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ŚĀNTIDEVA

THE BODHICARYĀVATĀRA

A Guide to the Buddhist Path to Awakening

Translated with Introductions and Notes by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton

With a General Introduction by Paul Williams

Written in India in the early eighth century AD, Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* became one of the most popular accounts of the Buddhist spiritual path.

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* takes as its subject the profound desire to become a Buddha and save all beings from suffering. The person who enacts such a desire is a Bodhisattva. Śāntideva not only sets out what the Bodhisattva must do and become, he also invokes the intense feelings of aspiration which underlie such a commitment, using language which has inspired Buddhists from his time to the present.

Important as a manual of training among Mahāyāna Buddhists, especially in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is still used by modern Buddhist teachers.

• INTRODUCTIONS • NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION • BIBLIOGRAPHY
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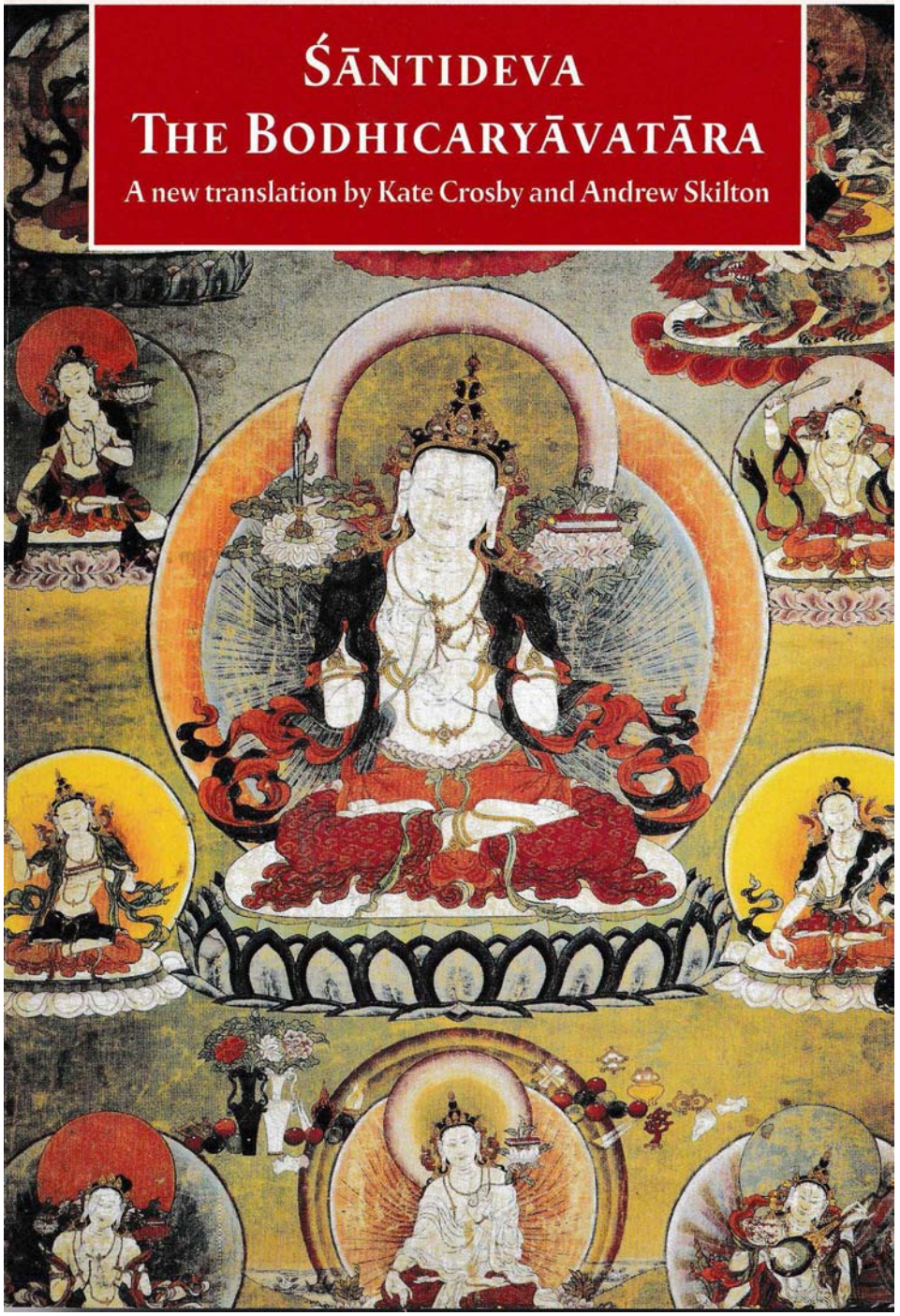

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THE BODHICARYĀVATĀRA

ŚĀNTIDEVA was an Indian Buddhist monk, a scholar, philosopher, and talented Sanskrit poet. He may have lived sometime between 685 and 763 CE. Apart from that we have no reliable information concerning his life story. As he had written so movingly of the spiritual path, however, and perhaps also through hazy memories of a person of real spirituality, legends of his life developed in the centuries after his death. According to these, he was born a crown prince. He fled royal consecration to adopt the religious life, meditating particularly on the Buddhist 'patron saint' of wisdom, Mañjuśrī. Having received visions and teachings from Mañjuśrī in person, Śāntideva became an effective minister to a king, showing by a miracle that behind his ordinary appearance he was really a powerful spiritual figure. He subsequently became a fully-ordained monk at the great monastic university of Nālandā, and while there, although he appeared to be thoroughly lazy, really he reached a very high level of the spiritual path. After delivering his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* before the monastic assembly, Śāntideva disappeared into the sky. He is sometimes said to have reappeared elsewhere in India and to have lived as a hermit and wanderer, doing good, defeating religious rivals in debate, and performing miracles. Always, it is said, he worked to fulfil his spiritual vows to act for the benefit of others in every possible way. Of his death nothing is known. Śāntideva fades out of legend, but many Buddhists are sure he is still present in some appropriate form, continuing to labour for others as he vowed to do 'as long as space abides and as long as the world abides'.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION: ŚĀNTIDEVA AND HIS WORLD

