

## Demandingness, Well-Being and the Bodhisattva Path

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**Abstract** This paper reconstructs an Indian Buddhist response to the overdemandingness objection, the claim that a moral theory asks too much of its adherents. In the first section, I explain the objection and argue that some Mahāyāna Buddhists, including Śāntideva, face it. In the second section, I survey some possible ways of responding to the objection as a way of situating the Buddhist response alongside contemporary work. In the final section, I draw upon writing by Vasubandhu and Śāntideva in reconstructing a Mahāyāna response to the objection. An essential component of this response is the psychological transformation that the bodhisattva achieves as a result of realizing the nonexistence of the self. This allows him to radically identify his well-being with the well-being of others, thereby lessening the tension between self and others upon which the overdemandingness objection usually depends. Emphasizing the attention Mahāyāna authors pay to lessening moral demandingness in this way increases our appreciation of the philosophical sophistication of their moral thought and highlights an important strategy for responding to the overdemandingness objection that has been underdeveloped in contemporary work.

**Keywords** Buddhist ethics · Demandingness · Śāntideva · Buddhism · Bodhisattva · Well-being

While contemporary moral theorists like Peter Singer and Peter Unger insist that morality tells us that we should donate surplus income saved from forgoing afternoon matinees and ski vacations, the bodhisattva of Indian Buddhism prays to be reborn in the Avīci hell to save the beings there.<sup>1</sup> For those unfamiliar with Indian cosmology, in

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<sup>1</sup>See Singer 1972; Unger 1996 and Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 8:107 (Śāntideva 1997).

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the Avīci hell, fires from all directions slowly burn away the skin and bones of beings that dwell there for billions of years (Tsong-Kha-Pa 2000).<sup>2</sup> Bodhisattvas undergo this and many other torments as they voluntarily delay final liberation from suffering for countless lives in order to develop the full virtues of Buddhahood and liberate other sentient beings.<sup>3</sup> Although moral theories are expected to require some level of self-sacrifice, if a theory is extremely demanding, then it opens itself to the charge that it asks too much of its followers. Any Buddhist thinker who claims that we are obligated to become bodhisattvas will face this overdemandingness objection.

In this essay, I consider the resources that Buddhist authors possess to respond to this objection. In the first section, I explain what the overdemandingness objection is and argue that it applies to the Mahāyāna Buddhist monk, Śāntideva. In the following section, I sketch possible strategies that may be employed in responding to the objection and suggest which kind of response a Buddhist like Śāntideva would make. The concluding section reconstructs one such response that depends on recognizing the psychological transformation that early Buddhists and Mahāyāna practitioners alike undergo as a result of practicing the Buddhist path. I also argue that the demand-lesser strategy employed in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts is plausible, but that it depends on Buddhist presuppositions about the psychological effects of realizing selflessness and the pervasion of ordinary experience by suffering (*duḥkha*) to have the level of effect Buddhist authors require.

## The Overdemandingness Objection in Indian Buddhism

The overdemandingness objection arises when a moral theory makes unfair demands on its adherents. The most influential version of the problem occurs when a theory asks the agent to make an unfair sacrifice of her well-being. Although there are other ways of formulating the problem, it is only this central version that I will be concerned with.<sup>4</sup> The overdemandingness problem is most commonly associated with act consequentialism, since an act consequentialist will sacrifice her well-being whenever doing so would maximize welfare overall. Ethical theories other than consequentialism, however, can also face the overdemandingness objection, such as a virtue ethics or deontology that endorses potentially demanding habitual dispositions or rules.<sup>5</sup> Since it can apply to

<sup>2</sup> See also the discussion of the hell realms in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. See Vasubandhu 1988, pps. 456–460.

<sup>3</sup> The bodhisattva is the saint of Indian Buddhism who delays final liberation from suffering and takes innumerable rebirths in order to develop the wisdom and compassion necessary to become a Buddha and lead sentient beings from suffering. Although early Buddhism accepts the existence of bodhisattvas, the ideal gains much greater prominence in the later, Mahāyāna traditions.

<sup>4</sup> The overdemandingness objection is often linked to Bernard Williams' claim that Utilitarianism alienates us from our life projects by requiring us to abandon them whenever doing so would promote the good (Williams 1973). Moral theories are also sometimes said to be unfairly demanding if they severely narrow the range of options open to the agent (Murphy 2000, 26) or require an agent to make sacrifices, even when all things considered they have most reason not to do so (Portmore 2011, 26). To the extent that these formulations do not depend on a loss of agent well-being, I think it better to treat them as distinct problems, rather than group them under the overdemandingness objection, but I will not argue for that here. The welfare-reducing version of the objection is the most relevant to Buddhist demand-lesser strategies, and so I limit my attention to it.

<sup>5</sup> See Swanton (2009) regarding demanding virtue ethics. See Singer (1972) for an argument that common-sense morality can be overly demanding.

versions of most moral theories, we need not consider what kind of moral theory Buddhism represents before considering its vulnerability to the overdemandingness objection.

