

"How About a Little Something for the Effort?" The Significance of Merit and Merit Transfer in Śāntideva's

Morality"1

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The weight of scholarly effort to date within the study of Indian Buddhist ethics has leaned heavily toward understanding Pāli literature as interpreted in the Theravāda tradition.<sup>2</sup> This paper attempts to redress that imbalance by examining the moral thought of the 7th century Indian Mahāyāna thinker, Śāntideva. Specifically, I focus on the nature of merit (*puṇya*) and the function of merit transfer (*pariṇāmanā*) in Śāntideva's Compendium of Teachings (*Śikṣāsamuccaya*). I will suggest that for Śāntideva, the bodhisattva's capacity to cultivate and transfer merit is the key difference between the Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna,<sup>3</sup> and propose that this emphasis on merit signifies a difference between Śāntideva and some non-Mahāyāna traditions in their understanding of the role and nature of karma. Finally, I reflect on the nature of Buddhist moral theory,<sup>4</sup> and suggest that the importance of merit making and merit transfer in Buddhism problematizes, but does not negate, the claim that Buddhism is a form of virtue ethics.

To understand the context for Śāntideva's views on merit, we will begin with a brief summary of the bodhisattva path as outlined in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*. The bulk of the text consists of quoted passages from over one hundred Mahāyāna scriptures, as well as twenty-seven verses and some commentary by Śāntideva, all arranged in nineteen chapters. Through these quotations and verses, Śāntideva outlines a systematic path for

becoming a *bodhisattva*. This process begins by first reflecting on the fact that since all beings dislike fear and suffering, there is no basis for privileging one's own suffering above others. It is then argued that if one wants to end this suffering, which all experience, one should establish *bodhicitta*, the aspiration for awakening (K. 2; ŚS 2: 13,14).<sup>5</sup> With that, one can embark on the bodhisattva path proper, which consists of guarding, purifying, and cultivating (*rakṣā*, *śuddhi*, *vardhana*), respectively, three phenomena: one's self, one's possessions, and one's welfare (*ātmabhāva*, *bhoga*, *śubha*).<sup>6</sup> Essentially, this nine-fold process focuses on three tasks: first *rakṣā*, guarding oneself from attaining unwholesome and harmful qualities and habits; second *śuddhi*, purifying oneself of such qualities and habits, and finally *vardhana*, cultivating one's merit (*puṇya*) in order to dedicate it to the benefit of others (*pariṇāmanā*). Unlike other descriptions of becoming a *bodhisattva*, the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* includes but does not emphasize the importance of the perfections, which are more prominently featured in Śāntideva's other, more well-known text, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Despite this, in overall structure and content it appears that the *bodhisattva* path proceeds in more or less the same way in both of Śāntideva's texts, with the cultivation and transference of merit as the culmination of the bodhisattva path in both.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* it would seem that for Śāntideva, the capacity to cultivate and transfer merit is in fact what distinguishes the Greater Vehicle from that of the Hearers (Śrāvakayāna). To understand this perspective we need to look at the meaning of merit (*puṇya*).

Lance Cousins' (1996) analysis of this term, which was based on Pāli canonical sources and commentaries, indicates that *puṇya* refers to something "fortunate" or "happy," as well as to "an act which

brings good fortune" or "to the happy result in the future of such an act" (1996: 10). To reflect this sense of the positive "ripening" (*vipāka*) of the karma of actions, and to avoid the connotation of something being deserved,<sup>8</sup> Peter Harvey translates *puṇya* as something "karmically fruitful," "karmic fruition" or "a karmically fruitful act" (2000: 18). Its opposite, *apuṇya*, together with the synonym *pāpa*, refers to an act or the consequence of an act which is karmically unfruitful and leads to harmful or unhappy results, or the characteristic of unfruitfulness and misfortune. In reviewing the function of *puṇya* in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, we can see that this understanding of *puṇya* fits well with Śāntideva's use. For example, *puṇya* is used synonymously with *śubha*, which means "good fortune," "auspiciousness," or "happiness" (ŚS 146. 21; BR 14; 146, 253; s.a. Clayton 2001: 77). *Puṇya* is also talked about as something that can be accumulated or 'heaped': for example, when a *bodhisattva* gives a gift, or offers the teaching of the *Dharma*, this is said to bring a 'great mass of *puṇya*' (*bahu puṇya-skandha*) (351.15,16; BR 311; s.a 275.13; BR 252;). This of course makes sense if we think of *puṇya* as the 'good fortune' or 'fruitful consequences' of the *bodhisattva*'s actions. It is also evident that for Śāntideva the essence of protecting (*rakṣā*) *puṇya* is *bodhipariṇāmanā*, the transference of merit—the fortunate results of one's deeds—to all beings, for the sake of their awakening (158.6; BR 156). Since the motive behind an act determines to a large extent the amount of karmic benefit that arises, naturally if the motive is to give the benefits to others, the karmic fortune will be 'protected.' Similarly, *puṇya* is purified (*śuddhi*) through "actions whose essence is emptiness and compassion" (K. 21b).<sup>9</sup> In Śāntideva's thought there could be no purer basis for any deed than an understanding of emptiness and the concern to alleviate suffering.

Consequently, at the culmination of the bodhisattva path, when the bodhisattva has fully realized the truth that being conditioned and impermanent, the self is the same as the other (*parātmāsamatā*), and that therefore the suffering of others is the same as one's own, then Śāntideva asserts that the benefits of the bodhisattva's deeds "arise infinitely" or "endlessly,"<sup>10</sup> At this point the transference or dedication of *puṇya* to help other beings "happens completely."<sup>11</sup> So, for Śāntideva, *puṇya* or merit refers to fortunate acts or their results, and capacity to share or transfer merit to others is a key characteristic of a *bodhisattva*.

