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Mahāyāna Ethics and American Buddhism: Subtle Solutions or Creative Perversions?

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Mahāyāna Ethics and American Buddhism: Subtle Solutions or Creative Perversions?

Charles S. Prebish¹

Abstract

“Mahāyāna Ethics and American Buddhism: Subtle Solutions or Creative Perversions?” initially explores the notion of two distinctly different forms of *upāya*, first presented by Damien Keown in his 1992 volume *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, in which one form of skill-in-means is available only to bodhisattvas prior to stage seven of the bodhisattva’s path and requires adherence to all proper ethical guidelines, while the second form of *upāya* is applicable to bodhisattvas at stage seven and beyond, and allows them to ignore any and all ethical guidelines in their attempts to alleviate suffering. This distinctly Mahāyāna interpretation of *upāya* is used to examine the presumably scandalous behavior of Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche and Richard Baker, Rōshi, two of the most popular and controversial figures in American Buddhism. The article con-

¹ 2465 Circleville Road, Unit 137, State College, Pennsylvania 16803. E-mail: csp1@psu.edu. This article (although formatted differently) was previously published in *Destroying Māra Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honor of Damien Keown*, edited by John Powers and Charles S. Prebish, 95-111. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2009.

cludes that we can at least infer that applied in the proper fashion, by accomplished teachers, the activities allowed by *upāya* do present possibly subtle explanations of seemingly inappropriate behaviors. On the other hand, if abused by less realized beings, we must recognize these acts as merely creative perversions of a noble ethical heritage.

Introduction

Sandra Bell begins her exciting chapter on “Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* with a reference to a meeting of twenty-two Western *Dharma* teachers with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in the spring of 1993. They gathered to discuss the problems involved in the transmission of the *Buddhadharma* from East to West, and particularly those focusing on the role and ethical responsibilities of spiritual teachers. The results of that important meeting were captured in a stirring video called “In the Spirit of Free Inquiry: The Dalai Lama in Conversation with Western Buddhist Teachers,” produced by Meridian Trust and published by Parallax Press. Clearly, the most significant portions of that video are those that focus on sexual ethics and sexism, with penetrating questions and discussion offered by Tenzin Palmo, Sylvia Wetzell, Martine Batchelor, and other women participants. Bell frames the discussion by declaring early in the chapter:

In contemporary Britain and North America, Buddhists are most likely to be well-educated, white, middle-class folk of liberal persuasion who display permissive attitudes toward their teachers' eccentric behavior and minor indiscretions. But events have shown that tolerance breaks down when teachers make persistent use of the power

they wield over their followers to obtain material goods and sexual favors. I will argue that scandals resulting from this kind of conduct by teachers are most likely to occur in organizations that are in transition between the pure forms of charismatic authority that brought them into being and more rational, corporate forms of organization. (231)

Bell chooses to focus on two particular American Buddhist communities, the San Francisco Zen Center and Shambhala International (which was previously known as Vajradhatu and Nalanda Foundation). She doesn't choose them because they are the worst representations of misconduct, but rather because she was able to fully investigate each.

Early in my career I also had the good fortune to visit and spend significant time at each of these Buddhist communities. In 1974 I was invited to teach Sanskrit, and in 1975 a module on Indian Buddhism, at the then-called Naropa Institute (more recently, it has changed its name to Naropa University). During the academic year 1978-79, I spent my first academic sabbatical in Berkeley, California researching American Buddhist communities in the Bay Area. As such, the San Francisco Zen Center was just a short drive from my home base at the Graduate Theological Union. In each case, these highly influential and popular Buddhist communities were in the midst of serious difficulties surrounding the above mentioned behavior of their Buddhist teachers, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche in the former case and Richard Baker, Rōshi in the latter.

