

Embrace Emptiness to Prevent Suffering: A Journey through Santideva's Philosophy on Perception, Reality, and the Path to Liberation.

By Richard Liao

Author Bio

Richard Liao, a senior at the Hill School in Pottstown Pennsylvania, interested in religion and philosophy. He travels constantly to Tibet and hopes to address religious and philosophical topics in Tibet into everyday situations to navigate challenges in life. In the future, Richard wishes to address philosophy as an important soft skill that goes beyond its academic purposes as he hopes to continue under the mentorship of Professor Allison Aitken from Columbia University in College.

Abstract

The paper explores the profound philosophy of Santideva, focusing on the concept of emptiness and its implications on human agency and ways to prevent suffering through an argument reconstruction using analogies. A major issue Santideva highlights is how conventional truth, shaped by societal consensus and labels, veils the ultimate truth – the reality of things. Emptiness, as the absence of intrinsic nature in phenomena, becomes a cornerstone for understanding reality beyond conventional appearances. Santideva's arguments challenge the notion of a self and illustrate how conditions influence experiences and the illusion of a continuous, unchanging "I." This examination extends to self-awareness, refuting the mind's ability to perceive itself independently. Navigating through the complexities of suffering and categorizing it into various forms - all stemmed from attachments and ignorance – that ultimately advocate the path to liberation through the Four Noble Truths, this paper encourages a practical application of Santideva's philosophy in daily life, highlighting the need for practice and action over mere contemplation, paving the way toward understanding and embracing the elusive quest for liberation from suffering. The paper does not provide an answer; nonetheless, it should help inform readers without previous knowledge and researchers of the questions Santideva implores us to consider and offer a modern interpretation of Santideva's definition of how to attain liberation from suffering.

Keywords: Emptiness, Human agency, Suffering, Liberation, Tibet Studies, Religion, Philosophy, Mental Health

Introduction

What if our perception of life is not the reality we fathom and that our attachments to the world are, in fact, misconceptions? While the phenomenal level of the world exists as appearance, it is the misconception we overlay that the world is an illusion. The 8th-century Indian Buddhist philosopher wrote on the importance of understanding wisdom in the Perfection of Wisdom chapter in A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life, offering us insight into a potential possibility for how reality can be presented before us and make decisions with new wisdom. In this essay, I will argue that emptiness enables us to understand human agency (the capacity of individuals to make choices and act on those decisions) and to clarify the perception of matters, providing practical implications in our everyday lives to prevent us from suffering.

Santideva consolidates his argument by emphasizing defusing life's delusional appearance and grasping the nature of reality through the realization of emptiness. The concept of emptiness will be the central concept that I will consistently bring up throughout the essay. This essay will begin with understanding the two truths before approaching the idea of suffering. As we move along, Santideva argues for realizing the absence of a self to liberate from suffering. Then, we will take a deep dive into what is defined as a true reality, which will help lead us to the question of what suffering is and what the methods are. The concept of emptiness will permeate throughout the discussion as we begin to understand how the idea of emptiness fits into the picture. From Santideva's perspective, keeping his emphasis on emptiness in mind as we move along the argument is important.

SECTION 1 - Understanding the Two Truths

According to Santideva, to approach the subject of suffering, one must grasp the concept of the two truths - conventional and ultimate - and develop the wisdom to go beyond the surface aspects of all things. The conventional truth represents the appearances and the world presented to us through our ordinary minds and senses. It conceals reality and blurs the absolute knowledge of things as they are. For instance, when we see a leaf, we can recognize it instantly. However, it is not intrinsically a leaf from

its own side. It does not exist independently of how we think and speak about it. Instead, we recognize it intuitively because we are familiar with the so-called color "green" and the familiar structure and shape we associate with a leaf. The labels and definitions we granted to this object for convenient communication purposes in our life at a phenomenological level reflect our conventional truth. In constructing our experiences, our minds - influenced by consensus - distort how things truly exist. Such "ignorance" and "misconception," developed from over-simplified consensus constructed by superficial labels, has proven to be the easy way to understand the world since we fail to delve deeply enough to explain the reasonings that justify our current knowledge. Thus, such wisdom is just some sort of conventional wisdom.

