

WHERE DOES THE CETANIC BREAK TAKE PLACE? WEAKNESS OF WILL IN ŚĀNTIDEVA'S *BODHICARYĀVATĀRA*

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores the role of weakness of will (akrasia) in the Indian Buddhist tradition, and in particular within Śāntideva's Introduction to the Practice of Awakening (Bodhicaryāvatāra). In agreement with Jay Garfield, I argue that there are important differences between Aristotle's account of akrasia and Buddhist moral psychology. Nevertheless, taking a more expanded conception of weakness of will, as is frequently done in contemporary work, allows us to draw significant connections with the pluralistic account of psychological conflict found in Buddhist texts. I demonstrate this by showing how Amélie Rorty's expanded treatment of akrasia as including emotional response and perceptual classification allows us to recognize that one of the purposes of many of Śāntideva's meditations is to treat various forms of akratic response.*

Keywords: *weakness of will, akrasia, Śāntideva, Buddhism, moral psychology, ethics, Buddhist ethics*

1. INTRODUCTION

In his *Guide to the Practice of Awakening (Bodhicaryāvatāra; Hereafter BCA)*, the eighth century Indian Buddhist monk Śāntideva repeatedly urges himself to cease indulging in vice (*pāpa*) and creating the conditions for future suffering.¹ It is no surprise, therefore, that Tom Tillemans has claimed that *akrasia*, or weakness of will, in which I voluntarily act against my better judgment, is a deep theme running through Śāntideva's text (Tillemans 2008). In broad outline, comparisons of Indian Buddhist texts with ancient and contemporary treatments of weakness of will should seem promising. A significant goal of Buddhist moral psychology is to transform an aspirant's depraved *saṃsāric* mind into one that is tranquil and devoid of conflict. The halfway point of *akrasia*, in which the agent struggles between the conflicting forces of virtue and vice, should provide fertile ground for cross-cultural analysis.

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¹ Nowhere is he more explicit about this than BCA 4: 26-27. I return to these passages below.

Nevertheless, focusing on the details of this sketch may make us at least question how profitable a connection can be drawn. In a reply to Tillemans, Jay Garfield claims that Aristotle's treatment of *akrasia* presupposes a particular understanding of the tension between reason and desire that is not shared by Buddhist authors (Garfield 2010, 337).²

Garfield is right to stress disanalogies between Aristotle's account of *akrasia* and Buddhist moral psychology, and I explore these differences in my first section. In the second, I show how Garfield's concern can be addressed by broadening our focus beyond Aristotle's conception of *akrasia* as a tension between reason and desire, and adopting instead the common contemporary definition of weakness of will as any kind of voluntary action or response against one's better judgment.³ Both Aristotle and contemporary authors also discuss *akrasia* alongside closely related forms of psychological conflict such as being overcome by powerful emotion. I will also argue that broadening our focus to include some of these phenomena allows us to draw deeper connections between this work and Buddhist moral psychology.

The second section also explains why we should expect forms of psychological weakness, including *akrasia*, to be a prominent theme in Buddhist moral philosophy.⁴ Here I show how *akratic* response is an almost inevitable byproduct of Buddhist moral development which emphasizes, among other things, intellectual awareness of Buddhist truths and greater control over one's mental responses. In the final section I turn to Śāntideva's BCA and explore both his explicit treatment of weakness of will, as well as a series of meditations, part of whose purpose is to prevent *akratic* response. Here, I draw upon Amélie Rorty's expanded conception of *akrasia*, as including emotional reactions and perceptual classification, in order to identify the various kinds of psychological tensions that Śāntideva's meditations address.

² Garfield's other objection against Tillemans' emphasis on *akrasia* is that Śāntideva's text is better understood as a guide to radically reconstituting our experience of the world. Garfield characterizes this as a phenomenological reading of Śāntideva's text, and contrasts it to other approaches such as Goodman's (2008) consequentialism and Keown's (2005) analysis of Buddhism as a virtue ethics. See especially Garfield (2010, 334-337). As will become clear, although I emphasize the importance of weakness of will as a theme within Śāntideva's thought, I do not see this analysis as incompatible with any of the approaches Garfield refers to, including his emphasis on phenomenological reorientation. In the third section of this essay, I draw on Amélie Rorty's expanded analysis of *akratic* response to argue that perceptual experience, in some cases, can be *akratic*—that is both voluntary and in contrast to our better judgment. This kind of *akratic* response would, I think, play an important role in Garfield's phenomenological account, which emphasizes the desirability of radically altering how we perceive the world.

³ Tillemans also refers to the contemporary authors Donald Davidson and David Wiggins in his article (Tillemans 2008, 152), but his analysis does focus mainly on the tension between reason and desire.

⁴ My use of the phrase "Buddhist moral philosophy" in this essay is not intended to imply any particular interpretation of Buddhism as an ethical system, such as consequentialism, deontology and so forth. I merely mean that Buddhists like Śāntideva often pay explicit attention to ethical questions such as how I should live, what constitutes a virtuous character and so on. Likewise, "moral psychology" merely indicates that much of Śāntideva's thought focuses on considerations of mind and mental factors that relate to ethical questions such as how I should live; it is not meant to suggest a naturalized reading of Śāntideva's text. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I clarify my use of this oftentimes controversial terminology.

