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Readings of Śāntideva's Guide to Bodhisattva Practice

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A Review of *Readings of Śāntideva's Guide to Bodhisattva Practice*

Stephen Harris¹

Readings of Śāntideva's Guide to Bodhisattva Practice. Edited by Jonathan C. Gold and Douglas S. Duckworth. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 320 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-19267-5 (Paperback), \$30.00.

Readings of Śāntideva's Guide to Bodhisattva Practice is a new collection of fourteen essays written by leading figures in the field of Buddhist Studies, each exploring an aspect of the philosophical masterpiece of the eighth century C.E. Indian Buddhist monk. Most of the chapters provide a philosophical treatment of one of the text's themes; however, the collection is interdisciplinary, with additional contributions written from the standpoints of textual scholarship (chapter two), literary analysis (chapter three), material culture (chapter seven), and historical development (chapter eight). The book is part of the series *Columbia Readings of Buddhist Literature*, and is intended to be accessible to students and scholars without an extensive background in Buddhist thought. It largely achieves this goal, but many of the essays also break new conceptual ground and will need to be consulted by specialists in Buddhist philosophy with an interest in Śāntideva or Buddhist ethics.

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The collection is not divided into subsections, which I found manageable for this relatively short collection. Each essay is of high quality, carefully written by a leading scholar in the field. A significant feature of the collection is its inclusion of essays by several leading scholars in Buddhist Studies, such as Janet Gyatso (chapter five) and John Dunne (chapter fourteen), who are not known for previous work on Śāntideva's *Guide to Bodhisattva Practice* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*, hereafter *Guide* or *BCA*). This is paired with pieces by scholars for whom the *BCA*, or Śāntideva's other work, the *Training Manual* (*Śikṣāsamuccaya*), serves as a frequent object of analysis, such as Charles Goodman, Jay Garfield, Amber Carpenter, and Paul Harrison. The collection's range of authors and approaches suggests to the reader that virtually any serious student of Indian Buddhist thought will benefit from a close study of the *Guide*. For reasons of space, I explore only a small selection of the pieces included in the volume; however, I am glad to recommend the collection in its entirety.

After an introductory summary by co-editor Jonathan Gold, the collection begins with a chapter by Paul Harrison in which the *Guide's* structure and major themes are introduced, and contrasted with Śāntideva's other text, the *Training Manual*. According to Harrison, both texts can be understood as presenting the "discipline" (*saṃvara*) of the bodhisattva, here referring to the collection of trainings and practices in which the bodhisattva engages as they progress along the path (30). Harrison explains that we possess two versions of the *Guide*, the earlier of which has 701 verses, and a later version which has been expanded to 913 verses (42, footnote 7). In contrast to most scholars, Harrison suggests that the more recent longer version is a revision and expansion by Śāntideva himself, rather than a revision by later editors. He argues for this based on several references the later recension makes to Śāntideva's other text, the *Training Manual*, which are lacking in the older version. Given common scholarly agreement that the *Training Manual* was written by Śāntideva, Harrison suggests this makes it likely that Śāntideva himself drew upon the newly completed *Training Manual* to revise and expand the *Guide* (30-32). Although plausible, Harrison's hypothesis does not rule out the possibility

that later editors, rather than Śāntideva himself, expanded the *Guide* by incorporating material from his other text.

The chapter also contains a useful discussion of the structure of the *Training Manual* in relation to the *Guide*. The *Training Manual* presents giving (*utsarga*) as the central element of the bodhisattva path, supported by three additional activities of protecting (*rakṣā*), preserving (*śuddhi*), and enhancement (*vardhana*). This is in contrast to the BCA, which is structured as a presentation of the six perfections (*pāramitās*) (35), and which Harrison suggests can also be understood as an extended presentation of the Mahāyāna ritual of the Supreme Worship (*anuttarapūjā*) (35-37). The chapter includes helpful tables correlating the chapters of the *Training Manual* and *Guide* to the development of the four activities which structure the *Training Manual*, as well as the perfections and the elements of the ritual of Supreme Worship.

