

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

Moral Theory in Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya*: Cultivating the fruits of virtue

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Review of *Moral Theory in Śāntideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya: Cultivating the fruits of virtue*

Douglas Osto*

Moral Theory in Śāntideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya: Cultivating the fruits of virtue. By Barbra R. Clayton. London: Routledge, 2006, xv + 165 pages, ISBN 10041534697 (cloth).

Barbra Clayton's *Moral Theory in Śāntideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya: Cultivating the fruits of virtue* is one of two recently published monographs exclusively devoted to ethics in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (for the other, see Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics*, New York: Oxford, 2007). Clayton's investigation of the moral thought of an important medieval Indian Mahāyāna monk expands the discussion of Buddhist ethics beyond the confines of an earlier stage of scholarship (cf. Tachibana 1926, Saddhatissa 1970, Keown 1992 and Harvey 2000) that to date has focused almost exclusively on Theravāda Buddhism. Although less theoretically ambitious than Mrozik's study, Clayton's monograph, by framing Śāntideva's text within contemporary (Western) moral theory, will appeal to comparative ethicists (particularly those with an analytical orientation) and to students interested in the emerging field of comparative Buddhist ethics.

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In her Introduction, Clayton states that, “the aim of the present work is to provide a broader understanding of the ethics contained in Śāntideva’s works by systematically studying the moral thought of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*” (3). Clayton places this goal within the broader context of an emerging “hermeneutic approach,” or “third wave” of comparative philosophy (13; for these terms, see J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, London: Routledge, 1997), which seeks to create a dialogue between Western and Asian philosophies. Clayton sees her study as part of an initial phase of such an approach since its “primary aim is to provide a description of the ethics of one ancient thinker” (13). Further clarifying her approach, Clayton considers the definitions of “ethics” and “morality” in the Buddhist context and suggestions that these terms may be applied synonymously to Buddhist thinking on normative guides with regard to both conduct and character (19). Sensitive to the issue of Orientalism, Clayton states that she will neither romanticize the Buddhist tradition, nor scientifically objectify it; rather she will attempt to enter into “conversation” with the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* with the hope of understanding its ideas in a way relevant “to certain present realities” (29-30).

The next three chapters of the book are primarily descriptive. In the second chapter, “The Text and its Author,” Clayton discusses the life and work of Śāntideva, and the text and structure of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*. In the following chapter, she provides a clear, succinct summary of the text’s content. In chapter 4, Clayton analyses three “key moral terms” for Śāntideva—*kuśala*, *śīla* and *puṇya*. In her discussion of *kuśala*, the author addresses the relevant secondary literature by Cousins (1996), Keown (1992) and Harvey (2000). However, other than arguing against Keown’s avoidance of “skilful” as a translation of *kuśala* (due to his assumption that it implies some type of utilitarianism), Clayton makes no addition to our understanding of Śāntideva’s employment of the concept other than to conclude, “As such there do not appear to be any innovative uses of the term in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*” (72). Similarly, in her treat-

ment of *śīla*, Clayton states, “there does not seem to be any evidence to suggest that *śīla* for Śāntideva meant anything significantly different from how it has been understood in previous literature on Buddhist ethics based on Pāli sources;” she suggests as a translation “something like ‘restraint good conduct’” (75).

Clayton begins her examination of *puṇya* by agreeing with Harvey’s (2000) rendering of the term with such translation as “karmically fruitful,” “karmic fruition,” and “karmically fruitful act” (76). She then points out that according to the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, the culmination of the religious path results in endless *puṇya* arising from the bodhisattva’s deeds that may be dedicated to other beings. When addressing the text’s treatment of this dedication through the “transfer or merit” or “sharing karmic fruitfulness” (*pariṇāmanā*), Clayton astutely observes an important difference between the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*’s view of *puṇya* and its use in Pāli sources (77ff), which highlights a major doctrinal divergence between Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna (Indian mainstream and Theravāda) views of the religious path.

Relying on Harvey’s analysis of the Pāli texts, Clayton shows that the *arhat* was believed to have completely transcended karma and therefore *puṇya*. Moreover, citing Hayes’s (1994) investigation, Clayton points out that Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa* contains a similar view. Employing secondary sources materials by Dayal (1932), Lopez (1988), Nagao (1991), and others, Clayton maintains that Mahāyāna texts depict a decidedly different view. Since, she argues, the ontological distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* had been undermined already by the time of Nāgārjuna’s famous assertion of their nondifference, the Mahāyāna bodhisattva does not aim at transcending karma and *saṃsāra*, but rather strives to realize enlightenment. Thus *puṇya* need not be transcended, but can be cultivated limitlessly in order to use it for the salvation of sentient beings. This view clearly differs from the conception in main-

stream Buddhism of the religious goal as the attainment of an unconditioned state beyond *puṇya*. While her hypothesis is intriguing and possesses broad implications for our understanding of Buddhist doctrine, this reader was disappointed that Clayton relied so heavily on secondary sources and did not engage directly with the Buddhist texts in their original languages.

In Clayton's final two chapters, she argues that Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* displays "a morality best characterized within the family of virtue ethics" (116). This is in general agreement with Keown's position (based on his study of canonical Theravāda sources) that Buddhist ethics most closely resembles a type of Aristotelian virtue ethics and is not utilitarian. Clayton points out, however, that Śāntideva's text appears to portray a "gradualist" approach to the path whereby a bodhisattva's moral reasoning "comes to increasingly resemble utilitarianism" (117). Nevertheless, she maintains that it is not utilitarianism, but perhaps "a hybrid form of virtue ethics, or a 'utilitarian analogue' to virtue ethics." I wondered while reading Clayton's arguments in these chapters to what extent it makes sense to claim that Śāntideva's morality is virtue ethics resembling utilitarianism, rather than a type of utilitarianism that might first appear to be virtue ethics. In fact, Charles Goodman ("Consequentialism, Agent-Neutrality, And Mahāyāna Ethics," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 58, n. 1, January 2008: 17-35) has recently argued persuasively that virtue ethics does not represent a valuable interpretative strategy for understanding Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics, and that Śāntideva in particular may best be understood as an "act-consequentialist." Needless to say, the final word on Śāntideva's ethics has yet to be spoken, but the debate hopefully generated by studies such as Clayton's can only be fruitful for the emerging discipline of comparative Buddhist ethics.

Although some may disagree with Clayton's conclusion that the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* demonstrates a shift from a straightforward virtue ethic

to a kind of utilitarian hybrid of virtue ethics, this study, through its detailed description of an important Indian Mahāyāna text, adds necessary nuance to the growing body of literature on Buddhist ethics, and doubtlessly will remain a useful introduction to Śāntideva's ethical thinking for some time to come.