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**“The Śāntideva Passage:
Bodhicaryāvatāra VIII: 90-103”**

The passages from the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* [*BCA*] on “exchanging self and other” have been a center of debate in the study of Buddhist ethics, play a major role in this volume, and are read very differently by different Cowherds. In this chapter, we consider these passages, their role in the *BCA*, three ways in which they might reasonably be interpreted, and what hangs on their interpretation. We hope instead to survey several ways in which they are read and to provide some context for the reader who may find them read very differently in different chapters. We recognize, however, that not all Cowherds agree with this survey or with our assessment of the merits of, and challenges for, each of the readings. In particular, we direct the reader to the accounts of Mark Siderits and Charles Goodman, who would dissent from much of what we say here, and we encourage the reader to consult the translation of Prajñākāramati’s commentary on these verses, included as an appendix to his volume. First, we offer some comments on the composition of whole text and on its author or authors. Next, we consider the central passage at issue. We then turn to a discussion of the three possible interpretations. We close with a few comments on what is at stake.

1. Śāntideva and *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

The importance of the *BCA* in the Buddhist world is demonstrated by its distribution and influence across the Indian subcontinent over Buddhism’s last four or five centuries there, as well as in Tibet, Central Asia and perhaps Sumatra. (Liland 2009, p. 20) Its

influence is reflected in an abundance of Indian commentaries that span five centuries.

There are also two short summaries, the *piṇḍārthas*. (Eimer 1971, pp 74-75)

Little can be historically confirmed about the life of Śāntideva. Traditional hagiographies portray him as a monk at Nālandā University in the eighth century, which is consistent with the dating of works attributed to him. According to one tradition, Śāntideva is said to have recited the *BCA* and disappeared into empty space, leaving no manuscript. On this story the text we have was memorized from its oral performance. The first part of this account is, presumably, fiction. This leaves us with the fact, and the problem, of the text. Its various Sanskrit and Tibetan editions differ significantly from one another.

(Wallace and Wallace 1978, p. 8) Three different versions of it, varying between 700 and 1000 verses, circulated across the subcontinent. (Saito 1993, p. 17) Indian and Tibetan commentators also record different versions of the text and cross-reference them. (Liland, *op. cit.* p. 17)

The oldest version yet discovered is dramatically shorter than *BCA* and is attributed to Akṣayamati, a possible epithet of Śāntideva, under the title *Bodhi-sattva-caryāvatāra* [*BsCA*]. (Saito 1996, p. 258) This version circulated independently of the longer text, and a commentary remains in the Tibetan canon. The name Śāntideva, as we use it now, merely personifies the voice of a later version of the text, a version which was redacted, bowdlerized, and amended by an editor with views almost certainly different from those of the author of the earlier version.

Paul Harrison (2007, pp. 227-228) suggests that the longer version is a later revision by Śāntideva (taken to be the author of the original, short version) himself. However, as Akira Saitō (1993) notes, many of the additions of 70 verses to the wisdom chapter are “unnecessary” or out of context. According to Frederik Liland (2009, pp. 11, 89) the additions to the text often break its flow, and fail to clarify – or even obfuscate – the arguments. One would expect Śāntideva to have done a more elegant job in revising his masterwork. (Saito 1993, p. 26) Saitō (2006, pp. 36, 37) suggests the later version of the text was more focused on debates with rival traditions than the earlier version, which was more focused on individual practice.

The original author, whoever he was, recommends that the text be used in conjunction with a compendium of scriptural passages, the *Sūtrasamuccaya* (Anthology of *Sūtras*) attributed to Nāgārjuna; the later redactor adds a further recommendation of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (*Training Anthology*), a text also attributed to Śāntideva. These anthologies provided students with a pedagogical guide to the massive Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature, and were central to the curricula in Indian monastic universities for the study of key scriptural themes. It would thus appear that *BCA* was written as a training manual in the practice of a *bodhisattva* and, together with the anthologies, was used as a textbook in a course of study and practice.

The *piṇḍārthas*, composed by Dharmapāla of Sumātra, show that it was important to summarize the text in an easily memorable form. The *BCA*, hence, may well have been composed to function in the same way as a *sūtra*, and so was probably written to be

recited. (Saito, 1996, p 258, citing “The Bodhicaryāvatāra for Ritual Recitation.” *Machikaneyama Ronsō*, Vol. XXV, pp. 25-38.) Since the text had important ritual and performative roles, it may be important to interpret its conceptual content in relation to these roles.

For present purposes, it is most important to note, as Chiko Ishida (2010, pp. 1-16) has argued, that the anonymous editor’s extensive additions to the *BsCA* on ‘exchange of self and other’ diverge from that earlier text in arguing for compassion from a selfless perspective. All of the passages to which we refer in this volume on ownerless suffering appear to be later interpolations. Saitō notes that, of the more than twenty verses deleted by the reviser from the *BsCA*’s wisdom chapter, most are on a single subject, *anātman*. (Saito 1993, p. 26)

Any hermeneutical approach to the text must therefore be very cautious. We cannot automatically assume internal consistency in the works attributed to Śāntideva, or that they were the work of one mind or that they constitute a single coherent project. A certain level of internal dissonance might be expected. This is certainly the case in the passage on exchange of self and other, which may not even be internally consistent. What we can attempt, as does the commentarial tradition, is to address the text we have in front of us – a text which, whatever its origins, has been treated for many centuries as a unity – and to take Śāntideva not as an historical figure whose intention we might wish to divine, but as an authorial center of gravity for a text that may have coalesced through the contributions of a trans-historical committee of scholars with divergent aims and views.

