

Built on Emptiness:  
*Śūnyatā* as a Basis for Mahāyāna Ethics, With References to Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

Students of Western philosophy might find a surprise lurking amidst the wisdom of Buddhist thought. Compared to the European philosophical tradition there seems to be a paucity of ethical frameworks governing right moral action. Where in the works of the Western ethical tradition one finds claims of duty born from ontology and the nature of reality, the range of Buddhist thought on the matter appears to be more practical, far more concerned with action than action-inspiring principles. Where, on the one hand, one finds systematic philosophical treatises, on the other one finds a preponderance of stories, that range from seemingly straight-forward moral instruction to narratives that confront and confuse moral assumptions. While this contrast provides a rich juxtaposition for the comparative discourse, it may obscure the ways that Buddhist ethics is more systematic than it may appear. In the works of several authors in the field, the Mahāyāna concept of *śūnyatā* can be seen to function as the philosophical ground from which a resultant ethics is shaped. It functions in this way by first crafting an ontological framework in which to develop such a system, then defining one's field of ethical concern, and finally by providing a basis for prioritizing ethical responses when conflicts arise.

Within the academic discourse of Buddhist ethics, there exists both the desire to see Buddhist ethics as of a kind with, what we could broadly call the Western philosophical ethical tradition, and also as a unique body of thoughtful consideration, to be seen and analyzed with the conceptual tools native to the tradition itself. "Ours is a motley academic community," Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen write of those studying Buddhist ethics, "that makes appeals both to cross-cultural interpretive perspectives that tend to highlight historical particularity and to universalist analyses that originated historically in the modern West."<sup>1</sup> Hallisey and Hansen voice a challenge to examining Buddhist ethics from within the Western academic tradition that

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen. "Narrative, Sub-ethics, and the Moral Life: Some Evidence from Theravāda Buddhism," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Fall, 1996): 305-327, 305.

those engaging in this discourse do well to keep in mind. It should never be necessary to examine Buddhist ethics through a Western philosophical lens when engaging in analysis, as if that were the only way it could be properly called “ethics;” ethical consideration in Buddhist-influenced philosophies have developed with different assumptions and commitments, which is precisely what makes dialogue and comparison potentially fruitful. However, it might be helpful to consider possible analogues between two disparate traditions in order to better understand functional equivalents. In other words, we should never say that Buddhist ethics must be seen as a subset of the Western tradition, but neither should the tools and methods learned there be entirely off-limits for examining it. And doing so, while keeping the tension in mind that Hallisey and Hansen describe, can enrich the understanding of ethics in the European philosophical tradition and perhaps in the Buddhist tradition as well.

For writers like Barbara Clayton, Stephen E. Harris, and Luis Gómez, who have attempted to ask what foundational principles shape Buddhist ethics, much focus then has been aimed at the Mahāyāna concept of emptiness—*śūnyatā*, in Sanskrit—the fundamental claim of Mahāyāna Buddhism that all phenomena lack inherent existence. While it may appear that reality consists in separate entities—persons, trees, atoms—Mahāyāna Buddhism holds that all of these exist only as subjective imputations, constructions of a perceiving mind. Perhaps not surprisingly then, for outsiders looking in, *śūnyatā* has more often been seen as an impediment to developing an ethical theory than as its impetus. As Gómez points out, the view that beings lack an inherent self has led some to accuse Buddhist thought of leading to nihilism: “There seems to be a radical contradiction between the doctrine of nonself, or, even more, that of emptiness, and any possible moral obligation.”<sup>2</sup> That is, if beings lack an inherent nature, what moral obligations should one

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<sup>2</sup> Luis O. Gómez, “Emptiness and Moral Perfection,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 23 (1973): 362.

have to them? If I myself lack such a nature, and am constantly in flux, what obligations do I have to others? It doesn't take much guile to ask what is to stop one from beating and robbing another, if the ensuing pain is experienced by someone who doesn't really exist. In attempting to derive an ethical foundation from *śūnyatā*, one must address how beings can simultaneously lack any ultimately-defining characteristics and yet be ethically obligated to one another. To ask the question another way, why should anyone care about the empty pain of empty persons?

The answer to this lies, not in examining what is lost in acknowledging *śūnyatā* as a principle, but rather what is realized. While *śūnyatā* reveals the unreality of independent beings wholly defined in and of themselves, it does not reveal the total unreality of beings. In other words, persons and their experiences are not said to lack existence due to *śūnyatā*, but rather to lack ultimate, permanent, unchanging existence. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains, persons, of course, still exist, but are simply understood differently than before: “[T]he self, as with all other phenomena, exists in dependence on the labels and concepts we apply to the term.”<sup>3</sup> Selves exist, not absolutely, but conventionally, defined in relationship to all else in existence.