My style of doing fieldwork research has changed very little in the more than thirty years that has passed since those initial forays into American Buddhist communities. Then and now, I try to be invisible. Instead of appearing as a credentialed Buddhological researcher, filled with questions, inquiries, and opinions, I simply appear and watch, as

often as possible. At Naropa Institute, this was quite easy, as I had very few Sanskrit students in 1974, and not many more in my Indian Buddhism module in 1975. I was known to my Buddhological colleagues Reginald Ray, Janice Nattier, and Larry Mermelstein—and of course to Trungpa Rinpoche—but not to many others in the Vajradhatu/Nalanda Foundation community. This gave me immense flexibility and access to lectures, meditation sessions, discussions, parties, and general “hanging out.” Years later, in San Francisco, I was even less visible; and I doubt that anyone in the SFZC community even knew I had attended events, meditation occasions, or *Dharma* lectures. My first book on American Buddhism had just been published, and probably was not read by many (if any) community members, and certainly they would not have known me from my quiet work on Indian Buddhist monasticism and sectarianism. At SFZC I was invisible, again able to see the community in its raw essence.

Much has been written about these teachers and communities, so I need not spend time here rehearsing the details. The legends are known throughout American Buddhist *sanghas* and in the emerging sub-discipline in Buddhist Studies devoted to the development of Western Buddhism. Indeed, references can be found in Richard Seager's excellent book *Buddhism in America*, James Coleman's *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, my own *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America*, or any of the fine anthologies now in print. However, an earthier prose description of these circumstances appears in the more popular literature, such as Stephen Butterfield's volume *The Double Mirror: A Skeptical Journal into Buddhist Tantra* or Michael Downing's *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion, and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center*. Some of the descriptions are incredibly direct. Nancy Steinbeck, wife of John Steinbeck IV, for example, recalls:

As Rinpoche's drinking increased, we began to see holes in the fabric of our devotion. During a seminar that summer, Rinpoche was so drunk during his evening talks that several guards had to haul him on and off the stage. One night all he could say was “Be kind to each other. Please be kind to each other” over and over. It was horrible to see him so inebriated, but it was even more chilling to watch the sycophantic fawning of his henchmen. (176)

Not everyone—me included—sees things in this light. Rita Gross commented in 1998 that, “To me, the ideological fixation and conventional moralism of those who insist that teachers' sexual misconduct is an overriding concern sends up red flags. More than anything else, their self-righteousness and moral rigidity make me more suspicious and wary” (242). Gross goes on: “. . . It cannot be claimed that a sexual relationship between a spiritual teacher and a student *must* be inappropriate and exploitative, though under certain conditions such a relationship might be exploitative and inappropriate” (244). Given the importance of the issue of teacher impropriety, and the notoriety of the so-called scandals in American Buddhism, perhaps it is sensible to explore some of the ethical issues and imperatives of Mahāyāna Buddhism in hopes of determining whether some consensus can be reached regarding various behaviors in these American Buddhist communities.

Mahāyāna Ethics

If we acknowledge that the most general and consistent treatment of ethics in Buddhism is revealed by its expositions on *śīla*, rather than *Vinaya* (Prebish Text 49-68), then it also becomes critical for an accurate understanding of Buddhist ethics to ask the question clearly put by Winston King as early as 1964: “What is the relation of ethics to the total

structure of Buddhist doctrine and practice, particularly with regard to the definition of moral values, their metaphysical status if any, and the nature of ultimate sanctions” (v). The traditional way of expressing King's question considers the relationship between the three aspects of the eightfold path of early Buddhism, *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*, and their connection to *nirvāṇa*. Damien Keown, in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, reviews several longstanding notions on how these soteriological elements relate (8-23). Keown first cites the most common view that *śīla* leads to *samādhi* which leads to *prajñā*, and that *prajñā* is identified with *nirvāṇa*. In this context, the ethical concerns expressed by *śīla* are at best subsidiary to the others, and are generally thought to be *transcended* with the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. Secondly, it may be argued that ethical enterprise may facilitate enlightenment, and following the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, once again become operative. Thirdly, ethics and knowledge (i.e., *prajñā*) may *both* be present in the attainment of the final goal. About his review Keown concludes:

The three possibilities outlined above represent very different visions of the role of ethics in the Buddhist soteriological programme. In the first two cases, which I have bracketed together, ethics is extrinsic to *nibbāna*, dispensable, and subsidiary to *paññā*. In the third it is intrinsic to *nibbāna*, essential, and equal in value to *paññā*. (10-11)