More closely scrutinizing the conventional truth, it could also be split into two kinds: true conventional truth and false conventional truth. Confusion may arise regarding how a conventional truth can be true when, according to Santideva, it is already faulty. Going back to the leaf example once again, Santideva would very likely respond that while the image, the concept, and the feelings we generate from our experiences and knowledge are false in nature, there is conventional wisdom that is true in the sense that it engages with a deeper understanding of our world that will guide us on the path to the ultimate truth. Rather than accepting the leaf as merely a leaf, one should develop an awareness of the leaf's illusory appearance and actively seek ways to approach the ultimate truth by eliminating one's faulty perception. This is the first step to the understanding of the concept of emptiness.

On the other hand, the ultimate truth refers to the true nature of reality, the world in its undistorted form, established on the ground of the concept of emptiness, referring to the universal absence of an intrinsic nature or empty of a permanent and unchanging essence. In our case, there is a tendency for our natural way of conceptualizing things to directly determine or influence our interpretation of objects rather than verifying facts with reasons since the sorts of concepts we use to structure our experience are influenced by the language we speak and the conventions of the society we live in. Instead of questioning why we would call any object by its name or give any objects their meanings, we automatically accept these as universal truths from

birth. Our knowledge is constructed by what our parents, teachers, and people told us, who are also educated by similar mindsets in their time or last generation. Gradually, conformity becomes the dominating factor in establishing “facts.” But in the world of ultimate truth, these “facts” are merely names and vowels coming from our mind and mouth, both conducted by the same delusion – our conventional truth. This tendency makes attaining the ultimate truth incredibly difficult as we must cast away our existing interpretations to grasp the ultimate truth. In other words, we must disbelieve all concepts we once held true to ourselves and approach the world without notions. According to Santideva, “Ultimate reality is beyond the scope of the intellect. The intellect is called conventional reality” (Santideva, 1997). Therefore, such an attempt to remove our existing interpretations constructed by the way we developed and to be aware of this so-called ultimate truth that exceeds the scope of our intellect is extremely hard for us or may even seem impossible.

Then what is the point of pursuing this ultimate wisdom when it is difficult to grasp? While the intellect cannot perceive this because of its nature of conceptualizing things even when nothing is presented, there are ways for people to have a breakthrough. According to Santideva, when a mind breaks free from the chain of conventional thinking and fully grasps the ultimate truth, the mind is no longer referred to as an ordinary intellect, which refers to the mind that uses concepts to understand the world. Then, the question becomes how one can access the ultimate wisdom. Santideva states, “In light of this, people are seen to be of two types: the contemplative and the ordinary person.” And “the ordinary folks are superseded by the contemplatives” (Santideva, 1997). Prajñākaramati’s commentary on the Guide shows that a contemplative meditates and reflects on all phenomena free from concepts. At the same time, an ordinary person remains in the cycle of samsara as the cause of the origination. Both parties live with the conventional truths, except that “ordinary people see and imagine things as real and not illusory” (Santideva, 1997).

In contrast, the contemplatives see reality through the conventional truth and potentially utilize the conventional truth to approach the ultimate truth. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that in both cases, subtle illusions continue to exist, as the Buddha

in the sutras says, if both the contemplative and the ordinary people believe in an intrinsic nature in themselves. If that is the case, such subtle illusion is the highest form of illusion—the belief that there is an “I,” the self. This subtle illusion, being one of the highest forms of illusion, is the belief that there is an “I,” the self (Goodman & Schultz, 2020).

SECTION 2 – The Illusion of a Self and the Reality.

If “I” does not exist, then what exists? What exactly supports all these thoughts and information I produce every second? In response to this line of questioning, Santideva says that all aspects that comprise an experience are, in reality, products of the conditions around us. Conditions are the trigger of a response, and according to Santideva, we often misunderstand the true nature of these conditions and wrongly attribute experiences and suffering to an independent existing variable self or the concept “I.” However, we cannot be the sole condition that is producing everything that we claim as an experience; and perhaps we might not think that we are creating our experience, but we might think that we are the sole agent/condition responsible for our actions (Santideva, 1997).

