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Ethics and The *Lotus Sūtra*

*by*

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**M**y approach to the study of the *Lotus Sūtra* and to the subject of the *Lotus Sūtra* and Ethics is from the perspective of a western woman with a Christian background and as an academic who teaches in the field of the study of religions or religious studies. The methods contributing to this field of study are various and include history, sociology, philology and textual interpretation, anthropology and philosophy. For me, one of the most important of the many approaches that are both possible and stimulating within the field of religious studies is phenomenology of religion. The central emphasis of phenomenology of religion as an accumulation of conventions is the understanding of religious traditions as far as is possible from the points of view of those who believe in and belong to them.<sup>1</sup> The challenge of studying in this way is to make the subject of study speak with its own authentic voice. This naturally involves working closely with members of religious traditions and the necessity of bringing to the material sympathetic imagination and a bridging of worldviews. In the light of this style of study and interpretation it was particularly interesting and important that the first draft of this paper was presented at a conference organised by one of the Buddhist movements, Rissho Kosei-kai, for whom this is the central devotional and teaching text.

The theme “Ethics and The *Lotus Sūtra*” can be placed quite naturally against the background of my recent writing on ethics<sup>2</sup> and its choice is undoubtedly linked to the considerable interest being generated by the debates about values going on world-wide at the moment and the questions being raised about the global nature of ethics.<sup>3</sup> I have included in my interpretation of the title not only some of the teaching within the

*sūtra* which has bearing on ethics in some way but also wider issues such as the *sūtra*'s claims about its own source and use. I have also drawn out different types of themes that relate to ethics and worked with them in different ways. The discussion was based both on my own reading of the text and on the need to take account of Buddhist voices and perspectives.

From the point of view of Buddhists from the T'ien'tai (Tendai) and Nichiren Schools the *Lotus Sūtra* is a central scripture. Dr. Michio Shinazaki has pointed out that Rissho Kosei-kai tends to identify itself with the Buddhism of the *Lotus Sūtra*, rather than being a Nichiren affiliated school.<sup>4</sup> In the preface to his *Guide to The Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, Nikkyo Niwano, founder of RKK, sees it as “a valuable and practical guide for living beings in these troubled times”.<sup>5</sup> Founder Niwano makes two further points to illustrate his comment and these link with my general theme. Firstly, he says that the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches that people can change for the better and secondly, that it teaches that all beings are equal.<sup>6</sup> He traces its impact from the time of Kumārajīva's translation of the text from Sanskrit into Chinese to its introduction by Shotoku Taishi into Japan and Saicho's teaching of it at Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei, a place that was to influence so many great teachers, such as Shinran, Dogen and Nichiren himself. Paul Williams, a Buddhist scholar from the UK who is also a practising Buddhist within the Tibetan *dGe lugs pa* tradition, says, “For many East Asian Buddhists since early times the *Lotus Sūtra* is the nearest Buddhist equivalent to a bible—one revealed work containing the final truth, itself sufficient for salvation”.<sup>7</sup>

#### Historical claims as an issue in ethics

The request that I received to contribute something on ethics and the *Lotus Sūtra* for the Third International Conference asked me to be “more theological than historical.” There are some problems for me in this. I do not find the term “theological” an appropriate one to use when dealing with Buddhist material, because Ultimate Reality in Buddhism is not ar-

ticulated as a personal God (*Theos* in Greek). This is a perception that I am anxious to keep to the forefront as someone who wants to work phenomenologically. But I do, on the other hand, find ethical issues can arise from debate about historical issues. What follows is a case in point.