However, it is when we come to think seriously about the implications of the idea of "transferring merit,"<sup>12</sup> or "sharing karmic fruition" (*pariṇāmanā*) that we see apparent differences between the role and understanding of *puṇya* in Śāntideva's work and the primarily Pāli-based literature on Buddhist ethics. Such differences are highlighted when we consider the claim that the *arhat* has 'passed beyond' and 'abandoned' *puṇya* (Pāli *puñña*) and *pāpa* (see Harvey 2000: 43). Such statements are made in the *Suttanipāṭṭa* (Sn 520, 636, 790), one of the oldest books of the Pāli canon, and appears to represent a certain way of understanding the nature of karma and the *arahat* in the Theravāda tradition.<sup>13</sup> The contrast with what must be Śāntideva's view of *puṇya* becomes clear when we look at how this assertion has been interpreted. Using primarily canonical sources, Peter Harvey offers two explanations. At one level, he suggests, it refers to the fact that actions for the *arahat*<sup>14</sup> are all spontaneously wholesome, and he or she does not deliberate with regard to what is right or wrong. Because there is no clinging to, or no thought of, the karmic results of actions, the *arahat* is in this way "beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*."<sup>15</sup> Yet there is a second, more significant sense in which the *arahat* has gone beyond

*puñña* and *pāpa*. This is that the actions of the *arahat* actually do not bear any good or bad karmic fruit, because only actions conditioned by craving are thought to have any karmic result (S.V. 86-87, cited in Harvey 2000: 44). Since the *arahat* is beyond craving, he does not do any karmically "productive" actions, good or bad, and so goes beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*. Another way of understanding this is that if one is following the Buddhist path and is striving for *nirvāṇa*, then one's skilful (*kuśala*) deeds—those motivated by non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion—will ultimately lead to the future cessation of karma (good or bad) in the sense that they lead one to a point where karma, and thus rebirth, ends (A.I. 134-5, 263).<sup>16</sup> As it states in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (III. 108):

There are three causes for the arising of *kamma*: non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. The *kamma* done with one of these, caused by it, arising out of it, is skilful, not blameworthy, and brings happiness (*sukha-ṅipāka*); it conduces to the destruction of *kamma*, not the arising of *kamma*. (trans. Gombrich 1997: 53)

I take this to mean the following. For one who is not yet an *arahat* (including Stream-entrants or other *Ariya-puggalas*), who still has some degree of craving and traces of the "three fires" (*trividhāgni*) of greed, hatred and delusion, acts that are motivated by non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion are *puñña*, meritorious or karmically fruitful. They are also conducive to the eventual cessation of karma altogether. This is the state of *nirvāṇa*: "that stopping of bodily action, verbal action and mental action by which one touches freedom" (S.IV.i32-3; cf A.III.415, cited in Harvey 2000: 44).<sup>17</sup> For the *arahat*, karma ceases, *puñya* and *pāpa* are

overcome, and thus there is no more rebirth.<sup>18</sup> This is the more significant sense in which *puṇya* is transcended.

One can find a similar understanding of *puṇya* in the *Abhidharma* literature as well. For example, the view that the *arahat* is beyond *puñña* is explained in the fourth chapter of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (ABKb), in which Vasubandhu says that there is a type of wholesome or healthy karma (*kuśala-karma*) that does not lead to any kind of consequence or ripening (*vipāka*). This kind of healthy karma is achieved when one has completely eradicated the "intoxications" or "contaminations" (*āsrava*) of sense-desire (*kāma*), craving for continued existence (*bhava*), misunderstanding (*avidyā*) and opinions (*dṛṣṭi*). When this is achieved, wisdom (*prajñā*) is fully realized and the person's actions are no longer considered karma, because their actions are not the cause of future consequences (*vipāka-hetu*) (ABK 2: 57 in Hayes 1994: 24, 25, 33). Because such a person generates no more karma, once his present karma is used or burnt up he is liberated from the cycle of rebirth. In this way, only people who lack wisdom, the so-called "foolish masses" (*pṛthagjana*), perform deeds motivated by the desire for happiness and pleasure of the senses (ABKb 3: 28). These deeds are called meritorious or fruitful (*puṇya-karma*). All such actions are considered healthy or skilful in some way (*kuśala*), since only skilful actions lead to pleasant results. Yet, not all skilful actions are karmically fruitful, because as we have seen the acts of an *arahat* who has wisdom produce no karmic ripening, fruitful or not (Hayes 1994: 25). As we can see in a certain type of karmic discourse in both the Pāli canonical tradition and *Abhidharma* of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, *puṇya* is understood to be necessary, but not sufficient for realizing *nirvāṇa*. *Puṇya* is

essential because it is through "good karma" that one is reborn as a human and in a situation which will allow one the opportunity to study *Dharma*. However, since *nirvāṇa* is thought to be beyond all rebirth, the actions of an *arahat*, a liberated being, do not and cannot be thought to have the capacity to bring further karmic fruitfulness. Hence karmically fortunate acts—that is, acts which are essentially pure but still marred by traces of impurity (the *kleśas* or *āsravas*)—will tend to lead to happiness and to pleasant states, and even (as we saw in the Pāli material) lead to the cessation of karma. For these non-Mahāyāna traditions, though, *puṇya* is ultimately, in the highest state of liberation, transcended.

When we consider all of this in light of the understanding of *puṇya* in Śāntideva's work, a major doctrinal difference surfaces. For according to Śāntideva, by the time the bodhisattva has completed the stage of purification (the second of three stages), he is supposed to be cleansed of both any unfruitful actions (*pāpa*), and the impurities (*kleśas*): through realizing the emptiness of the person, he is supposed to have "cut them out by the root."<sup>19</sup> Consequently, his actions should not generate any more karmic ripening at all and he should, according to the canonical and abhidharmic views cited above, go beyond *puṇya*. But if so, in what way could he also be understood to build up infinite masses of 'merit' and then "dedicate it completely to the ripening of beings"? In other words, if an enlightened being is not supposed to have any capacity for karmic fruitfulness, how can there be bodhisattvas who endlessly create an abundance of karmic fruitfulness, which they then share with others?

