists, however, do not assign a moral value to actions based *only* on their consequences. The Buddhist doctrine of karma, for example, clearly prioritizes the intention or motivation of an action when assessing the moral value of that action. If Buddhist ethics were a type of consequentialism, then the mental activities associated with the

verbal and physical actions we undertake would be irrelevant to determining the moral standing of a given action.

Moreover, the examples from Buddhist ethical texts that are put forward as evidence of the agent neutral approach of universalist consequentialism, such as the promotion of self-sacrifice and the dedication of merit, are found under closer examination to be moral instructions for enhancing the agent's motivational state and supporting the agent's moral development. In Buddhist ethical writings, we continually find that it is the agent, and most especially the mental domain of the agent, that is of primary moral significance. For example, the monastic rules are not justified in terms of their consequences or practiced for a universal good. They are intended to support the ethical development of individuals seeking personal liberation.

I have also argued that the Buddhist metaphysical positions, such as selflessness, do not commit Buddhism to a consequentialist ethics. Instead, a close reading of these arguments of Buddhist thinkers like Śāntideva reveals that Buddhist ethical theories sometimes call on metaphysical positions to challenge the accuracy of the ordinary way in which an agent engages with the world, so as to effect a transformation in the agent's experience of the world. Simply put, the morally immature are described as seeing the world incorrectly, while the morally mature see the world in a metaphysically correct way. This is hardly the agent neutral approach of universalist consequentialism.

Buddhist ethics is also not a type of virtue ethics. For a system of ethics to be virtue ethics, it must be primarily concerned with the cultivation of virtues, and these virtues must be constitutively related to the final good as described by that system. Virtues as described in Buddhist ethical writings, however, they do not do the same type of work that they do in systems of virtue ethics. In Buddhist ethical and psychological texts, virtues are commonly described in

terms of mental events as opposed to character traits. Even if it were accepted that virtues in Buddhist ethics are states of character, the final good in Buddhism, nirvana, is not described in terms of these virtues. Nirvana is consistently described in negative terms, as an unchanging cessation or absence of suffering. Moreover, as I have argued, Buddhist ethics is primarily concerned with dispositions to perceive rather than dispositions to act. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is clear that virtues, such as generosity, are perfected by a particular way of seeing the world. It is a correct metaphysical view that qualifies excellent virtue, and it is this correct view that characterizes the morally mature agent.

There is certainly benefit in comparing Buddhist and Western ethical systems. Such comparative studies, however, would be much richer if we first understand Buddhist ethical thought on its own terms, instead of trying to understand Buddhist ethical writings through the structural lens of a Western ethical system. When we impose one of these familiar frameworks onto Buddhist ethics, we risk overlooking the important and unique features of Buddhist ethical writings as a result of undue emphasis on the distinguishing attributes of the two competing Western ethical systems. I have argued here that reading Buddhist ethical texts on their own terms reveals a common thread in the form of a central concern with the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life. What we find is an emphasis on the way we experience the world and with effecting a transformation in this experience. For this reason, I have suggested, following Garfield (2011), that Buddhist ethics is best thought of as a unique kind of moral phenomenology.

Even though I have suggested that there is a common emphasis on phenomenological properties in ethical writings across Buddhist traditions, my primary claim in this thesis concerns the ethical writings of Indian Mahāyāna Mādhyamika thinkers like Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and

Śāntideva, whose unique form of moral phenomenology has been influenced by both the Abhidharma literature and the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras*. From the Abhidharma tradition was inherited an ethical emphasis on the basic building blocks of experience in the form of the five constantly operative mental activities (*sarvatra-ga*). From the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras* was inherited an ethical emphasis on the metaphysical way the agent “sees” or understands herself, her action, and the patient of her actions. It is this unique kind of moral phenomenology evidenced in the writings of these Mādhyamika ethicists that I have sought to characterize in this thesis.

In the Buddhist moral phenomenology of the Mādhyamika ethicists considered here, the way one perceives the world has an ethical value. Seeing the world can be divided into two types of moral perception, the confused way of seeing the world that accompanies vice and the accurate way of seeing the world that accompanies virtue. The moral problem is that a metaphysically inaccurate vision of oneself and the world engenders the experience of suffering and vice. The moral solution is the development of a metaphysically correct view of the world and one’s place in it, which resolves suffering and is conducive to virtues. Moral development may be understood as a transformation of the agent’s experience of the world from the morally immature experience which is characterized by confusion, to the experience of the morally mature, who see themselves and their relation to the world accurately.

My argument that phenomenology is the central concern in Buddhist ethical thought is in part grounded in the observation that the mental domain is of foremost ethical significance in Buddhist texts. This is indicated by the fact that in Buddhist psychological treatises, such as those of Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Buddhaghosa, the description of mental activities includes an assignment of a moral value to each mental activity. These texts also describe perception not as

the passive representation of the world on the basis of sensory contact, but as an active, constructive process. This constructive perceptual process is ethically significant because it is understood that the way we think and feel about ourselves and the things in the world is the foundation for the way we engage with and act in the world.