2. The Meditation Chapter and the Passage which is our Concern

So much for the text as a whole. Let us now turn to the Meditation Chapter, which contains our target passage. *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is first and foremost a guide to the conduct and attitude necessary for following the *bodhisattva* path, the way of life committed to cultivating and acting on *bodhicitta*, the aspiration to attain awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is structured largely by the rubric of the six perfections to be cultivated on this path — the perfections of generosity, mindfulness, patience, effort, meditation and wisdom — in that order. The text begins by characterizing the nature of benighted life in *samsāra*, and presenting the motivation for embarking on the *bodhisattva* path. Most of the book is devoted to explaining the perfections to be cultivated on that path, the reasons for cultivating them, and the means for doing so.

The passage we will be looking at in detail comes late in the text, a bit more than midway through the eighth chapter (of ten), the chapter on meditation. The chapter is neither a manual on meditative technique, nor a brief for the importance of meditation *per se*. Instead, the bulk of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of objects of meditation, images or ideas upon which one is to meditate in order to cultivate dissatisfaction with sensual pleasures, commitment to practice, and positive motivations towards others. In this context, this set of verses can be read either as one more object of meditation, or as containing arguments for the value and probity of the moral attitude to be achieved through meditation.

The Meditation chapter comprises about 58 verses in the *BsCA*, but 186 verses in *BCA*. Some 60 per cent of the increase in length from *BsCA* to *BCA* constitutes additions to this chapter. (Crosby and Skilgon 1996, p. 77) The sections on exchange of self and other and sameness of self and other have about 32 added verses and both sections were moved from the chapter on *Vīrya* (Effort) in the earlier and shorter version to the chapter on meditation in the expanded version.

The original and emended versions of this text seem to reflect very different views about the place of self in this discourse. In the earlier version there is an emphasis on the conventional “self” as central to an ethical perspective, for instance in exchanging identity with another, or meditating on the sameness of self and other. In the later version, on the other hand, the ownerlessness of experiences is emphasized, and it is argued that the perspective of self is to be *eliminated*. The passage in question is, indeed, one of the most dramatically altered sections of the *BsCA* of Akṣayamati. The reviser, who gave us the *BCA* as we know it today, created the first half of verse 90 to introduce a section of verses, 90b to 99, which he moved from the earlier version’s chapter on *Vīrya* to the *BCA*’s chapter on meditation. (Ishida 2010, pp. 1-16) Except for verse 101a, verses 100 through 113 were then added by the reviser.

If we ignore the verses 100-113 that are added in the later version, an elegant continuity appears between verses 99 and 114, which reflects the original *BsCA* verses VI.43-44. Just as the hand protects the foot as part of one body, other

beings should be protected as part of one world, and, since others are no more different from us than our own future selves are different from our present selves, we should address their suffering just as we would our own. The *bodhisattva* is encouraged to identify with the body of another, rather than take a selfless perspective. The reviser appears to argue instead that self-identity is itself the ethical problem and should be rejected.

While the original text emphasized the wholeness of the body or the world, the later reviser emphasized that, because the wholeness of persons is unreal, the proper perspective for compassion is one of ownerless sufferings. Perhaps the second layer of thought was added as a corrective. It is not at all obvious that these positions can be reconciled: nonetheless they are treated as a unity in the Indian and Tibetan commentaries, and some Cowherds regard them as complementary rather than inconsistent.

Here is the passage in full. Words in italics are unique to the *BCA*.¹

- VIII: 90 *First, one should earnestly meditate*
On the similarity of self and others:
Everyone, subject to similar happiness and suffering,
Should be protected by me like myself
- VIII: 91 Just as the body, having many parts, divided into hands etc.
Should be protected as one.
The world, though divided, is undivided
With respect to in nature of suffering and happiness.
- VIII: 92 Even if my own suffering
Does not hurt others' bodies,
That suffering is still mine and is hard to bear
Because of self-love.

¹ Translations are from the Sanskrit with reference to the sDe dge edition of the Tibetan.

- VIII: 93 Just so, even though I do not experience
The suffering of another myself,
It is still his;
His suffering is hard to bear because of self-love.
- VIII: 94 The suffering of others should be eliminated by me,
Because it is suffering like my own suffering.
I should help others
Because they are sentient beings, as I am a sentient being.
- VIII: 95 When the happiness of myself and others
Are pleasing in the same way,
Then what is so special about me
That I merely strive for my own happiness?
- VIII: 96 When the fear and suffering of myself and others
Are not pleasing in the same way
Then what is so special about me
That I defend myself, but not others?
- VIII: 97 If they are not defended
Because their suffering does not hurt me,
So why defend against the suffering of a future body
That does not hurt me?
- VIII: 98 It is vain fantasy
To think “that is me then.”
Only another died
From which only another is born.
- VIII: 99 If it is thought that only the suffering which is his
Should be protected,
When a pain in the foot does not belong to the hand,
Why should it protect that?
- VIII: 100 *“Even though it is wrong,
This happens because of self-construction [ahamkāra].
But that which is wrong, whether one’s own or others’,
Should be avoided as far as possible.*
- VIII: 101 A continuum and collection,
Just like such things as a series or an army, are unreal.
*The one for whom there is suffering does not exist.
Therefore to whom will that suffering belong?*

VIII: 102 *Since all ownerless sufferings are
Without distinction,
They should be alleviated just because of being suffering,
What restriction can be made in that case?*

VIII: 103 *“Why should suffering be alleviated?”
Because it is undisputed by everyone that
If it is to be alleviated, all of it is to be alleviated.
After all, I am just like everyone else.*

3. The Three Readings

The *BCA* passage, as it was read by canonical commentators, appears to advocate adopting an impartial attitude towards the suffering of oneself and others, and treating the suffering of others as a motivation for action to relieve it - just as one might treat one's own suffering as a motivation for relieving it. The question is how, exactly, it is to be understood as doing this. Reasonable scholars disagree. Three distinct interpretations are encountered in this volume. One, which we call “the meditation reading” treats this passage not so much as containing an argument or arguments for the adoption of a particular position regarding suffering and happiness, but instead as an instruction for meditation, meditation intended to cultivate this attitude.