Early Indian Buddhism accepts two end goals of spiritual practice, becoming an *arhat* who eliminates ignorance and craving, and upon death, is not reborn, or becoming a full Buddha by adopting the path of the bodhisattva who willingly delays final *nirvāṇa* and takes practically limitless additional rebirths for the benefit of sentient beings.<sup>6</sup> The life of a monastic seeking *arhatship* seems demanding by non-Buddhist standards: monks and nuns forgo family life and accept the rules of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) which include not eating after noon, not handling money, and avoiding musical shows and dancing. Early Buddhism does not face the overdemandingness problem as I have defined it, however, since undertaking these apparent hardships help the monk or nun attain *nirvāṇa* and be released from suffering.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Buddhists, the apparent demandingness of the practice actually increases the well-being of the individual.

In contrast to aiming at *arhatship*, becoming a bodhisattva is demanding in the sense I am interested in, since the aspiring bodhisattva delays *nirvāṇa* and the release from suffering it represents.<sup>8</sup> Further, they perform many demanding acts, including giving up their limbs or even their lives to benefit others and being reborn in hell realms to work for the beings there. Although the bodhisattva ideal gains greater prominence with the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, most Mahāyāna authors also claim that *arhatship* is an acceptable, if inferior endpoint of spiritual practice.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to early Buddhist texts, which view the bodhisattva ideal of attaining full Buddhahood as beyond the ability of most persons, these Mahāyāna authors emphasize the possibility and desirability of all persons becoming bodhisattvas and eventually Buddhas. For this reason, they need to produce strategies that lessen the demandingness of the bodhisattva path, so that it is accessible to ordinary persons. Nevertheless, since undertaking the bodhisattva way is *optional*, they also do not face the overdemandingness objection.

On the other hand, in his *Introduction to the Practice of Awakening (Bodhicaryāvatāra; hereafter, BCA)*, the Mahāyāna monk philosopher Śāntideva makes a series of arguments in which he concludes that we should commit to impartial benevolence and remove everyone's suffering without partiality. For instance, in the eighth chapter, he writes:

I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. I should take care of others because they are sentient beings, just as I

<sup>6</sup> *Arhat* in Sanskrit means worthy one and refers to the early Buddhist practitioner who has attained the *nirvāṇa* of individual liberation.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, early Buddhist traditions hold the bodhisattva path to be an optional supererogatory commitment and so would not face the overdemandingness objection.

<sup>8</sup> In many early Buddhist texts, the liberation of an *arhat* and a Buddha is not clearly distinguished. As both Mahāyāna and early Buddhist traditions develop, however, the awakening of a Buddha is distinguished from that of an *arhat* in that he completely destroys the defilements (*āśravas*) of ignorance (*avidyā*) and develops various powers to effectively benefit sentient beings. To develop these advanced abilities, the bodhisattva voluntarily enters the longer path to full Buddhahood and delays liberation even after realizing selflessness. See Nattier (2003) and Bodhi (2010).

<sup>9</sup> See Nattier (2003), especially pps. 172–176. Also relevant are Harrison (1987), Samuels (1997), and Silk (2002).

am a sentient being (BCA 8:94). When happiness is equally dear to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I strive after happiness for myself alone? (BCA 8:95). When fear and suffering are equally abhorrent to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I protect myself but not others? (BCA 8:96)<sup>10</sup>

The argument appeals to the intrinsic unpleasantness of suffering as a reason to remove it, no matter within whom it occurs. Śāntideva suggests that there is nothing about my own suffering or happiness that justifies giving it any special priority. The implied conclusion is that I should accept impartial benevolence and commit to removing everyone's suffering without giving special concern to my own. For a Buddhist like Śāntideva, this would mean committing to the bodhisattva path, since it is by perfecting the virtues of Buddhahood that we would become most effective in removing suffering.<sup>11</sup>

I do not want to here evaluate this argument, but cite it to show that Śāntideva attempts to establish that we ought to become bodhisattvas. Moreover, as we have seen, the bodhisattva path is, at least at first glance, extraordinarily demanding. Unlike the *arhat* who enters personal *nirvāṇa* and escapes all suffering, the bodhisattva willingly takes billions of additional rebirths, often undergoing torments in his quest to liberate sentient beings. These verses, therefore, may be taken as evidence that Śāntideva, and Mahāyāna Buddhists who would follow him in accepting an obligation to commit to impartial benevolence, would face the overdemandingness problem. If we believe it unfair for a moral system to insist we give up movies and vacations, surely it is too much to ask that we remain for countless eons in *samsāra*!

We can conclude that most Mahāyāna authors have an interest in reducing the demandingness of the bodhisattva path and that at least Śāntideva appears to actually face the overdemandingness objection. In the next section, I survey possible responses to the objection and indicate in a preliminary way what type of response is open to Buddhist Mahāyāna authors. The following section reconstructs in more detail the response Śāntideva and other Mahāyānists can make to the objection.