The author

IT is natural to want to know a little about the author of a great work of literature, and a work of spirituality perhaps more than most others stimulates curiosity about what the author was really like, and the inner struggles which led to his or her profundity. We want to know of the author as an individual, and in this post-Freudian world perhaps we hope to see behind the wisdom to a tortured soul. Traditionally in India—and Tibet too, where Indian Buddhist ideals were and still are so important—this search for the individual apart from the profundity, this fascination for the psychological truth, the real spiritual agony, is rather alien, and psychological truth is thought to be a matter between the pupil and his or her spiritual master, not of concern to the public. Indian and Tibetan commentators sometimes recognize an interest in the life of an author, but his life story (the author is almost always male) is told in order to show his greatness, his almost superhuman miracles and spiritual attainments, to prove that his work and teaching can be trusted to lead to spiritual depths, and, of course, to justify the commentary. Thus we learn almost nothing about the author as a psychological individual, a real person. He is a type, an example of attainment, and his life a story of prediction, visions, triumphs, and magic. Learning, for such great examples, is straightforward and easy. There are no psychological torments, for most of the learning had been completed in previous lives and the torments, if there were any, overcome aeons ago. A recurrent theme in these life stories is how the author was taken by others to be a mere ordinary person before circumstances showed that actually, usually from a very early age if not from birth, he was a Great Being of wondrous attainment.

So it is with the traditional story of Śāntideva. Even the earliest version we possess is hundreds of years later than the life of its subject, and is already a completely legendary

hagiography.[1] It is quite possible that the story involves an amalgamation of two different persons, and even the claim that Śāntideva was a prince from North India who fled royal consecration for fear of implication in the evils of kingship repeats a traditional Buddhist theme and has no independent corroboration. Śāntideva is generally thought to have flourished some time between 685 and 763 CE, although the reasoning behind this dating is by no means conclusive. It is as certain as it can be, however, that Śāntideva was a Buddhist monk, who followed the Mahāyāna form of Buddhism, and it is possible if we can follow the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* itself that Śāntideva was particularly devoted to Mañjuśrī (or Mañjughoṣa), a 'celestial' figure who in Mahāyāna Buddhism plays a role rather like a god—or patron saint—of wisdom.[2] Śāntideva is associated with the great Buddhist monastery of Nālandā, the impressive ruins of which can still be seen in the state of Bihar in North India and bear fitting testimony to an enormous monastic university which was the pride of the Buddhist world, visited by scholar-monks and pilgrims from as far away as China. We know that Śāntideva was extremely learned. His other great work, the *Śikṣā Samuccaya*, consists in the main of quotations from nearly a hundred Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures (*sūtras*). Śāntideva must have had access to a large library—and used it. The ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the difficult chapter on Wisdom, is one of the principal sources for Mahāyāna philosophy, written in the form of a complex debate which must echo the debates which took place in the refined scholastic context of Nālandā university.

We know so little of Śāntideva, and yet the depth and spiritual profundity of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*—for sentiment, intention, and direct practical meditation one of the greatest works of world spirituality—indicate a person of rich compassion, honesty, humility, and wisdom, surely the qualities which make a

[1] For a modern retelling, based on the standard Tibetan sources, see Lobsang N. Tsonawa (trans.), *Indian Buddhist Pandits from 'The Jewel Garland of Buddhist History'* (Dharamsala, 1985), 60–4.

[2] Although it should be noted that there is a problem as to how much of the present text of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was contained in the original. The second, ninth, and tenth chapters have all had their detractors, and all the versions of Śāntideva's life mention disagreements as to the length of the work.

saint. It is the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* which supplies the ideals and practice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who so frequently cites as his highest inspiration *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 10.55:

> As long as space abides and as long as the world abides, so long may I abide, destroying the sufferings of the world.

There can perhaps be no higher human sentiment. Anyway, this is the aspiration of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and it is also the aspiration of Śāntideva, as a Buddhist monk trying to live the Mahāyāna vision, and of those many since him—famous and ordinary—who have seen in his words the most beautiful expression of their noblest ideals and intentions.

