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The joke is Saṃsāra: humor as a means in Śāntideva's Bodhisattva path

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The Joke is *saṃsāra*

Humor as a Means in Śāntideva's Bodhisattva Path

1. Introduction

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's groundbreaking comparative study of Christian theology and the soteriology of the eighth century Mahāyāna Buddhist Śāntideva is a rigorous, insightful, and creative achievement (see Schmidt-Leukel, 2019). Drawing on years of expertise developed in his work on comparative theology, Schmidt-Leukel's scholarship on Śāntideva is far from a laughing matter. This makes somewhat ironic his recent expression of a lingering regret regarding the absence, in the book, of a treatment of Śāntideva's use of humor as a liberative means.¹ Schmidt-Leukel is right about the importance of humor in Śāntideva's liberative psychology. For the Buddhist, *saṃsāra* is a horror show, which is constituted by a set of misperceptions: we see the impermanent as permanent, the impure as pure, and so on. Our understanding of the world is fraught with these errors, and it is this incongruence between the way the world exists and the way we perceive it that acts as the root underlying cause of suffering. It creates as well, I will argue below, the opportunity for Śāntideva to introduce grim humor into his therapeutic meditations on our mortal existential situation.

According to the dominant contemporary theory, humor results from perceived incongruity between two elements that are experienced together (see Morreall, 2009, pp. 10–15).² To borrow a classic example, we find the conjoined images of a Chihuahua and a Great Dane funny because of their incongruitous physical traits, combined with the fact that both are subsumed under the concept dog (see Morreall, 2009, p. 12). Likewise, the incongruity of the meanings of homographs can account for the humor found in puns. As Mae West quips, "Marriage is a great institution – but I'm not ready for an institution" (Morreall, 2009, p. 52). Such light-hearted frivolities will be of no interest to the eighth century Mahāyānist Śāntideva, given that his aim is to illustrate the absurdity of *saṃsāra* and thereby stimulate urgency

1 This remark was made at a conference co-organized by Schmidt-Leukel and myself, "Śāntideva and the Dynamics of Tradition" (Münster, May 25–27, 2023), and preceded his presentation of an unpublished essay on the subject of Śāntideva's use of sarcastic humor. My ideas in what follows are stimulated by and indebted to Schmidt-Leukel's analysis, and hopefully will in turn further encourage his attention to the topic.

2 The Indian theorists Bharata and Abhinavagupta also identify the perception of incongruity as a significant source of humor (see Clasquin, 2001, p. 110).

to take up the Buddhist path. Nevertheless, we will see that the comic juxtaposition of incongruous elements also forms the essence of his graveyard humor.

My focus in what follows will be on Śāntideva's incorporation of humor into a series of meditative techniques to lessen sensual craving, which are found in the first half of the eighth chapter of his most influential text, the *Guide to the Practices of Awakening* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*; hereafter *Guide*). I begin with a few brief comments on the structure and goals of the chapter, before turning to the role of humor within it.³

2. The *Guide's* Eighth Chapter

Although it is formally dedicated to the topic of concentration meditation (*dhyāna*), most of the meditative trainings contained in the *Guide's* eighth chapter can be divided into two thematic groups. The first half of the chapter contains a series of contemplations and arguments to weaken craving (*rāga*, *trṣṇā*), by drawing the reader's attention to the disadvantages of saṃsāric success, the dangers of sensual attraction, and the impurity of the body. It is here that we will find Śāntideva employ humor as a tool to supplement the effectiveness of visualization, argumentation, and social description. These trainings prepare the bodhisattva to deeply engage in meditations to develop compassion and *bodhicitta*, the wish to achieve awakening for all sentient beings, which compose the second half of the chapter. The basic strategy of chapter eight, therefore, is to first weaken desire and attenuate self-centeredness, so that the exercises to develop compassion in the later parts of the chapter can be efficacious.⁴

In the first half of the chapter, Śāntideva alternates between two interrelated but distinguishable kinds of techniques. The more graphic of these are a series of contemplations on bodies in stages of decay, conjoined with additional meditations on the repulsive features of living bodies. Below I show how Śāntideva incorporates humor into some of these descriptions, but the basic technique itself does not require this; simply contemplating repulsive features of the human body itself can weaken or even temporarily eliminate sensual lust.

A second strategy used in the first half of the chapter employs the method of social description. Particularly in the first thirty verses, Śāntideva describes dysfunctional saṃsāric social relationships, governed by the negative emotions of aggression, jealousy, and arrogant pride (see *Guide* 8:12).⁵ Social interaction by persons without advanced spiritual training is characterized as a hierarchical struggle for

³ For summaries of the structure and content of the *Guide's* eighth chapter, see Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, pp. 347–412 and Harris, 2024, ch. 4.