## Possible Responses to the Overdemandingness Objection

The most straightforward response to the overdemandingness objection is to simply claim that the correct moral theory is extremely demanding. Versions of this bite-the-bullet response have been adopted by prominent ethicists including Shelly Kagan, Peter Singer, and Peter Unger. Generally, this approach is matched with a campaign against the intuitions which lead us to believe that the demands of the theory in question are

<sup>10</sup> Translations from Śāntideva's BCA are from Śāntideva (1997), translation by Vesna Wallace and Alan Wallace unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> A few verses later, Śāntideva also makes an argument that if we accept the nonexistence of the self, then we should commit to impartially removing the suffering of all. See BCA 8: 101–103. In Harris (2011), I argue that the primary purpose of these verses may be to act as a meditation that causes psychological transformation, rather than to rationally convince. But as Garfield et al. (in press) emphasize, even if I am right about the meditative purpose of these verses, this does not mean that they should not also be taken seriously as an argument. I adopt this approach to verses 8:94–96 here.

unfair.<sup>12</sup> This approach is not really available to the Mahāyānist, however. The difficulty is that endorsing an extremely demanding theory generally requires accepting that most persons will not do what is morally required.<sup>13</sup> Singer, for instance, argues that although we are morally required to give up all our free time and income to help relieve poverty, it is only realistic to expect most persons to make a far smaller contribution (Singer 1993, 358). The goal of a Mahāyānist like Śāntideva, however, is to help all beings achieve full Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. This suggests Śāntideva will need to offer some response to the overdemandingness objection that actually lessens demandingness, rather than merely endorse a standard of rightness that most persons will not follow.

A second kind of response to the objection, which has received considerable attention from authors writing from a consequentialist perspective, is to restructure a moral theory to lessen the amount owed to others. Although theoretically this restructuring might take place on either the criteria of right action or the theory of well-being endorsed by the system, in fact most contemporary approaches have focused on the first of these options. Michael Slote's satisficing consequentialism, for instance, decouples consequentialism from maximization and claims that although consequences alone determine the rightness of an act, an act may still be right if it does not have the best consequences (Slote 1985, 36). An agent in Slote's view fulfills his ethical obligations if his action is good enough, even if it is not as good as it could be. Likewise, Samuel Scheffler abandons the consequentialist commitment to impartiality and allows agents to give their own interests greater weight than that of other persons (Scheffler 1982). Adherents of rule consequentialism, similarly, lessen the demands placed on adherents by determining individual obligation by the set of rules which would be most beneficial if followed by everyone.<sup>14</sup> A Mahāyāna Buddhist claiming that the bodhisattva path is obligatory cannot adopt this kind of demand-lessening restructuring of the criteria of right action, however, because to do so would require making optional the bodhisattva's primary commitment, the achievement of full Buddhahood in order to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. The bodhisattva vow requires the bodhisattva to devote all his resources and energy towards awakening as a means of liberating all sentient beings, and any diminution of this goal would mean abandoning this supreme intention.

Although it has been a less popular option, it is also possible to alter a theory of well-being to reduce the tension between moral demands and an individual's welfare. Three theories about the basic units of welfare value have been particularly prominent in recent contemporary ethical theory. Mental state theories, like hedonism, claim that welfare consists solely in experiencing certain psychological states. A desire-satisfaction theory, by contrast, claims that our life goes best when we satisfy our

<sup>12</sup> See Kagan 1989, p. 13; Singer 1972, 1993; Unger 1996.

<sup>13</sup> See Goodman 2009, chapter 7 for an exploration of several ways Buddhist moral texts function to reduce moral demandingness, including distinguishing moral praise and blame from moral wrongdoing and adopting a two-tiered level of moral obligation for extraordinary and ordinary persons. Both these strategies can be seen as a response to the problem referred to here that most persons will not follow an extraordinarily demanding moral code. These strategies identified by Goodman are complimentary to the one I develop below, but would perhaps be less attractive to a thinker like Śāntideva who goes to extraordinary lengths to urge his reader to aspire towards complete moral perfection.

<sup>14</sup> Hooker (2000) provides a carefully constructed defense of rule consequentialism. See Mulgan (2001) chapters three, five, and six for an accessible summary of rule, satisficing, and hybrid consequentialism.

desires. An objective list theory claims that certain items enhance our welfare, regardless of whether they bring us pleasure or satisfy our desires. This list might include such items as friendships, appreciation of beauty, and character development, and might also include items focused on by the other theories, such as pleasure and desire satisfaction.<sup>15</sup> Other theories of well-being have also been defended, but considering these three influential views will be sufficient for my purpose.<sup>16</sup>

In this welfare restructuring response, the strategy will be to endorse an alternative theory of welfare that will define the foundational units of well-being in terms that lessen apparent demandingness. A Christian objective list theory, for instance, might claim that closeness to God is the most significant element in individual well-being and devalue items such as pleasure or satisfaction of worldly aims. This is largely the strategy we find in early Buddhist texts that devalue worldly pursuits and claim most forms of sensual pleasure are pervaded by subtle dissatisfaction. As a result, the life of the monk who has forgone family and material comforts is held to be the best available for the monk himself.<sup>17</sup>

This strategy, alone, cannot provide an adequate response to the overdemandingness objection facing a Mahāyānist like Śāntideva, however. This is because the bodhisattva undergoes severe torments in numerous rebirths as part of his training and the activities he undergoes to aid sentient beings. Further, all Buddhists accept that suffering is bad. Although the Mahāyānist can claim the bodhisattva suffers no deprivation from renouncing *samsāric* pursuits, she still seems to face the overdemandingness objection if she claims that an individual is obligated to undergo these difficulties, rather than aim for personal liberation from suffering.

