

# Understanding the Basis of Buddhist Morality: A Hermeneutical Examination of Śāntideva's Śikṣā-samuccaya

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## Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the foundations of Buddhist morality through an analysis of Śāntideva's Śikṣā-samuccaya. In this exploration, Śāntideva's teachings are shown to transcend traditional Western ethical frameworks by centering on a compassionate, embodied approach to moral discipline. This model contrasts with conventional rationalist perspectives, offering an ethical path that prioritizes collective well-being over individual salvation. The text as a whole emphasizes virtues such as humility, self-discipline, and mindful renunciation of harmful behaviors, advocating for an ethics grounded in character development and self-reflection, though not without its limitations. Through the ideal of the Bodhisattva, Śāntideva's work presents a framework for moral discipline that integrates the mind and body, viewing morality as both a mental and physical endeavor. The aim of this study is to highlight specific practices Śāntideva outlines for cultivating virtues aligned with Buddhist ethical goals,

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such as compassion, equanimity, and non-attachment, guiding practitioners toward enlightenment. This holistic approach develops virtues through lived experience, embodying compassion as a central principle. The central argument of this study is that Buddhist ethics, particularly as expressed via its articulation in the Śikṣā-samuccaya, challenges dominant ethical paradigms by offering a distinctively embodied approach to morality. The research methodology used is that of critical analysis of the existing interpretive frameworks in this regard, with the objective of demonstrating how, by emphasizing compassion over abstraction, Śāntideva provides an alternative moral framework that speaks to contemporary issues of ethical inclusivity and collective responsibility. Ultimately, this paper suggests that Śikṣā-samuccaya offers insights into how virtue and compassion can shape ethical behavior and that Śāntideva's virtue-based approach remains relevant for rethinking moral development in a global context increasingly focused on shared human welfare.

**Keywords:** *Bodhisattva ideal, Buddhist ethics, compassion, moral discipline, Śikṣā-samuccaya*

## Introduction

The Śikṣā-samuccaya (SS) [1]—also known as the ‘Training Anthology’ (Goodman, 2016) or ‘A Compendium of Buddhist Doctrine’ (Śikṣā Samuccaya, 1971), with the more accurate translation being ‘A Compendium of Ethical Training’—was written by Śāntideva, a monk from North India. His other work, the Bodhicaryāvatāra [2]—also translated as ‘Introduction to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life [3]—is the primary reason for his fame. A Mādhyamika philosopher from the early eighth century CE, Śāntideva expands on the school’s central concept of *sūnyatā* (emptiness) in the SS to show how it has applications in everyday life.

By establishing discipline for monks, nuns, and laypeople to aid them in their journey of the attainment of Bodhisattva-hood, Śāntideva sheds light on an individual's journey from imperfection to the realization of *prajñā-pāramitā* (the perfection of wisdom) through his depiction of the figure of the Bodhisattva in this treatise. In terms of behaviour, wisdom—which is philosophically defined as the cessation of all erroneous conceptions of reality—is upheld as an ethical ideal that is marked by compassion and selflessness. In addition to focusing on this ideal, in this treatise Śāntideva also examines the several stages of accomplishment that a novice Bodhisattva must go through in order to realize wisdom (Bastien, 1982, p. iii).

The Śikṣā-samuccaya thus entails a compilation or collection of the Buddha's teachings, or doctrine. This text is a beautiful verse summary of the spiritual path of the Mahayana form of Buddhism, along with its unique doctrines and many of its most potent meditation techniques. The treatise is divided into three sections: firstly, the twenty-seven memorial or root verses that make up the *kārikās*, which together form the text; secondly, a commentary that explains the text of the *kārikās*, which is divided into nineteen chapters (called *parichhedas*); and thirdly, the authoritative sources from the Buddhist sutras. Almost the entire book is covered by the volume of citations from Buddhist sutras. These excerpts are from a little more than a hundred different works (Vaidya, 1961, p. vii). Among the six widely accepted *pāramitās*, the first four are dealt with in the SS (forming distinct chapters of their own).