⁴ See Harris, 2024, ch. 4 for a fuller explication of my understanding of the relationship between the two parts of the *Guide's* eighth chapter. See also Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, p. 348.

⁵ References to Śāntideva's *Guide* indicate the chapter and verse number(s) of the passage(s) in question. All translations are by Ernst Steinkellner and Cynthia Peck-Kuback-

higher status. Relationships of affection in this saṃsāric social milieu are instrumentalized, becoming dispensable tools to be used merely for self-gain (see *Guide* 8:24–25). Later parts of the chapter argue that any success achieved in this way is of no real value, given the anxiety material wealth causes (see *Guide* 8:79–80), the difficulties in making and keeping wealth (see *Guide* 8:72–79), and the likelihood that good reputation, if achieved, will simply result in emotional pain (see *Guide* 8:79). These two sets of meditations, focused on the repulsive aspects of the body and the dysfunction of saṃsāric society respectively, both complement and overlap with each other. Śāntideva's social descriptions frequently reference the inevitability of death as undercutting the value of societal success (see *Guide* 8:5, 8:8, 8:33–35). Likewise, as we will see below, the contemplations on impurity of the body frequently take romantic partners as their focus.

Before turning to these passages, it will be helpful to note a tension running through the *Guide's* eighth chapter, which may partly explain Śāntideva's use of humor. The bodhisattva path, whose aspirants have vowed to remain in the realm of rebirth for the sake of others, contrasts strongly in end goal with the path of the early Buddhist disciples who aim at liberation for themselves. Nevertheless, adherents to both paths share a commitment to eliminating craving and thereby ending the suffering that it causes. The meditations of the first half of chapter eight, therefore, are equally applicable to bodhisattva training and the path of the early Buddhist disciple. Moreover, reducing craving towards saṃsāric pursuits will not, of itself, awaken compassion. There is a danger, therefore, that the bodhisattvas engaging in these practices will undercut their motivation to remain engaged in the realm of rebirth, and thereby risk losing their bodhisattva commitment. This may be one reason why Śāntideva supplements his meditations on the irrationality of craving with humor, given that humor can create a certain emotional distance from a painful situation, and in so doing enables the individual to function within it, rather than simply abandoning it when doing so would be inappropriate. I return to this point in the conclusion.

3. Śāntideva's Graveyard Humor

In this section, I examine three instances of Śāntideva's use of humor as a therapeutic tool to reduce lust. Each is incorporated into a contemplation on the foulness of the body, either a meditation on a decomposing corpse, or on a disgusting aspect of a living body. As such, some of the therapeutic work of each exercise is achieved simply through generating disgust or terror through repeated contemplation of the images in question. Nevertheless, we will find Śāntideva introduce humor into all three meditations, as an additional tool to enhance the efficacy of the visualization.

zek in Śāntideva, 2019. See also the translations by Crosby & Skilton (Śāntideva, 1995) and Wallace & Wallace (Śāntideva, 1997).

The first of the contemplations has a lover reflecting on the body of his beloved now that she is decomposing in the charnel ground. In the verses, the second person pronoun is used to indicate the lover.⁶

The face which you once saw as it was hardly lifted, lowered in modesty, or did not see when covered by a veil, this face has now been exposed by vultures, as if they had pity on your distress. Look at it! Why do you flee now? What was well protected even from the gaze of others is meanwhile being devoured. Why, jealous one, don't you protect it? (*Guide* 8:44–46)

In this grim meditation, the practitioner's attention is directed towards a corpse of a former lover, now laid out in the charnel ground. Śāntideva reminds the lover that he was eager to gaze at the woman's face while she lived, a longing increased by her habit of hiding her visage out of modesty, through a downcast gaze, or a veil of cloth (see *Guide* 8:44). That same face is now "exposed" in the charnel ground by the vultures; although Śāntideva is not explicit about his meaning, we can imagine the birds will tilt up the head, strip it of any covering cloth, and most graphically, rip away the flesh, exposing the bones, as they conduct their work (see *Guide* 8:45).⁷ By comparing the attentions of the birds to the tender treatment of the lover, Śāntideva challenges his reader to take up a humorous perspective on the distressing tableau in which the horrors of impermanence and human vulnerability are laid bare. The dramatic tension is heightened by his mocking insistence that the birds are doing the lover *a favor* (see *Guide* 8:45); given his eagerness to get at what was behind the veil of cloth while she lived, he should be eager to guard the revealed skin and bones now (see *Guide* 8:46). The ghastliness of the image may prevent any easy enjoyment of the incongruous pairing of the removal of a cloth veil and the veil of skin being ripped away in the charnel ground. Nevertheless, Śāntideva's treatment of the images is distinctly mirthful, expressed as well in his feigned astonishment that the lover is fleeing from the repulsive sight of the exposed face of the corpse (see *Guide* 8:45).