The seventh chapter, Eric Huntington's "Ritual Structure and Material Culture in the *Guide to Bodhisattva Practice*," explores the role of ritual in the *Guide*, which prepares the mind to engage in the meditations which constitute most of the text's length (134). Huntington suggests that the whole *Guide* can be read as having a ritual structure. The first three chapters of the *Guide* present Śāntideva's version of the ritual of unexcelled worship (*anuttarapūjā*), already discussed briefly in Harrison's chapter. This ritual is composed out of seven or eight parts: praise, worship, going for refuge, confession of misdeeds, rejoicing in merits, request for the buddhas to teach, supplication for them to remain, and dedication of merit (135). Most of the ritual is presented in the early chapters of the *Guide*: the praise of Bodhicitta comes in chapter one, all but the last limb follow in chapters two and three, and the dedication of merit concludes the text in chapter ten (135). From this, Huntington draws the fascinating conclusion that the middle chapters of the text, in which meditations and arguments for the development of virtue are presented, can themselves be seen as part of a ritualized structure (135-136).

These two chapters by Harrison and Huntington illustrate the strength of the collection's interdisciplinary approach. While not philosophical themselves, both chapters encourage deeper consideration of the themes analyzed in the remaining, more philosophically explicit chapters. Huntington's piece invites us to think about whether the arguments and meditations which form much of the content of the *Guide* should be approached somewhat differently, given that they take place within ritual space. Likewise, Harrison encourages us to consider the contribution each element of the *Guide* makes to the text's overall goals, as well as Śāntideva's broader commitments as an author.

Several chapters emphasize the *Guide*'s impact on the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Thupten Jinpa focuses on a set of verses in the *Guide*'s eighth chapter, in which one exchanges one's identity with others (BCA 8, verses 140-148), and explores their influence on the Tibetan tradition of mind training (*lojong*, *blo sbyong*), whose practices develop Bodhicitta and transform negative emotions into the virtuous mental attitudes of nonattachment, nonhatred, and wisdom (*Readings of Śāntideva's Guide*, 148-149, 151). These verses are referenced frequently by Tibetan authors in *lojong* texts for inspiration for the practice of taking on others' suffering (*tonglen*, *gtong lan*), in which one imaginatively accepts the misfortune and bad karma of others, and returns to them one's own happiness and good karma (153). Although inspired by the imaginative exchange described in the *Guide*, Jinpa stresses that the Tibetan practices differ in that they do not focus on the imaginative exchange of perspectives explored in the *Guide* (153). In the ninth chapter, Roger Jackson continues the investigation of the influence of the *Guide* on Tibetan Buddhism by analyzing the fourteenth century Tibetan philosopher, Tsongkhapa's, references to Śāntideva's text in his *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Awakening* (*Byang chub lam rim chen mo*). Likewise, in the tenth chapter, Douglas Duckworth presents the nineteenth century Tibetan Madhyamaka Buddhist, Künzang Sönam's (Kun bzang bsod nams), explication of Śāntideva's account of conventional truth. The fourth chapter, by Matthew Kapstein, also focuses on Śāntideva's wisdom chapter, and analyzes Śāntideva's

disagreements with Yogācāra Buddhists over whether consciousness is self-illuminating and how memories are formed.

Other chapters complement these historical efforts by providing cross-cultural analyses which draw links between the *Guide* and Western historical or contemporary philosophical approaches. Charles Goodman gives a clear and concise summary of utilitarian reasoning in the *Guide* (chapter twelve). Amber Carpenter applies Plato's idea of *protrepsis*, or "turning towards," to develop a reading of the *Guide* in which Śāntideva's goal is to turn the individual towards a richer and more morally satisfying perspective on reality (chapter two). Jay Garfield presents a condensed argument for using the lens of moral phenomenology to understand Śāntideva's emphasis on experience (chapter eleven). Garfield's piece also argues for the contemporary relevance of Śāntideva's phenomenology in addressing the deleterious effects of implicit bias. Janet Gyatso also offers a phenomenological analysis of Śāntideva's text, focusing on the exchanging self and other meditations in the *Guide*'s meditation chapter, and drawing connections between Śāntideva's methods and the Japanese dramatist Zeami Motokiyo (chapter five).

