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The Compassionate Gift of Vice: Śāntideva on Gifts, Altruism, and Poverty

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The Compassionate Gift of Vice: Śāntideva on Gifts, Altruism, and Poverty

Amod Lele¹

Abstract²

The Mahāyāna Buddhist thinker Śāntideva tells his audience to give out alcohol, weapons and sex for reasons of Buddhist compassion, though he repeatedly warns of the dangers of all these three. The article shows how Śāntideva resolves this issue: these gifts, and gifts in general, attract their recipients to the virtuous giver, in a way that helps the recipients to become more virtuous in the long run. As a consequence, Śāntideva does recommend the alleviation of poverty, but assigns it a much smaller significance than is usually supposed. His views run counter to

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many engaged Buddhist discussions of political action, and lend support to the “modernist” interpretation of engaged Buddhist practice.

In his *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (*Anthology on Training*, abbreviated ŚS), the eighth-century Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist thinker Śāntideva proclaims that a bodhisattva should think as follows: “I will give alcoholic drink (*madya*) even to alcohol drinkers; I will cause them to obtain mindfulness (*smṛti*) and introspection (*samprajanya*)” (ŚS 271). How, one might wonder, could giving alcohol to alcohol drinkers promote their mindfulness and introspection? Especially when, in the same text, Śāntideva warns the bodhisattva against alcohol consumption on the very grounds that it *interferes* with mindfulness and introspection (ŚS 120)?

In the same passage, Śāntideva’s advice on gift-giving takes another surprising turn. As well as alcohol, he says, one can even legitimately give the gift of weapons (ŚS 271)—a startling claim from a thinker who saves his harshest criticisms for anger and hatred and the harm they cause. And elsewhere in the text, Śāntideva even urges gifts of sexual intercourse. He praises a monk named Jyotis, who broke his vows to satisfy a woman who lusted after him (ŚS 167); he even says that bodhisattvas “intentionally become prostitutes . . . ” (ŚS 326). This even though he frequently condemns the dangers of sexuality and sexual attraction, in sometimes misogynistic terms (e.g., ŚS 81-2).

Sex, drugs and violence: these are not the gifts that one would expect from a pious Buddhist monk. Śāntideva’s praise of these gifts is particularly striking given his repeated alarm at the “three poisons” of lust, anger, and delusion (e.g., ŚS 209). With sex, weapons and alcohol, he seems to be enabling each of these three respectively, perhaps even ignoring his own advice about their dangers. What is he thinking? Why would one give gifts that seem so potentially dangerous?

This article will show that there is a coherent logic underlying Śāntideva's curious claims, based on Śāntideva's own claims about the benefits of gift-giving to the recipient: in brief, the recipient benefits from the gift *encounter* rather than the gift *object*. The article will then show that this logic applies not merely in these particular cases of vice, but for gift-giving in general.

Because Śāntideva's reasoning applies to gifts in general and not merely to these vices, it has significant wider implications for constructive study, especially among politically engaged Buddhists. Ellison Banks Findly has claimed that to the extent that early Buddhist texts are concerned with "questions of a good society, of civic equity, of social justice, and of righteous living in the broad community," these questions are to be found in discussions of giving. So too, as we will see, "engaged" Buddhist writers like Stephen Jenkins and Judith Simmer-Brown turn to Buddhist discussions of giving (including Śāntideva's) as a scriptural or classical argument for political action to alleviate poverty. Indeed, as we will see, Śāntideva does advocate giving to the poor. We will see, however, that because Śāntideva's gift-giving is about the gift encounter and not the gift object, it does not have the political implications that socially engaged Buddhists often see it as having. This article's investigation of Śāntideva therefore contributes to current debates about the origins and sources of Buddhist political concern.

Śāntideva and His Thought³

The name Śāntideva is associated above all with two extant texts, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA) and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (ŚS). The *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

³ This section is drawn largely from my dissertation.

(“Introduction to the Conduct of a Bodhisattva”), in its most widely known form, is a work of just over 900 verses. Tibetan legends suggest that the text was originally recited orally (see de Jong), as do the text’s own literary features (Kajihara). Although it has been translated into Tibetan multiple times and is revered throughout Tibetan Buddhist tradition, it was originally composed and redacted in Sanskrit. Its ten chapters lead their reader through the path followed by an aspiring bodhisattva—a future Buddha, and therefore a being on the way to perfection, according to Mahāyāna tradition.⁴

The *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, already discussed in the introduction and also dealing with the bodhisattva path, is a longer prose work in nineteen chapters. The ŚS is structured as a commentary on twenty-seven short mnemonic verses known as the *Śikṣāsamuccaya Kārikā* (hereafter ŚSK). It consists primarily of quotations (of varying length) from *sūtras*, authoritative texts considered to be the word of the Buddha—generally those *sūtras* associated with Mahāyāna tradition.⁵ It too was originally composed in Sanskrit, as were the *sūtras* it quotes.

Indian and Tibetan tradition continually recommend that the two texts be studied together, on the basis of common authorship—beginning with the canonical BCA itself, which proclaims “the

⁴ The term Mahāyāna, literally “Great Vehicle,” came into use to mean the new idea of attempting to *become* a bodhisattva oneself. (The concept of the bodhisattva, as a future buddha, had existed in early Buddhism’s *jātaka* stories.) This was the earliest usage of the term *mahāyāna* in Sanskrit, although even by Śāntideva’s time, understandings of what becoming a bodhisattva involved had undergone many changes; the Mahāyāna had come to be understood as a separate school rather than an optional vocation (see Nattier, and Harrison, “Who”). Non-Mahāyāna schools are often referred to in the scholarly literature as “mainstream” Buddhism.

⁵ Most scholars have taken the ŚS to be composed almost entirely of such quotations; Paul Harrison has recently claimed that a more substantial portion than previously thought is original to the redactor.