Although I limit my focus in this essay to weakness of will and psychological conflict in Śāntideva's BCA, it is important to keep in mind how these themes contribute to the text's overall development. Śāntideva wrote the BCA as a guide for developing the virtuous qualities of the bodhisattva, the saint of Mahayana Buddhism who delays liberation from *samsāra* to work tirelessly for the sake of all sentient beings (BCA 1:1). The text's primary purpose, then, is soteriological, focusing on the perfection of the moral character of an individual so that she is able to liberate herself and others from suffering. This process of moral growth takes place largely through the development of the bodhisattva's virtues, and in particular that of the six perfections (*pāramitās*) of generosity (*dāna*), ethical discipline (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), effort (*vīrya*), concentration (*dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). The BCA's soteriological strategy, then, incorporates both philosophical and psychological elements, including an influential articulation of the virtues constituting enlightened character. My purpose here is to emphasize another of its philosophic aspects: the attention that Śāntideva pays to overcoming weakness of will, and other closely related forms of psychological tension. Conquering weakness of will constitutes a lessening of suffering in itself and is also a prerequisite for consistent dedication to the training that prepares the bodhisattva to work effectively for the benefit of all.⁵

2. WEAKNESS OF WILL

Ancient and contemporary authors have used the terms "weakness of will" and "*akrasia*" in a variety of different ways. I use them interchangeably in this essay. We can characterize the general phenomena these discussions focus on as voluntary action against one's better judgment. This basic account of *akrasia* includes two required elements. First, there is a simultaneous intellectual component, where one judges that the response being taken is not the preferred option. If I am unaware at the moment of acting that my response is not for the best, the response is not *akratic*, although it may be a closely related phenomenon such as self-deception. Second, the

⁵ One of the difficulties of working with the BCA is the likelihood that certain portions of the text are intended for audiences of a specific level of moral development. For instance, much of the text encourages the reader to engage in the bodhisattva path for one's own benefit, and even the development of the bodhisattva's virtues is often linked to the removal of one's own suffering. See for instance BCA 1:19-23, 6:9-10, 7:30 and 8:129. The verses which focus on one's own well-being include several at the beginning of chapter four which below I argue constitute one of Śāntideva's clearest treatments of weakness of will. Much of this material is very much in the spirit of early Buddhist texts that emphasize practices to liberate an individual from her own suffering. In apparent contrast, much of chapters eight and nine focus on themes stressed more heavily in Mahayana texts, and often in particular in Madhyamaka philosophy, including compassion for others and the emptiness of all phenomena. My strategy in this essay will be to explore what I take to be Śāntideva's strongest contributions to debates about weakness of will, and this will require focusing mainly on the early portions of the text that often emphasize benefits to oneself. For reasons of space, I will have to bracket questions of how these passages relate to later portions of the text. Thanks for an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I explicitly address this issue.

akratic response must be voluntary.⁶ I reserve the term and phrase “*akrasia*” and “weakness of will” for actions that fulfill both criteria.

Within this general characterization of *akrasia*, we can distinguish a number of sub-varieties. Aristotle claims the judgment in question must be correct, and limits what he considers real *akrasia* to conflicts between the intellect and the desire for pleasure; acting in anger against my (correct) better judgment is *akrasia* only in a secondary sense (Aristotle 2011, 139). Contemporary treatments of *akrasia* tend to broaden their accounts beyond Aristotle’s constraints, even while maintaining both elements listed above. For instance, Davidson drops Aristotle’s success condition, so that action against my better judgment constitutes *akrasia*, whether or not that judgment is correct (Davidson 2001, 21). Both Aristotle and contemporary authors generally limit their attention to *akratic* action; however, Amélie Rorty, in an influential article, broadens her focus to include emotional response and perceptual classification, which, when voluntary, can also constitute varieties of *akratic* response (Rorty 1980). I argue in the next section that this broadening trend brings contemporary work on weakness of will closer to the pluralistic account of psychological conflict found in Buddhist texts. I will not be developing my own account of *akrasia* in this essay; rather my purpose is to highlight how connections can profitably be drawn between Śāntideva’s consideration of psychological conflict and certain contemporary treatments of weakness of will.

Aristotle and contemporary authors also distinguish a number of psychological phenomena that resemble *akrasia*, but do not meet both of the criteria of *akratic* response. Giving up the simultaneity of judgment component results in varieties of distraction or self-deception. If I believe in the moment of action that my response is for the best, then the action is not a case of *akrasia*, even if before and immediately after the action I believe otherwise. Likewise, if I give up the voluntary element, I have cases in which I am forced to act against my better judgment. Hare offers the example of Medea who (in his interpretation) is literally overpowered by her emotions, and is therefore forced to murder her children (Hare 1963, 78-9). Finally we can distinguish *akrasia* from Horton’s account of irresoluteness, in which one inappropriately abandons one’s intentions (Horton 1999).⁷ Such failure may or may not be *akratic*, depending on whether it is accompanied by a simultaneous intellectual judgment that giving up one’s intention is not for the best (McIntyre 2006, 291-292). Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of psychological states with some relation to *akrasia*, but all of these forms of psychological weakness are of interest to Buddhist

⁶ I am influenced by Sara Stroud (2014) in this section, although I do not always follow her presentation.

