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Ethics in the *Lotus Sūtra*

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Rissho Kosei Kai organised an international conference on the Lotus Sūtra that was held in Bandaiso, Japan, in July of 1997. Twelve scholars from Europe, North America and Japan met together for three days in a pleasant retreat centre to discuss various issues and themes in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Five of the papers, those by Robert Florida, Damien Keown, John R.A. Mayer, Peggy Morgan, and Gene Reeves, seemed to fit nicely into the mandate of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, and they are being presented here together.

As you will see on reading the papers, no consensus on any ethical issue was reached. There was not even an agreement on whether or not the *Lotus Sūtra* taught an "ethics." In discussion, Gene Reeves argued that "ethics" could be understood in three ways. First, in the philosophical sense of the word, it is the systematic study of the principles of right and wrong, and in this sense, is absent from the *Lotus*. The second sense of "ethics" as a list of moral principles to be followed is also lacking. However, Reeves argued, the *Lotus Sūtra* does contain "ethics" in the third sense of a *telos* or a guide for doing good.

Damien Keown countered that none of the three senses captures the essence of the Lotus. Keown suggests that it focuses on the nature of the Buddha and his *Dharma*, and only touches on ethics tangentially. There is no ethical analysis or discussion in the text, and it would miss the point to derive an ethics from it. The parables cannot support such an effort. In my view, Reeves is probably right. At any rate, followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* like members of Rissho Kosei Kai certainly look to it as a practical guide to ethical life.

All papers discussed the problem of veracity and the doctrine of *upāya*, which Gene Reeves argues, translates best as "appropriate means." Peggy Morgan's contribution raises the question of the historical veracity of the *Mahāyāna* claim that their sutras are the actual words of Gautama, a very important issue given that some of the doctrines of the *Lotus* and other *Sūtras* seem inconsistent if not contradictory to *Theravāda* teachings. Indeed, the doctrine of *upāya* as taught in the *Lotus Sūtra* may very well be a skilful device to get *Mahāyāna* off this

particular hook, so to speak. Reeves, Mayer, and Florida all tend to see *upāya* as a practical teaching to be followed in day to day life. Keown, in a very useful discussion, shows how *upāya* can be understood at four different levels, while Morgan focuses on *upāya* as a quality of Buddhas and Mahasattvas.

John Mayer takes a radical post-modern view and celebrates the *Lotus Sūtra* as a text that fundamentally undermines all fixed principles. Reeves' paper moves in the same direction. Keown, on the other hand, firmly upholds the place of principles as the foundation of Buddhist ethics. He was very strong on this point in the discussions as well, which one would expect from his books and articles on the subject. On this issue, Morgan was closer to Keown, while Florida seems to be in the middle ground.

Both Florida and Keown concentrated primarily on health care ethical issues, and coincidentally used the Beauchamp and Childress' four principles as a starting point. The papers are nonetheless very different in tone and direction. Florida's survey of all of the medical references in the *Lotus Sūtra* confirms that it is not a place to find systematic moral philosophy or even lists of ethical principles. Both authors, as well as Morgan, discuss the ethical implications of the paternalism found in the *Lotus*.

On behalf of the editors of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, I would like to thank President Niwano and the members of Rissho Kosei Kai for sponsoring the conference that made these papers possible. I hope they are of interest to the readers of the Journal.