It would be pointless to try and demythologize the traditional Life of Śāntideva in order to find some historical core. Yet throughout the story of his life there is a recurrent theme in which he appears to be quite ordinary, quite mundane, although actually a figure of immense spiritual development. One such story relates to the origins of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* itself. In the version known to Tibetans and their followers who still practise the religion of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (this is itself a corrupted version of our earliest legendary account), the story goes that Śāntideva—although he was an advanced practitioner who had visions of Mañjuśrī and received direct teachings from him—seemed to the other monks simply to laze around doing nothing, as Tibetans like to put it, with one of their infectious laughs, 'just eating, sleeping, and defecating'. The other monks decided to humiliate him by showing his lack of learning, and asked him to give a recitation before the monastery from the scriptures. Śāntideva initially refused, but assented when they insisted and agreed to erect a teaching-seat for him to sit on. The first stage of the humiliation was to erect the seat so high that he could not reach it. One can imagine the monks whispering and giggling as he approached, but it is said that with one hand—plus the magical powers which seem to descend on saints—he lowered the seat, sat on it, and asked what they wanted him to recite, something old or something new. At the request for something new he began to recite the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. When he reached Chapter 9 (perhaps it was verse 34) it is said that he ascended into the air and disappeared, although his voice could still be

heard. Śāntideva then refused to return to a monastery which had not understood that spiritual depth may not always be obvious, and that we can never tell who may or may not be saints working in their own way for the benefit of others.

Appearing to be ordinary when actually one is a saint, extraordinary—this admittedly is a common theme in Buddhist hagiographies. Yet perhaps we can combine it with the message of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* itself in order to glimpse through the mists of devotion the real Śāntideva, a Śāntideva who for all his learning appeared to be an ordinary monk and yet in his humility, wisdom, and compassionate warmth to those who knew him showed an inner development which maybe some guessed but few really understood.[3] We need not believe that Śāntideva disappeared into the sky, although he may well have had visions of Mañjuśrī; nor that the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was delivered spontaneously on a throne before the assembled monks of Nālandā, assembled to humiliate him. We can believe, however, that while he did not appear to be anything special to his fellow monks, in trying with all honesty to practise genuinely the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism that he found in the scriptures cited in his earlier *Śikṣā Samuccaya* he became something very special, and the record of that practice—his aspirations, intentions, and meditations—is the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* itself, a testimony to its author's greatness not only as a poet, not only in spiritual sentiment, but in making these teachings real.[4]

Buddhism and Mahāyāna

Śāntideva was a monk, and a Mahāyāna Buddhist. As a monk he was expected to live a simple life which, in the reduction of

[3] According to our traditional Tibetan story, Śāntideva's *Śikṣā Samuccaya* was among works found on a shelf in his room after he had left. It was no doubt compiled for the use of himself, plus perhaps a few like-minded friends. That same humility, I suspect, surrounded the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

[4] Although it is the traditional view, there is no compelling evidence that the *Śikṣā Samuccaya* was written before the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Nevertheless those early writers who considered it was had their reasons and we have no reasons for thinking that it was not. I prefer it on aesthetic grounds. I like to think of Śāntideva composing his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* while trying to practise the life he found in the scriptures through constructing his *Śikṣā Samuccaya*.

distractions, left space for following the spiritual path. He probably wore an orange or faded yellow patched robe, and had no hair. It is doubtful, if he came from the well-endowed monastery of Nālandā, that Śāntideva needed to go to local villages on the alms-round, but if he had he would have kept his eyes down and spoken little. When he did speak he would have weighed his words carefully in order to make sure that they were suitable to the occasion and beneficial for the person to whom they were addressed (see *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 5.79). He would have kept his simple, sparsely furnished room tidy and clean, seeing the cleaning as part of his spiritual practice, a metaphor for cleaning the mind of taints. In one corner we can imagine a shrine, with a statue of the Buddha, and for Śāntideva perhaps a statue or representation of Mañjuśrī. Possibly, as is common with Tibetan statues, Mañjuśrī is portrayed seated cross-legged on a lotus throne with the right hand holding aloft a flaming sword, the Sword of Gnosis, while the left hand holds the stem of a lotus which curls round to the left side of his body and contains, resting on the flower, a book—the *Eight-Thousand Verse Perfection of Wisdom* scripture.[5] Śāntideva would sleep little, eat but one meal a day, and as a serious practitioner devote many hours to study, teaching, perhaps debate, but certainly devotional practices—making offerings before the Buddhas and figures like Mañjuśrī and visualizing the assembly of Buddhas, holy beings, and saints, praising them as a means of recollecting their great qualities and aspiring to attain the same qualities—and meditation, stabilizing the mind, contemplating the teachings, regret and purification of previous transgressions, all the time increasing his insight into the way things really are, and his aspiration to help all other suffering sentient beings.

The Mahāyāna Buddhism which Śāntideva practised was the result of a gradual evolution, a maturation of reflection on the message and example of Śākyamuni Buddha, the so-called 'historical Buddha' who lived and died sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. Modern critical scholarship has shown that it is not possible to know very much in detail about the

[5] Although as far as I know no such representation of Mañjuśrī has yet been found in India from as early as the supposed lifetime of Śāntideva.