If we look at how this issue has been dealt with in the scholarship on Indian Buddhist ethics, while we find an acknowledgement that the idea of dedicating or "sharing karmic fruition" is an important aspect of the ethics of the *bodhisattva*, there seems to be little discussion of the implications of this idea for understanding the workings of karma, and how it indicates a shift in the role of karmic fruition on the religious path.<sup>20</sup> It would seem that an explanation for this doctrinal discrepancy might be found in the scholarship on merit transfer or "dedicating karmic fruitfulness" (*pariṇāmanā*), since this idea is obviously closely associated with *puṅya*, and has been considered—perhaps problematically—a Mahāyāna development which later influenced Theravāda practice. A. L. Basham, for example, in discussing the evolution of the concept of the *bodhisattva*, associates it and the doctrine of merit transfer with the rise of the Mahāyāna in India.<sup>21</sup> However, as Minoru Hara (1994) has shown, many different forms of sharing merit occur in Hindu traditions, and within Buddhism Gregory Schopen's scholarship has thrown into question the idea that merit transfer was ever a strictly Mahāyāna phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> His work on donative inscriptions indicates that the notion of transferring merit goes back at least as far as the third century BCE, and that this was a Śrāvakayāna as well as Mahāyāna practice (1997: 35-43). Indeed, different types of merit transfer practices are found in the Pāli canon and commentaries. Such practices, called *pattidāna* by Pāli commentators, include dedicating gifts to the Saṅgha to benefit deceased relatives (*petas*) or gods (*devas*), and resolving that one's good actions might yield benefit to oneself in future (Harvey 2000: 65f). However, aspiring to transfer the fruit of one's deeds to benefit another being—which is the widespread and characteristic Mahāyāna practice—is rare in the Pāli canon,<sup>23</sup> and the idea that



celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas can offer their merit to help sentient beings seems to be a uniquely Mahāyāna phenomenon. As Gombrich states, "[i]n early Buddhism, the Buddha was a saviour only in the sense that he taught the way to salvation. In the Mahāyāna, both Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* saved more directly, by transferring merit," (Gombrich 1997: 57). If he is correct when he goes on to suggest that the idea of transferring karma was crucial in turning Buddhism into a religion where one could be saved by others, then understanding *pariṇāmanā* will be central to understanding Mahāyāna ethics, and may indicate how views of karma and karmic fruition may have shifted over the course of Indian Buddhist history.<sup>24</sup>

The obvious doctrinal issue that arises in connection with merit transfer is its apparent contravention of karma theory, and the idea that the consequences of an action will be experienced by the person, or in the Buddhist case more particularly, the consciousness continuum (*citta-saṃtāna*), who (which?) committed the action. In attempting to explain this phenomenon, some scholars have suggested that the idea of transferring merit reflects a general "loosening" of the karma doctrine,<sup>25</sup> or is the logical outcome of the Mahāyāna doctrines of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and mind-only (*cittamātra*). As both Harvey (2000: 28) and Williams (1989: 208) point out, in a context in which all is understood to be empty and/or mind dependent, there are no inherent owners of karmic benefit. The transference of karmic fruitfulness is possible because it is "empty" and does not "really" or "ultimately" belong to a particular being, which is a fiction in any case. This helps us understand why the idea arose that one could "give away" or redirect *puṇya* for the benefit of someone else. However, this does not explain why, if a *bodhisattva* has overcome the delusion of self, and

eliminated the *kleśas* and *āsravas*, merit should continue to be generated at all, since according to the non—Mahāyāna traditions discussed above, actions that are pure and wholesome in this way are not supposed to lead to further karmic consequences, and are even said to lead to the cessation of karma. Furthermore, we need only consider that the above doctrinal explanation of merit transfer could equally, if not in a slightly different form, be generated from Theravāda views: that is, a Theravādin could equally well say that since persons (*pudgala*) and selves (*ātman*), like all composite phenomena, are conditioned and impermanent, they are not the inherent owners of anything, and thus the positive karmic consequences of actions can be "shared" because, like all conditioned arisings they do not 'belong' to anyone. On this analysis, one might understand the "transfer of merit" as simply a rather nice metaphor to indicate what happens to the effects of fruitful actions (*puṇya*)—so called "good karma"—when the illusion of self is overcome. Since both one's actions and their effects are no longer understood to be owned, they are "shared," and in this sense an awakened being can give away his or her "merit."<sup>26</sup> But this leads us back to the original problem, for if merit transfer is based in the idea of no-self in this way, then why is it that *arahats* in the Theravāda tradition are understood to overcome or by-pass karma and its consequences, whereas *bodhisattvas* in the Mahāyāna accumulate and share it without limit?

One explanation of this doctrinal development is offered by Nagao Gadjin. In an essay on the "Usages and Meanings of *Parīṇāmanā*," Nagao (1991) points out that the use of this phrase in Mahāyāna texts indicates that merit could be "transferred" or "directed" towards full awakening, or in certain instances for the purpose of

"coming back" to the world of *saṃsāra*. In both cases, the implication is that the bodhisattva directs his karmic benefits away from his own personal gain and towards the welfare of others—one by becoming a fully awakened being, the other by remaining in the world of sentient beings. As an example of the latter, he cites Vasubandhu's commentary on a passage from the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra* (XX–XXI, verse 11) in which it is said that a *bodhisattva* at the fourth stage (*bhūmi*) "transfers the [thirty-seven] aids to enlightenment to *saṃsāra*." Sthiramati's commentary on this statement explains that this means that the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment are normally thought to be the cause for liberation from *saṃsāra*, but they can become the cause for being born again in *saṃsāra* if they are "embraced" (*parigṛhīta*) by the means (*upāya*) of compassion (Nagao 1991: 87).<sup>27</sup> Based on Sthiramati's understanding, Nagao suggests that *pariṇāmanā* is the method of "directing" merit by which bodhisattvas can decide to be reborn in the world to work for the benefit of beings. On this view, *pariṇāmanā* essentially reflects the intention behind fruitful actions that directs them to, or literally "bends" them towards (*pari + ṅam*), *saṃsāra* and sentient beings, or towards full awakening.