A general hermeneutical examination of the text is the subject matter of the present study due to two reasons. Firstly,

there seems to be a dearth of Indian philosophical scholarship engaging with this text in particular. Secondly, even a preliminary study of Buddhist ethics in general offers what seems to be an interesting alternative, a more embodied and compassion-based paradigm that could help us reshape the existing Western liberal-rational framework of morality that has systematically been excluding the marginalized for ages. And hence the aim at large would be to arrive at conclusions in line with our initial understanding here, hopefully resulting in a relevant ethical theory that serves the need of our times.

It becomes important however, to resolve a contradiction that might arise even before one attempts this study, making a clarification necessary. One could argue that by accepting the Mādhyamika philosophy, which holds that all things are devoid of intrinsic existence, Śāntideva is implying that nothing, not even virtues, can have inherent value. This can be contended by arguing that one can differentiate between intrinsic value—value that is dependent on an object's non-relational qualities—and intrinsic value in the sense of having value 'as an end,' that is, being valuable in and of itself rather than only serving as a tool for a more fundamental kind of value. A Mādhyamika metaphysics of emptiness is clearly at odds with only the first type of intrinsic value. It is however, the second understanding which best captures Śāntideva's view of virtue (Harris, 2024, p. 27), which this paper thus will be adhering to henceforth. The second section of the paper hereafter, serves as an introduction to the text Śikṣā-samuccaya by Śāntideva, also providing some larger context as groundwork for the questions that this essay seeks to raise. The third and final section will bring it all together by attempting a hermeneutical exercise of understanding the

text both in its own context and in terms of its relevance to the discourse around morality and what Buddhist ethics can be in this day and age.

## **Śāntideva's Śikṣā-samuccaya: Text and context**

Śāntideva is widely acknowledged to have existed between 685 and 763 CE; however, it is Embar Krishnamacharya who provides one of the strongest arguments we have for this chronology by noting that Śāntarakṣita, another Buddhist philosopher, repeats an entire line from the Bodhicaryāvatāra in his Tattvasiddhi (Goodman, 2016, p. ix).

The majority of the material in the Śikṣā-samuccaya is taken from other Mahayana scriptures, many of which are no longer available in their original Sanskrit. Śāntideva's Compendium thus pulls from over a hundred texts, making this work considerably a lens through which to view the wide range of Mahayana scriptures, or sutras, while also allowing us to acknowledge their diversity. This text in particular explains significant facets of Mahayana ethics, including the nature of moral concepts, the Bodhisattva path's characteristics, and the connection between morality and other Mahayana philosophical viewpoints, through these quotations, the author's commentary, and his twenty-seven verses (*kārikās*). Consequently, the SS has been referred to as a 'major primary source for Mahayana Buddhist ethics' in addition to being an exceptionally rich source of information on the writings that practitioners of the Mahayana considered canonical in seventh-century India (Clayton, 2006, p. 2).

The portrayal of the Bodhisattva that arises from the teachings of Śāntideva offers a remarkable example of

human greatness that is accessible to people from all cultural backgrounds. The Bodhisattva's compassion knows no bounds; they are calmly introspective and thoughtful, unrelentingly giving and passionate, and they perceive with piercing insight the emptiness of everything. According to Śāntideva, their virtues allow them to respond to difficult situations with skill, are highly beneficial to human development, and are admired by both humans and gods (Harris, 2024, p. 21).

Asking how this ideal Buddhist practitioner, the Bodhisattva, behaves thus sets the stage for the investigation of the Śikṣā-samuccaya. Answering this topic involves following the moral evolution of a Bodhisattva and taking into account the moral weight and status of the perfections (*pāramitās*), various moral goods or values (such as the *brahmavihāras*), and the relative moral weight of monastic rules or precepts. Following this, it is explained how the Bodhisattva is expected to embody these perfections, rules, and values in their actions; specifically, it highlights the situations where Bodhisattvas are said to have broken moral laws (Clayton, 2006, p. 3).

To establish a clearer distinction before moving further in this regard, one can make use of Jay Garfield's compelling parallel that perhaps provides the greatest explanation of the connection between the two essential works of Śāntideva that have been discussed thus far. In passing, he said that the Śikṣā-samuccaya is similar to a diverse course pack with additional readings, and the Bodhicaryāvatāra is similar to a university course textbook. What's the course topic in terms of this analogy? Obviously, the road that goes from the reactivity and confusion of everyday life to the bliss, clarity, and compassion of Awakening is what

Śāntideva intends to teach. Śāntideva, in fact, thus aims not just to impart to us an academic grasp of the way Buddhism views that spiritual path. In addition, he also wants to provide us with useful practical skills for overcoming roadblocks and spur us on to keep going despite challenges (Goodman, 2016, p. xii).