The authority of Buddhist *sūtras* has traditionally rested on their being Buddha *vac* or Buddha *vacana*, the word of the Buddha, and this has usually been understood as the word of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. The *Lotus Sūtra* presents itself as the teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha dwelling in the city of King's Home (Rājagrha) on Vulture's Peak or Mount of The Numinous Eagle (Gṛdhakiṣṭa) surrounded by many arhants and bodhisattvas and emitting a white light from the circle of hair on his forehead. The white light is seen as a portent and "it is because he wishes all living beings to be able to hear and know the Dharma (teaching/truth), difficult of belief for all the worlds, that he displays this portent".<sup>8</sup>

That this is understood as claiming a literal root in the life of the historical Buddha can be illustrated by the struggle of a Tibetan student studying at Indiana University when he first read the *Lotus Sūtra*. "As a devoted Buddhist, he accepted the verdict of his tradition that all Mahāyāna scriptures (including this very peculiar *sūtra*) were the word of the Buddha Śākyamuni. But at the same time it seemed quite clear to him that the *Lotus Sūtra* conflicted with everything that he, as a Mahāyāna Buddhist monk, had been taught and said 'I can't believe that the Buddha would say such things'".<sup>9</sup>

The setting is a mixture of historically linked and mythological description which raises real questions about the origins and authority of the *sūtra*. Its emergence on the stage of history is described by Williams in the following way.

The earliest Chinese translation was made by Dharmarakṣa in 286 CE and revised in 290 CE. The version which conquered East Asia, however, and therefore by far the most significant version given the *sūtra's* importance in East Asian

Buddhism, was the Lotus translated by Kumārajīva and his team of translators in 406. . . . Kumārajīva's *Lotus Sūtra* consists of twenty eight chapters. It is not a homogeneous work. Japanese scholars, who have carried out extensive study of the *Lotus Sūtra*, are inclined to see the oldest part of the text as having been composed between the first century BCE and the first century CE (chapters one to nine, plus chapter seventeen). Most of the text had appeared by the end of the second century.<sup>10</sup>

To support his statements, Williams quotes two Japanese and one western scholar.<sup>11</sup>

The literal link of the *Lotus Sūtra* with the historical Buddha Śākyamuni is thus questioned in historical scholarship, including that done by Buddhist scholars, along with that of other great Mahāyāna *sūtras*. For many historically-minded people this tension can present a crisis of confidence and the raising of what is an ethical question about making claims for the *sūtra*'s origin that are not 'true', which tends in this context to mean historically accurate. If people have been and are being told that this *sūtra* was preached on the Vulture's Peak during his lifetime by the Buddha Śākyamuni and they then find out that there is good reason for questioning that this is historically the case, there might well follow a crisis of confidence in the integrity of the whole tradition of the teaching and the authority figures who have handed on that tradition.

This sounds harsh as I have stated it, but I think it is a realistic presentation of the challenge involved. It is a challenge that has been experienced by many Christians as a result of historical critical work on the Christian Bible during the last century or more and is therefore a familiar one to westerners coming into Buddhist scholarship. There is an imaginative exploration of the challenge in the life of one man in the nineteenth century novel by Mrs. Humphrey Ward entitled *Robert Elsmere*.<sup>12</sup> But the challenge should not be seen as one that comes to the material and eastern Buddhists from the outside culturally and solely as part of a package of post-enlightenment western thought. The distinguished Japanese

thinker Tominaga Nakamoto (1715-1746 CE) also questioned Śākyamuni Buddha's authorship of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* and says:

The scholars of later generations vainly say that all the teachings came directly from the golden mouth of the Buddha and were intimately transmitted by those who heard him frequently.<sup>13</sup>

Tominaga Nakamoto seems to have been the first writer “systematically to question the assumption that the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, or indeed others, were transmitted directly from the Buddha himself. He did this by the critical, historical method of juxtaposing innumerable variations in the various texts and illustrating how these arose in order for some point to be made over against another school”.<sup>14</sup> He did this entirely independently of western scholarship. He states that:

We can tell that for long after the Buddha's decease there was no fixed exposition among his followers and there were no writings upon which one could depend. Everybody renewed the teachings according to their opinions and passed it on orally.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the *sūtras* were compiled by people five hundred years after the Buddha, so they contain many words from these five hundred years.<sup>16</sup>