Śikṣāsamuccaya is necessarily (*avaśyaṃ*) to be looked at again and again” (BCA V.105). Other thinkers from the early Indian commentator Prajñākaramati to the present Dalai Lama also see the texts as mutually illustrating each other, based on common authorship. For these reasons, the article treats Śāntideva as the postulated author of both texts, in Alexander Nehamas’s sense. Rather than being equivalent to the historical writer, for Nehamas an author is “postulated as the agent whose actions account for the text’s features; he is a character, a hypothesis which is accepted provisionally, guides interpretation, and is in turn modified in its light” (145). The tradition, and its attribution of common authorship and coherence, is what produces the original hypothesis of a common author; this hypothesis is confirmed by the coherence of the two redacted texts when taken as a unit.

It is difficult to learn much about the texts’ historical composer, or their redactor, beyond what is found in the texts themselves. Tibetan historians recount the life story of a Śāntideva identified as the texts’ author, but it is difficult to sort fact from legend, with so little corroborating evidence (see Pezzali and de Jong). There seems little reason to doubt that someone known by the name of Śāntideva wrote a significant portion of the two texts, or that he was a monk at the great monastic university of Nālandā; the Tibetan historians agree that Śāntideva lived at Nālandā, and based on what we know of Indian Buddhist history it seems a likely place for historically significant Buddhist works to have been composed. Paul Griffiths (114-24) uses the accounts of Chinese and Tibetan visitors to reconstruct a detailed account of what life and literary culture at Nālandā might have looked like.

Beyond these points, we can say relatively little beyond the approximate date of the texts’ composition. The Tibetan translator Ye shes sde, who rendered the BCA into Tibetan, worked under the Tibetan king Khri lde srong brtsan (816-838 CE), so it must have been composed be-

fore that time (Bendall v). Since the Chinese pilgrim Yijing (aka I-tsing) mentions all the major Indian Mahāyāna thinkers known in India but does not mention Śāntideva, it is likely that these texts were composed, or at least became famous, after Yijing left India in 685 CE (Pezzali 38). We may therefore assign Śāntideva a date of approximately the eighth century.

The central concern of both of Śāntideva's texts is the bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is a being aiming to become a buddha (literally “awakened one”); the process of the final transformation into a buddha is called *bodhi*, “awakening,” sometimes referred to as “enlightenment.”

The bodhisattva is distinguished primarily from “ordinary people,” *prthagjanas*—essentially, people who are not bodhisattvas, whose minds have not been awakened. The term *prthagjana* is a Sanskritization of the Pāli *putthujana*. In the (non-Mahāyāna) Pāli canon this term refers to a person who has not yet entered any of the traditional stages of Buddhist achievement and retains all of the fetters (*saṃyojana*) leading to continued rebirth. The term does not mean a “non-Buddhist” in the contemporary sense; one can be a “good *putthujana*” who strives but fails to realize Buddhist teaching (Nyanatiloka 161).

Theoretically, Śāntideva's use of the term is an extension of this older meaning, as he refers at one point to “all buddhas, bodhisattvas, solitary buddhas, noble disciples and ordinary people” (ŚS 9)—suggesting that ordinary people are the residual category of all those who do not fall into the previous categories. It is standard in Mahāyāna texts to refer to three “vehicles” (*yāna*) or paths, with the vehicles of the disciple (*śrāvaka*) and solitary buddha (*pratyekabuddha*) being distinguished from the Great Vehicle (*mahāyāna*) of the bodhisattva. It is quite rare, however, for Śāntideva to refer to disciples and solitary buddhas, and even buddhas appear relatively infrequently, so in practice the most im-

portant distinction in his texts is between bodhisattvas and ordinary people.

Śāntideva's view of ordinary people is not flattering. The term "ordinary person" frequently occurs in his work alongside the term "fool" (*bāla*)—sometimes with the latter as a modifier ("foolish ordinary person," *bālapṛthagjana*, as on ŚS 61) and sometimes with the two terms used synonymously and interchangeably, as on ŚS 194. Ordinary people's foolishness traps them in suffering; the way for them to get out of suffering is to get on the bodhisattva path and become a bodhisattva.

Śāntideva refers to the process of becoming a bodhisattva in terms of the awakening mind (*bodhicitta*), a mental transformation that brings one out of the status of ordinary person and eventually toward awakening. Śāntideva makes an important distinction between two kinds of the awakening mind: the mind resolved on awakening (*bodhipraṇidhicitta*) and the mind proceeding to awakening (*bodhiprasthānacitta*). The first, he tells us, can be reached quickly; it arises simply when one sincerely vows, "I must become a buddha" (SS 8). He is not as explicit about the nature of the second, but in describing the first he notes that "the awakening mind is productive even without conduct" (SS 9), suggesting that conduct (*caryā*, *bodhicaryā*) may be what makes the difference between the mind resolved on awakening and the mind proceeding to awakening. Much of his work, especially after the first chapters of the BCA, seems intended for readers who have achieved the mind resolved on awakening but not the mind proceeding to awakening.

The Benefits of Giving Vices

With Śāntideva's background in mind, let us return to the gifts of vice with which we began—starting with alcohol, where his reasoning is most

explicit. Why, for Śāntideva, does a bodhisattva give alcohol to alcohol drinkers? The advice to do so comes in a quote from the *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra* (abbreviated to *Ugra*), a Sanskrit text now available only in Tibetan and Chinese translation except for the Sanskrit quotations preserved in the ŚS (see Nattier). While the *Ugra* itself advocates giving alcohol in order to produce mindfulness and introspection, it does not explain *how* the gift achieves its goal (*Ugra* 7A).

Śāntideva appears to recognize a problem, for he gives the *Ugra* quote an unusual extended gloss in his own words; in most cases the ŚS lets the *sūtras* speak for themselves. Śāntideva may be finding here an apparent conflict between *sūtra* scriptures. Immediately before quoting the *Ugra* on alcohol, Śāntideva quotes another *sūtra*, the *Akṣayamati Sūtra*, which proclaims that “there is no gift of poison or weapons, there is no gift that injures beings” (ŚS 271). He may also have in mind other *sūtras*, such as the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi Sūtra*, which argue that the bodhisattva should *not* give alcohol to others (Nattier 110,n14). He needs to explain, then, how the *Ugra* can consistently advocate the gift of alcohol.