Let us experiment with our minds by trying to think of something original. If you are attempting to think of anything at this moment, then you have failed to think of something original because my suggestion of an experiment triggers your act of thinking. No matter how original your idea may be, my condition prompted you to think. Whenever we do or think something, an essential framework in how we think and act must exist. So, if we broaden our understanding of this experiment, you might realize my suggestion was not the only element that triggered your response. Your environment, senses, and location could factor into the answer you produced after I pitched the experiment to you. Therefore, the actual reason why we feel like we experience the world so real is because of the infinite number of conditions triggering your endless number of responses that make everything appear so smooth and authentic, just like how movies are made – fast-forwarding frames that create the illusion of continuity. In reality, they are just static pictures connected.

Consequently, the experience we believe we have regarding “my life” is an illusion. The concept of an “I” as an independent variable that can live all the frames in life fails to withstand the analysis of it because if that were to be the case, then we are essentially saying at every frame of a second, the “I” remain consistent, which that is not the case at all. Santideva says, “What happens earlier is remembered but not experienced by what arises later. It does not experience itself, nor is it experienced by something else” (Santideva, 1997). Try to perceive anything right on the spot, and one might notice no one can perceive their experience instantaneously. It is after what occurred that we then analyze the input information post-experience. Therefore, the nature of a self does not exist. It is just the collection of information from each of your senses that consists of the illusive feeling of a self, combined with the recollection of your relationships to many other things you experienced.

At this point, one may wonder if “I” is an illusion; my mind must be an illusion, too. Then, if my mind is also an illusion, what is perceived by what? How do you explain self-awareness? In response to this question, Santideva would likely respond based on the assumption that his opponents would argue that the mind has this ability to perceive itself: “The Protector of the World stated that the mind does not perceive the mind. Just as a sword cannot cut itself, so it is with the mind” (Santideva, 1997). To demonstrate his point better, Santideva used the lamp and the color blue as primary examples. A lamp cannot illuminate itself because it is not surrounded by darkness. The presence of darkness allows the light to illuminate, not the light illuminating and creating darkness. Like how a blue object cannot grant itself blueness, “What blue by itself could make itself blue?” (Santideva, 1997). Putting this in the modern context, we know that elements determine the final visual presentation of an object, and no element by itself generates the color blue. As Santideva put it, “Nowhere does a single condition have the ability to produce everything.” Ultimately, no mind is possibly capable of perceiving or being aware of itself. Assuming self-awareness is even true, it is not only the mind that does the reflection. So, this means the process of “self-awareness” is prompted by dependence on something else, proving the existence of self-awareness unreasonable. Thus, this logic further supports Santideva’s argument that a self cannot possibly exist considering that the self is not all that is producing everything of what we are calling “experiences,”

and if one were to argue that the self is a collective whole that generates an experience, then what part or parts would be considered as the “self” to produce an experience? Thus, Santideva rejects the notion of the existence of a “self” for its irrationality and its ability to recognize itself.

Additionally, it is imperative to understand that an illusion can continue to exist as long as the conditions are not destroyed. Even if the illusion exists as an aspect of the consciousness, it would be something different in reality. (Santideva, 1997). To elaborate on the point that consciousness fails to exist, Santideva comments that one can truly be understood as existing when one can produce everything independently. However, nothing can truly achieve that since there will always be a diverse account of conditions that add multiple layers to the composition of the thing. In other words, what may appear to be unique “characteristics” or “personalities” cannot be identified as independent factors. They cannot exist independently due to their inability to maintain the same conditions and qualities throughout time. Otherwise, it would be a different matter as the conditions change, which causes the change in the matter. You are who you are at this very moment because of all the conditions that lead you up to this point, not that you have the choice to develop yourself, considering no one can manipulate the conditions around them.

If the mind does not exist, are there still wrongs in committing murder or any other forms of sins since nothing truly exists? To this extent, Santideva responded it is, in fact, on the contrary and circled back to his point earlier. “When one is endowed with the illusion of consciousness, vice and merit do arise” (Santideva, 1997). The falsehood of our mind does not fall on the conditions themselves. In reality, whatever happened did happen, but it is certainly not the way we interpreted it. Take the example of a murderer swinging a knife at another innocent man, and we can see how this is a terrible sin to commit. However, in its ultimate form, it could just be an object carrying another object hitting the other object. We implemented the moral codes into the situation, while the situation itself holds no ethical aspects. Therefore, any products of the illusory mind are ultimately illusory since their origin is faulty to begin with. If a creature is genetically (inherently) diseased, its offspring are also diseased.