⁷ Horton (1999) argues that the phrase “weakness of will” should be reserved for inappropriate revision of one’s intentions. I adopt the frequent convention of using “*akrasia*” and “weakness of will” synonymously, however, as a way of emphasizing continuity between ancient and contemporary discussions about deliberately acting against one’s better judgment. Unlike many cases of self-deception or being overcome by emotion, failure to act on one’s intention will seldom be confused with *akrasia*, but I list it here since it is a type of psychological weakness that is of interest to Buddhist authors.

authors, since like *akrasia* they can represent instances in which a practitioner deviates from Buddhist practices.

In contrast to these closely related forms of psychological weakness, *akrasia* has been a particularly puzzling phenomenon for Plato, Aristotle and many contemporary authors. This is because they accept a strong connection between judgment and motivation, so that if one really believes an action to be for the best it is puzzling why one would not do it.⁸ The puzzle disappears, however, in the related cases of psychological weakness referred to above. If I deceive myself into thinking my action is for the best, I am no longer acting against my better judgment, and likewise, if I am literally overpowered by emotion, there is no mystery why I act as I do, even if I intellectually understand it is not the best option.⁹

Significantly, however, Buddhist authors will not share this intellectual puzzlement over why or how I can freely act against my better judgment. This is because within Buddhist psychology, propositional knowledge of itself seldom indicates a deep enough insight into reality to provide significant motivational power. It is only direct nonconceptual understanding of the Four Noble Truths and so on that removes the deepest of the negative mental factors (*kleśas*) like anger and greed that greatly influence action.¹⁰ For instance, Buddhists distinguish the intellectual belief that the self exists (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*) from the deeply engrained spontaneous tendency to reify momentary and fragmentary experience into a unified enduring subject interacting with enduring objects.¹¹ As long as these processes of reification continue, negative mental states will arise that have as much or more influence as intellectual knowledge over how I act. There is, then, no particular mystery within Buddhist psychology about why we often act against our better judgment, at least as long as our understanding remains at an intellectual level.¹²

⁸ This leads Plato to deny the existence of *akrasia*. See Plato, *Protagoras* 352a-358c. Arguably, Aristotle does this as well at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b (2011, 142).

⁹ My discussion in this paragraph is indebted to Stroud (2014).

¹⁰ Garfield makes a related point in arguing that for Śāntideva, vice is always accompanied by intellectual confusion (2010, 337-338). This does not rule out *akratic* action, however, since in Buddhist psychology deeply engrained intellectual confusion is compatible with making a simultaneous higher level intellectual judgment that a particular response is not for the best.

¹¹ Buddhist texts refer to these processes as I-making (*ahamkāra*) and mine-making (*mamakāra*). See Hamilton (2001, especially 55-60).

¹² In apparent contrast to my claim, Tillemans stresses Śāntideva's deep puzzlement over why he acts against his better judgment (2008, 154). In part, I think the passages Tillemans has in mind are better understood as expressions of Śāntideva's frustration, rather than theoretical curiosity over why *akratic* action occurs. Tillemans is right, however, in stressing the lack of intelligibility, in terms of good reasons for actions, for Śāntideva's, and indeed all *akratic* responses. My suggestion here is, I think, compatible with Tillemans' own analysis of Buddhist *akrasia* as explicable in terms of compartmentalized of "cognitive sub-systems" (160), some of which are dominated by forms of deeply rooted ignorance that falsely take the worse option as the better. What deserves emphasis in addition is that some of these subsystems occur at a deeper cognitive level than ordinary intellectual knowledge. For the Buddhist, then, my intellectual understanding of the good can be dominated by this deeper level of deluded conceptuality, and therefore have little motivational power.

Unlike Western philosophers, therefore, Buddhist authors will not see the possibility of *akrasia* as a theoretical problem to be solved, but rather will view weakness of will as a practical problem to be overcome. Moreover, the problem overlaps considerably with the other kinds of psychological weakness identified above. Meditational treatments of these various psychological states will overlap as well; fear towards rebirth in a hell realm for instance will help the practitioner to both overcome *akratic* resistance to practicing virtue, as well as gain the required amount of control to withstand a formerly irresistible harmful emotional response.¹³ What this suggests is that unlike Western authors, Buddhist ethicists will not be concerned about distinguishing *akrasia* from closely related forms of psychological weakness like self-deception and being overcome by emotion.¹⁴ All such cases for the Buddhist are instances in which I veer away from virtue (*kuśala*) towards vice (*pāpa/akuśala*) which binds me to future suffering and rebirth. In the third section, I will illustrate this by showing how some of Śāntideva's meditations can be seen as addressing *akratic* as well as non-*akratic* forms of psychological weakness.

3. CONFLICT AND *AKRASIA* IN BUDDHIST MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Although there are pluralities of ways Buddhist ethical texts can be analyzed, perhaps the most general is to see them as theorizing how suffering (*duḥkha*) can be overcome. Other items in the Buddhist moral vocabulary are usually defined in terms of, or acquire their significance in relation to suffering and its ending. The virtuous mental states (*kuśala-dharma*) for instance are those that are conducive to ending suffering, while the Four Noble Truths illustrate how suffering arises and is eliminated. Focusing on the Buddhist analysis of suffering will also let us locate the role of *akrasia* and related forms of psychological weakness within Buddhist moral philosophy.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Buddhist ethics is the extraordinary care it takes in distinguishing varieties of gross and subtle dissatisfaction. In particular, the deeper forms of suffering result from a primal ignorance (*avidyā*) in which unity and enduringness are superimposed upon discrete and momentary phenomena. As a result, we experience ourselves, falsely, as enduring subjects interacting with a realm of unified objects that we can own, desire and become averse to. Because I experience myself as an enduring unified subject opposed to a world of lasting objects, I crave (*trṣṇā*) them, or become angry (*krodha*) when I lose them, become jealous (*īrṣyā*) of their new owner and so on. In juxtaposition to these negative mental states, Buddhist virtue theory opposes various positive mental events (*kuśala-dharma*) like wisdom (*prajñā*), love (*maitrī*), and patience (*kṣānti*). These virtuous or skillful mental states eliminate suffering, while the negative mental states cause or constitute various aspects of pain.