Although the prevailing viewpoint in Buddhist scholarship has tended toward a utilitarian conclusion on the issue of *śīla*, especially with regard to Theravāda studies, and despite the contrariness of Mahāyāna-based testimony, an ever-increasing volume of new scholarship has rejected the so-called “transcendancy thesis,” in favor of a more valued role for

those practices collected under the categorical term *śīla*.² In so doing, it becomes possible to consider those principles categorized as *śīla* collectively, as a synthetic reflection of *both* *nikāya* Buddhism and Mahāyāna, and perhaps to at least reconsider, and at most dispel, such notions as *śīla* representing a purely mundane goal, largely considered as the highest pursuit for the laity, and practiced by monks and nuns only as a preparation for *samādhi*.

Many years ago, Lal Mani Joshi concluded from the Buddha's personal example that, "His love of solitude and silence was matched only by his universal compassion towards the suffering creatures. Hīnayāna seems to have laid emphasis on the former while Mahāyāna on the latter aspect of the Buddha's personality and ideal" (91). Such an approach led Joshi and others to identify the ethical approach of the Buddhist *nikāyas* as narrower and more limited in scope than Mahāyāna. About Mahāyāna, Joshi remarks, "Its aim is higher, its outlook broader, and its aspiration more sublime than that of Hīnayāna" (93). One should not read Joshi's evaluation too aggressively, or as a rejection of the earlier understanding of *śīla*, but rather as what Keown aptly calls a "paradigm shift" (130). This paradigm shift is of course reflected by the Mahāyāna emphasis on the *bodhisattva* ideal.

Nalinaksha Dutt, in his still important *Aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Its Relation to Hīnayāna*, notes that the Chinese pilgrim Yi Jing "who was chiefly interested in the *Vinaya*, remarks that the Mahāyānists had no *Vinaya* of their own and that theirs was the same as that of the Hīnayānists" (290). Dutt, however, goes on to list a large number of Mahāyāna *sūtras* that deal with ethical issues, including the *Bodhisattvacaryānirdeśa*, *Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra*, *Bhikṣu Vinaya*, *Ākāśagarbha-*

² Here I have in mind especially the work of Harvey Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), and Nathan Katz, *Buddhist Images of Human Perfection* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982).

sūtra, *Upālipariṣcchā-sūtra*, *Ugradattapariṣcchā-sūtra*, *Ratnamegha-sūtra*, and *Ratnarāśi-sūtra* (290-291). Of these, the *Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra* and the *Upālipariṣcchā-sūtra* are clearly the best known. The former was edited by Dutt and published in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 7 (1931), pp. 259-286, but to my knowledge, has never been translated into English. It is a *sūtra* only in name, comprised primarily of fragments taken from the *Upālipariṣcchā-sūtra* and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Dutt *Bodhisattva Prātimokṣa* 261). Nonetheless, it is not a code of monastic rules for *bodhisattvas*, as its name implies, but rather a general ethical guide for both lay and monastic *bodhisattvas*. The *Upālipariṣcchā-sūtra* has benefitted from the fine scholarly translation of Pierre Python.³

There is little doubt that at least three major texts form the basis of Mahāyāna ethics: the (1) (Mahāyāna) *Brahmajāla-sūtra*, an apocryphal Chinese work,⁴ (2) *Śikṣāsamuccaya* of Śāntideva, and (3) *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva. The *Śikṣāsamuccaya* was of sufficient importance to prompt Joshi to state, “The fundamental principle of Mahāyāna morality is expressed in the first verse of the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*: ‘When to myself as to my fellow-beings, fear and pain are hateful, what justification is there that I protect my own self and not others?’” (93). Structurally, the text is organized into three parts, beginning with twenty-seven *kārikās* outlining the

³ See Pierre Python (tr.). *Vinaya-Viniścaya-Upāli-Paripṛcchā* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1973), which offers Tibetan (with Sanskrit fragments) and Chinese text along with a French translation of the Chinese (taken from *Taishō* 310, 325, 326, and 1582). Python notes on page 1 that the Sanskrit fragments are taken from Dutt's edition of the *Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra*. Python's text is an entirely different text than Valentina Stache-Rosen (tr.), *Upālipariṣcchā-sūtra: Ein Text zur buddhistischen Ordensdisziplin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), which offers a translation from Chinese (*Taishō* 1466) with parallels to the Pāli.