*Śūnyatā*, then, rather than obviating the relationality that exists between persons, defines it. Instead of leading to nihilism, *śūnyatā* “deepens everything by disclosing the complex foundations upon which all things arise.”<sup>4</sup> The reality of the conventional self, the reality of the “I” experienced by persons, is not what removes the need for ethics in Mahāyāna thought, but what shapes and invigorates it. Luis Gómez answers the critics he earlier voiced, writing of *śūnyatā*: “For what is false here is not the phenomena of interpersonal relations but the notion of

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<sup>3</sup> His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead, 1999), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Dale S. Wright, *The Six Perfections: Buddhism and the Cultivation of Character* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 63.

permanent, graspable entities; and only the first is a necessary condition for ethical values.”<sup>5</sup> And indeed, this reality exists and is valued in Śāntideva’s work as well, as Stephen Harris writes that in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* “[t]he conventional self is not denied; rather it is the false conception of a self *existing* independently of its causes and conditions that is rejected.”<sup>6</sup> Harris wryly notes that one can turn to any verse in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and find Śāntideva assuming the experiences of a conventional selves.<sup>7</sup> And these experiences matter.

The conventional self that the Mahāyāna holds exists, exists in a way that is markedly and fundamentally different from that of individual persons existing independently. Śāntideva uses the analogy of a body with its many parts to describe the inter-relatedness of individual persons: “Just as hands and other limbs / Are thought of as the members of a body, / Can we likewise not consider others / As the limbs and members of a living whole?”<sup>8</sup> In these ways, *śūnyatā* does not disregard the conventional self, it contextualizes it by placing it in a proper, quite different, perspective. The conventionality of this self, that this self has a set of experiences, directs one’s ethical attention toward these selves. That is, a person who is empty of inherent existence, caused by and dependent on all else, nonetheless experiences the world, including its suffering and pain. However, in recognizing the empty nature of phenomena, these experiences are recast. That is, even though suffering, like all phenomena, lacks inherent existence, it becomes the object of one’s attention because it is conventionally experienced by a conventional self. Just as *śūnyatā* does not annihilate but shapes an understanding of selfhood, so too does it contextualize suffering. The empty suffering of empty persons is worth our attention

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<sup>5</sup> Luis O. Gómez, *Emptiness*, 372.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen E. Harris, “Does *Anātman* Rationally Entail Altruism? On *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 8:101-103,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 18, 2011: 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 99n7.

<sup>8</sup> Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, tr. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2006), 8.114.

because empty persons *experience* suffering, and to the one experiencing suffering, suffering appears as real as anything else. In the light of *śūnyatā*, suffering is taken seriously because it is experienced as real.

In recasting the relationship between persons from independently, abutting individuals to interconnected phenomena existing dependently on all else, pain, suffering, and all other ethical concerns are likewise redefined. First, persons and their pain are not dismissed or disregarded. Instead, since it is empty pain experienced by empty persons, the possibility of fruitfully addressing it is a constant presence. Rather than an inevitable part of life, suffering is revealed to be unnecessary and potentially dissolvable. Second, this relievable suffering is universalized. Jay Garfield expresses this succinctly: “[I]t is not the *locus* but the *fact* of suffering that makes it bad.”<sup>9</sup> That is, one’s suffering is no longer one’s own, affecting only that one person or those in their immediate vicinity, but rather any suffering exists among all persons. Again, Jay Garfield:

neither the self nor others, nor the relations of identity or differences among persons, exist ultimately. All are conventional. But that conventional status is not a reason *not* to take suffering seriously. It is, on the other hand, a reason to take *all* suffering seriously.<sup>10</sup>

As the boundaries that define one person from another are dissolved in the light of *śūnyatā* and persons’ identities are seen to be bound up with one another, so too are their pains and sufferings.

*Śūnyatā* leads us to see pain and suffering, and our potential role in dissipating it, in a different light. As persons are recast from individuals to relational conceptions, suffering too becomes unbounded. As Śāntideva writes: “Suffering has no ‘possessor,’ / Therefore no distinctions can be made in it. / Since pain is pain, it is to be dispelled. / What use is there in

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<sup>9</sup> Jay L. Garfield, “Buddhist Ethics in the Context of Conventional Truth: Path and Transformation,” in *Ethics and Emptiness*, The Cowherds (New York: Oxford UP, 2016), 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

drawing boundaries?”<sup>11</sup> In Śāntideva’s reality-revealing poetry, empty suffering is experienced by empty persons needlessly and awaits the attention of one dedicated to alleviating it. Those who see this—the universality and the unnecessary of suffering—and who resolve to dedicate themselves to its dissipation, like Śāntideva, assume the title *bodhisattva*, vowing to act on what they’ve come to see for as many lifetimes as it takes. “[T]he defining intention of a bodhisattva,” writes Barbara Clayton, is “the aim to become a buddha for the sake of all beings. The essence of the bodhisattva’s vow is to remain in saṃsāra working for the welfare of all.”<sup>12</sup> According to her, *śūnyatā* engenders a universalized ethic because pain and suffering is now no longer seen as bounded by any one person, or those in immediate contact, but rather exists among the interdependence that *śūnyatā* reveals.