There is, however, another kind of response to the overdemandingness objection that reduces the tension between benevolence and self-interest by closely linking the well-being of self and others. This option is really a demand-lessening strategy, compatible with multiple normative theories, rather than a restructuring of any particular theory of well-being. The strategy here is to leave the theory of well-being intact, while emphasizing psychological transformation to bring an individual's interests into line with what the theory demands.<sup>18</sup> For instance, a sense of joy at giving might be nurtured which,

<sup>15</sup> Parfit (1984, 403–407) offers an influential discussion of these three theories which is often taken as a starting point for considering what theory of welfare is correct. See also Heathwood (2010) for a good introductory discussion.

<sup>16</sup> Other influential views about well-being are developed in Sumner (1996) and Darwall (2002). As I will explain below, almost any plausible theory of well-being will give importance to either desire satisfaction or experiencing certain mental states. Since the Buddhist demand-lessening strategy developed below focuses on these, it will be compatible with any of these theories.

<sup>17</sup> I do not, however, think that early Buddhism commits itself to any foundational theory of well-being and therefore technically it would not represent a version of this strategy. Early Buddhist texts, I believe, argue that commonly held items of value are actually pervaded by suffering, but they do not specify at the deepest level what it is that welfare value consists of. See Harris (2014) for a consideration of the relationship between Buddhist understandings of suffering (*duḥkha*) and theories of well-being.

<sup>18</sup> The possibility of using psychological transformation as a means of reducing demandingness has been raised by Nagel (1986), 205–207; Scheffler (1992), 128–9; and Hooker (1996), 144.

under hedonic theories of well-being, will help balance out any loss of well-being from making significant charitable contributions. For a desire-satisfaction theorist, the strategy will be to over time eliminate self-regarding desires, like achieving personal success, and replace them with desires for the well-being of others. Since most plausible objective list theories will include either desire satisfaction or at least certain kinds of pleasure as elements of what makes a life go well, this same strategy applies to these types of theories as well.

It is this kind of demand-lessening strategy, focused on gradually shaping psychological response, that I will argue is to be found in Buddhist texts. Before doing so, I need to note an important feature of this approach, which is that it is not tied to any particular theory of well-being. This is because there is relatively broad agreement among theories about the welfare increasing value of certain kinds of psychological states. Almost any plausible theory of well-being will give importance to at least some pleasurable mental states, as well as the satisfaction of some desires. Theories will differ, of course, about what at the deepest level explains this increase to well-being. A hedonism will claim that the satisfaction of desire is valuable because it creates pleasure, while a desire-satisfaction theory will claim that pleasure is valuable because we desire it. Objective list theories might take one or both of these items as having intrinsic value. Therefore, as long as the psychological transformation strategy focuses on these commonly accepted items of value, it will be compatible with multiple foundational theories of well-being. Of course, there may be some disagreement about which kinds of pleasure or satisfied desires have welfare increasing value, and so adaptations to the strategy might still be necessary. Since it is compatible with multiple theories of well-being, I will not have to address the tendentious issue of which (if any) foundational theory of well-being Buddhist authors commit to in order to illustrate their use of this strategy.

## A Buddhist Response to the Overdemandingness Objection

As far as I know, there is no Buddhist text that explicitly formulates and responds to the overdemandingness objection. One of the authors to come close to doing so is Vasubandhu, in his *Commentary to the Treasury of Higher Doctrine*, or *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, where he considers the question of why anyone would take on the incredibly difficult task of becoming a bodhisattva. Vasubandhu's concern is to show that it is *psychologically possible* to adopt the bodhisattva path, and he is not trying to show how benefiting others also benefits the bodhisattva and lessens demandingness. Nevertheless, after considering Vasubandhu's comments, I will argue that they help us to understand how several elements of a Buddhist response to the overdemandingness objection would go.

For what reason do they undertake the effort? They make the effort for the welfare of others, so they would become able to rescue others from the great flood of suffering.