This kind of challenge made on the basis of historical investigations and claims about historical truth needs to be taken seriously within as well as outside religions, if scholars and members of traditions are to communicate with each other. But, being more phenomenological, so does the style of language being used by a tradition in the claims that it makes, and with it the possibility that different kinds of truth claims are being made. One of the best investigations and analyses of the issue of the claims of *sūtras* to be the word of the Buddha, to my knowledge, is that presented in two articles in the journal *Religion* in 1981 and 1982 by Graeme

MacQueen. His investigation uses the evidence of the tradition itself to build a coherent picture. He notes that at the time of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*' emergence, traditionalists in the Buddhist community called attention to the fact that these were not literally the word of the Buddha as it was collected in the Pali Canon and that they were therefore spurious. MacQueen investigates what the Pali Canon itself takes as the authority behind a *sūtra* and finds a significant number of *sūtras* there also that are spoken by other than the Buddha but which are included for one of three main reasons: because the Buddha approved of what was said by a disciple, because he invites and gives someone permission to teach and because he affirms a person's wisdom and ability, so by implication approves what they teach. These are all seen as Buddha *vacana* in some way. All of these, though, assume the existence of the historical Buddha to validate them. But MacQueen also describes a purely functional understanding of Buddha *vacana* (the word of the Buddha) and that is described in the Pali Canon itself.

The doctrines, Upali, of which you may know: 'These doctrines lead one not to complete weariness (of the world), nor to dispassion, nor to ending, nor to calm, nor to knowledge, nor to the awakening, nor to the cool (*nibbana*)'—regard them definitely as not Dhamma, not the discipline, nor the word of the Teacher. But the doctrines of which you may know. 'These doctrines lead me to complete weariness, dispassion, ending, calm, knowledge, the awakening, the cool'—regard them unreservedly as Dhamma, discipline, the word of the Teacher.<sup>17</sup>

Mahāyāna *sūtras* such as the Lotus do not rest, however, on this kind of principle alone. They set a scene in which the Buddha is still present so their origins are not restricted to the time of his historical birth as Śākyamuni. MacQueen's understanding that this is not a fraudulent claim rests on an appreciation of the Mahāyāna belief that the Buddha had never gone away and is still present, though only the faithful are

aware of this. There is a completely new emphasis and understanding of the Buddha as more than an enlightened teacher in history. Of course Mahāyāna Buddhists may claim that it is not discontinuous with the understanding within the Pali Canon, though it is not the understanding developed in Theravāda Buddhism. The mythological setting of the giving of the teaching in the Lotus and other *sūtras* sets them against this background and there is in the text a *dharmabhāṇaka*, an inspired speaker who is the channel and messenger. Williams gives an example from the *Pratyutpanna sūtra* of this being attained through meditation practice.

While remaining in this very world-system that bodhisattva sees the Lord, the Tathāgata Amitāyus; and conceiving himself to be in that world system he also hears the Dharma. Having heard their exposition he accepts, masters and retains those Dharmas. He worships, venerates, honours and reveres the Lord . . . Amitāyus. After he has emerged from that *samadhi* (meditative absorption) that bodhisattva also expounds widely to others those Dharmas he has heard, retained and mastered them.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of the *Lotus Sūtra* we can add to MacQueen's exploration the general understanding that derives from the *sūtra* itself that teaching is a device and that things taught have only an interim truth, a truth that is useful if it takes people along the path towards enlightenment. This fits in with the quotation from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, given above. The whole tone of the scripture is quite different from any intent to claim historical validity. It is mythological, poetical and full of imaginative narrative (stories, parables) intended to produce insight and wisdom not factual knowledge.

In the Lotus, the Buddha is no longer regarded as a mere mortal but as a sublime being with supernatural powers who preaches in a mythological paradise surrounded by thousands upon thousands of followers.<sup>19</sup>



Michio Shinozaki has stated the situation for Buddhists in the following way:

From the perspective of religious experience, the Buddha will appear together with us on the Divine Vulture Peak when we are upright and gentle and wish to see the Buddha. The Divine Vulture Peak is the sacred place where the Lotus was expounded by Śākyamuni Buddha. Such a place can be everywhere for religious people. When people seek to meet the Buddha, wherever they are; it is the place for ‘uniting’ between the Buddha and the people in their vision.<sup>20</sup>

Historical context is only one device used in Buddhism. The historical Buddha himself was an *upāya kauśalya*, a skillful means for helping beings. The real source of the teaching is beyond a historical figure.