But don't all things exist based on reality? Otherwise, wouldn't all just be nothingness? However, an illusion can be presented even when it does not exist. Furthermore, Santideva asked, "How can something that does not exist have any efficacy by being based on something real" (Santideva, 1997). He challenges the notion that something which lacks an inherent existence can have any actual efficacy. The assumption that something unreal can have real efficacy is not only a misconception of the nature of existence but also an attempt to attach the ultimate truth to the conventional world. If we agree that the mind has a nature of existence, then we are treating the mind as "an isolated unity" (Santideva, 1997). This then brings back the problem of the interdependent nature of all phenomena where nothing can exist independently. However, there is one distinction Santideva stresses: "The manner in which something is seen, heard, or cognized is not what is refuted here, but the conceptualization of its true existence, which is the cause of suffering, is rejected here" (Santideva, 1997). It is precisely the misconception we hold for the reality that causes us the suffering we ought to get rid of. While it is true that even illusions sometimes need a foundation to manifest, in ultimate reality, nothing has the intrinsic nature of existence. It is we who mistake our conceptual conducts as ultimate truths when we forget the labels we use are merely conventional truths, not an indication of inherent existence. Although it seems impossible to break free from the illusion of our lives so far, given how everything is being argued to be fake, there is still a path to enlightenment.

SECTION 3 – Understanding the Nature of Suffering and Embracing the Path to Liberation through Emptiness.

After a deep dive with Santideva into the world's knowledge, how exactly do we acquire the ultimate truth and prevent our suffering? Knowing our sufferings before approaching suffering is crucial, not simply as we might expect it to be. According to Carpenter, a known scholar in the field of Indian Buddhist philosophy, suffering can be classified into four categories:

(i)the physical suffering. One kind of suffering that we relate to brute force is a bruise, a

scratch, a cut, and so on. Such suffering is the most common, as well as the surface level of suffering.

(ii)the phenomenological suffering. This refers to emotional pains, such as misery, anguish, anxiety, fear, and desire. Such suffering extends to what we want and what we wish to avoid.

(iii)the suffering for lack of control. Despite our drives and desires, the world has proven not always to work as we wanted it to. The fact of impermanence ensures that the suffering of unexpected changes constantly reminds us of our impotence and inability to control, even when it is not occurring presently.

(iv)the metaphysical suffering. Everything is subject to the effects of other things.

Therefore, nothing is fully independent or free from conditions. This suffering is subtle, as we tend not to be aware of it.

The fact is that there is no "agency" in a free-will form as we take ourselves to have or to be (Carpenter, 2014). All suffering is an outcome due to the weak imprint of emptiness. Emptiness is the intrinsic nature of all things and phenomena, simply nothingness. It is the assertion that nothing has an inherent, independent existence. They all lack an intrinsic value and exist interdependently, with their existence influenced by various causes and conditions. To better understand what emptiness is, you can try to look at your water bottle as an example. It is currently a water bottle because you are familiar with what a water bottle will likely appear in general. The shape, material, and logos are all clues to how you identify a water bottle. But in reality, what defines a water bottle? Nothing. You can break it down into atoms and particles. Yet, regardless of how we define a water bottle, the terms are just labels we put as the characteristics of a water bottle. In the ultimate reality, the so-called water bottle is emptiness, for there is no true intrinsic nature attached to a water bottle. Inevitably, all things and phenomena fail to withstand the analysis of the possession of an inherent nature. According to Santideva, "When neither an entity nor a non-entity remains before the mind, then since there is no other possibility, having no objects, it becomes calm" (Santideva, 1997). When calm and aware, one liberates oneself from suffering and breaks free of

the cycle. Therefore, the only path to liberation is the knowledge that uses emptiness as its basis – the Four Pillars of Truth (Santideva, 1997).