A second interpretation, which we call the “*abhidharma* reading,” takes the passage indeed to contain arguments, the crucial one appealing to what appears to be an *abhidharma* metaphysics. A third interpretation takes it to contain an argument for adopting the attitude in question on the grounds that it is the only rational attitude to take: self-interest is arbitrary. We call this the “rationality reading.”

In exploring these readings we will consider two canonical commentaries on *BCA*, Prajñākaramati's *Bodhicaryāvatāra-Pañjikā* (*Commentary to Bodhicaryāvatāra*), and the influential Tibetan commentary by the fifteenth century scholar rGyal tshab Darma Rinchen, *Byang chub sems pa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa'i rnam bshad rgyal sras 'jug ngogs* (*Gateway to the Glorious Explanation of Bodhicaryāvatāra*) (1999).

4. The Meditation Reading

First, we consider the Meditation reading. The eighth chapter is structured around a set of objects of meditation, including the transience of relationships (5-10), the repulsiveness of the body (40-85) and so forth. It therefore makes sense to understand this passage as one more object of meditation. We may see these verses not primarily as containing *arguments* for the conclusion that one ought to regard others as morally and motivationally identical to myself, and to take their weal and woe as motives for action just as I do my own, but rather as a set of images which, if contemplated carefully in meditation, would *cause* me to adopt such attitudes. On this reading, Śāntideva does not *argue* for the value of these attitudes, but *assumes* them, and provides a practical way to cultivate them in meditation.

There are several reasons to like this reading. First, the passage begins and closes with admonitions to meditate in this way. The passage is at least part of a set of meditation instructions, whatever else they are. Ishida (*op. cit.*, p. 3) observes, one might note, that in the later version, this passage, which was transplanted to the meditation chapter, is introduced and characterized by meditational terms that are absent in the *BsCA*.

This supports the thought that this section should be read as meditation guidance and should be evaluated as such, not as a philosophical treatise, which would be written in the style of a debate manual, as is the ninth chapter on wisdom. Buddhist meditation manuals, it should be noted, often urge the use of imagination to generate motivation, and this may simply be a case in which *bodhisattvas* are asked to imagine taking on the identity of another person and observe themselves through another's eyes. On this reading, then, the whole section should not be taken as containing philosophical arguments, but as an imaginative motivational technique. (See Harris, 2011.)

We might note, also, that rGyal tshab rje, who, we shall argue, himself supports the rationality reading, begins his commentary on verse 90 as follows:

“How should one meditate on this?,” one might ask. One should first meditate on the fact that self and others are alike. “How?,” one might then ask. Just as one attempts to increase one's own happiness and reduce one's own suffering, one should attempt to increase others' happiness and reduce others' suffering. Thus, since the achievement of others' happiness and the dispelling of their suffering is similar, one should see that all sentient beings are like oneself, and so one should protect them.

The second part of this discussion divides into four: The explanation of the meaning of meditating on the similarity of self and others; How to meditate on the similarity of self and other; the benefits of meditating in this way; having meditated on the similarity of self and others, how to see things this way.² (1999: 329)

² *thabs gang gi sgon nas bsgom zhe nab dag dang gzhan du mnyam pa ni dang po nyid du 'bad de bsgom par bya'o/ji ltar zhe nab dag gi bde ba ched du bsgrub cing sdug bsngal ched du 'gig pa bzhin du bzhan gyi bde sdug la yang 'dor len de ltar byed pas gzhan gyi bde ba bsgrub p dang sdug bsngal sel bar mnyam pas na sems can thams cad bdag bzhin gces par gzung nas bsung bar bya'o//nyis pa la bzhi/bdag bzhan mnyam par sgom pa 'I don bshad pa dang/bdag gzhan mnyam par sgom tshul dang/ de ltar sgom pa 'i phan yon dang/bdag gzhan mnyam par goms na de lrat bskyed nus pa'o//* All translations of rGyal tshab contributed by Jay Garfield.

We need go no further into rGyal tshab's commentary at this point. The important issue is this: he characterizes the structure of the discussion as a set of meditation instructions in the classic mold of explaining the meaning, method, benefits and consequences of the meditational practice.

Though there is good reason to take this passage simply as a description of a meditational practice, and although the reviser's intentions in moving the material to a chapter on meditation and his use of meditational language is clear, we should also remember that the passages that were relocated were not originally framed, composed, or intended in this way. Moreover, note that taking them as concerned with meditation is not inconsistent with taking them also to present arguments. For many Buddhist meditational practices are analytical in character, and the mind can be transformed as much by familiarization with argument as by visualization.

Indeed, the fact that this passage figures in a chapter on meditation and in the context of the introduction of a set of meditation practices does not entail that it itself is merely of practical use. After all, the *BCA* generally defends the positions it sets out through argument. We can expect it as well to *argue for*, not merely *describe* the meditational practices it recommends and the goals at which it takes them to be aimed. The ideas here seem too deeply interlaced with basic Buddhist teachings on selflessness to be taken simply as practical imaginations. Furthermore, Prajñākaramati's commentary clearly analyzes the verses as if they contain the technical components of a logical argument. We now turn to two readings of this passage as argument.

5. The *Abhidharma* Reading

The first argumentative reading we consider is one that appeals to an *abhidharma* understanding of what it is to be a person. This is the way it is interpreted by Paul Williams (1997). On this interpretation, the passage is to be understood roughly as follows. Verse (90) states the major conclusion of the passage at (d). (c) also gives a reason for this, though an apparently fallacious one. The reason is that everyone experiences happiness and suffering in the same way. It follows that everybody is motivated to act in the same way. This would be achieved in two distinct ways, though: (i) if everybody is motivated to alleviate only their own suffering; (ii) if everyone is motivated to alleviate everyone's suffering. Śāntideva clearly wants the stronger conclusion (ii), but this does not follow if (i) is a possibility.