⁴ On this issue see, for example, James R. Ware, "Notes on the Fan Wang Ching," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1, 1 (April, 1936), 156-161. Paul Groner makes a similar case in his article in Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (ed.), *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 251ff.

ethical ideal of the *bodhisattva*. A second part offers an extensive commentary on these verses, with the third part offering a huge compendium of supporting quotations from additional Buddhist texts. Taken collectively, its three parts form a comprehensive statement on *bodhisattva* ethics. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is possibly the best known Mahāyāna text associated with the conduct of the *bodhisattva*. It is arranged in ten chapters, five of which address the *pāramitās*, but with mindfulness (*smṛti*) and awareness (*saṃprajanya*) substituted for the traditional *dāna* and *śīla*. This does not mean to say that the *śīla-pāramitā* is omitted, for Chapter V, Verse 11 mentions it by name (Matics 163). Specifically ethical concerns are also considered in Chapter II, known as “*Pāpa-deśanā*” or “Confession of Evil.” Overall, an incredible breadth and scope of ethical issues are considered.

Curiously, it is not from these famous Mahāyāna ethical texts alone that we find the key that unlocks the major emphasis of *bodhisattva* conduct. Two further texts are critically important here: the *Mahāyānasamgraha* and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, and it is on the basis of their evidence that many authors, Buddhist and otherwise, have advanced the theory of the superiority of Mahāyāna ethics over that of *nikāya* Buddhism. In fact, the tenth or “ethical” chapter of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* was the focus of a complete translation and study by Mark Tatz titled *The Complete Bodhisattva: Asanga’s Chapter on Ethics with the Commentary by Tsong-kha-pa*.

Keown, in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (135-157), provides an extremely careful exposition of the argument. The *Mahāyānasamgraha* suggests that Mahāyāna morality is superior to Hīnayāna in four ways: (1) in its classifications (*prabheda-viśeṣa*), (2) in its common and separate rules (*sādhāraṇa-asādhāraṇa-sīkṣāvśeṣa*), (3) in breadth (*vaipulya-viśeṣa*), and (4) in depth (*gāmbhīrya-viśeṣa*). The first category is the most important of the four since it supports the other three, and is itself composed of three

sections: (a) morality as temperance (*saṃvara-sīla*), (b) morality as the pursuit of good (*kuśala-dharma-saṃgrāhaka-sīla*), and (c) morality as altruism (*sattva-artha-kriyā-sīla*) (Keown 137-138). The threefold categorization of morality as temperance, the pursuit of good, and altruism is further developed by the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, concluding that it is the element of altruism that enables Mahāyāna morality to surpass its *nikāya* Buddhist counterpart. The extreme importance of the issue of altruism in asserting the superiority of Mahāyāna ethics has not gone unnoticed by modern Theravādins. Walpola Rahula, for example, says,

The *bhikkhu* is not a selfish, cowardly individual thinking only of his happiness and salvation, unmindful of whatever happens to the rest of humanity. A true *bhikkhu* is an altruistic, heroic person who considers others' happiness more than his own. He, like the Bodhisattva Sumedha, will renounce his own *nirvāṇa* for the sake of others. Buddhism is built upon service to others. (126)

Other Theravādin authors echo Rahula's sentiment.⁵ Regarding the specific conduct of *bodhisattvas*, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* postulates a code having fifty-two rules, of which only the first four are categorized (as *pārājayika-sthāniyā-dharmā*) and a number of which allow the violation of (some of) the ten good paths of action. The second category explores the differentiation between serious and minor offenses, emphasizing that while both *bodhisattvas* and *śrāvakas* are enjoined to observe all the major rules of conduct, *bodhisattvas* may breach minor matters of deportment while *śrāvakas* may not. Of course the circumstances under which a *bodhisattva* may engage in this kind of behavior are also stated. The third category is essentially a summary. Finally, the fourth category is the

⁵ See, for example, the essays included in Swearer, Donald K. (ed.). *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

most innovative, focusing on the notion of skill-in-means (*upāya-kauśalya*) in relation to Mahāyāna ethics.