If *śūnyatā* reveals suffering to be both unnecessary and universal, and if one dedicates herself to working toward its resolution, a question arises: where to begin? If the pain experienced by conventional selves is real enough to merit our attention and effort, how should we prioritize the pain we seek to alleviate? Since it is the pain experienced by conventional beings that we are addressing, what reason is there for one not to prioritize one’s own conventional pain over that of the conventional pain of others? If there is no reason to refrain from doing so, then a *śūnyatā*-shaped ethic fails to distinguish itself from any other ethic based in the existence of selves and self-motivation—and so ceases to be a *śūnyatā*-shaped ethic.

Stephen Harris characterizes the dilemma thusly:

On the one hand, emphasizing the ultimate nonexistence of the self leads us to doubt whether we are obligated to eliminate any suffering whatsoever. On the other hand, emphasizing the importance of conventionally existing selves leads us to prioritize the welfare of our future conventional selves, which are identical

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<sup>11</sup> Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, 8.102.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara R. Clayton, “Śāntideva, Virtue, and Consequentialism,” in *Destroying Māra Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honor Damien Keown*, eds. John Powers and Charles S. Prebish (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2010), 17.

to our current selves.<sup>13</sup>

If a Buddhist ethic is shaped by a deepening understanding of *śūnyatā*, one must answer the question of why pain, or suffering, or behaviors that lead to these, should be considered bad or unethical. If the answer is because of the conventional reality of selves experiencing these things, then one may be justified in abandoning a *śūnyatā*-shaped ethic and adopting a “self-first” outlook, prioritizing one’s own conventional-self well-being over that of others.

The dilemma, for Harris, lies in the fact that Śāntideva is arguing from, not only the level of conventionality, but also of ultimate truth; that is, Śāntideva employs rhetoric from the perspective of the conventional, where pain and suffering are worthy of our attention, and from the perspective of the ultimate, where *śūnyatā* reveals pain and persons to be unreal. A *śūnyatā*-shaped ethic claims that suffering is real enough to merit our efforts to relieve it and, because of the boundless nature of persons in a *śūnyatā*-characterized world, all suffering is equally-worthy of those efforts. That is, because selves who experience pain and suffering are conventionally real, their experience of pain and suffering is conventionally real and so worth alleviating or preventing. But because selves do not ultimately exist, because *śūnyatā* prevents us from seeing delineated selves with unique and bounded experiences of the world, suffering is universalized and cannot be prioritized. If the first is true, that conventionally real selves experience conventionally real pain and that conventionally real pain is worthy of our attention, then it makes sense for one to address one’s own conventionally real pain more urgently than anybody else’s. If the second is true, and there are no persons experiencing pain that is in any sense real, then one is equally justified in ignoring all pain and suffering and a *śūnyatā*-shaped ethic collapses.

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen E. Harris, “*Anātman*,” 103.



Harris sees this dilemma most clearly in some of Śāntideva's most powerful poetry, a part of which appears above. The fuller context reveals Harris's concern:

Continua and gatherings, so-called, / Like garlands and like armies, are unreal. /  
 So there is no one to experience pain / For who is there to be its 'owner'? /  
 Suffering has no 'possessor,' / Therefore no distinctions can be made in it. / Since  
 pain is pain, it is to be dispelled. / What use is there in drawing boundaries? / 'But  
 why dispel the pains of all?' / You cannot argue in this way! / If 'my' pain is  
 removed, so too should that of 'others.' / If theirs is not, then neither should be  
 mine.<sup>14</sup>

There is a stark choice presented by Śāntideva in these lines, Harris claims: "[E]ither we should commit to eliminating all suffering no matter to whom it belongs, or we should stop removing any of it."<sup>15</sup> The difficulty arises because, to take the first option, one must acknowledge the existence and importance of conventional selves, but in so doing one must deny their existence in order to see the pain of all as equally worthy of attention. And if conventional selves do not exist, or exist but do not suffer or hurt in such a way as to merit our attention, then there is no reason to address any pain at all.

Barbara Clayton may provide a way to see through this dilemma. Often in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva argues from the position of an agent-neutral ethic, an ethic which holds that "what is good for the goose is good for all ganders."<sup>16</sup> She sees such an ethic exemplified in verses such as "Strive at first to meditate / Upon the sameness of yourself and other. / In joy and sorrow all are equal."<sup>17</sup> However, Clayton points out, Śāntideva elsewhere seems to jettison this value when it comes to bodhisattvas: "And anyone who, for a single instant, / Halts the merit of a Bodhisattva / Wanders endlessly in evil states, / Because the

<sup>14</sup> Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, 8.101-103.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen E. Harris, "Anātman," 101.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara R. Clayton, "Śāntideva," 18.