(91) then gives an independent argument for (ii). This is by analogy. Just as each part of the body looks after the well-being of each other part, so each person should look after the well-being of all others. This analogy is a poor one, though. Each part of the body looks after the well-being of the others because they all constitute an integrated functioning whole. This is not (or not obviously) the case with a bunch of people. To take it to be obvious would be to beg the question: for each of us, unlike the parts of our bodies, appears to have our own interests.

One can hear (92) as an objection to these arguments, since it states that every person does indeed have something that makes their relationship to their own suffering different

from their relationship to that of others. I feel my suffering, in a way that I do not feel others' suffering. (93) then replies that everyone is in the same boat. And (94) then concludes that that since this is the case, I should alleviate everyone's suffering. This, however, just repeats the argument of (91), and is problematic for the same reason.

Verses (95) and (96) ask why I should treat others differently from myself. This is effective rhetoric, but a rhetorical question is not an argument. As long as the objection of (92) has not been answered, the interlocutor can simply respond, "because it is mine." (97) and (98) do, however, give an argument that would undermine the objection raised against the argument in (90). I am in the same situation with respect to others as I am with respect to my future self. I am literally identical with neither. Nonetheless, it clearly makes sense to take steps to alleviate future suffering. After all, I cannot alleviate the suffering of my present self: that is *already now* happening. So if I act to alleviate my own suffering, it must be the suffering of my future selves. But since I am no more identical with those selves than with the selves of others, I should act to alleviate their suffering as well. Prajñākāramati glosses (97) as follows:

‘No harm—i.e., injury—comes to me by means of the suffering of that other person’—if consequently for this reason I do not protect someone else, then there would be the following difficulty. ‘There is no harm whatsoever to this [presently] appropriated body [of mine from suffering] of a future body marked by suffering of birth in hell, etc., in a future life’, since this is what is said in the world, or what follows from that. This being so, for what purpose does one protect it from that? Because, with respect to what is called the body, evil is to be avoided and the good promoted.³

³ See the appendix to this volume for context.

This is an interesting argument, but is problematic. For all that I am not identical with my future selves, my present self has a causal relationship with those that it does not have with others: it lies in the same causal continuum. It is my present self who suffers with a hangover today because of what my past self did last night. In the same way, if I drink to excess now, it is my future self that will pay the price. This causal continuity is what grounds my prudence. Clearly, I am not in the same situation with respect to others. There is still, then, a difference between myself and others. So there is no compelling argument yet for treating others as I do myself.

Verse (99) repeats the argument by analogy of verse (92). Verse (100) imagines someone saying that something or other happens only because of a false sense of self.

Prajñākāramati glosses the point as follows:

The sense of ‘I’ with respect to this body is due to conceiving of an ‘I’ even though there is no self. Protective attention toward the foot etc. results, i.e., is produced. This [conceiving of an ‘I’] is not correct. Since what is mistaken does not meet with success, it is to be abandoned, i.e., removed, with respect both to oneself and to others, to the best of one’s ability, i.e., to the extent that one is capable. Only because of insufficiency of power is it acceptable to overlook it. This is the meaning.

He then imagines an objection:

Perhaps it will be said: ‘While there is no self or the like, still there is a single series, and likewise the collection of many things such as hands and feet is a single body. In this case such things as warding off harm and the like as one’s own will be restricted to the pair that is suitably linked in this world and the next. Hence your “for there is no difference” [between the case of another person and the case of the hand and the foot] has an unproven reason, and the previous reason [“because it is suffering”] is inconclusive.’

This takes us into the core argument of (101), (102), which he interprets as a reply, and where the appeal to self-interest is finally laid to rest.

Since it asks us to take instances of suffering seriously, while pointing out that the owners of suffering do not ultimately exist, many have taken Verse (101) to contain an implicit appeal to *abhidharma* metaphysics. Prajñākāramati explains:

The series does not exist as a single ultimately real entity. But this is just a stream-like succession of resultant moments in the relation of effect and cause, for nothing distinct from that is apprehended. Thus in order to express with a single word these moments, the buddhas create “series” as a conventional designation, for practical purposes. This is only nominally existent. So attachment to this is not right. That is not appropriated by anything other than a self. The collection is likewise not some one ultimately real thing over and above the things that are collected, for it is not apprehended apart from them. But the mistaken concept with respect to this is understood by means of the analysis of the partite, which is not laid out here. And so this is also just conventionally real, like the former [the series]. He then says there are numerous examples of both—the queue, the army, etc. The series is like a queue, the collection is like the army and the like. Due to the term ‘and the like’, such similes as that of the necklace and so on are grasped. Just as, apart from the form of ants arranged one after another, there is no queue resembling a single continuous thread, and as apart from assembled elephants, horses, foot-soldiers and so on there is no other single thing whatsoever to be an army, the collection is so as well. And [since] this is analyzed extensively elsewhere, it is not analyzed here. Thus since it lacks an ultimately real object, the thought is mistaken. Alternatively this means that it does not hold up under analysis. Hence, since there is nothing whatsoever like a self that could be an owner, there is nothing to which suffering is connected. Hence ‘whose will this suffering be that is thought to be one’s own?’ The meaning is that there is no one at all.

(102) then infers correctly, that given this fact, the argument of (92) does not work.

Prajñākāramati glosses this verse as follows:

The analysis [of ‘ownerless’] is that owners do not exist for those [sufferings] under discussion; the meaning is that those [sufferings] that are not ‘mine’ are utterly lacking in a counter- positive. Why? Not for any? No, all are indeed ownerless, for there is no difference. There is no such thing as

being an owner of anything on the part of anyone, for there is no difference. Having obtained the non-distinction between self and other, they are to be prevented, i.e., to be warded off, just because they are suffering. There is here no other ground, mineness and the like. How can this limitation be imposed – in virtue of what difference is it imposed – by which sufferings of one's own are to be prevented and not sufferings of others? Thus it is determined that the reason 'because it is suffering' is not inconclusive.