In the fourth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, one reads, “The son of the Conqueror, having grasped the Thought of Enlightenment firmly, must make every effort, constantly and alertly, not to transgress the discipline (*śikṣā*)” (Matics 44). In the next chapter: “Thus enlightened, one ought to be constantly active for the sake of others. Even that which generally is forbidden is allowed to the one who understands the work of compassion” (Matics 169). How can these two conflicting views appear in the same text, and in such close proximity? The answer lies in a proper understanding of *upāya-kauśalya* and its role in Mahāyāna ethics: it is a theme that permeates Śāntideva's writings. Throughout the eighth chapter of the *Śikṣāsamauccaya* on “Purification from Sin” (*Pāpaśodhanam*), citations abound, especially from the *Upālipariṣcchā-sūtra* and the *Upāyakauśalya-sūtra*, in which ethical transgressions are allowed and sanctioned in the name of skill-in-means (Bendall and Rouse 157-174). Keown concludes from all these examples “that the freedom allowed to a *bodhisattva* is enormous and a wide spectrum of activities are permitted to him, even to the extent of taking life” (154). He goes on, however, to say:

When actions of these kinds are performed there are usually two provisos which must be satisfied: (a) that the prohibited action will conduce to the greater good of those beings directly affected by it; and (b) that the action is performed on the basis of perfect knowledge (*prajñā*) or perfect compassion (*karuṇā*). (154)

The relationship between *śīla* and *prajñā* in Mahāyāna is thus parallel to that noted above with respect to *nikāya* Buddhism in which it is remarked that “the two fuse in the transformation of the entire personality in the existential realisation of selflessness” (Keown 111-112). What

seems *not to be parallel* is that the *nikāya* Buddhist adept is at no time allowed to breach the practice of proper morality while the Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* may, under certain circumstances invariably linked to altruistic activities and based on *karuṇā*, *upāya-kausālya*, and *prajñā*, transcend conventional morality. G.S.P. Misra, for example, notices that, “In the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* we find an enumeration of the circumstances under which a *Bodhisattva* may justifiably commit transgressions of the moral precepts; the governing factor, however, is always compassion and a desire to save others from sinful acts (137). The above passages notwithstanding, parallel references can be also found (Matics 158) emphasizing a strict observance of the precepts for *bodhisattvas*. As a result, we find ourselves confused over the apparent incongruity in the textual accounts of Mahāyāna ethical conduct, and wondering just how breaches of conventional ethical behavior are sanctioned.

The solution emerges from the postulation of two uniquely *different* types of *upāya-kausālya*. About the first, which he categorizes as normative ethics and calls *upāya₁*, Keown says:

Upāya₁ does not enjoin laxity in moral practice but rather the greater recognition of the needs and interests of others. One's moral practice is now for the benefit of oneself and others by means of example. Through its emphasis on *karuṇā* the Mahāyāna gave full recognition to the value of ethical perfection, making it explicit that ethics and insight were of equal importance for a *bodhisattva*. (159).

The second type of *upāya* has nothing to do with normative ethics or ordinary individuals. It is the province of those who have already perfected ethics and insight. Thus:

. . . it is the *upāya* of *bodhisattvas* of the seventh stage (*upāya-kausālya-bhūmi*) and beyond, whose powers and

perfections are supernatural. *Upāya*₂ is depicted as an activity of the Buddhas and Great *Bodhisattvas* (*Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas*) and it is only they who have the knowledge and power to use it. It is by virtue of *upāya*₂ that *bodhisattvas* transgress the precepts from motives of compassion and are said to do no wrong. (Keown 157)

There can be little doubt that *upāya*₂ is *not* the model by which ordinary beings perfect themselves but rather the pragmatic moral outcome of the attainment of the seventh stage of the *bodhisattva* path. *Upāya*₂ is the social expression of a genuine understanding of the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in which no precepts can even be theorized. It is emphasized throughout the Mahāyāna literature on emptiness, but nowhere as eloquently as in the discourse between Vimalakīrti and Upāli in the third chapter of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*:

Reverend Upāli, all things are without production, destruction, and duration, like magical illusions, clouds, and lightning; all things are evanescent, not remaining even for an instant; all things are like dreams, hallucinations, and unreal visions; all things are like the reflection of the moon in water and like a mirror-image; they are born of mental construction. Those who know this are called the true upholders of the discipline, and those disciplined in that way are indeed well disciplined. (Thurman 31)

As such, it represents the far extreme of the ethical continuum, a Buddhist situation ethics established not simply on love, as in Fletcher's system, but on the highest and most profound manifestation of compassion.