<sup>17</sup> Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, 8.90.

welfare of all beings is reduced.”<sup>18</sup> This priority is evident elsewhere in writings attributed to Śāntideva as well.<sup>19</sup>

These verses seem to point away from an agent-neutral ethic, and toward some basis for justifiably prioritizing some suffering, though not necessarily one’s own, over the suffering of others. Clayton explains that for Śāntideva,

“one who has taken the bodhisattva vow is morally more significant than one who has not because the bodhisattva has taken on the task of aiding all sentient beings. [...] This implies that bodhisattvas as moral agents are ‘worth more’ than ordinary beings and their actions and actions with regard to them have more weighty consequences.”

Such a hierarchy at first seems counterintuitive. In a world where conventional selves are, in the same ways, intrinsically bound with one another and defined in an interconnected, *śūnyatā*-shaped understanding of reality, that an ethic derived from this view should prioritize some over others at first seems counter-intuitive. Recall, however, that the acknowledgement of the experiences of conventional selves is not the basis for developing an ethic, but is to the basis to be concerned with empty pain of empty persons. It is because beings *experience* suffering that suffering is worth our efforts to address and prevent with an ethical system. And because suffering is not contained by bounded individuals, but instead is shared by all interconnected beings, the suffering which is to be addressed is universalized. Suffering, then, is the impetus for developing a *śūnyatā*-shaped ethic. Such an ethic would be shaped by the desire to address and alleviate as much suffering for as many of the conventionally real persons who are experiencing it as is possible.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4.9.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara R. Clayton, “Śāntideva,” 20.

A *śūnyatā*-shaped ethic, then, is not agent-neutral because it is not based on the existence of agents in the way that a European philosophical ethic is based in the inherent existence of individuals. If the goal of such an ethic were to enshrine the rights of individuals, say, based on the ultimate and inherent nature of each individual, agent-neutrality would be demanded. But if the goal is to alleviate and prevent as much suffering as possible, suffering which exists universally, agent-neutrality is not necessary. Clayton summarizes:

So the heartmind of an awake being should be impartial: a Buddha cares for the welfare of all beings equally, and this is why the ethic is impartial and universalist. But Śāntideva's views also suggest that the welfare of a bodhisattva who is dedicated to becoming such a being should sometimes be privileged in the interest of all of those beings who will ultimately be helped when the bodhisattva succeeds.<sup>20</sup>

Clayton calls this system universalist consequentialism, because it is the consequences that affect all beings everywhere that is taken into consideration and not simply the consequences that affect any given individuals.<sup>21</sup> One is justified in prioritizing a bodhisattva's suffering over that of others because, in so doing, one assumes that universal suffering will be more effectively addressed.

In addressing his posed dilemma, Harris analyzes Mark Siderits to say that pain exists impersonally, within and without the conventional boundaries between persons, since those boundaries are themselves unreal; however, the concept of a conventional understanding of self can become a "useful fiction to maximize removal of pain."<sup>22</sup> Harris is cautious toward this view, claiming that a conventional understanding of selves is not actually a useful fiction but the very source of so much of what Buddhism characterizes as suffering.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara R. Clayton, "Śāntideva," 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen E. Harris, "*Anātman*," 105.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106.

However, it is the modifier “conventional” in Siderits’ understanding of selfhood that allows such a conception to be useful and distinguishes it from the understanding of self that leads to such suffering. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “It is not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not.”<sup>24</sup> That is, it is not any conception of selfhood at all that causes the suffering; it is the conception of a permanent, fixed, independent selfhood. Distinguishing that misconception from the “useful fiction” of Siderits is key. Such a distinction allows a conventional self to legitimize suffering as being worthy of efforts to minimize and address it without endowing such a self with the ultimacy that prevents one from seeing suffering as universalized. How then should such a “useful fiction” address suffering? In such a way as to minimize as much universal suffering, which has no single possessor, as is possible.

An ethic shaped by the characterization of reality as *śūnyatā* is an ethic which is not based on the existence of individual, independent selves. Rather, it is an ethic based on the experiences of conventionally real persons, who experience conventionally real suffering, and who deserve to have their suffering addressed, alleviated, and/or prevented. It is an ethic which engenders compassion by disrupting the lines that erroneously define the boundaries between people and so universalizes suffering as a concern for all of us. Finally, it is an ethic that, not being based in the existence of individual, independent selves, has no need to be agent-neutral but can be organized through on a unique priority: the alleviation of unnecessary suffering. In these ways, a systematic ethic operating within Buddhism can be said to be derived from concept of *śūnyatā*.

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<sup>24</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching* (New York: Broadway, 1998), 132.

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