#### The ethics of skillful means

I shall now move on from the ethical issues involved in the claims for the *sūtra*’s origins and a phenomenological insight into this issue from a Buddhist point of view to the general theme of ethics and the *Lotus Sūtra*. When beginning my investigations I looked in the index of various books on Buddhist ethics to see what connections others had made on this theme.<sup>21</sup> I was surprised to find no substantial references to the *Lotus Sūtra* in the indices. When I looked under skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*), however, I found some significant material. Damien Keown, for example, talks about “the apparently transmoral doctrine of skillful means”.<sup>22</sup> The entry on *upāya kauśalya* in the Bowker-edited *Dictionary of World Religions*, from which an earlier quotation is taken, says that the only way to bring the ignorant and deluded into the path of liberation involves a certain degree of duplicity, such as telling lies, but that the Buddha is exonerated from all blame since his only motivation is compassionate care for all beings.<sup>23</sup> Both of these references seem to indicate that *at first sight* the

overtones of the term *upāya kauśalya*, the *sūtra*'s key teaching, is ethically questionable.

Pye presents a chart with the pre-Buddhist, post-Buddhist and Buddhist meanings of the Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese terms for the concept *upāya kauśalya* which he translates as “skillful means”.<sup>24</sup> In a later chapter he presents the discussion of the range of meanings of the word *hoben*, usually used to translate *upāya kauśalya*, in modern Japanese. Pye gives this a lot of attention in chapter eight of his book and quotes Founder Niwano's attempt to overcome the sense of ‘expediency’ in the derivation and root of the term which might be linked with the idea of a trick or lie. He quotes:

If we look up the character *ho* of *hoben* in a dictionary we find that it means ‘dead square’ and thus also ‘correct’. *Ben* means ‘measure’. Therefore the term *hoben* means ‘correct measure’. . . . Originally it meant a teaching device which exactly fits the person and the circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

The place of the concept of *upāya kauśalya* within the Buddhist tradition certainly affirms and demands a definitive interpretation. Skillful means, as well as morality, is in the Mahāyāna list of the ten *pāramitās* (perfections) of which there are six in the Therāvada list. Keown highlights that this focus is twofold-wisdom/insight (*prajñā*) and skillful means (*upāya kauśalya*). He quotes the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa sūtra*, which presents the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā pāramita*) as the mother and skillfulness in means (*upāya kauśalya*) as the father of the bodhisattvas.<sup>26</sup> He sees the two as so interdependent that the absence of one results in bondage rather than liberation. So, for example, the *Vimalakīrti sūtra* 1V. 16ff. says in relation to *upāya kauśalya*:

When a Bodhisattva rejects false views, the invasion of the passions, residual tendencies, affection and aversion, and transfers to perfect enlightenment the good roots he has cultivated

without producing pride, these are skillful means acquired through wisdom and it is deliverance.<sup>27</sup>

Both Williams and Keown give examples from Mahāyāna *sūtras* other than the *Lotus Sūtra* of what Keown calls “radical ethical conclusions”.<sup>28</sup> Williams points out that “all is subordinated to the overriding concern of a truly compassionate motivation accompanied by wisdom. All is relative”.<sup>29</sup> Keown puts it this way: “Mahāyāna sources allow varying degrees of latitude to a bodhisattva when performing his (sic) saving work”.<sup>30</sup>

The examples he gives are not from the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, but as illustrations of what is perhaps the *Lotus Sūtra*'s central doctrine; they are important as examples of the ethical issues inherent in its stand.