This is the explanation that Śāntideva gives in his own words, to help resolve the conflict:

The meaning is: When a bodhisattva has caused the frustration of hope, the [resulting] anger is more serious even than alcoholic drink. Therefore there is a loss of the attraction of beings; alcohol may be given in the absence of other means of peacefully pleasing them. (ŚS 271)

The key terms in this passage are “attraction” (*saṃgraha*) and “peacefully pleasing” (*prasādana*). It is to preserve and create the alcohol drinker’s attraction and peaceful pleasure (*saṃgraha* and *prasāda*) that the bodhisattva must give alcohol when asked to do so—create these

states in those who did not yet have them, preserve them in those who did. The attraction and peaceful pleasure, in turn, will create the mindfulness (*smṛti*) and introspection (*sampraṇāna*) that are central to the path as Śāntideva envisions it.

How will they do this? To find out, we need to examine more general ideals of gift-giving in Śāntideva's thought, beyond this passage—focusing in particular on the meanings and usages of *saṃgraha* and *prasāda*. *Saṃgraha*, literally “grasping together,” refers in Buddhist Sanskrit to the attraction that beings feel to a bodhisattva. Edgerton (548) notes that several Buddhist Sanskrit texts (including the *Dharmasaṃgraha*, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, the *Mahāvastu*, the *Mahāvīryūtpatti* and the *Lalitavistara*) refer to four “characteristics of attraction” (*saṃgrahavastus*), behaviors by which bodhisattvas attract other beings—giving or generosity (*dāna*) being first among these.⁶ Śāntideva also refers multiple times to the characteristics of attraction as a set (ŚS 50, 95), although he does not list the set's members. In a passage comparing the Buddhas to fishermen, he claims that “having grabbed those beings by means of the Buddhas' knowledge and of the line of the characteristics of attraction, having drawn them from the watery pond of *saṃsāra* [wandering in rebirth], the blessed Buddhas establish them on the ground of *nirvāṇa*” (ŚS 95). Here, the characteristics of attraction—which include giving—are specified as something that lures others onto the bodhisattva path.

The ŚS speaks regularly of the bodhisattva's task of attracting others to him; ŚSK 10-12, and the chapter of the ŚS (VI) that comments on these, focus on this task. As Susanne Mroczek (“Relationships” 65-8, “Virtuous” 75-7) has noted, this attraction is often said to result from the

⁶ The list of characteristics of attraction also appears frequently in Pāli texts (Rhys Davids and Stede 666).

complex term *prasāda*, which I have rendered “peaceful pleasure.”⁷ It derives from the verb *prasīdati*, literally “to settle down.” In ŚS XIV, the ontological or metaphysical chapter of the ŚS, Śāntideva uses the term a number of times to refer to a process by which the physical elements become tranquil; but every other time he uses it, it has a psychological meaning, referring to a kind of mental state that is pleasurable and peaceful.⁸ He frequently alliterates it with *prīti* and *prāmodya* (each meaning “joy”), treating it as a near synonym to them (e.g., ŚS 27, 183).

Śāntideva suggests that a bodhisattva creates peaceful pleasure in order to win others over to the bodhisattva path:

. . . he also becomes suitable for the purposes of beings, because [he is] a maker of peaceful pleasure. How? Because of his supremely sweet speaking, always softly, a steady one can win over (*āvarjayati*) suitable people, and also becomes acceptable [to them]. This indeed is a duty of the bodhisattva, namely, the winning over of beings.⁹

Peaceful pleasure (*prasāda*), then, works to create attraction (*saṅgraha*), and the attraction in turn will win beings over to the bodhisattva path. It is this mechanism that explains the gift of vice. The gifts

⁷ In general, my argument here draws heavily on Mrozik’s (1998, 2007) perceptive and valuable discussion of the important role given in the ŚS to pleasing others.

⁸ In many South Asian contexts, this peaceful pleasure becomes a “grace” or “kindness” displayed by a divine being, which often manifests itself in the food left over from an offering, establishing a hierarchical relationship between worshiper and deity (see for example Babb 53-61). The term’s ubiquity in South Asian traditions is such that it has gone beyond its South Asian context in startling ways. At www.prasada.com, one may find a website promoting a “new and refreshing master-planned community in Surprise, Arizona” which takes the name Prasada, “derived from the Sanskrit word meaning ‘grace’ or ‘peace’ . . .”

⁹ ŚS 124. The phrases in the middle make up ŚSK 10.

of alcohol and weapons please their recipients and attract them to bodhisattvas, making them more open to receiving bodhisattvas' teaching. Once a being has entered the bodhisattva path, in turn, she will be able to achieve the mindfulness and introspection that bodhisattvas seek. It is through this attraction, then, that the gift of alcohol can have what first seems a curious and counterintuitive effect: cause its recipient to obtain mindfulness and introspection.

Since Śāntideva's passage glosses a quote from the *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra*, Mrozik ("Virtuous" 26) asks whether Śāntideva changes the meaning of that text. Mrozik argues that Śāntideva uses the passage from the *Ugra* for a different purpose than the *Ugra's* own. She notes that the *Ugra* provides a different explanation for the gift of alcohol: "And why is this? To fulfill all their desires is to carry out in full the bodhisattva's perfection of giving" (*Ugra* 7A). While Mrozik is right to note the difference in the explanations offered, I would suggest that the two explanations are compatible. It is the *Ugra*, quoted by Śāntideva, which says the gift of alcohol is intended to promote mindfulness and introspection. It is not clear how fulfilling beings' desires would promote mindfulness and introspection—unless it is according to a logic like that I have just outlined, where peaceful pleasure attracts them onto the bodhisattva path. It seems entirely possible to me that the author of the *Ugraparipṛcchā* had the same logic in mind.