SECTION 4 – The Four Noble Truths

The Four Pillars of Truth, also known as the Four Noble Truths, are fundamental principles of Buddhist philosophy. These truths form the core of Buddhist teachings and set the framework for understanding the nature of suffering and the path to liberation. Referencing the work by Carpenter, the Four Noble Truths states as follows:

1. This is suffering. It acknowledges that suffering is deeply integrated into human existence. The key idea of this truth is that no one can escape the reality of suffering.
2. This is the cause of suffering. It connects to the notion that suffering arises from attachments and our ignorance. In this context, attachment means our desires and attachments to things, people, and environments. Ignorance means misunderstanding reality's true nature and failure to recognize the impermanence, interdependent, and non-existing nature of all things and phenomena.
3. This is the cessation of suffering. This addresses the hope by asserting that suffering can be ended. By eliminating the causes of suffering (attachment and ignorance), it is possible for one to achieve the path of liberation or enlightenment where suffering ceases to exist (Carpenter, 2014).
4. This is the way to the cessation of suffering. The path is known as the Eightfold Path, and it serves as a guide to development, emphasizing the importance of wisdom.

While there are many terminologies related to the concept of the Four Noble Truths, most of which are an extension of the knowledge acquired after accepting emptiness. More specifically, one should be able to and must identify the irrationality in all things and phenomena without being blinded by ignorance and strong attachment to the illusory world. Among the arguments, Santideva engages in a context that challenges prevailing theories that may not align with

contemporary viewpoints. Thus, I intend to explore and interpret the philosophy of Santideva in a more straightforward and modern manner. It will gradually become clear that he is advocating for the avoidance of any irrational wrongdoings, which is the right step towards attaining the ultimate truth.

SECTION 5 – Overcoming Suffering

If one struggles with the more subtle form of suffering and cannot correlate so well to the issue on that level, then let us try a straightforward example of suffering and see how Santideva goes about it. The simple example we will be using is anger. As our daily experience has demonstrated to us: when we lose our temper and we are agitated from an event, we suffer deeply from that. Considering our lives essentially consist of events, we have a high chance of becoming angry due to events. Santideva claims that anger is a product of conditions. “I am not angered at bile and the like even though they cause great suffering. Why be angry at sentient beings, who are also provoked to anger by conditions” (Santideva, 1997)? We respond to things or events angerily because we are provoked by the conditions in which we are involved. Pain is undoubtedly inevitable. Yet, the possibilities one may argue to be changeable are inevitable results prompted by conditions. For instance, the act of punching will very likely trigger the feeling of anger, whether the punch lands or not. Additionally, Santideva says: “A person does not intentionally become angry, thinking: ‘I shall get angry,’ nor does anger originate, thinking: ‘I shall rise’” (Santideva, 1997). It is the interpretation of the intention that mainly triggers the anger, which occurs after the recollections and understanding of the event, not the direct effect of the event at the time it happens. If we were to assume the anger is a product of the interpretation of a “self,” then how does the interpretation even stand when there isn’t even a “self” to be the subject of these thoughts, considering the “self” immediately after the punch and the “self” one year after the punch will interpret this same “anger” completely different. If “self” does exist and has an intrinsic nature, then it will remain unchanged, which means it would likely have the same interpretation of the same anger even after years. Thus, it must mean that such so-called “anger” is merely a product of conditions since no other agent can withstand a rational analysis. Conditions that hold no conscious

thoughts of how and why it shall rise occur without the input of any emotional elements. Ultimately, if the anger is not the agent with the intention, nor can a “self” genuinely have its original intention. All sentient beings - subjects to anger - should be under the influence of conditions. And if both are subject to conditions, then there should be no valid reason for one person to be angrier than another on the same exact event.

As you may have noticed, the arguments begin to be repetitive. However, these few philosophies are the significant ones that one has to learn to set oneself on the path toward the ultimate truth. Although it is as simple as one can put it, there is another issue when utilizing it in real life. People constantly worry about improper things. They fear that they will never get what they want and that one day bad luck will get to them. Yet, this very mindset intimates the cycle of endless suffering. There would never be a threshold of satisfaction as long as one lacks the wisdom to understand he is not a human agent who holds his life in his hands. A great way to navigate away from this mindset would be meditation on emptiness. “If there were something called “I,” fear could come from anywhere. If there is no “I,” whose fear will there be?” (Santideva, 1997). To put Santideva’s words in layman’s terms, we set ourselves up for most suffering. By learning to let go of the obsession with an identity of the self, one will feel much more relieved without the burdens one puts on one’s shoulders. Ultimately, it is the courage to face reality without so many of its glorified elements that we hope it had and to accept and contemplate the world for how it truly is.