Each of these four chapters helps build the case for the relevance of the *Guide* to contemporary philosophical research, but they also illustrate a limitation of the collection. Their arguments are presented concisely and are often more succinct than would be desirable; the length of the pieces does not allow for in-depth defense of sometimes controversial theses, and the resonances as well as contrasts between the chapters themselves are not developed in depth. This limitation is perhaps most clear in Garfield's intriguing suggestion that phenomenology, rather than virtue ethics or consequentialism, provides the best cross-cultural lens to analyze Śāntideva's moral thought. Garfield's position is in apparent tension with much earlier scholarly work on the *Guide*, but his argument for this position is laid out in only seven pages and offers no detailed critique of previous approaches, such as that of fellow author Charles Goodman's consequentialist interpretation. Likely, this deficiency is a result of page

restrictions resulting from the editors' overall well-considered decision to present this text in a widely accessible introductory series.

Finally, several of the collection's essays draw attention to features of the *Guide* which have been relatively overlooked in previous academic work. My favorite example of such a piece is Reiko Ohnuma's chapter considering the role of the body in the BCA (chapter six). Much academic work on the BCA and many of the pieces of this collection focus on Śāntideva's account of virtuous mental experience (see chapters three to five, eight, eleven, thirteen, and fourteen), and Ohnuma's chapter acts as an important corrective to these approaches. Ohnuma begins by drawing attention to the apparent tension reoccurring throughout the *Guide*, in which Śāntideva alternates between descriptions of the body as the site of liberation and a tool for progress, on the one hand, and as filthy, radically impermanent, and liable to decay, on the other (115-120). Śāntideva's goal, suggests Ohnuma, is to find the "Middle Way" in which bodies' positive features are recognized, but are not overvalued, and therefore do not act as fuel for attachment and lust (116). Ohnuma also discusses the importance of bodily self-sacrifice for Śāntideva (123-124), and finally draws attention to the generally overlooked fact that many of Śāntideva's arguments for selflessness (*anātman*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*) take the body as the object of analysis in relation to which the essence of a person cannot be found (124-128). Although still suitable for an introductory audience, this chapter, along with the pieces by Carpenter and Garfield, are good examples of chapters that break important conceptual ground in our understanding of the *Guide*; they would need to be consulted by all philosophically interested scholars of Śāntideva's text. Ohnuma's emphasis on the body is complimented by several essays explicitly focusing on features of Śāntideva's psychology, including Bronwyn Finnigan's analysis of fear in the *Guide* (chapter thirteen) and John Dunne's chapter, which focuses on Śāntideva's strategies to develop compassion (chapter fourteen).

There are two weaknesses of the collection which should be mentioned. First, as discussed above, the pieces are quite short, and the

difficult topics discussed cannot always be presented with sufficient detail. Second, although many chapters successfully argue for the relevance of the *Guide* to Buddhist traditions and contemporary philosophical research, there is almost no attention to applied approaches to Buddhist ethics or to the movement of engaged Buddhism, which takes the *Guide* as a frequent inspiration. This slight defect is partly compensated by Garfield's skillful but compact application of Śāntideva's moral phenomenology to contemporary work on applied bias, in relation to racial justice and gender discrimination. Both weaknesses stem from the compact length of the volume and the chapters, necessitated by the introductory nature of the text.

In summary, this is an exceptional collection which not only provides a useful teaching tool for the classroom, but also makes significant conceptual advances to our understanding of the *Guide*. I warmly recommend it for any serious student of Śāntideva's thought.