Explaining merit transfer in terms of intention in this way still leaves us with the following difficulty: if *puṇya* is a type of karmic consequence, and awakened beings who have eliminated all defilements surpass karma, how is it that a bodhisattva can keep accumulating it? Again, Nagao's discussion may offer a solution. He treats the problematic case of Śrāvakas 'converting' to the bodhisattva path: such beings, he points out, would have practised with the aim of getting out of the cycle of *saṃsāra*, and would have thus eliminated the

impurities (*kleśas*) which cause rebirth. This difficulty, and how it might be resolved, are described as follows

(italics mine):

Now, Śrāvaka who has trained himself in accordance with the Śrāvakayāna, has already eliminated *kleśas*, the cause for re-birth in this world. A bodhisattva, however, does not eliminate *kleśas* for the purpose of remaining in *saṃsāra*, that is, not entering into *nirvāṇa*..., *and his compassion is nothing but a sort of a kleśa retained by him*. Therefore, for the Śrāvakas who have been trained to always aspire for *nirvāṇa*, there is no way to be reborn in this world, except by means of *pariṇāmanā*. (Nagao 1991: 88).

Nagao's idea is thus that Śrāvakas "need" *pariṇāmanā* so that they can transfer or redirect the fruits of their practice away from liberation and toward the benefit of sentient beings, and then, being *bodhisattvas*, they can be reborn in *saṃsāra* by virtue of their compassion, which "is nothing but a sort of a *kleśa*" (!) Further to this, Nagao indicates that according to the same text (*Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*) a *bodhisattva* is thought to be reborn from a number of causes other than karma or *kleśas*, such as by the force of his vow (*praṇidhāna*), by force of his concentration (*samādhi*), or by force of a superhuman power (*vibhūti*) (Nagao 1991; 30, 31). All of these causes can be understood to reflect the bodhisattva's willingness to be born in the world of existence (*saṃcintya bhavopapatti*) out of his great compassion for sentient beings. It is in this way that the bodhisattva's compassion can be understood as a "sort of *kleśa*." That is, compassion functions like a defilement insofar as it keeps the bodhisattva in the *saṃsāric* world.

Though Nagao's account raises some troubling doctrinal questions,<sup>28</sup> if we accept it as having some explanatory power, we are in a position to compare Śāntideva's understanding of the notion of *puṇya* with that of the canonical and abhidharmic predecessors discussed above. We can see that while the meaning of *puṇya* is basically the same, the function appears to be very different. Like its Pāli equivalent, *puṇya* refers to karmic fruitfulness, but it is not something to be overcome or abandoned, but rather multiplied, since it equates to happiness and benefit for sentient beings. In this sense, it is not just a stepping stone on the road to liberation from *saṃsāra*, but, as the means by which a *bodhisattva* helps sentient beings, the end goal of his or her path. When a *bodhisattva* is cleansed of all impurities and contaminants, he does not by-pass merit but rather completely "transforms"<sup>29</sup> or redirects it (*pariṇāmayati*), and produces it without limit for the benefit of others. Implicit in the idea that the bodhisattva can produce merit limitlessly and dedicate it to benefit others is the view that their actions do produce a kind of ripening (*vipāka*), but, perhaps because of the association of karma with ordinary rebirth, these actions might not be called "karma" and the results cannot be called "*karma-vipāka*." We see this, for example, when the bodhisattva's development is described according to ten stages (*bhūmi*): at the seventh stage she is said to overcome birth by karma.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, it seems to me that while it initially appeared that there may be a different understanding of karma functioning in this process, in fact, the law of karma, though officially "empty," appears quite intact, at least in the following sense. If karma is essentially an intention (*cetanā*), as the Buddha reportedly held,<sup>31</sup> then the intention here is the will to remain in saṃsāric existence because of the "*kleśa* of compassion" for other beings. It is this karma, this intention, that

ripens into *puṇya*. In the form of happiness, benefit, and good fortune—as the kinds of things that alleviate suffering—*puṇya* is an essential part of the *bodhisattva's telos*.<sup>32</sup>

An enhanced role for *puṇya* in the Bodhisattvayāna thus makes good sense when we consider the *bodhisattva's* altruistic goals. It makes even more sense if we consider these goals in the context of the Mahāyāna understanding of the relationship between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The claim that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are "not different" was of course famously asserted by Śāntideva's predecessor, Nāgārjuna, and is one of the characteristic doctrines of the Mahāyāna tradition.<sup>33</sup> Since the traditions of the Pāli canon and *Abhidharma* did in fact view *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* as different realms, they held onto the goal of stopping or escaping *saṃsāra*, the world of rebirth. Because the Mahāyāna tradition equated the two, there was no need to stop *saṃsāra*, only the need to realize or recognize the reality of liberation within it, and then help alleviate suffering wherever it is found. *Puṇya* for the earlier, non-Mahāyāna tradition was ultimately problematic, because like any karma it kept one hooked in the rebirth cycle. For Śāntideva it would not present this problem, for the aim is not release from rebirth.<sup>34</sup> The only possible problem with *puṇya* would be the assumption—apparently made, as we have seen, in certain discourses of the non-Mahāyāna—that it represents actions motivated by some trace of impurity. Śāntideva seems not to have held such an idea, since we have seen that for him *puṇya* only increases once the *kleśas* have been eliminated.

The fact that Śāntideva thinks enlightened beings continue to accumulate *puṇya* may reflect the fact that Śāntideva, and other Mahāyānists, did not make a distinction between what James Egge (2002: 3f) calls

"sacrificial" and "purificatory" karma. Sacrificial acts are *puṇya* acts which lead to good consequences (such as good rebirth) and purificatory acts are *kuśala* acts which involve the "mental purification" of ignorance and desire, and so lead to *nirvāṇa*. He argues that there are passages in the Pāli canonical texts (as well as in commentaries and later Theravāda literature) which make this distinction, but there are others where these two types of deeds are both understood as forms of "good karma" (Egge 2002: 5). Thus, the idea that one must overcome *puṇya* to attain *nirvāṇa* may represent only one strain of thought in the Pāli literature.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that what we may be seeing in the Mahāyāna emphasis on accumulating, cultivating and sharing merit is a view of karma which collapses the distinction between *kuśala* and *puṇya* acts. On such a view of karma, and contrary to that found in the *Abhidharmakośa*, all meritorious or karmically fruitful (*puṇya*) acts would be skilful, and all skilful, "purificatory" (*kuśala*) actions would also yield merit (*puṇya*).