SECTION 6 – Understanding Compassion

I can only manage to save myself. Should I care about others’ sufferings? If I should, why so? This is a complex concept that fits into the natural tendency of human beings – genuine empathy. Santideva argues that despite the varying degrees of suffering and happiness, they nonetheless have the same nature, which applies to everyone. While it may seem that it is not one’s responsibility to protect others from suffering due to differences, Santideva argues for the importance of protecting others just as one protects oneself. Just as the body, which has many parts

owing to its division into arms and so forth, should be protected as a whole, even though the hand and the feet share nothing alike. Why is this the case? Pain applies to both body parts, and the feeling of pain is avoided at all costs. Considering this, one may strongly argue that the case for the hands and the feet makes more sense in comparison to “myself” and the others since it would make the most sense for an individual to protect themselves against the suffering that applies to themselves than to those of the others. However, Santideva pointed out that if the above is considered reasonable, then why do people protect their bodies from future suffering, which is not the pain I can feel at this moment? One may continue to argue that it is still within the spectrum of avoiding suffering for myself. Yet, this notion of “it will be the same me even in the future” is incorrect. “It is one person who has died and quite another who is born.” There is no evidence that I will hold the exact same qualities and thoughts five seconds later when I would be affected by the condition, causing my thoughts to change. This will again lead to the idea that “I” is a delusion built up by the continuum of consciousness. Ultimately, we think significantly, or even selfishly, of our own sufferings because we bind ourselves to this attachment and notion of the “self.” The underlying issue with this is that we would assume we are exceptional in terms of suffering, which is also an unsupported and inappropriate assumption.

CONCLUSION

I find Santideva’s arguments compelling in that they point out the irrationality behind the reasons for many of our decisions. Instead of eagerly trying to prove that his points are right, he offers perspectives and raises good questions about the worth of our thinking. The essence of Santideva’s philosophy here lies in the unwavering pursuit of avoiding inappropriate and irrational, whether the knowledge pertains to oneself or others, regardless of the existence of the self or the presence of the two truths. It has been proved to be difficult, even impossible, to always do the proper thing as a human being. The pattern of seeking refuge or a comfort zone is in our blood. We are so familiar with what we have and what is around us, without even questioning anything until things go wrong. The path to liberating life from pain is not a well-kept secret but more of an elusive quest. Like Santideva’s methods to find the path of liberation,

we need to confront our ignorance and act instead of just thinking. Monks go on pilgrimages; they meditate for a long while to clear their minds and be closer to the truth. All of these recommend one's practice instead of just using one's thoughts. Santideva's work covers an exceptional amount of information, which takes us a long time to digest. However, a thinker with all of the knowledge in the world will stride no further than a practitioner who integrates his daily knowledge into his everyday life. Start here, and at this moment, we set off our first step. It is a mark of our journey to somewhere ultimate. If we are still confused about where to start, try to track back and draw out that first question Santideva has asked you.

References

Carpenter, A. (2014). *Indian Buddhist Philosophy*. Routledge.

Davis, J. H. (2017). *A Mirror is for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*. Oxford University Press.

Garfield, J. L. (2013). Just another word for nothing left to lose: Freedom, Agency and ethics for Mādhyamikas. *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy*, 164–185. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199922734.003.0008>

Gampopa. (1998). *The jewel ornament of liberation: The Wish-Fulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings*. Shambhala.

Goodman, C., & Schultz, A. (2020). Prajñākaramati on Śāntideva's Case against Anger: A Translation of Bodhicaryāvatāra-Pañjikā VI.1-69. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 48(3), 503–540. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10781-020-09429-y>

Śāntideva. (1997). *A guide to the Bodhisattva Way of life*. Snow Lion.

Cowherds. (2016). *Moonpaths: Ethics and Emptiness*. Oxford University Press, USA.