In his construction of the comparison, Śāntideva's choice of the cloth veil itself as one of the items contrasted already hints at the joke's import. The lover's attraction to the veiled woman's face illustrates that his apparent perception of her beauty must be a conceptual superimposition, given that the face is quite literally not being seen. Śāntideva uses the example to show how craving responds to a conceptually constructed representation which covers over what is really experienced. What the image of the body in the charnel ground adds is a reminder that the situation is not

6 The techniques are aimed at reducing sensual desire of heterosexual male monks, and therefore a female body is presented as the object of meditation (see Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, p. 356).

7 Schmidt-Leukel draws attention to this last element of the comparison. "Now on the charnel ground, the lover, who was so keen to see her face, has an even more exposed view; for the vultures have removed her skin" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, p. 367).

that different when the face of a living being is perceived; all the time, just below the thin draping of skin, are bones, pus, and blood which terrify when they are exposed. The passion of the lover depends on his suppression of these well-known facts, and the superimposition of the illusion of permanence and beauty upon the impersonal collection of bodily elements.⁸

I have already remarked above that contemplating these gruesome images themselves can function as an antidote to lust. What is it then that Śāntideva gains by introducing humor into his descriptions? Part of the answer is that humor depends upon recognizing the incongruity of the two elements which are connected. In this meditation, Śāntideva conjoins what is ordinarily taken to be beautiful, the face of the living beloved, with what is ordinarily taken to be repulsive, the exposed face of the corpse in the charnel ground. According to Buddhist psychology, both responses are the result of delusion; the dead body is not fearsome to the highly advanced practitioner, any more than the living body is attractive. From the perspective of ordinary persons, however, the humor of the situation is constituted by playing off one deluded response against the other. To the extent that he has the fortitude to recognize the absurdity of his psychological habits, the practitioner can gain insight into his saṃsāric predicament, in which irrational craving continually replaces and is replaced by irrational aversion, with each arising as a result of the underlying delusive conceptual superimposition of permanence.

The remaining two examples largely repeat the elements described above, and may be treated briefly. The first comes a few verses later, as Śāntideva continues the theme of the deconstruction of romantic love. It differs from the first, in that the verses focus on the superimposition of attractiveness upon a living body.

If you have no passion for what is foul, why then do you embrace the other born in a soil of excrement, sprouting from it and nourished by it? Because it is small, you do not want the unclean worm that emerges from excrement, yet the body made of plenty of excrement and even born from excrement, you like. Not only do you not despise that you yourself are excrement, you crave for other vessels of excrement, lecher of filth. (*Guide* 8:59–61)

The perception of a living body as clean, Śāntideva argues in the passage, is itself a superimposition, for the maintenance of the body requires eating food, which becomes excrement and churns through the bowels before being excreted (see *Guide* 8:59–60). The discordant elements in this meditation are the pairing of the supposedly clean body of the lover, with the worm living in the filth strewn on the ground. Given the disgusting nature of the body, sexual attraction towards it should be rec-

8 Here I am influenced by Schmidt-Leukel's analysis of the passage. "Sexual desire wants to see and touch the other's body, but it cannot stand the body's full exposure. It only works as long as the real nature of the body, its impurity and transience, remains concealed. That is, sexual desire operates through an inherent mechanism of delusion" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2019, p. 367).

ognized to be the product of the conceptual superimposition of purity. Embracing the body of a lover, mocks Śāntideva in the passage's conclusion, is embracing something as filthy as the body of the worm (see *Guide* 8:61).

The first of the above examples took a corpse as its central object of contemplation, while the second directed attention to the foulness of a living body. The final example, quoted below, combines these approaches, by analogizing living and dead bodies: "Of course you are terrified by the sight of some skeletons at the charnel ground; in the charnel ground of a village, where walking skeletons crowd, you are cheerful" (*Guide* 8:70).

Living bodies are like corpses, in that both are collections of interconnected bones. Moreover, seeing these bones laid out in the charnel ground terrifies us. How much more, jokes Śāntideva, should the body of a living person terrify us, given that this concealed skeleton is moving back and forth as if possessed by a ghost (*Guide* 8:70). The passage's effect is enhanced by the meditations which preceded it, during which exposed bones as well as visualizations of what lies beneath the skin were repeated elements of contemplation. Now Śāntideva can simply contrast the incongruous elements of the living village of moving bodies, with the charnel ground strewn with skeletons, in order to produce his humorous effect.

4. Conclusion

In this short essay, I have surveyed three uses of humor by Śāntideva in his sequence of meditations on the foulness of the body. In all three cases, given the seriousness of the topic and the graphic nature of the images, it is possible to fail at least initially to notice that the descriptions have moved into a humorous register. Nevertheless, attention to Śāntideva's jesting tone indicates that humor has been deliberately introduced to supplement the work done by the images themselves.