## **Importance in the overarching Buddhist ethical paradigm**

The idea of *Tathāgata-garbha*, which maintains that every sentient being possesses the essence of Buddha-hood, is the conceptual cornerstone of the Bodhisattva ideal. In this theory, the common metaphysical substance of all creatures, their equal status, their universal good, and their universal Buddha-hood are professed, along with the realization and perception of the Essence of Buddha-hood in all living beings without exception. The Bodhisattva pursues this by achieving realization of *pudgala-nairātmya* (the selflessness of individual souls) and *dharmā-nairātmya* (the selflessness of entities). The Bodhisattva likewise approaches āsrava-kṣaya-jñāna (knowledge of the path of cessation) through their focus on *praññā-pāramitā* but then chooses to skip the last phase in order to free all beings. Having transcended birth, old age, illness, and death, they thus achieve *śūnyatā* and clarity.

In this context, a Bodhisattva can be likened to a philanthropist who distributes food to others, as opposed to *srāvakaś*, who eat it alone. In various Buddhist Sanskrit literary passages, the Bodhisattvas are declared to be immensely superior to the elder *srāvakaś*, and the Mahayanists credit this to their altruistic motivations. A Bodhisattva assists all beings in achieving both the more material benefits of happiness and

well-being in the world (*sukha*) as well as the spiritual objective of *nirvāṇa* (the highest state of enlightenment that a person can attain). Thus, in this model, a more compassionate goal replaces the austere unworldliness of the previous ideal.

This explicates why *prajñā* and *mahākaruṇā*, or the Highest Wisdom and Great Compassion, are the dual endowments of a Bodhisattva. Hence, it can be argued that in Mahayana Buddhism overall, compassion and wisdom are both valued equally. Manjusri is invoked in the opening verses of various Mahayana treatises because, in Mahayana literature, he is the embodiment of wisdom. The Mādhyamika school's works are the pinnacle of the exaltation of wisdom, which is seen in this school of thought as being somewhat more significant than compassion. Later Mahayana, however, places more emphasis on compassion, which is symbolized by Avalokiteśvara in Mahayana literature. This shift makes Mahayana more moral than argumentative as a tradition overall.

## **Interpretations from within normative western ethical frameworks**

Even though Śāntideva's explanation of morality differs greatly from Aristotle's explanation of virtue and the good life, it is considered to be a uniquely Buddhist conception of moral virtue in the West. Other interpretations of it include consequentialism (propounded by the likes of Charles Goodman) and Jay Garfield's moral phenomenological perspective. While each of these interpretations captures part of the essence of Śāntideva's method, they are all symptoms of a perilous hermeneutic temptation to fit Buddhist ethics into a Western mold (Garfield, 2010, p. 335). Restricting ourselves to the most

recent work on this text by Stephen Harris, however, it can be said that the two prominent interpretations of Śāntideva's ethics—the consequentialist interpretation of Goodman and the phenomenological interpretation of Garfield—do not conflict with the idea that he was a theorist of virtue. Since virtues benefit their possessor, in part by shielding him from the suffering of disordered emotions, virtue is a key element of Śāntideva's view of well-being. This is supported by the methods Śāntideva employs to develop virtue throughout his SS, chief among them being the use of the perfections as counteragents to eradicate the pathological emotions (Harris, 2024, p. 22).

However, even from these significantly differing interpretations, a way to see the SS on its own merit does emerge, i.e., instead of attempting to fit it into any one western normative ethical framework, when looked at holistically rather, one cannot but agree regarding the uniqueness of Śāntideva's descriptions of many virtuous mental states as well as the virtues that the Bodhisattva acquires as they train to consistently react to the environment in ways that result in the greater good of all (Harris, 2024, p. 24), culminating in *nirvāṇa* for all.