This same logic also holds in the passage describing the gift of sex. When the monk Jyotis has sex with the woman who desires him, the reason Śāntideva provides is that it produces a *kuśalamūla* in the beneficiary (ŚŚ 167)—literally a "root of excellence," a piece of good karma, a mental state which allows one to advance on the bodhisattva path. So

too, when bodhisattvas become prostitutes, it is “in order to draw men to them” (*puṃsām ākārṣanāya te*, ŚS 326).¹⁰

Śāntideva does mention the potentially dangerous consequences of the gifts of vice, but sees their benefit as outweighing these. After his discussion of giving alcohol, he turns to gifts of weapons, and claims “Even concerning a sword and so on, after consideration of bad and good consequences, one should make the gift, and then the thought ‘there is no transgression’ arrives” (ŚS 271). Possessing the gift may well be bad for the recipient, but the benefits of the gift encounter outweigh that danger.

Śāntideva does not specify a procedure of cost-benefit analysis, of how one may decide whether the gift’s benefit outweighs its dangers. In general I think he does not perform such analyses because he leaves them up to the discretion of the skillful bodhisattva, to “excellence in means” (*upāyakaśālyā*). In speaking of alcohol, Śāntideva uses the gerundive form *deya* (ŚS 271), and the gerundive in *-ya* does not have the imperative force of the gerundive in *-tavya* (Coulson 188-9); therefore, he is saying only that alcohol *may* be given, not necessarily that it always should be.

Attraction Beyond Vice

We have, then, an answer to the question with which we began. The bodhisattva gives sex, alcohol and weapons in order to attract the gift’s recipient to the bodhisattva path. This consequence is so momentous that

¹⁰ ŚS 326. See Mroziak (1998, 144-51) for a discussion of the gender implications of this metaphor and similar passages.

it outweighs the danger posed by the recipient's possession or partaking of the vice in question.

But the significance of this point goes well beyond the gift of vice itself, to Śāntideva's more general theory of compassionate gift-giving—a theory that may well turn out to be expressed in other Buddhist texts. For Śāntideva, attraction is a central component to compassionate gift-giving in general, not merely to the gift of vice.

I specify *compassionate* gift-giving because, in Śāntideva's work, gift-giving can have other motivations beyond compassionate benefit to others. For him, very often, giving functions primarily as a form of self-cultivation. Sometimes this is a matter of reducing one's attachment to material objects; Śāntideva often uses terms for "giving" that are synonymous with "renunciation" or "nonattachment" (*utsarga*, *tyāga*). Sometimes it is a matter of expressing one's esteem or faith (*śraddhā*) in more advanced beings, such as one's guru or the celestial bodhisattvas (as in BCA chapter II). In the next section we will see other ways in which giving serves as self-cultivation.

In this article, however, I am primarily concerned with compassionate gifts—gifts made out of a concern for others' suffering and intended to benefit them. Śāntideva endorses the view that one gives for beings' enjoyment (*paribhogāya satvānām*, ŚSK 5), adding that one also preserves the gift for the sake of their enjoyment (*satvôpabhogārtham*, ŚSK 6). The purpose of the gifts of vice, as I have described above, is also compassionate in this sense. The way that beings benefit from enjoying their gifts, however, is not what one might first think.

On a common-sense understanding of gift-giving, one might think that the recipient benefits by having the gift in her possession, being able to use it. Śāntideva, however, places a much greater emphasis

on the benefit of being attracted to the bodhisattva path—not merely in the peculiar cases of alcohol, gifts and weapons, but for gifts in general.

Śāntideva discusses gift-giving most extensively in the first chapter of the ŚS. Several passages in this chapter—the chapter of Śāntideva’s work most devoted to the praise of generous giving—confirm the claim that giving is a way for the bodhisattva to win recipients over, at a level much broader than the gifts of vice. Right before declaring that giving is itself the awakening or enlightenment of the bodhisattva (*dānaṃ hi bodhisattvasya bodhir*, ŚS 35), Śāntideva again compares the bodhisattva’s potential gift offerings to bait on a fish hook, in helping others to cross to awakening (ŚS 34). While praising the awakening mind, too, Śāntideva notes how some past bodhisattvas were able to produce the awakening mind in others by giving particular things to them, giving long lists of cases where this happened (ŚS 9).

Later in the text, Śāntideva praises the giving of the highly advanced bodhisattvas who have acquired supernatural powers. Here, he specifically says that they do so in order to train or lead (*vinayati* or *vineti*) other beings (ŚS 328-9). This process of leading is described as “the miracle that is attraction of and knowledge of the world,” or alternately “the miracle that is knowing how to attract the world”¹¹ (*jagasamgrahajñānavikurvā*, ŚS 327). Here too, giving is a means to draw people closer to the bodhisattva.

Śāntideva’s approach may appear to parallel those of evangelical Christians who see giving to the poor as a form of “social outreach” to promote conversion. Omri Elisha (444), for example, interviews evangelicals for whom “nourished stomachs and softened hearts are a means to a proselytic end,” telling him “You can’t talk to an empty stomach. Com-

¹¹ I thank Paul Harrison for suggesting the latter translation. Either way, the point remains that bodhisattvas give in order to lead by attraction.

passion has to come before the message.” There is indeed one parallel in that in both cases, the material giving is for non-material purposes.