If this is the case, then the distinction we have outlined here between the Bodhisattvayāna and the Śrāvakayāna regarding the function of *puṇya* would reflect both a significant change in the understanding of the goal of spiritual life (Buddhahood vs. arahatship), and a shift in the understanding of karma. Whereas in the Pāli and *Abhidharma* texts examined here, *puṇya* is understood as something to be ultimately overcome by an awakened being, because it represents karmic ripening and therefore an involvement in or attachment to *saṃsāra*, in Śāntideva's Mahāyāna it is treated as something to be endlessly cultivated, since the happiness and good fortune that *puṇya* represents is the means by which the *bodhisattva* helps other beings.

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some comments on the implications of these observations for Buddhist moral theory. In recent years, beginning with Damien Keown's influential *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992), we have seen the ascendancy of the view that Buddhism might best be viewed as a form of virtue ethics (e.g., MacMillan 2002, Mroczic 2002, Whitehill 2000).<sup>36</sup> Overall, Śāntideva's description of the bodhisattva path seems to accord with this moral view insofar as the basis of character and behaviour norms in both Theravāda (as Keown's work has shown) and Śāntideva's Mahāyāna is the idea that one should cultivate certain skilful qualities (*kuśala-dharma*) which by their very nature instantiate the highest good for humans, awakening or *nirvāṇa*. The norms of behaviour found in the five precepts and other guidelines for virtuous conduct (*śīla*) found in the rules for monastics (*prātimokṣa*), the perfections (*pāramitās*) and practice of the "divine abodes" (*brahmavihāras*), can all be understood as practices which help one to cultivate these qualities and eliminate their opposite: the roots of unwholesomeness or unskilfulness (*akuśala-mūla*) (viz., greed, hatred and delusion). Because it is evident that the aims of these practices and guidelines is to have people be a certain way, or cultivate a type of character that is good, rather than do certain things that are right, they can both be described as virtue ethics, rather than deontological or utilitarian (see Rachels 1993: 160).

However, the moral landscape is more complicated than this, because there is evidence in Śāntideva's works that the model of a virtue ethic cannot fully account for the moral reasoning at work. For example, there are instances in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* where—in addition to compassion—maximizing benefit to sentient beings is the criterion by which actions are guided. For example, in deciding whether it is appropriate for a *bodhisattva*



'in-training' to give a gift to another *bodhisattva*, the novice *bodhisattva* is supposed to measure the relative level of skilfulness of himself and the recipient, and their respective capacities to help others, and choose the course of action that will least hinder whoever has the greater skilfulness and power to help.<sup>37</sup> This kind of injunction to measure who might be able to bring the most benefit to the most beings is also seen in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (V. 86,87), where Śāntideva says furthermore that a bodhisattva should not give up his life for someone else if the other person's disposition to compassion (*karuṇā-aśaya*) is not as pure as his own. But if the other person's disposition is as pure, he should give his life, as then there will be no loss (*na parihā*) (BCA V 86, 87).<sup>38</sup> It seems clear that the idea in these verses is that compassionate bodhisattvas are valuable beings not just because compassion is an inherently good quality—though no doubt it is—but also that compassionate bodhisattvas help sentient creatures, and the more highly developed or purer one's compassion, the more beings one can help, and the more benefit one can be. So if it comes to deciding whether or not to sacrifice one's life, one should think about what the overall benefit or loss to beings this will incur. This clearly indicates that determining right and wrong (or better and worse) actions is not simply a matter of having the right motive, but also of weighing consequences.

Finally—and to return to the subject of *punya*—another indication that there is more than just a virtue ethic at work is that what we might call a "hierarchy of merit" is an important factor in deciding one's course of action. In the Mahāyāna such an idea is apparent in the fact that *bodhisattvas* are in a sense "worth more" than other beings because they are greater or better "fields of merit" or "fields of karmic fruitfulness" (*punya-kṣetra*)

than other types of beings.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, of course, the Theravāda tradition also has the idea that there are varying amounts of merit associated with beings depending on their degree of spiritual accomplishment, which leads to the idea that the *Saṅgha* is a "field of merit," to which it is beneficial to donate. Such donations lead both to fruitful karmic results and spiritual benefits (Harvey 2000: 21,22).

In the notion that one should give to the *Saṅgha* or a *bodhisattva* rather than someone else because it will be more karmically "fruitful," we seem to see an obvious example of utilitarian-style reasoning, because the idea seems to be that one should try to maximize the karmic benefits of one's actions. That is, it is a consequentialist criterion for the best action, since karmic fruitfulness—and not the motives or any other intrinsic qualities of the action or agent—determine the right or best course of action. As with the example of the bodhisattva giving gifts, it is not only the generosity of the agent that matters, one also considers the karmic consequences and choose the recipient that will yield the best results.<sup>40</sup> This focus on the consequences of actions rather than the character of the agent of course do not fit well in a virtue tradition.

Thus merit, or karmic fruitfulness, makes the classification of Buddhist ethics more complex than we might like. Though Buddhist ethics would seem generally to fit well within the rubric of a virtue ethic, the kind of reasoning that attends considerations of merit, and the need or desire to maximize merit—and thus provide benefit or good fortune to sentient beings—brings a consequentialist criterion to Buddhist morality that makes the fit somewhat uncomfortable. As I have suggested elsewhere, Buddhist morality may best be considered a hybrid version of virtue ethics, in which the cultivation of an awakened character is the principal goal and

criterion for what is good and right, but which allows for the maximization of happy and fortunate consequences. This is true not only for ordinary, unenlightened strugglers on the path, but also, and in Śāntideva's view, especially for those bodhisattvas who have reached its end.