The claim that each person has a special relation to his or her own pain fails, because there are literally no people. If any pain should be alleviated, then all pain should. (103) states this conclusion.

On this interpretation, the central argument is that of (101) and (102). Let us spell out the metaphysical picture apparently appealed to more carefully. On an *abhidharma* metaphysics, composite entities, such as armies, forests, and persons, are merely conventionally or nominally (*saṃvṛti/prajñapti*) real (*sat*). Their identity conditions depend upon decisions about what entities to aggregate. Nonetheless, composite entities reduce to momentary property instantiations, *dharmas*. These are substantially (*dravya*), or ultimately (*paramārtha*) real (*sat*). Of course many palm leaves were used to work out the details of this picture, but those details are beside the point of the present discussion.

All endurants, and all macroscopic entities are composites, since all reduce to sequences or aggregations of *dharmas*. Therefore, all endurants and macroscopic entities are merely conventionally real. Ultimate reality is constituted by an interdependent array of momentary instantiations of properties. Dharmas are ultimately real; all else is ultimately unreal. Moreover, since dharmas are *dravyasat*, or substantially real, they each are

characterized by a *svalakṣaṇa* or essential individual characteristic that makes them the *dharma* that they are.

Momentary experiences of suffering and happiness are dharmas. They are hence ultimately real. Suffering has the *svalakṣaṇa* of being unbearable, happiness the *svalakṣaṇa* of being desirable. Persons are composites; they are hence ultimately unreal, albeit conventionally real. They have no *svalakṣaṇa* at all. For this reason, we should be concerned with suffering and happiness — they are ultimately real; but not with any distinctions between their bearers — they, and the distinctions between them, are only conventionally real.⁴

There are certainly reasons to take this reading seriously. The passage so read develops an intelligible and continuous line of thought. Moreover, *abhidharma* metaphysics was important in the history of Buddhist philosophy and would have been foundational to the training of Śāntideva and his reviser. It is not implausible that they would have appealed to it when necessary. So this framework does provide a natural parsing of the verses in the passage in question. Finally, this is the reading that appears to be endorsed by Prajñākaramati in his commentary, a commentary which carries a great deal of weight in the Indian and Tibetan traditions.

⁴ (101) says that persons are unreal. It does not say explicitly that dharmas are not. Indeed, neither the root text or commentaries speak in terms of dharmas or their relative reality. But if they were unreal too, the contrast in the passage would appear to lose all force. Moreover, in that case, if the people do not exist, neither does the pain!

There are also reasons to worry about this reading. First, usual *abhidharma* discourses about ethics, and notably compassion, insist that compassion is conventional and that its *ālambana*, or objects, are sentient beings.⁵ This would therefore be an unusual use of abhidharma ideas, and fits better with Mahāyāna constructions of *dharmā lambana* of *karuṇā*.

Second, and more importantly, the central argument is at least *prima facie* fallacious from a Madhyamaka standpoint, as Williams and others note. The argument, on this understanding, appeals to the fact that the dharmas of suffering are ultimately real; but selves are only conventionally real. This is not something that a Mādhyamika can endorse. For them, all things have the same ontological status: empty, conventionally real. And Śāntideva, like his reviser, is not an *abhidharmika* but a Mādhyamika. Once again, Cowherds disagree about the force of this argument. In particular, see Mark Siderits' chapter for a contrary view.

For a Mādhyamika, from the fact that persons are not *ultimately* real, it does not follow that they are not real *in any sense*. And since action is conventional, and is undertaken by conventional agents, there is no reason to think that merely conventional distinctions are irrelevant to action and its goals. Indeed, if it were the case that we could disregard things that exist merely conventionally, then we could disregard suffering, since this has no ultimate existence either!

⁵ *Sphutārthā: Abhidharmakośavyākhyā* by Yaśomitra. ed. Unrai Wogihara. Tokyo: Publishing Association of *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, 1932-36 [reprinted 1971], Part 2, VII:12a-b, p. 687:12.

If one is persuaded by these considerations (and, as we note, not all Cowherds are), the Principle of Hermeneutical Charity militates against this reading. The composite nature of the text could, however, be seen as mitigating this point. This is the most heavily revised section of the BCA, and it is plausible that the reviser found the original arguments either unacceptable or inadequate and tried to repair or supplement them with arguments related to ownerless suffering.

Third, this interpretation, while endorsed by Prajñākaramati, is arguably at odds with that of rGyal tshab Darma Rinchen. When two such influential commentaries disagree, arguments from canonicity are fraught, and the fact that a Tibetan commentator felt free to diverge in this way (although, to be sure, without acknowledging that divergence) suggests that the *abhidharma* reading may already have been suspect. In any case, while this reading is plausible and well-attested, it is not the only one on the table, either philosophically or historically.