Having concluded in the above pages that *śīla* is operative throughout the individual's progress on the *nikāya* Buddhist path, even after the attainment of *prajñā*, and that the same claim can be made for

Mahāyāna, enhanced by the altruistic utilization of *upāya*₁ up to the attainment of the seventh *bodhisattva* stage, after which *upāya*₂ becomes operative, albeit in rather antinomian fashion, it now becomes important to address the issue of whether textually based Buddhist ethics can be truly current; whether an ethical tradition solidly grounded on the textual heritage can serve as the foundational basis for a socially engaged Buddhism, effective in addressing the complex concerns cited in the growing literature on the subject.

The relative vitality of Buddhist ethics in today's world is a concern that cannot be minimized. Indeed, Kōshō Mizutani, in the *Prologue to Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society* asserts, "I submit that a study of Buddhism that emphasizes its ethical aspects will be the most important task facing Buddhists in the twenty-first century" (Fu and Wawrytko 7). Studies abound stressing the difficulties of living effectively in a post-modern society that is becoming increasingly pluralistic and secular. This dilemma is further exacerbated for Buddhists in that "Buddhists today face the question not only of how to relate to other religions, but also how to relate to other forms of Buddhism from different traditions" (Chappell 355).

Modern Applications

In 1987, Rick Fields delivered a paper on "The Future of American Buddhism" to a conference entitled "Buddhism and Christianity: Toward the Human Future," held at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Although case specific to the American Buddhist situation, Fields concluded his presentation with a sketch of eight features that he felt would be critical in the on-going development of American Buddhism. All eight points were directly or indirectly related to issues of Buddhist ethics, prompting Fields to comment: "The Bodhisattva notions of direct

involvement in the world will tend to overshadow tendencies towards renunciation and withdrawal. Buddhist ethics, as reflected in the precepts, the paramitas, and the Bodhisattva vow, will be applied to the specific problems of day-to-day living in contemporary urban North America” (26). It is difficult to consider Fields' words, and those of similar, like-minded individuals such as the contributors to works in the genre of *The Path of Compassion* edited by Fred Eppsteiner without feeling much sympathy for the predicament facing Buddhists in Asia and America as they try to confront ethical dilemmas directly.

In an interesting article, drawing heavily on the work of fairly recent biblical scholarship, Harold Coward points out that:

The relationship between a religious community and its scripture is complex, reciprocal and usually central to the normative self-definition of a religion. The awareness of this relationship is the result of postmodern approaches that no longer see scriptures as museum pieces for historical critical analysis, but recognize them to be the products of human perception and interaction—both in their own time and in today's study by scholars. (129)

The problem of precisely how ethical guidelines can be appropriately reinterpreted in the context of changing times and cultures was confronted early on in Buddhist religious history. By including only the presumed words of Buddha, referred to as *Buddhavacana*, within a closed canon, *nikāya* Buddhism in general and Theravāda in particular made a clear statement about the relationship of community and scripture in the early tradition. Mahāyāna chose the opposite approach. As Coward points out: “Rather than closing off the canon as the *Theravāda* school had done, *Mahāyāna* maintained an open approach and added to the 'remembered words' of Ananda new *sūtras* such as the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* and the *Lotus Sūtra*” (142). This openness allowed Buddhists the occasion

to utilize Buddha's own approach in transmitting the substance of his teaching if not his exact words. Robinson and Johnson point this out clearly in *The Buddhist Religion*: “Both strictness in preserving the essential kernel and liberty to expand, vary, and embellish the expression characterize Buddhist attitudes through the ages toward not only texts but also art, ritual, discipline, and doctrine. The perennial difficulty lies in distinguishing the kernel from its embodiment” (39).