How does the welfare of others benefit them? Since they desire the welfare of others, it is their own welfare.<sup>19</sup>

Vasubandhu claims that bodhisattvas are willing to undertake the demanding task of becoming buddhas because they identify their own well-being with the well-being of others.<sup>20</sup> As I will develop below, this is an example of the psychological transformation demand-lessening strategy described in the last section. Many of us have this kind of attitude towards our children or close friends and family; a parent will herself flourish when her child flourishes, even if this requires undertaking hardships for the child's well-being. What is astounding is that the bodhisattva takes this attitude towards all sentient beings, including strangers. Here, we might wonder how this is even psychologically possible. Vasubandhu continues:

Some people take delight in the pain of others because they lack compassion as a result of always focusing on their own welfare. Likewise, [bodhisattvas] take delight in doing actions for the welfare of others, since they lack all concern about themselves, because of repeatedly feeling compassion. Just as those who are ignorant of the mark of conditionality of conditioned selfless elements, who by the power of repeated practice have become settled in attachment to the self, endure suffering because of this [self]. Likewise, [bodhisattvas], after eliminating attachment towards the self arising from these [erroneously grasped selfless elements], through the power of repeated practice, increase concern for others and endure suffering on account of them. The family [of bodhisattvas] comes from another lineage which experiences suffering because others suffer, and happiness because other are happy, not from their own happiness.<sup>21</sup>

In the above passage, Vasubandhu links the selfish attitudes persons obsessed with their own welfare display, to ignorance about the selfless and conditioned nature of the elements making up the conventional person. In other words, the selfishness of ordinary persons arises because they erroneously believe themselves to be unitary,

<sup>19</sup> *kimarthaṃ ta iyantaṃ yatnamārabhante? parārthaṃ ta iyantaṃ yatnamārabhante 'kathaṃ parānapi mahato duḥkhaughāt paritrātuṃ śakmyām' itī ka eṣāṃ parārthena svārthaḥ? eṣa eva teṣāṃ svārtho yaḥ parārthaḥ, tasyābhimatatvāt* Vasubandhu (1998) p. 430; 3:93–94. See also the English translation by Pruden in Vasubandhu (1988) p. 480–81. The reference to desire might be taken to suggest Vasubandhu ascribes to a desire-satisfaction theory of well-being, but I think this is too quick. It is compatible with this quote to hold that Buddhists are hedonists who hold satisfaction of desire is valuable since it brings pleasure. Other theories of well-being might also be defended. My point is that mentioning satisfaction of desire provides little evidence for a particular foundational theory of well-being, since most theories will give some value to the satisfaction of desires.

<sup>20</sup> See also Vasubandhu's commentary to the *Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra)*: 'When suffering must be endured, the bodhisattva will be able to find pleasure even in that suffering, as it serves as the cause of helping others' (Thurman 2004, p. 209).

<sup>21</sup> *yathā ceha kecidabhyastanaīrghṛṇyā astyapi svārthe paravyasanābhiratā upalabhyante| tathā punarabhyastakāruṇyā asatyapi svārthe parahitakriyābhiramāḥ santīti sambhāvyaṃ| yathaiva cābhyāsavaśādanātmabhūteṣu saṃskāreṣu saṃskṛtatalakṣaṇānabhijñā ātmasnehaṃ niveśya taddhetorduḥkhānyudvahanī, evaṃ punarabhyāsavaśādātmāsnehaṃ tebhyo nirvartya pareṣvapekṣāṃ vardhayitvā taddhetorduḥkhānyudvahanīti sambhāvyaṃ| gotrāntarameva hi tat tathājāīyaṃ nirvartate yat pareṣāṃ duḥkhāyate duḥkhāyate sukheṇa sukhāyate, nāmana itī* Vasubandhu (1998) p. 430; 3:93–94. See also the English translation by Pruden in Vasubandhu (1988) p. 481.



enduring and self-subsisting selves. The reason bodhisattvas are psychologically able to care more for strangers than they do for themselves is that they have overcome this belief in an enduring self. Here, we should remember that Buddhists hold that there is no enduring self (*ātman*) that grounds our identity, but rather that ‘person’ is merely a conventional designation (*prajñāpti*) we give to mental and physical events in close causal interaction, what Vasubandhu calls ‘the conditioned elements,’ that account for human experience. Further, they claim that our egoistic concern is rooted in misidentifying this impermanent conventionally existing self as an enduring unitary self that is not dependent on conventional labeling for its existence. A low-level bodhisattva overcomes the intellectual mistake of believing that any of these mental or physical events are, or belong to an enduring self, thereby greatly lessening selfishness. At the higher stages of the path, the bodhisattva weakens, and finally eliminates the much more deeply rooted psychological tendency to identify as being or possessing an enduring self. At this latter stage, his egoistic selfishness is destroyed.<sup>22</sup>

According to Vasubandhu, then, accepting the nonexistence of any enduring independent self has two related psychological effects that explain how it is psychologically possible for bodhisattvas to commit so radically to the welfare of others. First, the elimination of the belief in self lessens self-cherishing, making it easier for the bodhisattva in training to give up his possessions and even his life for others. Second, the destruction of the belief in an enduring self results in an extreme psychological flexibility, which allows the bodhisattva to radically identify his well-being with the well-being of others. Unlike most of us, who can only deeply do this with close friends and family, the bodhisattva takes the well-being of everyone in the whole universe as his goal.