actual words of Śākyamuni, although we can be reasonably clear about the sort of spiritual perspective and path the Buddha advocated.[6] In social terms Śākyamuni was a renunciant, one of those who can still be seen in India today who have chosen to renounce their families, social status, and ties in order to live a wandering life seeking for a higher truth than that of social place and function. This truth is commonly portrayed as the truth which leads to freedom from all sorts of suffering and, in the Indian context, from the round of repeated rebirth into still further repeated unhappiness—as Buddhists put it, the endlessly repeated anguish of old age, sickness, and death, the state of unenlightenment (*saṃsāra*). As far as we can tell, Śākyamuni's message in its simplest expression was that of a very deep sort of 'letting go'. He seems to have discerned that most—he would say all—of our unhappiness and frustration comes from holding on, reifying, when actually things are always changing. Seeking for a raft in the sea of change, we particularly grasp at some sort of self-identity for ourselves. To hold onto all such unchanging self-identities is a fundamental misapprehension which ends in tears. Ourselves and others, animate and inanimate, are composite collections which come together and part again bringing life and death, purpose and apparent uselessness. That is the nature of things, against which we fortify ourselves through the misapprehension of grasping an unchanging identity which is at variance with the way things really are and thus invariably produces suffering. The principal dimension of this misapprehension is reifying ourselves into Selves, the feeling that somehow I must have an unchanging core which is the 'Real Me'. Thus, unlike other spiritual teachers in India, the Buddha did not teach the search for the True Self behind the changing world, but rather the opposite: he taught that there is no True Self either in or behind the changing world, and grasping at such Selves is the cause of suffering. The permanent truth is that there is no such thing. To seek to dissolve away apparent unities into their constituent flow of parts is a hallmark of the Buddhist approach. Thus, as far as we can tell, the Buddha seems to have taught that what we call ourselves is actually a construct super-

[6] For an excellent short study see Michael Carrithers, *The Buddha* (Oxford, 1983).

imposed upon an ever-changing flow of physical matter, sensations, conceptions, further mental contents such as volitions and so on, and consciousness. That is all there is. There is no unchanging Me, my Self. To understand this deeply in a way which truly leads to the cessation of grasping after all fixed identities is to destroy completely the very forces which lead to continued embodiment, rebirth into suffering. That is enlightenment, *nirvāṇa*.

The practice of the Buddha and those specially adept monks and nuns who followed him in the centuries after his death was 'insight', seeing through deep thought—meditation—beyond the way things appear to the way they really are. This seeing the way things really are (a common epithet of *nirvāṇa*) carries with it a change of behaviour, a letting go, an 'existential relaxation', a cessation of grasping. This relaxation and cessation of grasping can when cultivated in a particularly sensitive way lead to great compassion, a compassion which no longer has any egoistic involvement. Such great compassion for those who still suffer was thought to be a quality of the Buddha himself, who did not sit alone in a forest meditating and 'letting go' but rather felt a need to help others, touring North India, teaching in forests, certainly, but also in market-places and palaces.

Reflection on the compassion of the Buddha was surely one (but only one) of the factors which led some centuries after his death to the emergence of scriptural texts claiming to represent a 'Great Way (or Vehicle) to Enlightenment' (Mahāyāna), eventually to be contrasted with an identified 'Inferior Way' (Hīnayāna). These scriptural texts purported to be the words of Śākyamuni Buddha himself. The origins of the Mahāyāna, and even its exact nature, are obscure in the extreme. Mahāyāna could not be called a 'sect' of Buddhism, nor, we now know, was it the result of a schism. There might be monks holding to Mahāyāna ideas and others holding non-Mahāyāna views living together, as far as we can tell, quite harmoniously in the same monastery.[7] Rather, Mahāyāna concerns a vision of what the ultimate intention of the Buddhist practitioner should be. In

[7] There is no space to deal here with the fascinating and hotly-debated issues surrounding the historical origins of the Mahāyāna. For an extensive discussion see my *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London, 1989), ch. 1.

Mahāyāna this ultimate intention is said to be to attain not just enlightenment, as some Buddhists might think—one's own freedom from suffering and rebirth—but perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. One who has through great compassion for others taken a vow to attain this Buddhahood no matter what it may cost, no matter how many times one must be reborn on this long and difficult path, is called a *bodhisattva*.[8] Mahāyāna advocates the path of the bodhisattva as the highest and final path for all or most sentient beings—all (or most) will eventually become fully-enlightened Buddhas, and the reason for this is the benefit of all.

Perhaps the best way to understand the nature of Mahāyāna Buddhism is through its own self-definition reflected in a work from three centuries after Śāntideva, the *Bodhipathapradīpa* (*Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment*) by the great missionary to Tibet, Atiśa (982–1054). Atiśa speaks of three 'scopes', three aspirations which one might have when engaging in spiritual practice. The first and lowest aspiration is that of a person whose goal is purely within the realm of unenlightenment—religion for wealth, fame, or even a favourable future rebirth. This aspiration—if they were honest the aspiration of so many people—is not particularly Buddhist, although at least in its higher concern with future rebirths it is somewhat better than having no spiritual aspiration whatsoever. In some of the earlier sections of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* Śāntideva seeks to generate in himself (and his readers if they are interested) this aspiration, reflecting for example on death and impermanence, which leads to a concern with future lives (Chapter 4) governed by the morality of actions and a need to purify misdeeds already committed (Chapter 2, verses 28 ff.). According to Atiśa the second and middling aspiration is that of one who turns his or her back on all concern with future pleasures and future rebirths (with their invariable attendant sufferings) and aims for freedom. The

[8] An expression perhaps meaning an 'enlightenment being' or, with the Tibetan, an 'enlightenment mind hero'. The name of Śāntideva's great work, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, means 'An Introduction (*avatāra*) to the Conduct (*caryā*) which leads to Enlightenment (*bodhi*)'. There is some reason to think that the original title may have been *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, 'An Introduction to the Conduct of the Bodhisattva'.

hallmark of this aspiration is renunciation, and the goal is enlightenment, understood as freedom from suffering and rebirth. The many verses in which Śāntideva tries to inculcate in his mind a spirit of renunciation belong to this scope. It is a stage of a progressive path which involves an accurate assessment of the practitioner's level of spiritual development, and transformation into that which is higher through meditations, which are taken as medicines appropriate to the particular spiritual illness. Thus Śāntideva's many verses on the foulness of the female body (Chapter 8), a foulness which he also perceives in his own body, should not be read as a strange form of misogyny or bodily hatred. They express a specific meditation practice appropriate to a specific stage on a clearly-discerned spiritual path. It is misleading in reading Buddhist writings—or indeed any writings on the spiritual path—to take what is intended as counselling, meditation instructions embedded in a particular context, as abstract statements about the universal way things actually are.