Nevertheless, the purpose is different; according to Martin Marty, Śāntideva’s aim is not “proselytization” as such, if proselytization is understood conventionally as “inducement to convert” (1). The goals of Śāntideva’s attraction are not stated in terms of inducing people to follow the Buddhas and their *dharma*, let alone of bringing people over from false doctrines. When ŚSK 10 says a bodhisattva should “win over” (*āvarjayati*) people, Śāntideva glosses this term only as “developing” them (*paripāka*, literally “cooking” or “ripening,” ŚS 124).¹² Some sort of personal transformation is involved here; the transformation is not, however, one of movement between traditions. Rather, as we saw above, the goals involve producing mindfulness (*smṛti*) and introspection (*samprajanya*), virtues not limited to a Buddhist context. The goal is also described as producing pieces of good karma (*kuśalamūlas*) in the recipients, and good karma can be used for a variety of purposes, not necessarily Buddhist ones.¹³ The closest Christian equivalent might be found in Thomas Thangaraj’s ideal of “evangelism without proselytism”: an attempt to produce a profound and beneficial personal transformation that does not primarily involve making others into Christians.

Engaged Buddhism

Let us now turn to the broader implications of Śāntideva’s views of gift-giving. As noted, in Buddhist texts, it is often in discussions of gift-giving

¹² See Mrozik (2004) for a discussion of this term and its implications.

¹³ The point fits with Brekke’s observation that in classical Indian Buddhism, “conversion” from householder to monk is more important than conversion from one monastic tradition to another (such as Jainism to Buddhism).

that one finds the closest analogue to contemporary concerns of social justice and poverty alleviation. Śāntideva's approach to gift-giving, however, bring into question some contemporary views on these topics, especially those associated with engaged Buddhism.

The term "engaged Buddhism," attributed to the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, is usually a shorthand for "socially engaged" or "politically engaged" Buddhism: thought and practice that understands itself as Buddhist amid "energetic engagement with social and political issues and crises" (Queen ix). There is a debate among scholars of engaged Buddhism on its provenance: is engaged Buddhism a modern reform of Buddhist tradition, or an element of Buddhism dating back to antiquity? Thomas Yarnall provides a long account of this debate, naming its two sides based on their characterization of engaged Buddhism: those who see it as modern he calls "modernists," and those who see it as traditional "traditionists." As we will see, Yarnall stands firmly on the "traditionist" side; I will argue in the next section that Śāntideva's work provides significant support for the "modernists."

On both sides of this debate, however, much of the scholarly engaged Buddhist literature shares an assumption, often unquestioned, that political action is a good. In speaking of the founding of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, for example, Simmer-Brown claims with some shock and surprise "that Buddhist practice centers and groups had become entirely removed from the social and political issues of the day: some teachers and organizations were even actively discouraging political involvement" ("Speaking Truth" 69). Yarnall goes considerably further, accusing the modernists of "a subtle form of neo-colonial, neo-Orientalist bias" (289) because they believe that political engagement is found in their Buddhism but not in that of precolonial Asia. Śāntideva's views, I want to show, undercut Yarnall's claim and provide important cautions for contemporary engaged Buddhists.

Engaged Buddhists take action on a number of political issues, including peace and the environment. I focus here on one such issue: poverty alleviation. Several authors, including José Ignacio Cabezón, Judith Simmer-Brown (“Suffering”) and Stephen Jenkins, have correctly made claims to the effect that bodhisattvas relieve poverty and material suffering, often turning to Śāntideva for textual support. However, they have not sufficiently explored the bodhisattva’s motivations for doing so.

Cabezón, for example, quotes famous verses from BCA chapter VIII that provide a metaphysical justification for altruism, arguing that the self is an illusion and that therefore one should alleviate everyone’s suffering equally (302). Śāntideva certainly does urge such an unqualified altruism. The question is: how does this altruism express itself? What sorts of actions follow from the proposition that one should benefit everyone? Cabezón, following Tibetan tradition and especially the works of the Dalai Lama,¹⁴ stresses political action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. I argue, however, that this is not Śāntideva’s own view. For him, the important thing is developing others’ virtue, making them more like bodhisattvas.

Is there a relationship between developing virtue and poverty alleviation? Jenkins’s article deals with the topic in greatest detail.¹⁵ He begins by noting a passage in Śāntideva’s work that minimizes the im-

¹⁴ Throughout his article, Cabezón draws his views from Tibetan tradition, especially those of the present Dalai Lama. I will not take a position here on the question of whether Tibetans have themselves misinterpreted Śāntideva; to argue that point either way would require at least a separate article and possibly a book.

¹⁵ Others, such as Christopher Ives (34, 41n15), cite Jenkins as an authority to the effect that Buddhists have long been concerned with suffering caused “by social, economic, political, and environmental problems” and not only with suffering caused by bad mental states.

portance of poverty alleviation, which he translates as follows: “If the perfection of generosity were the alleviation of the world’s poverty, then since beings are still starving now, in what manner did the previous Buddhas perfect it?” (BCA V.9, quoted in Jenkins 40). In response, he provides many quotations from texts identified as Mahāyāna which do recommend that bodhisattvas relieve poverty, and more generally suffering born of material causes. Indeed, one of these quotes is from the ŚS: “And he gives the best fine food to beings wishing to eat (*jighatsita*) . . . and he satisfies poor (*daridra*) beings through possessions (*bhogas*) . . . and he makes a distribution of possessions to beings afflicted by poverty (*daridraduṣkhita*).”¹⁶ Jenkins is absolutely correct to note that Śāntideva’s bodhisattva *does* attempt to provide for poor people. The question is: why does he do it?