What I have tried to show in this paper, then, is that merit is significant for a number of reasons. For Śāntideva it is the ability to ceaselessly cultivate and dedicate or transfer karmic fruitfulness to others that is the mark of the *bodhisattva*, and what distinguishes the Mahāyāna from the 'lesser' vehicle of the Hearers. I proposed that this emphasis on accumulating and sharing merit is tied to the Mahāyāna spiritual goal of saving all sentient beings, along with an understanding of karma which failed to distinguish between *puṇya* and *kuśala* acts. For moral theorists, it is the impact of weighing and maximizing karmic fruitfulness, and the consequentialist reasoning that that entails, that undermines any easy classification of Buddhism as a virtue ethic.

## Endnotes

1. This paper is based upon my doctoral dissertation, "Ethics in the *ōikūàsamucaya*: A Study in Mahāyāna Morality" (2002, McGill University).
2. For example, the most cited monographs would include Peter Harvey's *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (2000), Damien Keown's *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992), Hammalawa Saddhatissa's *Buddhist Ethics* (1997[1970]), Winston King's *In the Hope of Nibbana* (1964), and S. Tachibana's *Ethics of Buddhism* (1926), all of which focus primarily if not exclusively on Pāli texts and Theravāda interpretations.

3. A *śrāvaka* ("hearer" or "disciple") is a follower of the Śrāvakayāna ("vehicle of the disciples"). These terms are used in Mahāyāna texts such as Śāntideva's to refer to non-Mahāyāna practitioners and their teachings (Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary [BHSD] 535). *Śrāvakas* are considered by Mahāyānists to be part of the Hīnayāna or "inferior vehicle" (BHSD 620). D. Seyfort Rugg (1992: 111-113) has recommended, and I concur, that modern scholars use the term "Śrāvakayāna" instead of "Hīnayāna" to designate pre or non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, because of the partisan and pejorative sense of the latter.

4. By "moral theory," I mean the systematic and rational reflection on morality. I use "morality" and "ethics" synonymously to refer to that system of values and customs concerned with notions of right and wrong, guilt and shame, good and bad, as well as normative guides to human conduct and character. I take it that the task of a moral theory, or philosophical ethics, is to outline the relationship between norms of conduct and character—that is, the kinds of motives, traits, and actions that are considered good or right—and "the good" defined in terms of the overall well-being of humans (Clayton 2001, 37, 38. See Ch.1, part II for a full discussion of the difficulties in defining morality in a Buddhist context.)

5. The first *kārikā* [K. 1] reads: "Since fear and suffering are disliked by both others and myself / then what is special about me, that I protect myself and not others?" ( *yadā mama pareṣāṃ ca bhayaṃ duḥkhaṃ ca na priyam / tad-ātmanaṃko viśeṣo yat-taṃ rakṣāmi na-ītaram* ) (ŚS 2: 10,11). All references to the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (abbreviated as "ŚS") will be to the page and line number in the Bibliotheca Buddhica (1970)

Sanskrit edition. Reference to the translation of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* completed by Bendall and Rouse (1990)

will be indicated by "BR" followed by a page number.

6. While *ātmabhāva* is usually taken simply as a synonym for *śarīra*, the body, it is apparent from the content of the text that *òantideva* is referring to mental and emotional qualities of the person as well, so the term "self" seems more appropriate. Bendall and Rouse (ŚS *passim*) also favoured "self" as the translation. See BHSD 92.

7. If we compare the structure of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* with that of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (BCA), both begin with the generation of *bodhicitta* (ŚS Ch 1, BCA Chs 1-4), followed by a description of the perfections in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Chs 5-9), which corresponds to the process of guarding (*raḅṣā*) and purification (*śuddhi*) in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (Chs 2-15). Both conclude with the cultivation of merit, which sees full expression in the transference of merit (*pariṇāmanā*) (BCA Ch.10; ŚS Chs 16-19). For a useful discussion of the structure of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, with a comparison of the canonical version of the text with the Tun-huang recension, see Crosby and Skilton's translation (1996), pp. xxxiv and 10,11.

8. Insofar as it is primarily the nature of the act itself as skilful or wise (*kuśala*) and well-intentioned, and not some outside force which is thought to determine whether there any positive (or negative) karmic results, the concept of "merit," Cousins argues, is inappropriate (1996). Note that though the motive or reason (*hetu*) for performing an action plays perhaps the most emphasized role in determining the kind and amount of karmic result, with selfish motives diminishing the good results, there are other factors involved as well, namely the consequence of the action in terms of its effect on suffering, and character of the recipient of the action. The

more virtuous the recipient, the greater the karmic fruit. This is of course the basis of the idea that the *Saṅgha* is a "field of merit" for donors. See Harvey 2000:17-23; 46-48 for a discussion of the various factors that influence the karmic fruitfulness of an action.

9. *Śūnyatā-karuṇā-garbha-eeṣṇitāt puṇya-śodhanam* (ŚS 270.8).

10. "Therefore karmic fruitfulness arises without end, like the realm of sentient beings," (*puṇyaṃ pravartate tasmād anantaṃ sat[t]vadhātuvat*) (ŚS 361.4: BR 317).

11. "Also in this way the transference of merit happens completely," *pariṇāmanam apy evaṃ nirviśeṣaṃ pravartate* (ŚS 361.3; BR 317). See Clayton 2001: Ch.3 part IIIc.

12. Although as we have seen there may be problems with using the term "merit" for the concept of the karmic benefits of actions, because "transference of merit" is such a common translation for *pariṇāmanā* I will also follow this custom in an effort to minimize my own contributions to the already substantial lexicon of "Buddhist Hybrid English."

13. See Harvey (2000:43) and Premasiri (1976: 7) for further canonical references and discussion of the idea that the *arahat* is beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*. It should be noted, however, that the Pāli texts have different ways of talking about karma, and the idea that an *arahat* transcends *puñña* seems to be a feature of only one particular kind of karmic discourse. See discussion below.