6. The Rationality Reading

Let us now turn to the other argumentative reading: the “rationality reading”. This takes these verses to be advancing a different kind of argument, one that works by shifting the burden of proof from the bodhisattva to those who appeal to self-interest, and arguing that egocentrism itself is unmotivated rationally. It hence shares insights both with Humean ideal observer theory and with Schopenhauer’s argument in *On the Basis of Morality*. This reading is articulated by rGyal tshab.

rGyal tshab labels the section of the text comprising these verses “the explanation of the meaning of meditating on the similarity of self and others.” He begins his commentary on this section with the following challenge:

Suppose one asked, “How does it make sense to consider increasing the happiness and reducing the suffering of others as just like increasing my own happiness and reducing my own suffering? After all, since there are infinitely many sentient beings, it makes no sense to visualize them all as *me*.”⁶ (329)

The interlocutor here is the naïve egoist, who takes it for granted that self-regarding action is intrinsically justified, and that other-regarding action requires justification. It simply makes no sense on this view to regard others’ harms or benefits as motivations for *me*. In his commentary to (91), rGyal tshab articulates what he takes Śāntideva’s reply to be:

Just as my body has many parts, such as hands and feet, since it constitutes only one person, it is to be protected as a whole. In the same way, although beings such as deities and humans are indeed distinct living things, it makes no sense to say that their *suffering* is different. Once one has seen that there is no difference, since they [deities and humans] are all similar to oneself, once one takes them as oneself, one should work to bring about their happiness. Since they are suffering, one should work to eliminate that, and one should think this way of all of [deities and humans]. This is the meaning of this meditation⁷. (329)

rGyal tshab suggests that Śāntideva asks us here to focus not on the identity of the being as the ground of motivation, but on the identity of the state of suffering. If suffering is

⁶ *Sems can mtha’ yas pa du ma yin pas de la nga’o snyam pa’i blo bskyed du mi rung pa’i phyir/ de dag gi bde sdug gi ‘dor len la rang dang mtshungs par ji ltar rung zhe na//*

⁷ *rang gi lus la rkang pa dang lag pa sogs pa’i dbye ba rnam pa mang yang nga’i snyam du gang zag gcig gis yongs su bsrung bya’i lus su gcig pa ltar/ de bzhin du lha dang mi la sogs pa’i ‘gro ba tha dad kyang de dag gi bde sdug dag la tha dad med pa ste/ khyad par med par dmigs nas thams cad bdag dang ‘dra bar bdag tu gzung nas bde ba ‘di bdag gis bsgrub par bya/ sdug bsngal ‘di bdag gis bsal bar bya’o snyam du ‘di kun de dang ‘dra bar sgom pa’i don to//*

taken to be a bad thing, then it is a bad thing wherever it occurs, and if something is bad, that itself is a reason to eliminate it. (Note the affinity here to Nagel's account of the grounds of altruism in (1986).) rGyal tshab then has his interlocutor continue, in an introduction to (92), by pointing out that even if suffering is all bad, the harm it causes is to particular people:

Suppose one argued as follows: Since others' suffering does not harm oneself, and similarly, one's own suffering doesn't harm others, it makes no sense to say that dispelling one's own suffering and that of others is similar.⁸ (330)

But, rGyal tshab continues, in (92) and (93), presenting the following reply:

... Consider the claim that others' suffering does not harm oneself. Even though one's own suffering does not harm others' *bodies*, it is nonetheless *their* suffering: Since they are different from oneself, they do not need to bear one's own suffering. Nonetheless, if other sentient beings meditate on taking others as oneself, their own suffering and those of others such as oneself will not appear different. And for this reason, they will strive to eliminate the suffering of sentient beings because it is suffering. Since sentient beings are taken to be as oneself, when suffering arises, one should protect them from enduring it.⁹ (330-331)

The point is straightforward. If everyone responds to the suffering of all others, then even though nobody will be physically harmed by anyone else's suffering, all will suffer sympathetically. The only question then, is whether it makes sense for everyone to do this meditation. Of course, if it makes sense for any random individual, it makes sense for all, and it is to establishing that claim that rGyal tshab takes Śāntideva now to turn. He

⁸ *gshan gyi sdug sngal gyis bdag la mi gnod pa rang gi sdug bsngal gyis gzhan la mi gnod pa dang 'dra bas/ de ched du sel ba rang gi sdug sngal sel ba dang mtshungs pa mi 'thad do zhe na//*

⁹ *gshan gyi sdug sngal gyis rang la mi gnod pa ltar/ gal te bdag gi sdug sngal gyis gzhan gyi lues la mi gnod pa de ltar na'ang de bdag gi sdug sngal yin te/ rang la bdag tu zhen pas rang gi sdug sngal la mi bzod pa 'byung ban yid yin pa de bzhin du sems can gzhan yang bdag tu gzung ba goms pas gzhan gyi sdug sngal dag bdag la 'bab par mi 'gyur yang/ de ltar na'ang sems can gyi sdug sngal de bdag gis bsal bar bya ba'i sdug bsngal yin te/ sems can la rang gis bdag tu zhen pas de la sdug sngal byung na bzod par dka' bag 'gyur rol//*

calls (94)-(96) “Explaining the argument that meditating on this makes sense,” further subdividing the argument in ways that need not concern us here.

Commenting on (94), rGyal tshab writes:

Consider the suffering of others. It makes sense for one to eliminate it, because it is suffering. Take one’s own suffering, for instance: it is the same. And it makes sense for one to bring about the happiness of others: since other sentient beings are indeed sentient beings. Take one’s own body, for instance: bringing about its happiness is the same.¹⁰ (331)

We can clarify this terse debate-courtyard style commentary using Prajñākaramati’s commentary on the same verse:

If my suffering does not cause hurt in other distinct bodies, still it is indeed my suffering. Why? Through love of self it is difficult to bear, i.e., intolerable. This states the reason. The meaning is that activity with respect to some does not set aside the nature of suffering ...

Hence having rejected the distinction between self and other, the intrinsic nature of suffering is by itself a reason for averting it.

Whatever suffering occurs is to be prevented by me, just as one’s own suffering. That the suffering of others is suffering—this is the consequence of a reason based on intrinsic nature (*svabhāvahetu*). It is to be prevented solely in virtue of possessing the intrinsic nature of suffering. And the reason is not unestablished (*asiddha*), for it is proven that suffering has this intrinsic nature undifferentiatedly. Nor is [the reason] inconclusive (*anaikāntika*), since the proposition that one’s own suffering is not to be prevented due to non-difference [from that of others] is rejected as erroneous. For this reason there also can be no fault of contrary reason (*viruddhatā*) [i.e., a reason for the opposite conclusion].