Jenkins answers that material well-being is *necessary* for spiritual benefit—that poverty makes people worse or prevents them from becoming better. Jenkins identifies this connection most explicitly in the early (non-Mahāyāna) *Cakkavattī-Sīhanāda Sūtra*, where a king’s refusal to alleviate poverty leads his kingdom to theft (43). He finds similar connections in Mahāyāna sources such as the *Large Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom*, in which bodhisattvas “provide all beings with everything that brings ease—food for the hungry, drink to the thirsty . . .” and then lead those beings to awakening (45). The chronological order of the bodhisattva’s

¹⁶ ŚS 274. I use my own translation here. Jenkins (48n17) instead refers to Bendall and Rouse’s translation; their translation suggests that the first phrase refers more clearly to poverty alleviation than it actually does, by rendering it “When any are hungry he gives them the best food.” Śāntideva’s term is *jighatsita*, a desiderative from *√ghas* “eat,” rather than a term deriving from *√kṣudh*, the root more commonly used for hunger, especially the kind of chronic hunger that could come from poverty. So in this passage he may well mean that the bodhisattva serves rarefied delicacies to gourmets. However, this translation issue does not itself annul Jenkins’s overall point, since later parts of the passage in question explicitly refer to poverty (*dāridrya*).

actions is one important piece of evidence for Jenkins: the bodhisattva first provides food and drink, and only then leads the beings to awakening. Linking such Mahāyāna texts with the *Cakkavattī-Sihanāda*, Jenkins concludes that bodhisattvas satisfy material needs first because doing so is a necessary condition for awakening: in both kinds of texts there is “a distinction and relation between material and moral goods, where material goods have priority as a prerequisite for moral well-being” (46). Poverty alleviation, on Jenkins’s account, is central to the bodhisattva’s work, indeed *more* important than moral development, because the latter cannot happen without the former. In the following sections, I argue that Jenkins’s view on this point is incorrect.

Śāntideva on Poverty Alleviation

As we have already seen in earlier sections, the connection between poverty alleviation and spiritual benefit appears very differently in Śāntideva’s work than in Jenkins’s. There are indeed numerous passages in Śāntideva’s work where he says that bodhisattvas give to the poor and hungry and thirsty. But what is his reasoning? Śāntideva does sometimes follow the chronological order that Jenkins notes in other texts, claiming that bodhisattvas first relieve poverty and then teach spiritually: he says that “in ages of famine, [bodhisattvas] become food and drink,” and then adds in the next sentence that “having removed hunger and thirst, they teach the dharma to living beings” (ŚS 325).

But the importance of attraction strongly suggests a different logic than Jenkins’s. The bodhisattva removes hunger and thirst first, not because they present intrinsic obstacles to beings’ receiving the teaching, but because he needs to win over the beings he will teach. It is soon after discussing the removal of hunger and thirst, in the same passage, that Śāntideva says bodhisattvas “intentionally become prostitutes in

order to draw men to them”; they even become dutiful slaves in order to win over their masters (ŚS 326). Similarly, in other passages poverty alleviation is treated as one kind of giving among many. For example, in the final chapter of the BCA, Śāntideva conducts a redirection of good karma (*pariṇāmanā*), attempting to use his accumulated good karma to provide for others; he tries to provide food and drink, but as part of a list that includes perfumes and ornaments (X.20).¹⁷

One might ask whether poverty alleviation might help awaken beings in both respects: giving attracts them to the path, and material want presents an obstacle to their getting on the path.¹⁸ Śāntideva never says, however, that poverty interferes with spiritual advancement. Indeed, there are a number of passages that suggest it might even *help*—because possessions (*lābha*) of any kind lead one to dangerous states of attachment.¹⁹ Śāntideva argues that property (*lābha*) is to be avoided by a bodhisattva because it generates desire (*rāga*, ŚS 105), and that therefore “great gain (*bahulābhatā*) is among the obstacles to the Mahāyāna” (ŚS 145). Elsewhere he describes protecting possessions as a “torment” or “burden” (*kheda*, BCA VIII.87). In his praise of giving he contrasts the great spiritual fruitfulness of what is given away with the dangers of what is in one’s own home (*yad grhe*, ŚS 19). By contrast, Śāntideva also describes physical hardships—including hunger and thirst—as insignifi-

¹⁷ In this regard, one of Bendall and Rouse’s translations is again misleading. In Śāntideva’s longest and most systematic discussion of giving in ŚS I, the recipient is frequently referred to as a *yācanaka*. Bendall and Rouse render this term as “beggar,” which is a sense it *can* have, but the word more broadly means “requester, one who requests,” from the root *yāc* “ask, request”; and nothing in the passage suggests that the *yācanaka* is necessarily poor or a mendicant, as the term “beggar” would imply.

¹⁸ I thank Barbra Clayton for raising this point (in a personal communication).

¹⁹ Indeed, Śāntideva sees the two as so closely linked that he often uses the same word (*parigraha*) to refer both to physical possessions and to the dangerous emotional attachment they produce.

cant at worst, perhaps even beneficial opportunities to develop one's patient endurance (*kṣānti*, BCA VI.15).

Now since most of these claims are aimed at aspiring bodhisattvas, one might suggest that possessions do not pose a similar danger for ordinary people; but while they might be neutral for ordinary people's advancement, it is unlikely that they are positive. Where correlations between material goods and spiritual well-being appear in Śāntideva's work, they are *negative*.²⁰

One apparent exception is the monk's robe and bowl, which a bodhisattva is urged not to give away (ŚS 145); these, it would seem, can be beneficial to possess. But this passage should likely be read in the light of Śāntideva's numerous exhortations on monastic comportment. On ŚS 67 he argues that even an immoral monk may be able to lead others beneficially, by virtue of his monastic appearance.²¹ The monk's bowl, like his robe, is important because it marks him as a monk, not because it is the monk's means of attaining food.

Śāntideva's work, then, supports Jenkins's claim about the chronological order of the bodhisattva's action—first give, then teach—but not about its logic. Examining the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra*, Jenkins says: "There is a correlation here between material support and proselytization, but the reasoning is always that in order to create the conditions necessary for benefitting people spiritually, one must first attend to their material needs" (46). This reasoning does not appear to be Śāntideva's. His concern is primarily with satisfying wants rather than attending to needs; the more pressing concern is spiritual benefit, and material benefit is important because often that is the only way to reach people.

²⁰ For more discussion of these points, see Lele 93-100, 124-8, 136-9.

²¹ See Mroziak 1998, 63-74 for discussion of this and related points.

As noted in the previous section, attraction is not the only reason that Śāntideva's bodhisattva gives gifts, to the poor or anyone else. But his other reasons also do not support the thesis that poverty alleviation is a prerequisite for spiritual benefit. Especially, one of the key reasons Śāntideva gives for poverty alleviation, as for other kinds of giving, is self-cultivation, of various kinds.