¹³ Śāntideva appeals to fear of negative rebirths frequently, for instance in BCA 4:25.

¹⁴ See Hayes (1996) for a treatment of self-deception in Buddhist texts that overlaps with weakness of will.

As a result of ignorance, therefore, the experience of someone progressing on the Buddhist path to liberation is shot through with psychological tension in which these vicious and virtuous mental states clash. Moreover, these factors are diverse, including intellectual, emotional, motivational and attention-focused mental events.¹⁵ Buddhist psychological conflict, then, will take a vast variety of forms. Intellectually, the practitioner may understand Buddhist truths like selflessness and impermanence, but nevertheless continue to reify phenomena into enduring subjects and objects as a result of deeper levels of ignorance. Emotionally, mental defilements like anger and craving clash with patience, generosity and love.¹⁶ Motivationally skillful states like effort (*vīrya*) contrast with laziness (*ālasya*).¹⁷ Skillful kinds of awareness like mindfulness (*smṛti*) and introspection (*samprajanya*) are opposed by distracted forms of attention,¹⁸ and concentration (*samādhi*) can degenerate into a weakened form incapable of any deep focus. Likewise, anger and desire can pull us away from concentration (*samādhi*), while effort (*vīrya*) helps overcome craving (*trṣṇā*) and so on.¹⁹

The plurality of psychological conflict theorized in Buddhist ethical texts suggests two contrasts between the form we would expect Buddhist accounts of *akrasia* to take, and Aristotle's as well as many contemporary accounts. First, Buddhist texts will be unlikely to limit themselves to the tension between reason and desire that shapes Aristotle and some contemporary accounts. For this reason, the broader contemporary understanding of weakness of will as a voluntary response against one's better judgment will provide a closer fit for Buddhist authors than Aristotle's characterization. Second, Buddhist texts see the arising of the negative mental factors themselves as causing or even constituting various forms of suffering. Therefore, unlike Aristotle and much contemporary work, their focus will not be restricted to *akratic* action. An eruption of anger, a moment of listlessness, a slippage of concentration—to the extent that these are voluntary and intellectually recognized as inferior responses, all of them may be seen as kinds of weak-willed response by the Buddhist ethicist.

Of course, for ordinary people many of these instances of psychological conflict will not be *akratic*, for they will either be involuntary, or the agent may not judge his reaction to be an inferior response. In some cases the practitioner may be unaware of a harmful emotion like subtle anger, and in others he will be overcome and literally unable to resist a strong emotion. Likewise, he may judge the non-virtuous response he is engaging in, such as anger at an unjust situation, to be appropriate. Moreover, I

¹⁵ Buddhist texts do not use these four categories to group the virtues and vices, but I employ them here to help bring out the diversity of psychological tension within Buddhist moral psychology.

¹⁶ Chapter six of Śāntideva's BCA provides numerous examples of patience characterized as opposed to anger.

¹⁷ This is emphasized in chapter seven of Śāntideva's BCA.

¹⁸ A number of Buddhist psychological manuals give distractedness (*asamprajanya*) as the opposite of introspection. Chapter five of Śāntideva's BCA focuses on preserving mindfulness and introspection.

¹⁹ Śāntideva frequently uses the fear of death and negative rebirths to stimulate effort (*vīrya*) and lessen craving (*rāga*). See in particular BCA chapter seven. On anger and attachment as obstacles to concentration, see Walsh (1995, 349: D ii 314).

have already suggested that Buddhists will be less concerned to distinguish actual cases of *akrasia* from closely related forms of psychological weakness.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of the Buddhist path that suggest practitioners will pass through a stage of moral development in which they alternate between succumbing to and resisting *akratic* response. This is because Buddhists practice emphasizes the importance of correct intellectual judgment; for instance, the first limb of the eight-fold path is right knowledge, which includes elements of intellectual understanding, such as acceptance of the four noble truths and the selflessness and impermanence of all phenomena.²⁰ Further, Buddhists place great emphasis on becoming aware of and controlling one's mental states; in particular, the sixth limb of the eightfold path, right effort, is defined as causing positive mental states to arise and develop, while preventing and eliminating negative ones.²¹ This requires careful continual awareness of the mind, which itself is facilitated by skillful mental states of awareness like mindfulness (*smṛti*), which is a lucid state of attention, and introspection (*samprajanya*), a background awareness of one's body and mind.²² As a result of these greater levels of attention and awareness, the practitioner develops the ability to intervene in previously automatic emotional and perceptual reactions, so that harmful physical, verbal and emotional responses can be²³ prevented.