Humor is achieved, in all three cases, by the pairing of incongruous elements: removing the beauty veil of cloth is analogized to the exposure of a corpse's face by vultures; an apparently beautiful body is likened to a filthy worm; and a village of living people is compared with a charnel ground strewn with skeletons. One side of each equation represents ordinary delusive attitudes of craving and affection, while the other stimulates aversion by making plain the stark realities of human mortality. In so doing, desire and aversion are played against each other. The result will be a lessening of lust, but I have suggested as well that Śāntideva may be using humor to illustrate to his reader that *both* aversion and attraction are irrational responses arising in dependence on unconscious and semi-conscious superimpositions of permanence. Saṃsāric experience, therefore, is tragic just in so much as it is comic, comprised of these incoherent fluctuations between emotional poles.

A complementary explanation for Śāntideva's employment of humor is revealed when we ask how the pairing of incongruous elements produces humor. Here is how philosopher of humor, John Morreall, describes the process:

The core concept in incongruity theories is based on the fact that human experience works with learned patterns. What we have experienced prepares us to deal with what we will experience. ... Most of the time, most experiences of most people follow such mental patterns. The future turns out like the past. But sometimes we perceive or imagine a thing whose parts or features violate our mental patterns. (Morreall, 2009, p. 10)

Humor operates through stimulating our habitual patterns of response to the world, and then, through methods such as wordplay or sudden unexpected alteration of the scenario, interrupts these patterns for comic effect. It therefore exposes and may at least temporarily destabilize these patterns of habitual response. Here we have a natural resonance with the aims of Buddhist soteriological psychology, whose final goal cannot merely be to eliminate occurrent moments of craving and aggression, but rather must expose, weaken and eventually eradicate the habitual tendencies for their arising.⁹ We can understand Śāntideva to be targeting these negative habitual emotional patterns through his introduction of humor into the visualizations on the repulsiveness of the body. The well-worn psychological patterns of attraction to bodies taken to be beautiful are highlighted and interrupted through their incongruous pairing with the chosen repulsive elements, that is, the exposed face in the charnel ground, the worm, and the skeleton. Recognizing the humor afforded by these conjoined discordant elements provides the practitioner the opportunity to become aware of and begin to weaken habitual emotional patterns, and the underlying processes of superimposition and conceptual exclusion upon which they depend.

A final reason Śāntideva may have chosen to integrate humor into his contemplations of the first half of chapter eight was already raised above. As we have seen, the meditations of the first half of the *Guide*'s eighth chapter lessen craving but will not of themselves stimulate compassion which can function as a motivation to remain in saṃsāra. There is a danger, therefore, that deepened awareness of the horrors of saṃsāra may motivate the developing bodhisattva to abandon their commitment and assume the quicker early Buddhist path to individual liberation. Śāntideva's introduction of humor into the early parts of the chapter may be a means of blunting the emotional trauma of the bodhisattva's developing insight into impermanence and suffering. Humor, by making visible the absurdity of a situation, provides a certain emotional distance from present dysfunction. In so doing, it may increase one's ability to act effectively within the problematic situation, when leaving it is not an immediate option. Such an attitude would be essential for the developing

9 A relevant term in Buddhist psychology in this respect is *anuśaya*, or underlying habitual tendency. The *anuśaya* of anger, for instance, is the habitual disposition to become angry in unpleasant situations. See Waldron, 2003, pp. 33–36 for an explanation of *anuśaya*. Chapters one and two of the same work provide an excellent introduction to Buddhist psychology which provides the conceptual background for Śāntideva's meditations.

bodhisattva, who is in the process of recognizing the painfulness of their saṃsāric condition but is not ready yet to wholly overcome it.¹⁰

This is not to say that for Śāntideva humor can act as a final balm for saṃsāric suffering – this is the role that must ultimately be performed by compassion and wisdom, the topics of the latter half of the *Guide's* chapter eight and the subsequent ninth chapter. Nevertheless, in making visible the absurdity of saṃsāric processes of attraction and aversion, as well as the conceptual superimpositions upon which they depend, humor plays a useful role in heightening the effectiveness of Śāntideva's meditations on the dissatisfactory nature of saṃsāric existence. Simultaneously, humor provides psychological distance from the bodhisattva's growing realization of the painfulness of their present situation, thereby enabling continued progress on the bodhisattva path. In both these ways, it can function as a useful means in bodhisattva training.

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¹⁰ This is a delicate point, given Śāntideva's continued insistence that progressing on the bodhisattva path benefits the bodhisattva (see Harris, 2024). The relevant point here is that humor may be a provisional means to endure the early-stage bodhisattva's heightened awareness of her own suffering, before that suffering itself can be eliminated at the later stages of the bodhisattva path.