One major context for alleviating hunger and poverty in Śāntideva's work is the redirection of good karma (*pariṇāmanā*): when one believes that one has generated good karma for oneself, one makes a determined wish that this karma will work to benefit others in various ways. Judith Simmer-Brown ("Suffering," 108-9) points to a passage about karmic redirection (BCA III.8-10) to indicate that Śāntideva's bodhisattva works to benefit the poor. Elsewhere, however, Śāntideva notes that a key purpose of karmic redirection is to develop one's own compassion (*maitrī*, ŚS 213-19). And the karmic redirection that Simmer-Brown identifies is specifically a part of the *anuttarapūjā* or Sevenfold Worship ritual, a ritual that takes up BCA II and III and culminates in the generation of the awakening mind, making one a bodhisattva.²² The *ultimate* purpose of becoming a bodhisattva is of course to benefit other beings; but in the immediate context, the mental attempt to alleviate poverty turns out to be for one's own development.

²² The commentator Prajñākaramati, commenting on BCA IV.1, confirms that the purpose of the *anuttarapūjā* is to generate the awakening mind. Crosby and Skilton (11) agree that this is the ritual's purpose. Luís Gómez suggests an alternate interpretation where karmic redirection, rather than the development of the awakening mind, is the purpose of the ritual: "the ritual is a means toward acquiring merit and then relinquishing it, dedicating it to one's own awakening and to the awakening of all living beings." If this were so, however, one would wonder why the awakening mind and the bodhisattva vow come *last*, after the karmic redirection has already taken place. The redirection seems to be a penultimate step here.

Similarly, the passage that Jenkins cites from the ŚS is in the context of enhancing one's own person (*ātmabhāva*), and specifically increasing one's own strength or power (*bala*). In a quote from the *Tathāgataḡuhya Sūtra* (ŚS 274), the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi says that there are ten ways to obtain strength like his; giving food and satisfying the poor are among them. What is the causal connection between these actions and becoming stronger? It seems to be that, by giving these items up and producing attraction in their beneficiaries, one receives good karma and thereby is reborn as a stronger person in future lives. Here too, the rationale offered here for provision to the poor is the bodhisattva's own development, not any material benefit to them.

None of this is to say that material benefit plays no role in Śāntideva's thought. He does claim that real suffering (*vyathā*) comes from material deprivation; in BCA III.8, the passage to which Simmer-Brown refers, he refers to *kṣutpipāsavathā*, suffering deriving from or consisting of hunger and thirst. But he tends to deemphasize this suffering. He claims in BCA V.6 that "all fears and immeasurable sufferings" come from the mind alone; there are some sufferings which derive from material causes, but these are relatively minor. He expounds on these topics at greatest length in his chapters on *kṣānti*, patient endurance (BCA VI and ŚS IX), where he notes that minor (*mṛdu*) suffering can be greatly exaggerated by poor mental states and even great suffering can be alleviated with proper practice. So, when Śāntideva does make a mental determination to alleviate suffering, as in his karmic redirections in BCA X, he refers to beings afflicted by bodily and mental suffering (*kāyacittavyathā*), hoping that they will attain "oceans of happiness and delight" (BCA X.2).

What Śāntideva never does, however, is imply, as Jenkins does, that the alleviation of material suffering is a *prerequisite* for spiritual benefit. There is one point, at ŚS 161, where his language suggests a logic

like Jenkins's, in which poverty causes moral degeneration. Here he refers to his bad karma made by means of *śāṭhyadāridryadoṣa*: a “wickedness-poverty-fault.” Bendall and Rouse (159) translate this phrase as “the deceitful offences of poverty,” suggesting perhaps that poverty is at the root of wickedness or deceit (*śāṭhya*), or that allowing the existence of poverty is itself an offence. The phrase could also be read as “the faults of wickedness and poverty,” removing the connection between the two. Either way, however, the Sanskrit compound is modified by another compound: *īrṣyamātsaryaheṭu*, “caused by envy and jealousy.” That is, whatever faults are at issue here—likely including poverty—have envy and jealousy as their root, a claim supported by Śāntideva's claim a few pages before that rebirth in poverty is a consequence of excessive pride (*māna*, ŚS 153). It is not clear here, in other words, whether poverty causes bad behavior; in the text it seems clearer that bad behavior causes poverty, and it is preventing the bad behavior that, for Śāntideva, must take priority.

We have seen in Śāntideva's work, then, that a key rationale for bodhisattvas' poverty alleviation is the production of attraction in the beneficiary; that bodhisattvas also alleviate poverty for their own self-cultivation; and that, while material aid to deprived beings can directly alleviate some of their suffering, this alleviation is neither a prerequisite nor a priority when placed beside the importance of benefitting beings spiritually in the long run. With these insights in mind, we may now be better able to see why Śāntideva seems to disparage poverty alleviation at BCA V.9 even though he advocates it elsewhere in his work. Alleviating poverty helps alleviate some suffering; but it is not one of the bodhisattva's more significant tasks.

Śāntideva on Political Engagement

Having understood Śāntideva's views on poverty alleviation, we are in a better position to understand his more general views on political engagement. In a worldview where material need is as important as Jenkins claims, one would expect that government would play an important role: "to prevent social degeneration by attending to the needs of the poor," as Jenkins (46) says of his mainstream Buddhist sources. But Śāntideva's few comments on government serve primarily to reject its significance. In a discussion of knowledge and textual learning—which kinds are valuable and which not—he specifically includes texts on law and politics (*daṇḍanīti śāstras*) among the kinds of knowledge which are fruitless (*apârtha*), are opposed to liberation (*mokṣapratikūla*), lead to delusion (*saṃmoha*), and are therefore to be avoided (*parivarjitavya*) by one who has set out or is established on the bodhisattva path (ŚS 192). The bodhisattva, Śāntideva tells us here, does not concern himself with politics.