Together, this emphasis on intellectual knowledge of Buddhist tenets, and on the development of skillful attention and control over one's mind, entails that progression along the Buddhist path will increasingly result in the factors necessary for potentially *akratic* response. As virtuous and vicious mental states clash, the practitioner will retain intellectual knowledge of what represents the better course of action, as well as gradually develop the ability to respond virtuously. The possibility of *akratically* choosing the worse option, therefore, represents a provisional achievement along the development to full virtue.²⁴

²⁰ See for instance Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995, 134: M i 48).

²¹ On right effort, see for instance Bodhi (2000, 1529: S v 9).

²² Both of these mental factors are understood in a variety of ways by both Buddhist and contemporary commentators. I base my characterization on Śāntideva's BCA chap 5, and also borrow Bodhi's description of mindfulness as "lucid awareness" (2011, 25).

²³ This does not necessarily mean that Buddhist psychology need accept a mental factor that plays an analogous role to the will in Western thought, as that which deliberates and freely determines action. Maria Heim (2014, 25) and Karin Meyers (2010) are convincing in their arguments that at least important figures and traditions within Indian Buddhism do not accept any such concept. Nevertheless, as Meyers elsewhere argues, Buddhist psychology can distinguish between voluntary and involuntary action by appealing to a range of mental factors including *cetanā* (roughly, intention), mindfulness (*smṛti*), introspection (*samprajanya*), attention (*manaskāra*), desire for action (*chanda*) and discernment (*mati*) (Meyers 2013, 58-59, but my translations of Sanskrit terms where necessary for consistency with the body of this essay.) This is all that is needed to satisfy the voluntary condition of the broad characterization of *akrasia* that I am using in this essay. Heim (2014, 25 and 42, n. 21) and Garfield (2010) are right to suggest incompatibility between Buddhist psychology and certain conceptions of *akrasia*, but as I will argue in the following section, there are rich connections to be drawn with some work coming out of contemporary treatments of weakness of will in the broader sense of voluntary action against one's better judgment.

²⁴ Tillemans makes this point on 162.

This sketch of the role of *akrasia* in Buddhist moral development also shows how emphasizing its importance is not in tension with other analysis of the structure of Buddhist ethics. We have already seen that emphasis on *akrasia* is compatible with understanding Buddhist ethics as a solution to the problem of suffering, since it is precisely the deeper forms of suffering that result from, or even constitute the psychological tensions of which *akratic* response is a subspecies. Further, since it is the virtuous and vicious mental states that clash in Buddhist accounts of psychological conflict, an analysis of weakness of will is not only compatible with, but even requires exploring the role of virtues in Buddhist moral theory. In the final section of this article, I will also argue that the Buddhist understanding of psychological weakness overlaps in important ways with an account like Garfield's that stresses the importance of moral perception in Śāntideva's text.

4. WEAKNESS OF WILL IN ŚĀNTIDEVA'S *BODHICARYĀVATĀRA*

In the first section of this essay, I emphasized several related differences between Buddhist moral psychology and Western treatments of *akrasia*. First, unlike ancient Greek and many contemporary authors, Buddhists reject a strong connection between ordinary judgment and motivation, and therefore are unlikely to find *akrasia* a particularly puzzling phenomena. Second, Buddhist authors are more interested in the practical question of how psychological conflict can be overcome, rather than the theoretical question of how *akrasia* is possible. Moreover, treatments of *akrasia* and other forms of psychological conflict will often overlap. For these reasons, Buddhist authors will have relatively little interest in distinguishing *akrasia* from closely related forms of psychological weakness, such as being overcome by emotion or momentarily deceiving oneself into thinking the weak-willed option is the best.

This suggests that not only are we unlikely to find extended theoretical treatments of *akrasia* in Buddhist texts, but also that Buddhist authors will often treat various forms of psychological weakness together without sharply distinguishing them. This is exactly what we find in Śāntideva's BCA. This does not mean that he does not recognize weakness of will and its close cousins as problems, however. One of Śāntideva's most explicit acknowledgements of psychological weakness occurs in the fourth chapter. The key term in these verses is "*cetanā*," which Wallace and Wallace translate as "will", and to which I will return below. The context is Śāntideva bewailing the fact that he continues to perform harmful actions, under the influence of negative states of mind (*kleśa*), even though he knows these will lead to bad karmic consequences.

I have somehow obtained the advantageous state that is very difficult to achieve, and though aware of that, I am led back to those same hells. (BCA 4:26)

I have no will [*cetanā*] in this matter, as if bewitched by spells. I do

not know by whom I am bewitched or who dwells inside me. (BCA 4:27, brackets mine)²⁵

In these verses, Śāntideva comments on his fortune in achieving a human life that allows him to practice Buddhist teachings, and bewails the fact that his failure to use it appropriately may result in a negative rebirth. The reference to something dwelling inside of him is explained in later verses which describe the cognitive and emotional defilements (*kleśas*) of anger, attachment and delusion, the forces that cause Śāntideva to act against his commitment to the bodhisattva path. The key phrase in the second verse is his claim that his will (*cetanā*) does not belong to him. *Cetanā* has been variously translated as will, intention, volition, effort and choice, but there isn't any single term that adequately captures its meaning.²⁶ In Buddhist psychology, conscious experience is made up of moments of conscious awareness (*citta*) and various mental factors (*caitasika*) that provide the affective and cognitive content of conscious experience. *Cetanā* is a mental factor, held to be present in all conscious experience, which moves itself, conscious awareness (*citta*) and the other mental factors (*caitasika*) to the object being experienced. Object, here, refers to anything that can be the content of mental awareness.²⁷

In the second verse quoted above, Śāntideva is complaining that the *cetanā* that is impelling his mind and mental factors does not belong to him. In other words, he has committed intellectually to the Buddhist path, and identifies this as the entire purpose of his life. As such, he also commits to a host of supporting practices, such as various forms of meditation, creating meritorious karma through helpful speech and actions, study of Buddhist teachings and so forth. Instead, influenced by mental defilements, *cetanā* drives his consciousness and mental factors to rest upon harmful objects, such as distasteful features of sentient beings that arouse anger, diversions that distract him from spiritual practice and so on. Alternately, the object itself may be neutral, as in the case of thinking of a friend, but *cetanā* might move afflictive mental states to the object, such as jealousy when I am envious of my friend's success.