In following this second middling scope the practitioner can attain freedom from rebirth, enlightenment. Such a person is called an *arhat*, a Worthy One. The goal is held to be a difficult one requiring intensive practice and great insight which will fuel the letting go, the deep renunciation which leads to freedom. Perhaps this was the main concern of serious Buddhist practitioners in the immediate centuries after the death of the Buddha. Yet from the Mahāyāna perspective, no matter how many of their fellows follow it, this is not the highest goal and its aspiration is not the supreme aspiration. There is something higher than simply attaining enlightenment, the state of an arhat, and that is the state of a Buddha himself. What characterizes a Buddha, the Mahāyāna urges, is not just great insight, supreme wisdom, but his (or sometimes her) immense compassion as well. Compassion for others is missing in the description of the second scope which leads to the enlightenment of the arhat. Atiśa adds that those of the third and highest scope wish in every way—even by means of their own sufferings—for the complete destruction of all the sufferings of others.[9] In fact, so

[9] For a translation of Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpa*, with a commentary attributed to Atiśa himself, see Richard Sherburne, SJ, *Atīśa: A Lamp for the Path and Commentary* (London, 1983).

long as someone else is suffering the Mahāyāna practitioner cannot attain peace. Superior to the arhat is the bodhisattva, one who vows to attain perfect Buddhahood, the perfection of insight and compassion, for the benefit of all. The great poem of the bodhisattva, embedded within a progressive path which will lead to the cultivation of that supreme aspiration, is the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, in which Śāntideva the bodhisattva vows (3.7):

> I am medicine for the sick. May I be both the doctor and their nurse, until the sickness does not recur.

Those Buddhists who follow the path to their own personal enlightenment—sometimes called the Hearers (*śrāvakas*) and Solitary Buddhas (*pratyekabuddhas*)—are termed by the Mahāyāna followers of an Inferior Vehicle (Hīnayāna). In the last analysis Śāntideva's concern is to help himself and others pass through (but without ignoring) this conception of the spiritual life towards what he sees as the great integration of insight, wisdom, and compassion which is found in the bodhisattva and eventually flowers in full Buddhahood. In aiming for Buddhahood the bodhisattva turns away from his or her own personal peace, the *nirvāṇa* of an arhat.[10] Indeed from a Buddhist point of view time is infinite, and from a Mahāyāna perspective compassion is so strong that surely there must also be many, infinitely many, Buddhas still present in the infinite cosmos, and many advanced bodhisattvas of great power, all acting for the benefit of others. For the follower of Mahāyāna a being such as a Buddha would not really have abandoned us at the age of eighty, as Śākyamuni Buddha is supposed to have done. The death of a Buddha is mere appearance. Really Buddhas remain, benefiting sentient beings (not just human beings) in innumerable appropriate ways. Thus some Mahāyāna texts speak of a Buddha having three types of body: his (or her) actual body as a Buddha which remains in what is called a 'Pure Land', a realm where a Buddha sits in glory helping sentient beings; his emanated bodies—one of which was the Śākyamuni Buddha who appeared

[10] Let me stress here very strongly that it seems clear to me the bodhisattva does not, as books often have it, *postpone* nirvāṇa. A little thought would show that this is incoherent. See Williams, 1989, 52–4.

to die at the age of eighty; and the 'Dharma-body', another name for the ultimate truth itself as perfectly understood by a Buddha (see 1.1).[11] It is therefore felt to be possible to enter into a relationship of devotion and prayer with these Buddhas, and also with advanced bodhisattvas. One such advanced bodhisattva who may well have been particularly important to Śāntideva is Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom.[12] But—and this is important—in terms of the Mahāyāna spiritual path the real purpose of such prayer and devotion (found, for example, in *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 2.1–27) is the transformation of the mind of the devotee towards greater wisdom and compassion. It is helpful for us in reading Buddhist texts, in meeting their strangeness, to be constantly sensitive to the practical context: 'How does this perspective, or this practice, transform the mind of the practitioner in a way which Buddhists would see as beneficial—the cultivation of wisdom and compassion?'

The bodhisattva

Thus in terms of Mahāyāna self-understanding, to follow the Mahāyāna is not a matter of robes, philosophies, or sectarian traditions and differences. It concerns the deep motivation for leading a spiritual life. One who follows the Mahāyāna is a bodhisattva, or truly aspires to be a bodhisattva. Śāntideva has a clear idea of what a bodhisattva is, and of those meditation practices which can lead to the development of that supreme aspiration. A bodhisattva is one who has generated the 'Awakening Mind' (*bodhicitta*), that astonishingly rare but totally transformative intention to work solely for the benefit of others right up to Buddhahood, the full development of one's own potential.[13] Śāntideva's hymn to the power and significance of this supremely altruistic intention opens the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, and its implications are contained in the vow of 10.55 quoted

[11] On the bodies of the Buddha see Williams, op. cit.

[12] For the names of others see in particular *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Chs. 2 and 10. Alongside Mañjuśrī the most important is Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva held in particular to personify compassion.