The Lord has taught that what is forbidden may be performed by one who perceives with the eye of knowledge a special benefit for beings therein. . . . The forgoing exemption does not apply to everyone only to cases of the exercise of compassion in its highest degree by one who is of a compassionate nature, who is without a selfish motive, solely concerned with the interests of others and totally dedicated to this ideal.<sup>31</sup>

The examples he quotes of what he calls “permissive attitudes,” he indicates were the focus of considerable heart searching. Williams introduces modern examples as well as those from the classical texts. The examples he includes are the story of how in a previous life the Buddha killed a man and that this was the only way to prevent the man from killing five hundred other people and spending a very long time in hell realms. He exercised compassion both towards those who were about to be killed and towards the potential murderer. How this relates to the central Buddhist teaching that karmic consequences are the fruits of intention is not explored at this point. But this kind of story, Williams says, has provided the basis for violence by Tibetan monks trying to defend the

Dharma against Chinese Communist invaders.<sup>32</sup>

What needs to be born in mind when considering these examples is that *upāya* is an attribute of those already perfect in ethics and insight, it is the seventh stage (*bhūmi*) of the bodhisattva path. This means that *upāya* is not presented as a normative path for all to follow but as something manifest in the activities of Buddhas and Great Bodhisattvas. Their true domain is mythical and cosmic, hence the setting of the opening of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The language to communicate their skill-in-means and compassion is one that engages not so much with our inclination and powers of imitation but with our imagination. It is highly symbolic and communicated by stories and descriptions of ingenuity not by history or moral paradigms. It has what a Tibetan Buddhist friend of mine calls the ‘wow’ quality. “Just imagine that people could be that skillful, that compassionate!” is what she described as the typical effect of these kinds of stories and examples on Mahāyāna Buddhists.

In seeing *upāya kauśalya* as the symbolic affirmation of the importance of *karuṇā* (compassion), Keown makes a link with situation ethics, as expounded by Joseph Fletcher.<sup>33</sup> Just as situation ethics for the Christian affirms an ethic rooted in the principle and practice of love (agape), which is the one thing that is intrinsically good, so:

An *upāya*-inspired ethic would break free of the code of laws passed on through tradition and approach the situation of ethical decision-making not empty-handed but armed with a revised scale of values in which compassion (*karuṇā*) is predominant.<sup>34</sup>

As more and more emphasis is placed upon the welfare of others as the sole end, the means employed to achieve it are questioned less and less. The bodhisattva who is motivated by *karuṇā* will seek the well-being of his fellow creatures and choose that course of action which has best consequences irrespective of moral norms which might prohibit it. It is, of course, assumed that the act will promote the well-being of

others, and this is where *prajñā* plays its part.<sup>35</sup>

The area obviously related to this, the centrality of which is mentioned earlier, is the emphasis in Buddhism on motivation, on intention as that which bears karmic fruit. It is the *cetanā*, the motivation that determines the moral quality of an act: intention rooted not in greed, hatred and ignorance but in generosity or liberality, loving-kindness, compassion or benevolence and wisdom or understanding. It may be the case, as the above example of the man with murderous intent seems to indicate, that a bodhisattva's intention can override the karmic fruits of others' intentions. But any emphasis on intention is also challenged by a query about consistency. Does not the *Lotus Sūtra* suggest that even if you drop a flower offering accidentally, it will still be effective? It is also challenged by the fact that skillful means are judged by their effectiveness. If an action or a teaching works, then it is seen to be skillful. But the same action, for example of deceiving someone, if not effective might seem to be the word or action of an unenlightened person and therefore fall into the category of an unethical word and deed.

#### Turning to the text

I now want to look in more detail at parts of the text of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the teachings it communicates as they relate to ethics. Translations of the *sūtra* are readily available. I am most familiar with that by Hurvitz,<sup>36</sup> from which the following quotations are taken, but will cross-refer to other texts as appropriate.