The Buddhist psychological account of the basic mental activities that shape our experience provides evidence for why these thinkers considered the mental domain, and in particular the way we perceive the world, to be ethically significant. The Five Constantly Operative Mental Processes that are the building blocks of each moment of experience (contact, feeling, ascertainment, intention, and attention) are each important components of Buddhist moral phenomenology. In particular, the two mental activities of feeling and ascertainment are singled out for their constructive role in perception. To perceive an object is to both classify it and to associate it with an accompanying feeling. In reliance on contact with an object, we experience one of the three kinds of feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral) with respect to that object. Feeling has a particularly close relationship with ascertainment, which performs the role of apprehending distinguishing characteristics of objects, identifying them, and categorizing them. It is due to the operation of feeling and ascertainment that, when we see a person, we consider them a friend, an enemy, or a stranger. In this way, the active and constructive nature of our perception as informed by these mental processes has an ethical value. These mental activities determine in each moment the way we view ourselves and the people and things in our world. Foundational to this engagement with the world is the mental activity of *cetanā*. *Cetanā*, often translated as intention, is best understood as the mental impulse directing the mind toward a given object. Where *cetanā* points, the other mental functions follow, and in this way it plays a key role in shaping and constructing our experience. While *cetanā* directs a mind towards a

general object, attention directs the mind to engage with specific objects, and in this way, attention also plays a fundamental role in shaping our experience. It is with these formations and categorizations that, in each moment of our experience, we engage in thoughts, speech, and action that are either wholesome or unwholesome.

Building on the presentation of the constructive nature of perception in the psychological texts of Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, and Buddhaghosa, the Mahāyāna Buddhist ethical writers Āryadeva and Śāntideva argue that experience constructed under the influence of confusion, a hypostatized view of ourselves and the world, has moral implications because it supports suffering and vice. Conversely, they maintain that experience guided by an accurate knowledge of oneself and the world—which understands things to be impermanent, selfless, and interdependent—is incompatible with vice, supports wholesome mental states, and is a defining characteristic of excellent virtue.

The moral language used in the works of Āryadeva and Śāntideva, supports this reading of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. The morally mature are designated by terms indicating that they are knowledgeable, while the morally immature are referred to as foolish. Virtue and vice are also consistently associated with mental states. Āryadeva's *400 Stanzas* endorses this picture of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics of placing correct view as the foundation for ethics. Āryadeva as well as Candrakīrti in his commentary on the *400 Stanzas* emphasize the primacy of mental states accompanying an action in the ethical assessment of the deed. In particular, they describe excellent virtue as being characterized by the unique mental state of a bodhisattva that unites wisdom that correctly understands the nature of reality with the motivational component of compassion.

Śāntideva's *How to Lead an Awakened Life* also prioritizes the mental state of the agent as the determinant of the moral value of an action. This is exemplified in his reinterpretation of the field of merit, wherein the mental attitude of the agent is prioritized over the object, recipient of actions, and the action itself. Moreover, the description of virtue in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras clarifies that good deeds are qualified as good because of the accurate metaphysical view that accompanies them. These texts also describe the unique mental state of a bodhisattva that unites wisdom that correctly understands the nature of reality with the motivational component of compassion, which is the defining characteristic of excellent virtue.

Why Buddhist thinkers, who have such a rich philosophical tradition of metaphysics, epistemology, and so forth, did not write treatises providing an explicit theory of metaethics is an interesting question. Perhaps the absence of this kind of a treatment of the topic indicates that Buddhist ethics is so closely related with the larger Buddhist project of addressing the problem of suffering, that it was thought unnecessary to treat it as a separate subject. Given the critical role that ethics plays in the larger Buddhist problem and solution, suffering as caused by confusion and its removal as brought about by knowledge, it may have seemed unnatural to Buddhist philosophers to identify an ethical structure distinct from the structure of the general Buddhist project of the transformation of one's experience.

Yet, if the general form of Buddhist ethics is understood as a kind of moral phenomenology, this allows for a number of advantages. First, it articulates a central theme that characterizes Buddhist ethics which makes it more transparent to those wishing to engage with Buddhist ethical thought in contemporary and comparative discussions on ethics; at the same time, it allows for an appreciation of Buddhist ethical writings on their own terms, with a recognition of intimate connection between ethics and the structure of the larger Buddhist

soteriological project of the transformation of experience. This reading also does not require us to stretch or distort Buddhist metaphysical assertions about persons and pains, or to overemphasize the function of virtues, problems that come about from attempting to force Buddhist ethics to accord with familiar Western ethical systems.

There is a temptation when encountering any unfamiliar system to draw parallels to familiar frameworks, and this can be helpful in the stage of initial encounter, but this approach may obstruct the understanding of the unique features of this “other” system. Only when we genuinely encounter Buddhist ethical thought on its own terms, can we grasp what it may have to contribute to larger discussions in the field of ethics. Two kinds of moral perception are central to Buddhist ethical thought: the confused way of seeing the world that supports vice and the accurate way of seeing the world that characterizes virtue. This places the way we experience the world at the foundation of ethics. This unique ethical perspective has much to contribute to the contemporary conversation on ethics, especially on moral issues that are grounded in perceptual and conceptual biases entrenched in the way people ordinarily take up the world.

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