On rare occasions, Śāntideva does offer advice to kings—but the advice is that they give their kingdoms up entirely. ŚS 19-34 lavishly detail the bodhisattva's giving, going on at length about the many things he is supposed to give up. A number of times there, a kingdom (*rājya*) is listed as an item among these, as are other things only a king might possess. For example, he cites the *Vajradhvaja Sūtra*²³ as describing the bodhisattva in the following way:

It also said: "And giving himself to all beings or receiving the presence of all buddhas, he is giving a kingdom or a citadel, or a city or capital decorated with all ornaments, or, according to worthiness, giving up his whole entou-

²³ Although it may have existed independently in India, this sūtra is now usually known as a portion of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, which is in turn better known by the Chinese name *Huayan Sūtra*.

rage to those who ask; or giving his son, daughter and wife to those who ask; or abandoning his entire dwelling, and likewise giving all enjoyments.” (ŚS 27)

The king’s giving away of his kingdom in such passages might seem to be the closest that Śāntideva comes to urging that giving happen through a political institution; but the giving seems to be treated as a matter of the king giving his own property as any other bodhisattva would. The gifts described are extravagant; giving luxuries to the rich appears about as beneficial as giving basic needs to the poor. Cabezón is therefore technically right when he says that “virtuous action on behalf of the oppressed creates merit and aids in the task of mental purification”—but for Śāntideva, this is true of virtuous action on behalf of anyone. Oppression is not the issue. The poor do not get priority as a recipient of the gift; it is not a matter of using the power of state institutions to improve others’ material conditions.

We can therefore explain Śāntideva’s dismissive comments about politics: the state *qua* state can do little to improve people’s well-being, because oppression and material want are not the primary causes of their suffering. The real causes are mental; one should work very hard to alleviate others’ suffering, but one does this best through individual teaching encounters, in which gift-giving is one part.

Now the significance of these points should not be exaggerated. Jenkins is dealing explicitly with a broad range of mainstream and Mahāyāna texts; I am dealing here with only two Mahāyāna texts and one author. A more general characterization of South Asian Buddhist gift-giving ideology is beyond the scope of this article. It is reasonable to expect that the many Buddhist sources written in South Asia over thousands of years would disagree with each other.

Nevertheless, having looked at a wide range of sources including the BCA and ŚS, Jenkins claims that it is a “reasonable generalization” to see poverty as an “obstruction to spiritual progress” in the Mahāyāna, and a “clear mandate for its direct relief as a prerequisite for addressing the more subtle roots of *saṃsāra*.” Jenkins makes these claims by reading Mahāyāna injunctions for poverty alleviation “in light of those *sūtras* which speak directly on the relationship between material and moral well-being.” Having looked at Śāntideva’s work, however, we see that despite Śāntideva’s own instructions to alleviate poverty, this relationship does not hold. Material and moral well-being are largely separate, and moral well-being takes priority. To the extent that moral well-being is promoted by the alleviation of poverty, the connection has to do with attraction and not with material well-being or need. Jenkins’s generalization does not hold in these texts; we might reasonably suspect that there are other Mahāyāna texts where it does not hold either.

Conclusions

We have seen that Śāntideva’s texts describe and illustrate a counterintuitive approach to compassionate gift-giving. One gives gifts in order to create attraction in the recipient, and thereby make the recipient more virtuous, closer to a Buddhist spiritual path. This logic is clearest in the case of problematic gifts like alcohol, sex and weapons, but it applies to all gifts more generally.

In this respect, Śāntideva complicates discussions of poverty alleviation in Mahāyāna tradition. Remedies of material deprivation may often chronologically precede spiritual teaching in his work, but contrary to Stephen Jenkins’s interpretation, material benefit is not a prerequisite for spiritual benefit, nor is material deprivation a hindrance. Rather, when the two are connected, it is because the gift attracts the recipient

toward the giver. Śāntideva does suggest other motivations for alleviating poverty, but in no case is it a prerequisite or a priority.

Śāntideva's view offers one piece of evidence for what Yarnall calls the "modernist" interpretation of engaged Buddhism: political engagement is not a concern of at least this one classical, precolonial thinker. Indeed, Śāntideva offers cogent, powerful Mahāyāna arguments *against* political involvement: it does much less to alleviate others' suffering than we think it does. One might speculate that similar views could have animated Simmer-Brown's teachers who "were even actively discouraging political involvement"—teachers whose own voices go entirely unheard in Simmer-Brown's piece.

If we take Śāntideva's anti-political stance seriously, it becomes much harder to dismiss a "modernist" view of Engaged Buddhism as the product of Orientalist bias. Some traditional Buddhists were anti-political for thoughtful and important reasons, reasons that often go unreported amid the contemporary excitement over Engaged Buddhism. We do precolonial Buddhists no favors by silencing their voices to make them more palatable for contemporary activist tastes. There may be precolonial Buddhists who were more enthusiastic about political participation than Śāntideva was, but the voices of anti-political Buddhists like Śāntideva nevertheless matter. (Yarnall, for his part, cites almost no evidence from precolonial Buddhist tradition, thereby giving us little reason to believe that other precolonial Buddhists' views differed from Śāntideva's.)

A "modernist" position, by contrast—of which Christopher Queen is the best known exponent—allows Buddhists like Śāntideva their voice, while respectfully disagreeing with it. A modernist approach to Engaged Buddhism is a conscious modification of the tradition as understood—just as the Mahāyāna was in its day.

A modernist approach also points to analogies between Buddhism and contemporary reinterpretations of other traditions, such as Christian liberation theology. Cabezón has claimed that in the Tibetan liberation movement, “Traditional philosophical speculation and scriptural interpretation are not seen as obstacles to social action, the case with various liberation theologians. Rather, as we have seen, they are perceived as providing the theoretical and spiritual *basis* for action” (311, emphasis Cabezón’s). If my argument here has been sound, then engaged Buddhists may have more to learn from liberation theology than they had previously thought.

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