That being said, while the Śikṣā-samuccaya presents viewpoints that religious practitioners and some modern scholars find compelling and hence should attempt to salvage to the best of their abilities, one must also acknowledge that it also presents viewpoints that many of us would find quite troubling, particularly its hierarchical categorization of bodily distinctions. It accepts for males to be superior to women, for example, and for animals to be superior to high castes. An analysis of the SS thus involves a hermeneutics of suspicion as well as recovery, indicating how a sophisticated, brilliant, and often problematic

discourse on bodies can provide intellectual resources to modern practitioners and scholars dedicated to a human-diverse flourishing vision (Mrozik, 2007, p. 8).

## **Philosophy and the World: An Extra-Diegetic Reading**

It would certainly be fair to presume that monastic Bodhisattvas are evidently the target audience of this text; however, we know that they are not the only ones. Monastic practices like abstaining from sensual pleasures—including having sex with one's own spouse—are occasionally encouraged for even householder Bodhisattva aspirants too. Hence, modern common perceptions of Mahayana Buddhism as a tradition geared largely towards laypeople are certainly at odds with the Śikṣā-samuccaya's advocacy for a monastic Bodhisattva lifestyle. A monastic lifestyle, as opposed to a lay one, is promoted by numerous other specimens of South Asian Mahayana literature as well, and hence analyzing the functioning of this institution in and of itself becomes important before advancing any arguments about the same (Mrozik, 2007, p. 5).

Even more overarchingly, during the first millennium, North India, like all societies where the plough is the primary method of agriculture, was a patriarchal society. High-status men controlled the majority of the wealth, power, and opportunities in that culture. Customary law treatises emphasized women's reliance on male protection and urged wives to submit to their husbands in a servile manner. Many Indian religious professionals, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, joined in the upholding of patriarchy, tinged with harsh and strident notes of ascetic misogyny, due to the widespread practice and enormous

emphasis of celibacy (*brahma-cārya*). Additionally, Buddhist monks tried to employ aversion even when faced with a pious group of laywomen who respected them, due to any kind of sexual contact being forbidden, by using extreme means like that of meditation on foulness (*asubha-bhāvanā*) of female bodies to suppress sexual attraction.

Fortunately, the very progressive beliefs that women have a spiritual potential that is entirely equal to that of men and that the distinction between males and females is only customary and not fundamentally established do help to counterbalance the terrible propensity toward misogyny in this school of thought overall. With their deeper socio-historical roots, these teachings could perhaps help give rise to the feminist and egalitarian Buddhism that is currently attempting to emerge in the modern age as well.

Despite that though, in the larger Indian civilization, patriarchy was by no means the sole kind of unfair hierarchy. The SS regularly mentions the many forms of the old four-caste system (*varṇa*), which was a ubiquitous social reality (Goodman, 2016, p. xxiii). It seems that being loyal to the Buddhist faith did not shield Indians from harboring disdain for individuals categorized as “untouchables.” Conversely, untouchables are frequently mentioned in the SS in a somewhat more positive light, as examples of the humility that Bodhisattvas should strive to cultivate (Goodman, 2016, p. xxv).

All these aspects lead us to the only important philosophical context when looking at this text, that of rejecting monistic and monotheistic intellectual currents. Contrary to common belief, Buddhists in India accepted the existence of many gods

without hesitation, but they largely gave these gods a small and unimpressive place in their religious practices and beliefs. Because of this very minor role that the gods play, hardly any of the basic truth claims of the Buddhist tradition would be brought into doubt if the gods vanished. Even though it was discouraged for Indian Buddhists to worship the gods, it's possible that many of them had aspirations to become gods upon rebirth. This type of rebirth is mentioned several times in the SS as one of the potential outcomes of good deeds.

Furthermore, three cosmogonical categories of god-realms (as also mentioned in the chapter in focus) can be distinguished here: those belonging to the world of desire, realms of form, and formless realms (which, along with mentions of the seven-tiered heaven and hell, could perhaps be seen as informed by commonplace mythological treatises in the South Asian context). The *karmic* outcome of generosity, moral discipline, and the practice of the four *brahmavihāras* is divine rebirth within the world of desire, which is marked by an abundance of sensual pleasures. Thus, in many respects, the SS does reflect the values and beliefs of the surrounding, predominately non-Buddhist community from which it originated, and hence its desire to be applicable to all regardless of them already being a practicing Buddhist or not can certainly be credibly accounted for (Goodman, 2016, p. xxvi).