These verses put us in at least the vicinity of *akrasia*, since Śāntideva intellectually recognizes that he is behaving in ways that harm his purpose in life. Moreover, there is a stronger and weaker reading of this verse, both of which I think are appropriate here. In the stronger, he finds himself fixated on these objects literally against his deliberate control. In the weaker reading, Śāntideva allows his mind to be influenced by the afflictive mental states, even though it is within his power to resist

²⁵ All translations of the BCA are by Wallace and Wallace (1997).

²⁶ See Meyers (2010, chap 4) for a careful explication of the meaning of *cetanā*. I am influenced by her analysis in what follows. As Maria Heim argues in her study of Buddhaghosa, we should be careful not to identify *cetanā* with a faculty of will which plays a central role in many Western discussions of *akrasia* (2014, 25). Nevertheless, Śāntideva does here appear to be struggling with the problem of voluntarily acting against his better judgment, which is what I mean by "weakness of will" and "*akrasia*" in this essay. In its broadened contemporary sense, weakness of will can occur without a faculty of willing, and this allows us to put some contemporary work into conversation with Buddhist traditions that may not accept any such faculty. See also footnote 22 above.

²⁷ In other words, the intentional object in the phenomenological sense of the term.

their sway. The weaker reading would indicate an instance of weakness of will, while the stronger would refer to the closely related phenomena of being overcome by emotion, since the voluntary element necessary in *akratic* action is lost.

In these verses, then, Śāntideva explicitly recognizes his responses against what he intellectually judges to be best as a deep problem to be overcome. In other words, he recognizes *akrasia*, or at least closely related forms of psychological weakness, as a practical problem to be solved. Moreover, these verses include no extended theoretical discussion over how it is possible for emotion to overpower reason, nor do they clarify whether the knowledge that the response is harmful is present at the time of the action, or whether the harmful action is done voluntarily. Śāntideva does not, in other words, distinguish between *akrasia* and closely related psychological states like self-deception or being overcome by emotion. These verses therefore illustrate two of the features I have claimed Buddhist treatments of weakness of will are likely to contain: little theoretical curiosity about how *akratic* action is possible, and little concern for carefully distinguishing between *akrasia* and closely related forms of psychological weakness.

The other feature I claimed we should expect to find in Buddhist treatments of weakness of will is that they will consider *akrasia* and related forms of psychological conflict as practical problems to be solved. The treatment Śāntideva's BCA provides for weakness of will is various kinds of meditations through which the positive mental factors are strengthened and the negative ones are weakened, leading to greater awareness and control over one's mind. One way to understand the role of these meditations is as an invaluable component of Buddhist virtue theory, since they develop virtuous and lessen negative mental states.²⁸ Nevertheless, these virtues themselves function to stabilize the mind, bringing it under control and allowing the practitioner to respond well to any situation. This suggests that a complementary way to understand the role of these meditations is as treating the various kinds of weak-willed responses that prevent the practitioner from following Buddhist teachings.

In the second section of this essay, I argued that Buddhist accounts of psychological conflict go beyond Aristotle's emphasis on the tension between reason and desire, to include intellectual, emotional, motivational and concentrative forms of tension. Moreover, Buddhist ethicists are as interested in mental responses, like emotional reaction, as they are in physical action. Any of these conflicts, then, can lead to *akrasia* in a broadened sense if accompanied by an intellectual awareness that how one is responding is not for the best. This suggests that to properly analyze Śāntideva's meditations as treatments for *akrasia* we will need an expanded conception of *akratic* response that is not limited to physical action. Comparative work drawing upon classifications of *akratic* response developed by contemporary philosophers would be useful here; however, most contemporary discussion of

²⁸I use "virtue theory" here in Julia Driver's sense of theorizing the role of the virtues in moral theory. I am not claiming Buddhist ethical theory should be classified as a virtue ethics in contrast to consequentialisms and deontologies. See Driver (1988, 113 n.1), and Harris (2015, 266-268).

weakness of will follow Aristotle in taking *action* against one's better judgment as their object of analysis.

Amélie Rorty's influential article "Where does the *akratic* break take place?" however provides a significant exception to this trend. Rorty's article illustrates how *akratic* response can take place at multiple psychological levels; like Śāntideva, she is concerned with unskillful mental reactions, even in cases when these reactions may not result in a physical action against our better judgment. Below, I apply elements of Rorty's analysis to help bring out the significance of several meditations offered by Śāntideva as treatments for *akrasia* and related forms of psychological conflict. I begin each subsection by introducing a relevant form of *akratic* response as described by Rorty, and follow this with an explanation of Śāntideva's treatment of this phenomena, as well as an example of a meditation addressing the *akratic* break when appropriate.