The openness in creating new scripture emphasized by Mahāyāna, and the utilization of an on-going commentarial tradition, as fostered by earlier Buddhism, conjointly provide the potential for a profoundly *current* Buddhist ethics that is also *textually grounded*. Such an approach is solidly in keeping with the program outlined by Charles Weisun Fu (in a slightly different context). Fu says, “The Buddhist view of ethics and morality must be presented in the context of open discussion in a free and democratic forum” (327). To be successful, it requires that:

A philosophical reinterpretation of the Middle Way of *paramārtha-satya/samvṛti-satya* must be undertaken so that the original gap between these two can be firmly bridged, thereby accomplishing the task of constructive modernization of Buddhist ethics and morality. On the theoretical level, a new ethical theory based on the Middle Way of *paramārtha-satya/samvṛti-satya* can meet the challenge of modern times . . . (327)

In the context of the “free discussion” noted above, Sandra Bell highlights in some detail the ethical dilemmas experienced by the two communities she highlights. Regarding Chögyam Trungpa, she notes,

Chögyam Trungpa was surrounded by an inner circle whose members took a vow not to discuss his behavior, although it was openly acknowledged that he had sexual re-

lations with a number of his female disciples. The disciples were also unrestrained in their sexual liaisons, believing that sexual jealousy indicated a failure to grasp Chögyam Trungpa's teachings. (233)

Trungpa's successor, Thomas Rich (given the Tibetan name Ösel Tenzin), appointed in 1976, carried on Trungpa's tradition of antinomian behaviors, eventually dying of AIDS. In San Francisco, Richard Baker Rōshi, Shunryu Suzuki's one *Dharma* heir, took over authority of SFZC in 1971, eventually accumulating enormous power and authority. As he presumably misused this authority, escalating problems began to occur in the community. In 1983, a spring meeting of the board of directors of SFZC resulted in Baker Rōshi taking an indefinite leave of absence. The center's journal *Windbell* describes the situation candidly: "The precipitating event which brought this about was his [Baker's] relationship with a married resident woman student, and the upset which this caused for those principally involved, and for others in the community who knew about it" (2). This was especially problematic because, according to Bell, "Baker had previously told students that although Zen practice did not involve celibacy for priests and laypeople, a person's sexual conduct should not deceive or harm others, while a teacher's behavior should be exemplary. The respected teacher appeared to have broken his own precepts" (235-236). The turmoil eventually resulted in the production of a statement called "Ethical principles and Procedures for Grievance and Reconciliation," which the SFZC board of directors adopted in 1996.

Bell tries to summarize the ethical dilemmas, and their potential solutions in a number of ways. First, she notes that,

Many Buddhist movements in the West, including those described here, were founded during the second half of the twentieth century by charismatic leaders, assisted by an initially small group of devoted followers. It is typical

that as a movement expands this group evolves into an inner circle, “a charismatic aristocracy” that stands between the growing membership and the leader. Increased numbers of students mean that over time certain members of the inner circle also become meditation teachers and candidates for succession to the leadership. The founder, as in the current examples, may nominate a successor who, in adopting the mantle of charismatic authority, becomes remote from the other members of the inner circle who were once his peers. This happened to Richard Baker and to Ösel Tendzin. (238)

Second, she goes on to say:

It may be that as Buddhist organizations mature and move slowly away from charismatic leadership toward rationalized and democratically structured models of authority—what Gordon Melton has described as *broad leadership*—there will be fewer events like those that occurred at Zen Center and Vajradhatu during the 1980s. Melton has proposed that corporate structures, imposed for tax purposes within new religious movements in the United States, have given “new religious groups an additional stability that no single leader could bequeath.” (239)

Finally, Bell is not unaware of the complex relationship that exists between Buddhist teachers and their students, one that expresses a comprehensive intimacy that is sometimes fraught with what she refers to as “romantic and erotic overtones.” Some aspects of this additionally complicating factor were explored by Katy Butler more than two decades ago who argued, with reference to SFZC, that senior students “strove to out-do each other for approval of their insight” (120). Nonetheless, Bell and most other researchers continue to see this as an ongoing ethical di-

lemma, breaches of which violate the *Buddhadharma* and endanger the developing Western Buddhist tradition. The issue has become sufficiently important that David Van Biema, in a *Time* magazine story said, about the American Buddhist community, “Beginning in 1983 the community discovered to its horror that a probably majority of U.S. teachers, both foreign-born and American, had abused their authority by sleeping with students.” He goes on: “The result, in many schools, was a radical democratization, with leadership often subdivided to prevent abuse, and even a certain amount of government by consensus” (80).