[13] The emphasis and praise given to the Awakening Mind remind one sometimes of the conversion experience in certain forms of Protestant Christianity.

above—always on the Dalai Lama's lips—with which Śāntideva ends his great poem. With a characteristically Buddhist love of classification, Śāntideva refers in general to two types of Awakening Mind (1.15–16). The one, termed 'the Mind resolved on Awakening', is like someone really wishing to go on a journey, really wishing from the depths of one's heart to follow the path of a bodhisattva. The 'Mind proceeding towards Awakening' is actually embarking on the long and difficult path of insight and altruism, the Mahāyāna journey. Thus one who truly wishes to be an active and altruistic bodhisattva can also be said to have the Awakening Mind—to *be* a bodhisattva—albeit in a derived and lesser sense.

Tibetan writers have developed a number of meditations intended to generate this supreme aspiration, and one of these meditations is particularly associated with the eighth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the chapter in which Śāntideva gives specific instruction on meditation practices said to lead to the 'perfection of meditative absorption'. This meditation is called 'exchanging self and others'.[14] Śāntideva makes it clear that such meditations presuppose that the practitioner lives in solitary, undistracted retreat, and he offers reflections intended to enhance the necessary spirit of renunciation (8.1–89). After that, he urges that we meditate on the essential equality of ourselves and others in that we all have one fundamental quality in common: we all wish for happiness and the avoidance of suffering. In this fundamental respect we are all equal, and feelings of favouritism or repulsion are, it is argued, the result of relatively unimportant adventitious factors—a particular person was nice to me, another harmed me, and so on. To reflect that others, no matter how much I may dislike them, are just like me, and in their confused manner like me simply want to be happy, is an interesting way to cut through the complexities of life and their many barriers and boundaries. It is, Śāntideva argues, the identification of certain sufferings as 'mine' which causes me such problems. This sense of 'I' brings about a perception of inequal-

[14] See here also the handy commentary by His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama, *Āryaśūra's Aspiration and A Meditation on Compassion* (Dharamsala, 1979), 122–43.

ity between self and others which actually causes a great deal of unhappiness. In reality:

> All those who suffer in the world do so because of their desire for their own happiness. All those happy in the world are so because of their desire for the happiness of others. (8.129)

Śāntideva holds anyway that there is in reality no enduring entity to which the term 'I' corresponds: it is simply an imposition upon an ever-changing flow of psycho-physical elements (8.101–2; cf. also Chapter 9). The notion that certain pleasures or sufferings are somehow more important because they are *mine* has no grounds in reality and is beneficial neither for myself nor others (8.92 ff.).

Having generated a sense of equality between oneself and others, the next stage in this meditation is to reflect that while I am one, others are infinite. In terms of the previous meditation, since I am no more important than others, in aggregate others are infinitely more important than I am. The rational person who has abandoned prejudices of egoism will thus exchange self and others, that is, will always place others before oneself. Śāntideva states (8.105):

> If the suffering of one ends the suffering of many, then one who has compassion for others and himself must cause that suffering to arise.

Thus through deeply meditating in this way the practitioners can begin to replace their own strong self-concern, which is actually the cause of unhappiness, with a pure altruism which turns out—in an unintended way—to be the fulfilment of their own aspirations as well. Thereby the meditator generates the Awakening Mind. In aiming for full Buddhahood as the perfection of wisdom and compassion, the supreme state most completely suitable for benefiting others, the bodhisattva also finds his or her own (unintended) fulfilment. The very being of the bodhisattva is the welfare of others. That, it is argued, is the only source of true happiness. The Dalai Lama has summarized the essence of the whole *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and indeed all of Mahāyāna Buddhism when he states: '"The only purpose of my existence is to be used by others and to serve others". This idea,

this attitude, this determination must arise from the depths of one's heart, from the very depths of one's mind.'[15] And elsewhere:

> We should have this [compassion] from the depths of our heart, as if it were nailed there. Such compassion is not merely concerned with a few sentient beings such as friends and relatives, but extends up to the limits of the cosmos, in all directions and towards all beings throughout space.[16]

Wisdom

There is no denying that *Bodhicaryāvatāra* Chapter 9 presents a problem. It is not properly understandable (if at all) without a commentary and a great deal of thought and study.[17] Scholars keenly debate verses and even half-verses of the text. For those lacking the perverse intellectual masochism of scholars and monks the details are scarcely crucial or helpful. Chapter 9 concerns insight or wisdom (*prajñā*), and wisdom in this context refers to an understanding of the way things really are, the ultimate truth. For Śāntideva and Indian Buddhists like him who follow what is known as the Madhyamaka ('Middling') school or approach to Buddhist philosophy, understanding that liberating ultimate truth is not a matter of waiting for some sort of mystical influx or sudden overwhelming vision. The ultimate truth is seen as what

[15] *Āryaśūra's Aspiration*, 140. [16] Ibid. 111.