1) *Akrasia* of Direction or Aim. Rorty characterizes *akrasia* of aim as a break between general beliefs about what is good and the commitment to guide one's actions by these evaluations (Rorty 1980, 335). I might, for instance, acknowledge that eating animals is needless and cruel, but refrain from becoming a vegetarian. For the Buddhist, *akrasia* of aim occurs when there is acknowledgement of the Four Noble Truths, but no commitment to practice Buddhism. It might also involve acknowledgment of the greater value of the bodhisattva path, while maintaining an aspiration for individual liberation. For the Buddhist, this occurs because, under the influence of mental afflictions like greed (*rāga*) and hatred (*dveṣa*), *cetanā* does not move a mental consciousness (*mano-vijñāna*) and associated mental states (*cetasika*) to the mental representation of a particular Buddhist goal that has been intellectually acknowledged as what should be done.

In the BCA, Śāntideva formally commits to the bodhisattva path in the third chapter. If he were to offer a solution for *akrasia* of aim, we would expect it to come before this point. In fact, Śāntideva offers two motivations to undertake the bodhisattva path. In the first chapter, he praises its nobility, suggesting the bodhisattvas are great men (BCA 1:30) worthy of veneration by gods and humans (BCA 1:9). In the second, he reminds us of the horrible suffering that awaits us if we do not commit to Buddhist teachings. Below are two sample verses from an extended section detailing the trauma of death.

One completely languishes while being led today to have the limbs of one's body amputated. Parched with Thirst and with pitiable eyes, one sees the world differently. (BCA 2:43)

How much more is one overpowered by the horrifying appearances of the messengers of Death as one is consumed by the fever of terror and smeared with a mass of excrement? (BCA 2:44)

Śāntideva is aware that we have deeply engrained psychological blocks that prevent our experiencing the terror of our awaiting death. For this reason, he offers us

the image of amputation as a contrast. The image of having a leg or arm cut off as punishment for a crime or as treatment for an infection creates a visceral reaction. Reading the lines or hearing the words forces us to imagine the act, and we have a sense of the terrible suffering of fear and pain that accompany the event. Śāntideva can then point out that the suffering of death will be much greater than this, since not just a limb but one's entire body, as well as friends and possessions, will be lost. We should note in the second line the language Śāntideva uses to help us feel some sense of the terrible pain resulting from the separation from everything at the time of death. One suffers from the fever of terror (*jvara-mahātrāsa*) which is so great that one literally defecates in petrification! This will motivate us to take up the Buddhist path that intellectually we have already judged to be best.

2) *Akrasia of Interpretation.* According to Rorty, in *akratic* interpretation one interprets a particular situation in a way that conflicts with the principles one has adopted (Rorty 1980, 338). Below, I consider three subspecies of *akratic* interpretation identified by Rorty that are relevant to Śāntideva's text.

As will become clear, these kinds of *akratic* interpretation are closely related, and therefore Śāntideva's treatments of each will largely overlap. Below, I refer to passages that seem particularly appropriate to the *akratic* break in question, but all these passages, I think, would have some beneficial impact on treating other forms of *akratic* interpretation.

2a) *Akrasia of Perception:* *Akrasia* of perception occurs when I interpret and categorize what I perceive in a way that conflicts with my principles (Rorty 1980, 338). For instance, even though I am committed to disabled rights, I might interpret a person using a wheelchair as weak. Rorty gives voluntary shifting between aspects of a gestalt, like the painting of two women or a vase, as evidence that we have some control over perceptual interpretation (Rorty 1980, 338). For Rorty, to the extent that they are voluntary, perceptual interpretations and categorization can be *akratic*.

For a Buddhist monk, viewing a woman's body as beautiful would conflict with his commitment to reducing lust. Śāntideva's solution to this case of *akratic* perception is to use descriptions calling to mind repulsive images to counteract such habitual interpretations.

You fear a skeleton that has been seen like this, even though it does not move. Why do you not fear it when it moves as if set in motion by some ghost? (BCA 8:48)

If you have no passion for the impure, why do you embrace someone else, who is a skeleton of bones tied by sinews and smeared with a mire of flesh? (BCA 8:52)

A monk struggling with sexual impulse can view the woman to whom he is attracted as an animated skeleton draped by a flesh covering. The imaginative reinterpretation counteracts the monk's usual perception of the woman's body as beautiful, allowing for it to be seen as repulsive and fearful instead. Of course, this

strategy would only be used provisionally, to counteract lust, and a similar strategy could be used by female monastics.

2b) Verbal Characterization. In verbal *akrasia*, we characterize situations in ways that conflict with our principles and considered judgments. Rorty gives the example of a person committed to nonsexist attitudes characterizing an assertive woman's behavior as "unreasonable" and "demanding," while calling similar behavior in a man "self-respecting" (Rorty 1980, 339).

Although we can distinguish *akrasia* of verbal characterization from perceptual *akrasia*, it is closely related, since we ordinarily verbally characterize a situation based upon our perceptual interpretation of it. Not surprisingly then, Śāntideva's strategy for dealing with such cases will overlap. His strategy here will be to use provocative language that interferes with our habitual characterizations. A female body, usually characterized as "beautiful", for instance, is referred to as "being smeared with flesh" (BCA 8:52), "a sack of muck" (BCA 8:53), and "composed of filth" (BCA 8:56), as a means of helping the monk avert his lust.