In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, Vasubandhu is writing from the perspective of early Buddhism that holds *arhatship* is an acceptable goal, and he does not claim that destroying the innate belief in self will necessarily lead one to become a bodhisattva. His remarks here are distinct from Śāntideva’s arguments that we are obligated to commit to impartial benevolence and accept the bodhisattva path. Further, his goal is not to argue that the bodhisattva path is not overly demanding, but to show how it is *psychologically possible* for one to undertake its difficulties. Nevertheless, his comments suggest how a successful Mahāyāna response to the overdemandingness objection might go.

There are two essential steps to this response. The first is to recall that both an early Buddhist disciple aiming at *arhatship* and a Mahāyānist on the bodhisattva path will weaken and finally destroy the belief in an enduring self. Not just a bodhisattva, but

<sup>22</sup> As Mahāyāna Buddhism develops, a scheme of ten stages is adopted that the bodhisattva is said to progress through on his way to full Buddhahood. Upon entering the first stage, the bodhisattva overcomes the pernicious view called *satkāya-dṛṣṭi*, or personality belief, in which the self is held to be identical to, possessing, contained within or containing one or more of the five aggregates of matter, feeling, recognition, compositional factors, and consciousness which comprise a person’s experience. At this point, the intellectual belief in an enduring self has been eliminated. The psychological tendency to identify oneself as an enduring self, called *asmimāna*, or the conceit ‘I am’ is not eliminated till much later, although accounts vary as to exactly when this happens. Selfishness is not eliminated until conceit is destroyed, but weakens as the bodhisattva progresses along the path. See Collins 1982, pps. 93–95 on the difference between *satkāya-dṛṣṭi* and *asmimāna*. See Gethin 1998, pps. 187–198 and Williams 2009, chapter 9, for the explanations of the ten stages of the bodhisattva path. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting I distinguish between the intellectual and psychological aspects of *anātman*.

also a disciple approaching *arhatship*, will experience a radical lessening of ego grasping as he approaches his goal. As suggested in the second quotation from Vasubandhu, this means that they will have eliminated the grasping after one's own welfare that results from the erroneous belief in the self.

Further, we should recall that for a Buddhist, accepting any version of the Buddhist path will always be better for the individual than remaining content to stay in *saṃsāra*. Even the difficulties of the bodhisattva path will be less than the eternal torments of continual death and rebirth.

Taken together, these claims entail that the demandingness of the bodhisattva path should be assessed, not from the standpoint of one standing outside the Buddhist path, but from the standpoint of the disciple nearing *arhatship* who has destroyed all but the subtlest remains of her innate self-grasping. This is because Buddhists hold that it is in everyone's interest to aim at either *arhatship* or take up the bodhisattva path to full Buddhahood, and both these endpoints require eliminating belief in a self. The relevant question, then, is not how demanding would the bodhisattva path be for us, but rather how demanding would it be for the advanced Buddhist practitioner.

A general principle that applies here is that demandingness in the welfare decreasing sense may increase or decrease depending upon the resources possessed by an individual. Consider the classic example of giving surplus income to charity. A moral theory that only required a donation manageable relative to my level of income is unlikely to be too demanding. Moreover, as overall income increases, the amount that can be asked increases as well. Similar claims could be made about other demanding situations, such as whether a person is obligated to rescue a child in a burning house. If it is likely that I will be badly hurt in the attempted rescue, it may be counterintuitive to claim that I am required to attempt it. A former firefighter in great physical shape, however, might have only a small chance of being injured if she attempted the rescue. Intuitively, we would probably not think it too demanding if a moral theory required her to do so.<sup>23</sup>

What this shows is that as resources increase, which in these examples include material goods and physical abilities, the amount of well-being that is lost as a result of aiding others may decrease. Since the version of the overdemandingness objection I am considering depends on an unfair loss of well-being, this means that individuals with greater resources are less likely to experience unfairly demanding losses of well-being as a result of moral demands. The relevant Buddhist point stressed in these passages by Vasubandhu is that the resources in question here can also be psychological. Because of her mental training, the Buddhist practitioner advanced in the knowledge of selflessness experiences a far smaller decrease in well-being than the ordinary person undergoing the same apparent hardships.

In fact authors like Śāntideva take into account this difference in psychological resources between early and later stage bodhisattvas in their structuring of the bodhisattva path. Śāntideva forbids bodhisattvas from sacrificing their lives until they have perfected generosity (BCA 5:87). Instead, he recommends that early-stage bodhisattvas give away vegetables to prepare their minds for greater sacrifices in the future (BCA 7:25–26). Moreover, early-stage bodhisattvas, like disciples of the early Buddhist path,

<sup>23</sup> Relevant here is Moss 2011, p. 85.

will focus on eliminating their innate belief in self before taking on demanding tasks to aid others. As this innate belief is lessened, both disciples and bodhisattvas undergo a psychological transformation in which clinging to one's own welfare is radically reduced. At this point, committing to take on additional rebirths for the welfare of others would be much less of a hardship. The early Buddhist disciple aiming at *arhatship*, here, is analogous to the former firefighter; although not currently committed to rescuing other beings, the task of doing so would be far less demanding for a high-level disciple than for one without advanced Buddhist training.