[17] There are a number of commentaries reasonably easily available in English. Most reflect the influence of the dGe lugs (pronounced Geluk) school of Tibetan Buddhism, and are based on the Tibetan version. (i) The translation of Ch. 9 with onrunning excerpts from a classical Tibetan commentary: Shantideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, trans. Stephen Batchelor (Dharamsala, 1979). Also contains the verses of the other chapters, from the Tibetan. (ii) Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Meaningful to Behold*, trans. Tenzin Norbu (London, 1986). This is a commentary to the whole of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. (iii) H.H. the Dalai Lama, *Transcendent Wisdom*, trans. B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, NY, 1988). Based on an oral commentary given to Ch. 9 alone. There is also a short oral commentary by the Dalai Lama to the whole text: *A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston, 1994). Another oral commentary by the Dalai Lama to Ch. 9 is *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston, 1997). (iv) Two commentaries by Khenchen Kunzang Palden and Minyak Kunzang Sönam, *Wisdom: Two Buddhist Commentaries*, trans. by the Padmakara Translation Group (Peyzac-le-Moustier, 1993). For a background commentary see Williams, 1989, chs. 2–4

is ultimately true about things, and it can only be understood through investigating things in order to find out what is the case. Thus although he is a poet of great spiritual sensitivity, Śāntideva does not see the poetic and intuitive, spiritual faculty as in some way opposed to sharp, incisive analytic thought. Since the Buddhahood which the bodhisattva strives for is the perfection of wisdom and compassion, it must employ to the full and stretch to their limit both the nurturing warmth which expresses compassion and a deep understanding which results from the sharp critical investigation that leads to insight. In the bodhisattva not only must both compassion and insight be developed fully, but they must be integrated into one spiritual being who acts most effectively for the benefit of all sentient beings.

In Western thought the idea that the rational and analytic is diametrically opposed to the spiritual and intuitive goes back many hundreds of years and is often accepted uncritically in contemporary writing (particularly writing associated with the so-called 'New Age'). This perhaps explains the shock many people feel when, lulled by happy sentiments of compassion, they reach the ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and are required to engage their brains in philosophical analysis. Yet Śāntideva states that all that has gone before served as a preliminary to this analysis and the integration of the results of analysis into one's being (9.1). We have already seen that implicit in the very origins of the Buddhist perspective was a distinction between the way things appear to be (things appear to have an enduring permanent or quasi-permanent identity, a 'self'), and the way they really are. Things are not the way they appear to be. Actually—as a little reflective thought will show—things are changing all the time. In particular I, a sentient being, am not really the same as I was ten years ago, last year, yesterday, or even a minute ago. I can investigate my own nature and discover, it is claimed, that I am no more than an ever-changing flow of physical matter, sensations, conceptions, further mental contents such as volitions and so on, and consciousness ('the aggregates'). I come to know this through investigation, not through simply believing it is so because I have been told, or waiting for it to dawn upon me out of my psychological depths.

The more I become familiar in a very deep way through meditation with the difference between the way things appear and the way they are discovered actually to be, the more deeply that actuality affects my behaviour. I begin to 'let go', to relax, to put things in perspective. Out of insight I become wise. This distinction between the way things appear to be and the way they really are is behind the distinction made by Śāntideva in *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.2 concerning the ultimate and conventional truth. The ultimate truth is what is discovered at some stage, through sharp analysis, to be finally, ultimately the case concerning things. There is some debate among later Tibetan commentators concerning what exactly is the conventional truth, but in general we can think of it as the things themselves. Thus the ultimate truth is what is ultimately true about the conventional truth. Or, to use a concrete example, the ultimate truth of a chair is what is ultimately true about the chair. Since conventional objects are plural, we can thus speak more accurately of conventional *truths*, and since ultimate truth is about conventional truths we can also speak in the plural about ultimate *truths*.

But what, for Śāntideva, is an ultimate truth? The answer is that it is called an 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*), and only emptinesses are ultimate truths. An emptiness for Śāntideva and his Madhyamaka tradition is a very specific sort of negation. Things appear to exist in a particular sort of way. It is claimed that things appear to us unenlightened beings to exist as if they have independent, fixed, inherent existence—the sort of existence things would have if their existence were completely contained within themselves, if they existed not as the result of some sort of combination of components or some other causal operation. We must think that things exist this way, Śāntideva wants to say, because we think of things as *inherently* satisfying or *inherently* repulsive, and fail to see the role of our mental constructions in the way things appear to be. But things are not so inherently, they exist in dependence upon our mental projections and inevitably change and decay. The gap between our perceptions of the inherent status of things and their actuality is the source of stupidity and suffering.

Sharp critical investigation shows that things do not have the inherent status we project upon them. They are *empty* of that

inherent existence. The very quality of being empty of inherent existence is an emptiness, a negation of inherent existence. Thus the chair, which is the result of a construction with a very practical purpose, does not have inherent existence, unchanging self-contained existence. It is empty of inherent existence. The chair is a conventional truth (if it did have inherent existence it would itself be an unchanging ultimate truth), and its emptiness of inherent existence is the ultimate truth concerning that chair.

We discover the absence of inherent existence through investigating a subject to see whether it has inherent existence or not. This analysis which discovers the ultimate truth is very much a mental and conceptual activity. However, in more advanced stages of meditation it is thought to be possible to enter a state where the mind is held absorbed unwaveringly on the ultimate itself, in other words the negation of inherent existence which is emptiness. This state, when fully developed, is said to be experienced beyond the normal dualistic mind, 'like water entering water'. This, according to certain Tibetan commentators, is why Śāntideva speaks of the ultimate truth in *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.2 as 'beyond the scope of intellection'. Obviously he could not mean that it is not an object of mental activity in all senses, otherwise one could not discern the ultimate truth and become enlightened. The meaning of this verse was much debated in Tibet, and serves as an example of the difficulties involved in interpreting Buddhist philosophy.