A startling feature of Śāntideva's text is his employment of grim humor in his recharacterization of what we usually take to be beautiful. The following pair of verses refers to a charnel ground meditation in which the monk imagines the decaying corpse of a lover.

Either you have seen that bashfully lowered face before as
being lifted up with effort, or you have not seen it as it was
covered by a veil. (BCA 8:44)

Now, that face is revealed by vultures as if they are unable to
bear your anxiousness. Look at it! Why are you fleeing away
now? (BCA 8:45)

Śāntideva taunts his reader (and perhaps himself), pointing out that since the lover longed for and fantasized about the face of the beloved when it was covered by a veil, he should be delighted now that the vultures of the charnel ground have removed the flesh and laid open the face. The characterizations, disturbing and playful at the same time, sharply contrast with the usual romantic characterizations of the woman's body.

2c) Emotional Reactions: Rorty suggests that emotional reactions can be *akratic* when they conflict with the person's judgment of the situation (Rorty 1980, 340). We might, for instance, judge that a colleague deserved a promotion more than we did, but still feel jealous towards him. Buddhists believe that over time habitual tendencies (*anuśayas*) to experience negative mental states increase, entailing particularly strong harmful emotional responses. It is not surprising, then, that Śāntideva spends much of the text offering techniques to influence them. For instance, remembering that one has vowed to help others achieve the supreme welfare of awakening will dissolve jealousy arising as a result of their material prosperity (BCA 6:83), and remembering the sufferings that await one in hell as a karmic result of anger acts as an antidote to this affliction (BCA 6:89). Much of the text, in fact, can be understood as ways of

bringing emotional reactions under conscious control. Progressing through a period in which *akratic* emotional response sometimes occurs will be a necessary transitional period in the development of full virtue.

One of the most striking sections of Śāntideva's text is his sixth chapter, dedicated to developing patience and averting anger. Below is one of the many meditations he offers to dissolve anger towards sentient beings when it begins to arise.

If inflicting harm on others is the nature of the foolish, then
my anger toward them is as inappropriate as
it would be toward fire, which has the nature of burning. (BCA 6:39)

If this fault is adventitious and if sentient beings are good by
nature, then anger toward them is inappropriate
as it would be toward pungent smoke in the sky. (BCA 6:40)

Śāntideva offers these meditations to help avert anger against someone hurting us. He points out that if the one harming us is simply depraved, then anger towards them is like being angry at a wild animal that cannot control its behavior. If they harm us after being overcome by a temporary negative emotion, then once again anger towards them is inappropriate since their behavior is only a temporary aberration.

3) *Akrasia of Character*: This is the variety of *akrasia* that has attracted the most philosophical attention, in which one acts against one's better judgment (Rorty 1980, 343). Śāntideva, however, gives relatively little attention to physical behavior in his text. His emphasis is on perfecting one's character by developing the virtues of the bodhisattva. Once the *akratic* breaks identified in this section are resolved by these virtuous dispositions, then *akratic* action will cease with little further effort.

In the prior section, I argued that Buddhist authors will see weakness of will as a problem to be solved, and will therefore be likely to both recognize and provide treatments for it. In the first part of this section, I argued that Śāntideva explicitly recognizes weakness of will, or at least a closely related kind of psychological weakness, in the fourth chapter of the BCA. I then examined a series of meditations which illustrate Śāntideva's treatment of various *akratic* responses.

5. CONCLUSION

Although Garfield is right to emphasize differences between Buddhist moral psychology and Aristotle's treatment of *akrasia*, this does not conflict with viewing weakness of will as an integral element in Śāntideva's moral thought once we broaden our understanding of *akrasia* to include all voluntary action against one's better judgment. Moreover, like Rorty, if we broaden the *akratic* responses under consideration to include emotional reaction, perceptual classification and so on, it becomes easier to draw deep connections with the pluralistic accounts of psychological conflict we find in Buddhist texts. Finally, since Buddhist authors are unlikely to carefully distinguish *akrasia* from closely related forms of psychological

weakness, cross-cultural work on *akrasia* will most naturally include consideration of closely related phenomena such as self-deception and being overcome by emotion. Since both ancient and contemporary authors writing on *akrasia* already frequently discuss these phenomena, this is no reason not to consider their work alongside Buddhist authors.

Another significant difference between Western and Buddhist treatments of *akrasia* is the lack of theoretical puzzlement as to the existence of weakness of will within a Buddhist psychological framework, and moreover their greater emphasis on seeing psychological weakness as a practical problem to be overcome. Nevertheless, I have tried to show how theoretical work on *akrasia*, in particular Rorty's development of an expanded conception of *akratic* response, can help articulate the implicit recognition by authors like Śāntideva of the existence of multiple *akratic* breaks requiring treatment.

None of this requires claiming that *akrasia* is the single key to understanding Śāntideva's BCA, or any Buddhist text. Buddhist ethics frames itself as the solution to the problem of suffering, and overcoming weakness of will takes its place alongside the development of the virtues, adoption of moral commitments, pursuit of the consequence of lessening suffering and so on that largely constitute the activities of the Buddhist path. For any particular agent, however, psychological conflict will enter into the consistent pursuit, maintenance or development of any of these liberating activities. For this reason, weakness of will and its close conceptual cousins will resurface continually as the practitioner strives to model his physical, verbal and psychological behavior to accord with what he intellectually recognizes as best.

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