The first stage of this reconstructed Buddhist response to the overdemandingness problem, then, is to note that the demandingness of the Buddhist path should be assessed from the perspective of a highly advanced practitioner who has realized selflessness. The second stage is to detail the demand-reducing benefits accruing to a bodhisattva who has achieved this realization. Here, as illustrated by our look at the passages by Vasubandhu, we find two sets of benefits, both of which fall under the psychological transformation demand-lessening strategy introduced in the prior section. First, as mentioned above, destroying the false belief in an enduring self eliminates deeply rooted grasping after one's own interests. This means that desires for one's own prosperity, as well as mental aversion against contributing to others' welfare, will be reduced. Since most plausible theories of well-being will give some value to lessening mental suffering, or reducing unsatisfied desires, for these theories the destruction of belief in self results in a lessening of demandingness when the agent makes apparent sacrifices for others.

The second part of the Buddhist demand-lessening strategy is referred to by Vasubandhu when he claims that the bodhisattva takes the welfare of others to be his own welfare. The bodhisattva has adjusted his conception of what matters so that the tension between self and others is reduced. We see this to a limited degree in a parent whose welfare depends partly on the flourishing of their child. As a result of his realization of selflessness, the advanced bodhisattva's conception of his identity has become extremely fluid. This allows him to take the role of parent to all sentient beings, fully identifying his welfare with theirs. The result is psychological transformation that, on most plausible theories of well-being, connects the well-being of the bodhisattva with those she serves. First, she experiences great joy when sentient beings are liberated from suffering. Second, she desires the well-being of others, and successfully satisfies these desires by aiding them. Since most plausible theories of well-being will give value to the satisfaction of desires, or experiencing joyful mental states, this identification with the needs of others will result in an increase in the well-being of the bodhisattva when she successfully aids others.

Śāntideva, the Buddhist monk whom I argued above faces the overdemandingness objection, writes in detail about this psychological transformation, in which concern for one's own well-being is replaced by concern for others. In the verses below, he describes how the bodhisattva, upon realizing selflessness, shifts his concern to the well-being of others.

Just as the notion of a self with regard to one's own body, which has no personal existence, is due to habituation, will the identity of one's self with others not arise out of habituation in the same way? (BCA 8:115)

Therefore, just as you wish to protect yourself from pain, grief and the like, so may you cultivate a spirit of protection and a spirit of compassion toward the world. (BCA 8: 117)

In these passages, we see Śāntideva deploy the extreme psychological flexibility that follows elimination of belief in an enduring self, by urging his reader to identify with other persons as if they were oneself. The result is that great compassion and concern for their welfare arises. Śāntideva also describes in detail the many sufferings that result from attachment to the self. In the verse below, he combines the claim that eliminating self cherishing reduces my own suffering with the claim that identifying our well-being with that of others brings us great joy.

All those who are unhappy in the world are so as a result of their desire for their own happiness. All those who are happy in the world are so as a result of their desire for the happiness of others. (BCA 8: 129)

Śāntideva provides a number of meditations and arguments to help us value the well-being of others as much as our own, such as this one, in which he draws our attention to the suffering that others experience.

One should first earnestly meditate on the equality of oneself and others in this way: ‘All equally experience suffering and happiness, and I must protect them as I do myself’ (BCA 8: 90).

In a particularly powerful pair of verses, he links what appears to be the ultimate sacrifice of descending into hell in order to liberate sentient beings with the great joy the bodhisattva experiences when these beings are freed from suffering.

Thus, those whose mind-streams are cultivated in meditation and who equally accept the suffering of others dive into the Avīci hell like swans into a pool of lotuses (BCA 8: 107).

They become oceans of joy when sentient beings are liberated. Have they not found fulfillment? What is the use of insipid liberation? (BCA 8: 108, translation altered)<sup>24</sup>

Although the image of the bodhisattva joyfully descending into hell beautifully illustrates Śāntideva’s linkage of benevolence and self-interest, it also raises an obvious objection to his strategy. The bodhisattva’s embracement of these apparently extreme demands might seem a fantasy of self-flagellation, rather than a praiseworthy ideal of personal perfection. The initial response to this concern is to point out that the basic strategy of psychological transformation employed by Mahāyāna Buddhists is an

<sup>24</sup> *mucyamāneṣu sattveṣu ye te prāmodyasāgarāḥ taireva nanu paryāptaṁ mokṣeṇārasikena kim.* Śāntideva 2001, pps. 192–193. I translate *arasika* as insipid, rather than adopt the Wallace and Wallace translation of sterile, to bring out the literal meaning of without flavor. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this change.

intuitively plausible way of at least somewhat lessening demandingness. We can see this by using everyday examples, such as the parent caring for the child or the cheerful volunteer taking great joy while giving up his Sunday afternoon in service. Surely, it is plausible to claim that a well-off donor, signing away a modest portion of a paycheck to a scholarship fund, while taking great pride in having increased educational accessibility, has contributed to the flourishing of his own life?