Conclusions

So where does this leave us? Are there any alternative modes of interpretation that might clarify the seemingly inappropriate behaviors of several of the prominent Buddhist teachers? Can we utilize the Mahāyāna textual tradition cited above to shed new light on a difficult circumstance? Are these circumstances really as dire as these popular sources suggest?

One highly vocal, and contrary, voice has been that of Rita Gross, known best for her influential book *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. In her important chapter “Helping the Iron Bird Fly: Western Buddhist Women and Issues of Authority in the Late 1990s,” published in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, she moves in a new direction, squarely confronting the issue of presumed ethical misconduct. She frames her unusual position around two major issues: (1) What a spiritual teacher is not; and (2) whether “women should not or cannot consent to certain kinds of sexual activities if they also want to function as self determining adults” (241). Gross sees the spiritual teacher as neither an authority on all issues nor a religious therapist. Gross argues that,

Because the guru is not an all-wise absolute authority and the student is not a needy, immature person in need of fixing up by such an authority, it cannot be claimed that a sexual relationship between a spiritual teacher and a student *must* be inappropriate and exploitative, though under certain conditions such a relationship *might* be exploitative and inappropriate. Such a relationship could also be mutual and mutually enriching, and in some cases surely is, as has been attested by some women I know. (244)

In other words, Gross sees women as moral agents rather than victims. From her feminist stance, Gross focuses significantly on the role of women students in American Buddhist communities. However, might it not also be argued, in light of the above discussion of Mahāyāna ethics in general, and the theory of two highly different forms of *upāya*, that many of the sexual and other behaviors of teachers like Chögyam Trungpa and others were not ethical misconduct at all, but a proper application of an ethical tradition that recognized the human manifestation of highly realized *bodhisattvas*?

If the relationship between *śīla* and *prajñā* is, as we have seen, that “the two fuse in the transformation of the entire personality in the existential realization of selflessness,” then it would be possible to argue that seemingly inappropriate acts of various American Buddhist teachers are really a manifestation of *karuṇā*, applied through the vehicle of a perfectly subtle but absolutely reasonable use of *upāya*. Yet, as is textually made explicit in texts such as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, *Upālipariṣcchā-sūtra*, and others, these actions are not reflective of the normative ethics of *upāyā*₁, which requires application of the normative pattern of Mahāyāna ethics in which all the precepts must be observed, but rather *upāya*₂, available only to *bodhisattvas* of the seventh stage and beyond, in which case these highly accomplished beings may transgress

any of the precepts in their pursuit of helping to liberate all beings. As noted above, such actions “are the social expression of a genuine understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in which no precepts can even be theorized.” No doubt, this suggestion represents the far extreme of the Buddhist ethical continuum, but it *could* serve as a highly subtle expression of Mahāyāna ethics utilized by American Buddhist teachers having attained precisely that realization that their students have assumed on their part. Gross seems to affirm this position when she says,

I want to suggest that those who adamantly condemn sexual relationships between spiritual teachers and their students are overly reliant on conventional morality, especially conventional sexual ethics, which are often erotophobic and repressive . . . There are simply too many examples of outstanding people, including religious teachers, who engage in unconventional behavior to assume that adherence to conventional sexual morality is any safe guide to judging people's worth. (246)

This does not mean to say that *all* Buddhist teachers who act in ways that seemingly violate Buddhist ethical precepts are seventh stage (or beyond) *bodhisattvas*, and certainly those who are not would invariably be bound by the guidelines of *upāya*₁ which require the keen observance of all ethical precepts. Nonetheless, in light of the above, we can at least infer that applied in the proper fashion, by accomplished teachers, the activities allowed by *upāya*₂ do present a possibly subtle solution and explanation of seemingly inappropriate behaviors. On the other hand, if abused by less than realized beings, we must recognize these acts as merely creative perversions of a noble ethical heritage.

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