There is this further consequence:...

Whatever beings there are, all are to be shown benevolence by me, just as one is oneself a being. That all beings are also living things is a reason based on intrinsic nature as well. In the mere state of having the nature of a being is found the intrinsic nature of being deserving of benevolence. And this [reason] is not unproven, for it is established in the locus of having the nature of a being. [The reason] also could not be inconclusive, since that would lead to the absurd result

¹⁰ *sems can gzhan gyi sdug sngal cos can/ bdag gis bsal bar rigs te sdug sngal yin pa'i phyir/ dper nab dag gi sdug bsngal bzhin no// bdag gis gzhan la phan pa dang bde ba bsgrub bar bya rigs te/ sems can pa rol po sems can yin pa'i phyir/ dper nab dag gi lus la bde ba bsgrub pa bzhin no//*

that one should not help oneself. And as before, there could be no contrary reason.¹¹

The commentarial point is this: the text is arguing that suffering is bad, *per se*, and this gives a *prima facie* reason for its elimination. To privilege one's own suffering over others would require one to be different from others in a morally relevant respect. But the only morally relevant fact is that one is a sentient being, and we are all the same in that respect. There is hence no reason to privilege one's own suffering as a motive. This reasoning is available to anyone, and so it is rational for everyone to think this way. If so, the suffering of anyone in fact is a source of suffering for everyone. rGyal tshab continues, commenting on (95):

Having seen the suffering of oneself and others, it follows that it makes just as much sense to alleviate each and to bring about the happiness of each. When one maintains that both self and others are similar in desiring happiness, it would make no sense to distinguish between oneself and other persons. Therefore, for this reason, if it makes sense to pursue one's own happiness, it makes no sense not to pursue that of others.¹² (332)

He concludes with these remarks on (96):

Since self and others are similar in not desiring suffering, one cannot distinguish between them in this respect. For this reason, without protecting the happiness of others, one cannot imagine increasing one's own happiness, and so one should protect it. We have established rationally that they are similar.¹³ (332)

It is clear that rGyal tshab take these initial verses to be offering an argument; that the argument is one that shifts the burden of proof to one who invokes self-interest,

¹¹ See appendix for full translation.

¹² *gang gi tshe bdag dang gzhan gnyis ka bde ba 'dod du mtshungs pa la bdag dang gang zag gzhan khyad par ci yod na ci yang med pa'i phyir/ rgyu mtshan gang gi phyir nab dag gcig pub de bar brtson par byed cing gzhan gyi bde ba la mi brtson pa mi rigs so//*

¹³ *gang gi tshe bdag dang gzhan gnyis ka sdug sngal mi 'did par mtshungs pa la bdag dang gzhan khyad par ci yod na ste ci yang med pa'i phyir ro//rgyu mtshan gang gi phyir gzhan gyi bde ba bsrung ba min par bdag gi bde b ached du bsgrub cing mi nams par srung bar byed//*

challenging them to present a reason to take their own suffering and happiness as special sources of motivation; and urging that no such reasons can be forthcoming.

rGyal tshab takes (97) ff to contain refutations of anticipated objections to this argument.

The commentary on (97) gives the flavor of this interpretation:

Suppose one replied that since when the suffering of other sentient beings occurs it does not hurt oneself, one should not guard against it. This makes no sense. A young man may doubt that when he is old he may suffer from such things as poverty. In the same way, it makes no sense to doubt that one should ignore suffering that will occur tomorrow or later because it is now today. Since later suffering is still suffering, it makes no sense for a person, at an earlier time, if he does not want to be harmed, not to avert it.¹⁴ (332-333)

The analogy is clear. Just as it is arbitrary and irrational to refrain from averting suffering because it is not present in time, it is arbitrary and irrational to refrain from averting suffering because it is not present in space. In either case, an argument for the special value of the here and now would be necessary; in neither case is it forthcoming.

Verse (101) may also be interpreted as anticipating an objection, and rGyal tshab's commentary is ambiguous here. On one reading, the interlocutor is represented as worrying that, since on a Madhyamaka analysis the person is ultimately unreal, there is a problem about explaining the origin of suffering, which should be the result of past actions, and should be the suffering of *someone*. On this understanding (102) replies that this issue is beside the point. Suffering clearly occurs; it is bad *per se*, as noted above,

¹⁴ *gal te sems can de la sdug bsngal byung bas bdag la mi gnod pa'i phyir mi bsrung ngo zhe na// de ni chas mi rigs te rgos pa'i tshe sdug bsngal byung dogs nas gzhon pa'i tshe nor gsog pa dang/de bzhin do sang dang phyi dro sdug sngal byung deogs nas de ring dang snga dro'i dus nas sdugs sngal sel ba'i thabs la 'bad pa mi rigs par thal// phyi ma'i dus kyi sdug bsngal ma 'ongs pa'i sdugs sngal yang snga ma'i dus kyi gang zag de la gnod par mi cbyed ba de byung dogs nas cis bsrung mi rigs par thal lol*

and so its very existence, regardless of its relation to any particular continuum, is always a reason to alleviate it. On the other hand, if we read rGyal tshab as following Prajñākāramati, he would be read as taking 101 and 102 together as a response to an anticipated objection, arguing that the ownership of suffering can never, on its own, figure as a reason for its alleviation. Either reading is plausible, and the text is ambiguous. rGyal tshab writes:

For this reason, suffering is without an independent self that endures it. Thus there is no distinction between one's own suffering and that of another. But since conventionally, the self and others exist in mutual dependence, their suffering exists; therefore, there is reason to eliminate one's own suffering.¹⁵ (336)

Locating suffering in a particular continuum cannot add anything to its badness or provide any additional reason for its alleviation. rGyal tshab concludes the exegesis with the following remark on (102cd) and (103):

Thus, since others' suffering is indeed suffering, it makes sense to eliminate it. And why would you distinguish between the suffering of oneself and others? ... If there is no reason to eliminate the suffering of others, then one's own suffering is not to be eliminated either, since it is just like the suffering of other sentient beings.¹⁶ (336)

The summary is nice. There is either reason to care about the suffering of others or not. If there is, fine. If not, then suffering itself is not what is bad. And if that is the case, there is no reason to worry about one's own.