14. In this section and the remainder of this work, I will use the Pāli terms where appropriate.

15. In fact, Harvey suggests, at the level of stream-entrance (*sotāpanna*) one overcomes karmic fruitfulness and unfruitfulness in this sense, since one is said to follow the precepts without thought for the karmic benefits of doing so (D.A. III 784 in Harvey 2000: 40). Following the precepts (*śīla*) has become spontaneous and habitual, and is done without desire for the reward. In this way the Stream-entrant is said to have destroyed the fetter of "grasping at precepts and vows" (P. *sīla-ḥbata-ḥparāmāsa*; Sk. *śīla-vrata-ḥparāmarśa*). Another interpretation (D.A. III.784, cited in Harvey 2000: 40 n14) is that the disciple no longer "grasps" precepts because it is recognized that precepts and vows alone will not lead to *nirvāṇa*.

16. Cousins has suggested that in the earliest Indian literature there was a purely descriptive as well as moral sense of the term *puñña*, but if Harvey is correct that only acts motivated by non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion lead to *puṇya*, then *puṇya* would never be merely descriptive (Harvey 2000: 43-45; Cousins 1996: 10). In the the sense of *puṇya* would clearly be primarily, if not exclusively moral, since the basis of guarding, purifying and developing karmic fruitfulness is always associated in some way with being unselfish, recognizing emptiness, and *Śikṣāsamuccaya* acting out of compassion, suggesting that the idea of *puṇya* is somehow inherently involved with morality, or how one ought to live. For this reason, Damien Keown's distinction between *kuśala* and *puṇya* (P. *puñña*) would not hold for Śāntideva. That is, Keown wants to say that *kuśala* is the moral quality of actions, while *puṇya* is the non-moral, hedonistic consequence of actions. This idea is based on the Theravāda perspective which takes the goal of the spiritual path to be escape from *saṃsāra* and the realm of karma and *puṇya*, but as I argue in the following section, the bodhisattva goal is to remain in

*saṃsāra* and help other beings, by means of karmic merit. As such, I would argue that this division between *kuśala* as moral and *puṇya* as non-moral does not hold up in Śāntideva's context. See discussion below.

17. Compare the idea that the Eightfold Path consists of actions that are "neither dark nor bright, neither dark nor bright in result, the action that conduces to the destruction of actions" (M.I. 389-91; cited and discussed briefly in Harvey 2000: 44).

18. That is, when the defilements are eliminated (*kleśa*), one achieves "*nirvāṇa*-with-remainder" (*sopadhīśeṣa-nirvāṇa*). Thereby one is freed from the causes of suffering and the accumulation of new karma, and thus the basis of rebirth. See Strong 2002: section 3.4, especially p.106, and Gethin 1998: 76.

19. *evaṃ hi pudgala-śūnyatā siddhā bhavet / tata) ca chinna-mūlatvāt kleśā na samudācaranti* (ŚS 242.5,6).

20. For example, in comparing the idea of *śīla* in Mahāyāna and Theravāda, Harvey points out that dedicating karmic fruitfulness "goes beyond" simply acquiring the kinds of wholesome qualities (*kuśala-dharma*) available through the practice of the Eightfold Path, but the possible implications of this are not pursued (Harvey 2000: 131). Similarly, in descriptions of the bodhisattva path that follow the ten "stages" or "grounds" (*bhūmis*), a *bodhisattva* is said to become a celestial being who is no longer born according to karma at the seventh *bhūmi* (Harvey 2000: 128-130; Lopez 1988: 200-202. While it is apparent that compared to the Theravāda tradition, a different view of karma and karmic ripening must be at work in the Mahāyāna, neither Lopez nor Harvey mention this. Keown also indicates that the accumulation of *puṇya* is one of the distinguishing aspects of the



Mahāyāna, but this subject attracts no attention in his comparative analysis of Theravāda and Mahāyāna ethics (Keown 1992: 137, 150) .

21. Basham suggested that the transfer of merit was the "highly appropriate" doctrinal corollary of the mythology of heavenly *bodhisattvas*, a notion that in turn is attributed to the *Jātaka* tradition. See Basham (in Kawamura 1981), especially pp. 32–37. Scholars that share the view that merit transfer is a Mahāyāna development would include Lamotte (*Histoire du bouddhisme indien*, 456) and Fussmann, ("Documents épigraphiques kouchans," BEFEO 61, 1974) cited in Schopen 1997: 36,42. See also Dayal 1970: 189–192.

22. See also Gethin 1998: 109; Williams 2000: 268, n.18 for idea that merit transfer is pan-Buddhist.

23. James Egge, personal communication (Nov. 24, 2003).

24. While I am here contrasting Mahāyāna and śrāvakayāna views of karma and *puṇya*, this does not mean that I assume that I assume that non-Mahāyāna views were static or univalent. For a discussion of developments in the Theravāda understanding of karma and merit, for example, see Egge (2002).

25. Basham, for example, suggests that merit transfer was part of a "widespread reaction, evident also in Hinduism at the time, against belief in the rigid operation of karma," (in Kawamura 1981: 37). Basham links the notion of merit transfer with the notion that a deity or *bodhisattva* could cancel past wrongdoing through grace, and also the Buddhist idea of liberation through faith, evident in the Pure Land traditions. See also Kajiyama (1989) for the idea that merit transfer was a response to a rigid doctrine of karma and karmic retribution.

26. Presumably one should also then be able to transfer or give away one's demerit to another, but so far as I am aware this is not something that is part of the tradition, though it seems like it is theoretically possible.

27. Sthiramati's passage reads: "When a *bodhisattva*, through compassion, practices such 37 aids to enlightenment that are contrary and adverse (*vimukha*) to *saṃsāra*, because he practices them for the sake of benefitting sentient beings by virtue of his compassion, those 37 aids to enlightenment become non-contrary to *saṃsāra* and become the cause for coming face to face (*adhimukha*) with *saṃsāra*; thus, it is stated that he transfers [the 37 aids to enlightenment] to *saṃsāra*."