### **What sets SS apart from other such moral accounts**

**B**uddhist ethics research more frequently centers on the heart-mind (*citta*), characterizing ethical development as the cultivation of desired affective and cognitive traits like wisdom

and compassion. Buddhist traditions acknowledge that there is no clear-cut distinction between a living thing's moral and physical aspects; thus, morality and the body are closely intertwined in this schema (Mrozik, 2007, p. 3). Despite these implications, bodies are rarely given considerable attention in studies of Buddhist ethics. This oversight has been made for a number of reasons. Part of the problem probably stems from the more culturally authoritative currents in Western thought's propensity to draw a clear division between the body and the mind. But the ethical rhetoric of Buddhism itself points us toward the heart-mind. It specifically draws our attention to *cetanā*. Translated, it can be seen as referring to intention, motive, volition, or will. This supplements the common knowledge that Buddhist traditions place a high value on considering an individual's intentions or reasons when assessing their acts but do so at the expense of the embodied aspects of such an ethical process (Mrozik, 2007, p. 4).

This is why it becomes important to challenge widespread misconceptions in research on Buddhism and Buddhist ethics that say South Asian Buddhists place minimal significance on their bodies, with the exception of Tantric or Vajrayana practitioners. This line of argumentation can somewhat be supported by original Buddhist writing from South Asia, where bodies are often described as transient, vile, and devoid of any fundamental, everlasting nature. However, because of this, the majority of South Asian Buddhists were also negatively thought to give little thought to their bodies, according to scholarly conclusions—an assumption that can be seen to have two issues.

Firstly, having a negative conversation about bodies does not indicate that one is uninterested in them. Conversely, it

indicates a profound curiosity with bodies. Secondly, Buddhist literature contains a variety of body discourses. We discover a positive narrative that emphasizes the inseparable relationship between body and morality alongside a negative discourse that portrays bodies as transient, vile, and devoid of intrinsic and everlasting essence. This uplifting conversation emphasizes the vital role that bodies play in one's own and others' ethical development. The discourse surrounding bodies that is negative can be hence referred to as 'ascetic discourse,' and the speech surrounding them that is favorable as 'physio-moral discourse.' It is safe to say that within the Śikṣā-samuccaya, both can be found (Mrozik, 2007, p. 6). This is why it can be posited that this text can be a good starting point for perhaps developing an alternative embodied and compassion-based Indian ethical paradigm, in opposition to the more seemingly neutral and abstraction-focused Western mainstream framework, which seeks to hierarchize bodies and effectively exclude all those who don't conform to its unspoken ideals.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Śāntideva's presentation of teachings in the Śikṣā-samuccaya does not indicate what exactly marks the purpose of beginning a Bodhisattva lifestyle, which certainly explains the diversity of interpretations that have emerged to account for it. On its own though, the Bodhisattva certainly is, in a strict sense, an ideal being with unwavering resolution whose actions and services originate from the high virtue of *prajñā-pāramitā*, or knowledge of *śūnyatā*. However, it is because *śūnyatā* and wisdom transcend barriers and distinctions that this noble goal is kept from being too distant from the average individual.

Hence, by proving that the ordinary and the ideal are significantly connected, Śāntideva effectively grounds his ideals in the everydayness of ordinary life, making this ethical theory much more accessible than its average classical Western mainstream counterparts. This connection is based on the notion that anybody can make progress toward ultimate collective enlightenment by developing oneself to be able to will it for others as well. The ability to reach into the imperfect world and make an impression there is the test of the ideal, despite the fact that it is extremely sublime and appears to be far away. Overall, the SS thus effectively establishes what it sets out to do, which is proving, as Śāntideva so eloquently demonstrates, that the wisdom of the Bodhisattva is an ethical ideal that must be pursued (Bastien, 1982, p. 101).

The above instantiations lend further credence to the central argument of this paper—that in the model of ethical conduct prescribed in the SS, if there even exists any hierarchization between the mind (reason) and the body (actions) when it comes to which takes precedence, it is definitely the latter (with compassion replacing reason as being the highest ideal instead). This makes it all the more important for us to look for a way to characterize this kind of morality as something that lies beyond the limited liberal-rational frameworks of thought, which seek to only largely abstractive and universalize the whole process of moral reasoning.

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