¹⁵ *rgyu mstan des na sdug bsngal la longs spyod pa'i rang dbang ba'i dbag po med par nib dag dang gzhan gyi sdug bsngal thams cad bye brag med pa nyid yin la tha snyad du phan tshun ltos pa'i dbag gzhan de dag gi sdug sngal yang yod pas/ rang gi sdug sngal sel ba la 'bad par rigs so//*

¹⁶ *des na gzhan gyi sdugs bsngal de yang sdug bsngal yin pa'i phyir de rang gis bsal bar bya ba rigs kyi rang gzhan ris su gcod pa'i nges pas der ni ci zhig bya//... gzhan gyi sdug bsngal sel ba de min na bdag gi sdug bsngal kyang sems can gzhan gyi sdugs bsngal bzhin du/*

So, on the “rationality reading” articulated by rGyal tshab, the argument can be reconstructed like this:

- (1) Suffering is bad *per se* (by definition).
- (2) Suffering is hence a motive for action. (1)
- (3) To take one’s own suffering as a *special* motive requires that there be something *morally special* about one’s oneself.
- (4) All sentient beings are fundamentally alike in *desiring happiness and not desiring suffering*.
- (5) There is hence nothing *morally special* about oneself. (4)
- (6) There is hence no reason to take one’s own suffering as a special motive. (3) and (5).
- (7) So, one should take all suffering as a motive for action.

This reading shares with the “*abhidharma* reading” the view that this passage presents arguments for abandoning self-interest and embracing *karuṇā*. It differs regarding what those arguments are.

This interpretation also has in its favor the fact that it is endorsed by an influential canonical interpreter, and, most importantly, the fact that it does not have Śāntideva appealing to an *abhidharma* metaphysics that is unacceptable to any Mādhyamika. These considerations, however, are not conclusive.

First, even canonical commentators misinterpret texts, especially when the text and the commentators are separated by countries and centuries (as is the Tibetan commentary in this case). One need think only of the interpretation of Plato given by Neo-Platonists such as Plotinus. They might have thought they were being faithful to Plato. Modern scholarship has disagreed. (Disputes abound between Buddhist commentators, such as that between Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka regarding how to read Nāgārjuna.) We also need

to remember that the traditional commentaries were operating on the assumption of a single author working from an enlightened perspective, rather than a work subjected to massive revision.

Secondly, this interpretation itself faces *prima facie* cogency problems of its own. Recall the very first step of the argument, (1) above: suffering is bad *per se*. Suffering is always *someone's* suffering - for a Mādhyamika anyway. It makes no sense for suffering to float free in mid air, as it were. So *whose* suffering is it that is bad *per se*? The answer is simply that anyone's suffering is bad, no matter whose. Once this has been granted, the rest of the argument is, in fact, otiose. Of course all bad things should be eliminated if possible. But as now becomes clear, when properly spelled out, (1) just smuggles into the argument the very conclusion to be established, and so begs the question.

7. What is at Stake?

Of course, there is much more to be said about all three of the interpretations we have spelled out. And we do not rule out the possibility that there are other possible interpretations as well. Indeed, in the last analysis, the two halves of the text may simply be at odds with each other. But the aim of this introduction is not to settle the question of which, if any, of these interpretations is the correct one (or to develop detailed exegesis of the text). That matter gets taken up in a number of the chapters that follow. Let us just close by commenting on what is at stake in choosing between these readings.

The meditational reading gives ethics a kind of subjective flavor. That is, on this view, the role of these verses is to transform the way one sees others, and the nature of one's moral experience, not by giving reasons for seeing others in a new way, but by inducing a moral gestalt shift, presuming that that shift is salutary.

The two more analytical readings give ethics a more objective flavor, arguing (in different ways) that reason itself determines that one should adopt this proper ethical standpoint. One should remember that most Buddhist thought is framed by soteriological intentions and functions. This suggests another distinction between two views of ethical cultivation. On the meditational reading, ethics is a matter of spiritual practice, to be cultivated through meditation. On the two analytical readings, ethical sensibility is to be developed through argument and analysis.

Now, these are not, of course, mutually exclusive. The standard account of personal cultivation in the Buddhist tradition is the three-stage process of study, analysis and meditation, with analysis as the necessary mechanism for ascertaining and clarifying the views one encounters in study, and meditation as the mechanism for internalizing those views and rendering them operative in engagement with the world.

In choosing between the two analytic readings, two issues seem central. First, there is the question of the degree of continuity or discontinuity between early Buddhist *abhidharma* thought and Śāntideva's or his editor's own thought. If one takes Śāntideva's Madhyamaka to be a continuous development of the ideas articulated in the *abhidharma*,

the first reading is more plausible. If one takes his view to be part of a radical critique of that tradition, the second is more plausible. And indeed, it is therefore not surprising that commentators likely to thematize the divide between the Mahāyāna and earlier schools, and to valorize the later, tend to adopt the second reading. It may be useful to keep that agenda in mind.

Secondly, one way to think of what is at issue between the two argumentative interpretations is a question of *onus probandum*. On the *abhidharma* reading, the reasons to be prudent are obvious; the burden of proof is on the ethicist to show why one should be moral. On the rationality reading, moral considerations are, by default, universal and motivating; self-interest requires justification. This debate is familiar in Western ethics as well. How one thinks it should come out might well incline one to one reading over the other.

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