28. Such as: if the compassion for sentient beings and the intention to save them is the means by which *bodhisattvas* (and Buddhas) give away their merit, then should evil intention allow less altruistic beings to transfer their demerit to others? There are further problems for this doctrine if we consider Wright's (2004) arguments for a "naturalized" view of karma. Wright wants to argue that in a "naturalized" concept of karma, where rebirth is not assumed, morally good actions do not necessarily lead to good fortune for the agent, since the relationship between actions and "external" rewards or consequences is contingent (Wright 82-85). Since this seems a reasonable assertion—in fact, one might be inclined to go further and suggest that the doctrine of conditioned arising undermines even the idea that there are any necessary "internal" consequences for any acts—then the concept of *bodhisattvas* being able to accumulate and offer great stores of merit, if understood as providing practical, "external" benefits to sentient beings, becomes problematic. While it makes sense at some level to think that on a naturalized understanding a *bodhisattva* is a supremely altruistic person, and by

"transferring merit" we might think that such a person gives away or shares any and all of the "external" benefits and good fortune of their deeds (happiness, material goods, money, skills, etc.), if such good consequences do not necessarily follow on the *bodhisattva's* deeds and character, in what sense can *bodhisattvas* be reliable sources of merit? The integrity of the bodhisattva path, if not the Buddhist path in general, seems to be worryingly undermined if we acknowledge—as I think we should—that conditioned arising and interdependence disrupts any guaranteed connection between the nature of an act and its (internal or external) results.

29. See Kajiyama (1989) for a discussion of *pariṇāmanā* as both the transference and transformation of merit.

30. See note 20.

31. "It is will (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma: having willed, one acts through body, speech, or mind." A.III.415., cited in Harvey 1990: 40.

32. According to Mahāyāna doctrine, *puṇya* is critical to a bodhisattva's career for other reasons as well. On the scheme of the five paths (*mārga*) to Buddhahood, the first "path of accumulation" (*sabhāra mārga*) comprises the accumulation or collection of merit (karmic fruitfulness) and wisdom (Lopez 1988: 199; Makransky 1997: 73f). This store of karmic fruitfulness is required to eliminate the subtle traces of ignorance which block omniscience. Also, according to the doctrine of the three bodies (*trikāya*) of a Buddha, the principle cause of the form body (*rūpakāya*) is this vast collection of karmic fruitfulness (Gyatso 2000: 388).

33. See MMK 25: 19, 20 and discussion in Williams 1989: 69. The Cittamātrin Asaṅga also asserted the "non-distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*" (*saṃsāra-ñirvāṇa-ñirviśeṣa*) in the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*. See Nagao 1991: 148.

34. In the sense that advanced *bodhisattvas* (e.g. seventh level and beyond, in the ten stage scheme of the path) are not reborn by means of karma, they do escape *saṃsāra*, but in the sense that there is not thought to be any ultimate difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and that bodhisattvas remain accessible to ordinary, saṃsāric beings, they remain in *saṃsāra*. They attain *apratiṣṭhita-ñirvāṇa*, an awakening that does not abide in either *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*.

35. See, for example, Egge's discussion of medieval Sinhalese stories where meritorious deeds (deeds that are puñña, such as giving and devotion) are said to directly lead to the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (Egge 2002: 107-43).

36. Sometimes a distinction is made between "character ethics" and "virtue ethics." Kupperman (1991), for example, understands virtue ethics to place more emphasis on discrete virtues, or excellences associated with the performance of particular tasks, whereas character ethics place more emphasis on the general notion of a person's "normal patterns of thought and behaviour" over a variety of circumstances (17, 18). On Kupperman's understanding Śāntideva's morality would more likely be considered a character ethic, since he appears to be primarily concerned with the cultivation of beings whose dispositions overall are habitually wholesome or good (having habitually skilful thoughts, words, and actions) and secondarily concerned with the virtuous traits such as patience (*kṣanti*), energy (*vīrya*) etc., which reflect such dispositions. Although this distinction between

virtue and character ethics is not made in the literature on Buddhist ethics, these are distinctions that certainly need addressing in future research. Similarly, Michael Slote's distinction between what he calls "agent-focused" and "agent-based" virtue ethics needs further consideration. According to Slote, in an agent-focused ethic, such as Aristotle's, rightness depends on what a virtuous person would do, whereas in agent-based ethics, the moral status of actions derive from independent features about the motives, dispositions, or "inner life" of the individuals who perform them (Slote in Crisp and Slote 1997: 239, 240). Since the criteria for the rightness of an action in Buddhism rests first and foremost on whether it is skilful or not (*kuśala*), which in turn reflects whether or not it is based on pure motives, i.e., without *kleśas* or *āśravas*, it would seem that Buddhism is an agent-based virtue ethic. Further research in Buddhism and virtue ethics needs to be more sensitive to these kinds of variations in theories of virtue ethics, but for our present purpose we will focus on Aristotle's tradition of virtue ethics, since to date this has been the main object of comparison for Buddhist scholars.

37. "In the case of a bodhisattva whose capacity to benefit other beings (*arthaśakti*) is equal or greater than one's own, when giving or not giving stands in the way of their skill (*kuśala-antarāya-kara*), which is equal or greater than one's own, then it should not be done," (144.6.7; BR 142).

38. *tyajen na jīvitam tasmād aśudhhe karuṇāśāye / tulyāśāye tu tat tyājyam ittha na parihīhate.*

39. For example, it is said that if a bodhisattva gives even one stanza of the *Dharma*, this is worth more karmic fruitfulness (*puṇya*) than a lay *bodhisattva* giving any amount of jewels to the Buddhas (ŚS 144.11-14; BR 143).

40. It is in fact even more complicated than this: the purity of the donor's mind as well as that of the recipient are factors determining the merit of a gift (Harvey 2000: 20,21). My point is merely that character considerations alone do not adequately explain the moral value placed on these actions.

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