Many of us will judge, however, that there are limits to the level of time and resources that an individual can contribute before putting her own flourishing into jeopardy. One concern, here, is the possibility of psychologically deluding ourselves about how much it is healthy for us to give. Theories of welfare would characterize this concern in different ways. For example, a hedonism might give the agent welfare credit for an initial burst of manic generosity, but this would be outweighed by regret, as well as distress from future lack of resources. In response, the Buddhist can claim that when belief in an enduring self is completely eliminated, because selfishness is eradicated, future regrets will not arise and mental distress from future poverty will be minimal or nonexistent. What this shows is that although the Buddhist strategy of demand-lessening is itself sound, the Buddhist's radical use of it depends upon controversial assumptions about the psychological effects of realizing that no enduring self exists.

A second concern arises if we accept a theory of well-being that marks as particularly valuable pursuits like artistic achievement, career success, time spent with family, and so on. An objective list theory might grant these items intrinsic value, while a desire-satisfaction or hedonic theory might claim achieving these types of goals, or experiencing the pleasure associated with them has a particularly high welfare value. The concern now is that the requirements of the bodhisattva path will not allow us to pursue these items. Even if we grant that the satisfaction taken from helping others has welfare value for the individual, this will be outweighed by the loss of these welfare-contributing items.<sup>25</sup>

Again, the Buddhist response will depend on a controversial principle, this time the Buddhist analysis of ordinary existence as saturated by subtle forms of suffering (*duḥkha*). The Buddhist will claim that family relationships, career success, artistic achievements, and so forth, when pursued by a mind filled with craving for permanence, can never provide any lasting satisfaction. Therefore, giving them up will be much less of a loss to well-being than it might appear. Evaluating the plausibility of the Buddhist analysis of suffering, or their claims about the psychological effects of realizing the nonexistence of an enduring self, go beyond my present purposes. We can, however, conclude that the Buddhist strategy of demand-lessening is itself sound, but keep in mind that the extent to which Buddhists employ it depends upon the acceptance of these potentially controversial presuppositions.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole shares an interest in reducing the demandingness of the bodhisattva path, and that Śāntideva, in particular,

<sup>25</sup> Susan Wolf (1982) develops this kind of an objection to moral sainthood in her influential article, 'Moral Saints.'

faces the welfare-sacrificing version of the overdemandingness problem. I next surveyed a number of contemporary responses to the overdemandingness problem and suggested that they would not be acceptable to Śāntideva, since they either allow abandonment of the root bodhisattva commitment to liberate all sentient beings from suffering, or do not result in an actual lessening of demandingness. I suggested, however, that Mahāyāna Buddhism is compatible with a demand-lessening strategy dependent upon psychological transformations that bring the interests of oneself and others into alignment. I then showed that this strategy occurs in passages by the Buddhist philosophers Vasubandhu and Śāntideva. I argued that this demand-lessening strategy does, plausibly, reduce demandingness, but that the radical reduction claimed by Buddhist authors is believable only if we accept controversial claims about the psychological effects of realizing the nonexistence of an enduring self and the pervasion of ordinary existence by subtle forms of suffering.

Buddhist texts do not explicitly formulate and respond to the overdemandingness objection. Nevertheless, Mahāyāna Buddhists were aware that the apparent demandingness of the bodhisattva's commitments created a tension in their moral system, and they developed sophisticated demand-lessening strategies in response. Looking at these Buddhist responses alongside contemporary literature on demandingness helps us to appreciate the philosophical sophistication existing just beneath the surface of these texts. As I have tried to show, the Mahāyāna tradition had developed the resources to provide a powerful response to the overdemandingness objection, even though this criticism was never explicitly raised against them by their traditional opponents.

A second benefit from this comparative study is the attention it brings to a relatively neglected strategic response to the overdemandingness objection. Although authors like Nagel have mentioned the possibility of bringing one's psychological responses into line with what a moral theory demands, no author to my knowledge has chosen to develop this insight. Instead, contemporary ethicists tend to focus on restructuring the theory of right action, in order to lessen the demands a moral theory makes on its adherents. A sizable literature has developed illustrating the drawbacks of making these various modifications.<sup>26</sup> A benefit of the psychological transformation demand-lessening approach, by contrast, is its compatibility with multiple normative theories and conceptions of well-being, and therefore its ability to leave the deep structure of an ethical theory intact. Unlike contemporary authors, Buddhist texts develop this demand-lessening strategy with great sophistication, employing a dual strategy of eliminating selfish desires, while transferring concern for self to concern for others.

Finally, my study illustrates that, at its ground level, much of Buddhist ethical theory stands or falls depending on the plausibility of its key presuppositions, in this case the psychological effects of realizing selflessness and the pervasion of ordinary experience by suffering. If we grant these presuppositions, I have argued that the bodhisattva may be able to get all the way to hell without experiencing a great loss to her overall well-being. Of course, this does not mean we should grant the Buddhist these presuppositions. I hope, however, to have helped demonstrate the importance they play in Buddhist moral thought.

<sup>26</sup> See Mulgan 2001, especially chaps. 1–6, for a survey and development of some of these problems.



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