The claim of Madhyamaka Buddhism, of which Śāntideva is one of the most famous Indian exponents, is that absolutely nothing, no matter how rarefied, will be found under analysis to have inherent existence. This includes the Buddha, *nirvāṇa*, and even emptiness itself. In other words if we think of ultimate reality as an Absolute, the really inherently Real, the Madhyamaka claim is that there is no such thing. *There is no Absolute*. Finally we need to let go of that grasping as well. Madhyamaka thinkers do not put forward the inherent existence of anything, but take claims by other thinkers that something inherently exists and investigate to see if that makes sense. Other thinkers all maintain the inherent existence of something: God, matter, atoms, the Self, causality, and so on. The Madhyamaka considers it has good arguments against these inherent existences. In particular

Śāntideva devotes considerable space to a complex refutation of rival Mahāyāna co-religionists who follow a tradition known as Yogācāra and teach that while the inherent existence of most things can be negated, we cannot deny the inherent existence of the flow of consciousness itself. Understood properly, according to this teaching, consciousness is non-dual (subjects and external objects are erroneous constructions) and is characterized by its reflexivity, which is to say that it is a unique quality of consciousness that it is not only aware of things but also aware of itself at the same time. It is the truly existing substratum to all illusion and unenlightenment, as well as enlightenment itself. This tradition is thus sometimes known as Cittamātra, since it teaches mind or consciousness (*citta*) only (*mātra*). For Śāntideva in the last analysis the Yogācāra tradition, for all its spiritual subtlety, represents an attempt to grasp at something instead of the complete letting go which he feels is necessary for the bodhisattva in order to develop perfectly both insight and, most of all, effective compassion for others.

Thus the main purpose of Chapter 9 is to refute claims by rival traditions, mainly Buddhist but also non-Buddhist, that something has been found which really inherently exists, and also to defend the Madhyamaka claim to show that all things exist only conventionally 'like illusions'. Later Tibetan commentators make it quite clear that such a claim, that something does not inherently exist, is not a rather obscure way of saying that it does not exist at all. Rather, it lacks the sort of existence called 'inherent existence', which is a sort of existence we tend to project upon things. This projection of inherent existence causes us considerable problems. But if things did have inherent existence that existence could be found when analysed. The fact that analysis shows something to be incoherent means that it does not have *inherent* existence. For example, if I investigate a chair to find out if it inherently exists, as something existing independently of my mental operations and the functions to which the bits of wood are put, I will discover that such an inherently existing chair cannot be found. Actually there is just a collection of bits which I employ in a particular way (and for Śāntideva the bits themselves could, of course, be further analysed *ad infinitum*). This does not mean that there is no chair. The chair does exist

as a conventional truth, but not in the way I thought it did. The chair *as I thought it existed* is what does not exist at all. It is in this respect that Madhyamaka writers say all things are like illusions. There is a strong contention among many Tibetan commentators that this should not be taken to mean that things are literally illusions. That would be incoherent, although it is sometimes said for dramatic impact. Rather, things are not true but are *like* illusions in that they appear one way and actually exist in another. Thus the Madhyamaka is 'Middling' in that it avoids the two cardinal errors of under-negation (something exists inherently) and over-negation (nothing exists at all, in any sense). Of these two errors the second, an understandable misunderstanding, is by far the worst, for it was thought to have serious repercussions in a moral nihilism which could scarcely be Buddhist. Madhyamaka writers urge accordingly that emptiness should be taught in an appropriate way and only at the right time.

One of the principal difficulties of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* Chapter 9 is that it presupposes a considerably sophisticated knowledge of the details of rival schools' tenets, and does not seem to be easily applicable to our current situation. It is debatable whether modern attempts to grasp at inherent existences can be fitted into the template offered by ancient Indian 'errors'. It would, I think, be unwise for most readers to try and wrestle with the detailed complexities of this chapter. What is of enduring value and contemporary significance here is the critical enterprise itself, the employment of the analytic investigative mind in the spiritual path in a way which refuses to be taken in by new and often subtle forms of grasping attachment but sees relentless critical probing as a means of letting go, creating a more balanced perspective which will aid in the project of effectively helping others. The spiritual path is not one of comfortable feelings and acceptance. It is deeply uncomfortable, and one cause of that necessary uncomfortableness is the persistent search for truth through employing rather than denying our critical faculties.

This integration of the analytic into a spiritual path based on altruism and compassion is but one aspect of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* which is of enduring relevance and significance. Though it was

composed in India over a thousand years ago by a Buddhist monk for himself and a few like-minded friends, even allowing for the verses concerned with a Buddhist monastic environment, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* nevertheless presents us with a series of brilliant meditations directly relevant to our own present lives. We are still sentient beings living with others, squabbling and loving, laughing and dying. We all need compassion, altruism, insight, and wisdom, and these qualities have not changed so very much over the years. Nor, I suspect, have the means of bringing them about.

> I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being. (8.94)

To heed so many of Śāntideva's wonderful verses does not require an acceptance of Buddhism or a denial of any other faith. All that is necessary is that one is human, living an ordinary human life. On the other hand the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is not a work to be devoured in our normal greedy way, nor is it a book to be skimmed through. That changes nothing. This is a meditation manual (however you do your meditation), a work for the proverbial desert island, a work to be slowly contemplated. And when our desert island dweller is rescued he or she will have perceptibly changed and will henceforth, to use a Zen saying, 'move among us with bliss-bestowing hands'.

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