The Buddha sees everything; the usual karmic consequences of actions (p. 6), the actions of giving and of reverence, but most importantly (p. 12) "He wishes all living beings to be able to hear and know Dharma" and precipitates "A Dharma-rain that shall satisfy the seekers of the path" (p.21). For Buddhists as well as the general reader, the main point about this cosmic setting is the extraordinariness of the Buddha's nature and

therefore the extraordinariness of the knowledge and wisdom that can claim to teach all living beings. This again is something to be wondered at and not something that Buddhists can claim for themselves. The beginning of the second chapter confirms this point. “The Buddha’s wisdom is profound and incalculable, hard to understand” and “The Thus Come One’s knowledge and insight are broad and great, profound and recondite, without measure and without obstruction” (p.22). “I, and the Buddhas of the ten directions, are the only ones who can know these things”, which statement is followed by a list of very distinguished types of followers who “still could not know it” (p.25).

So regarding the Buddha:

By the power of expedient device  
 he Demonstrates the teaching of the three vehicle  
 The living beings, attached to this object and that  
 He attracts and thus enables to extricate themselves (p. 25)

Śāriputra asks “whether this is the Ultimate Dharma or whether it is (merely) a path to tread (toward that Dharma).” The Buddha, as in the seminal story in the Pali Canon of his encounter with Brahma Sahampati after his enlightenment, is reluctant to expand teach further until asked three times and then confirms what the Kosei Publishing Company Translation calls “tactfulness”.<sup>37</sup> This extraordinary cosmic setting, combined with the confidence that “means” and the fulfillment of an innate potential are available for all beings to tread the path to enlightenment, even the evil Devadatta, suggest the balance for readers of humility and gratitude combined with personal self-respect and confidence, that are both spiritual and ethical values that the tradition then seeks to develop into action.

### The Story of Belief and Understanding

There are many stories in the *Lotus Sūtra*, sometimes called parables,

which illustrate aspects of its teaching. One of these stories, in chapter four, has been called by some translators, *The Parable of The Prodigal Son*, thus echoing the title of a Christian story in the New Testament. Both stories teach about a son who leaves home, forsakes his father and after a time becomes destitute. In the Christian story, the destitute son remembers his home and decides to go back and ask his father's forgiveness. The father welcomes him home with open arms, despite his behavior, and forgives him, asking his brother to make a family feast to celebrate his return. Father in the Christian story is an image used for God, who is thus seen as loving and forgiving to the sinner who returns and asks for forgiveness for his behavior. Teaching about the love and forgiveness of God is central to Christianity and illustrated par excellence by the story of the incarnation itself; the entering of God into human flesh to share the human predicament and help humanity "from within," with all the suffering that this involves. This teaching of the self-emptying (*kenosis* in Greek) of God in the form of Jesus Christ is most classically articulated in Paul's letter to the Phillipians chapter two. In that letter, it is obvious that this self-emptying of God is not only the instrument of human redemption but the central ethical paradigm of Christian teaching. God is the protagonist. He does not wait for any human initiative, because that could not effect the salvation that is necessary. This powerful theology and the example that it suggests have motivated Christians through the ages to enter lovingly into the situation of others in a spirit of self-renunciation.

But to my mind, this radical ethic is not captured and sustained at all deeply in the Christian story of the Prodigal Son, where the emphasis is on the need for the sinner to repent and ask God for forgiveness with the confidence that God as a loving father will welcome him home. It is a story that emphasizes that we have to initiate a return to God for salvation to be effective.

On the other hand, the Buddhist story of the son who left home and became destitute has always seemed to me to have something in it of the radical ethic of the Christian teaching of the self-emptying love of God in

the incarnation. It is not, of course, being presented in the same framework of ideas as the Christian teaching, which is an obvious problem for any systematic comparative worldview analysis. In the Buddhist story, the father is the cosmic Buddha, portrayed at the beginning of the *sūtra* amidst the host of cosmic bodhisattvas. In another famous story in the *Lotus Sūtra*, this Buddha-father uses skillful means to rescue his children from a burning house, which is an image of *saṃsāra*, with its fires of greed, hatred and ignorance. To return to the story of the father whose son has left home, I have always found this Buddhist narrative a more satisfying illustration of the self-emptying, incarnational paradigm of Christianity than the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son, to which it is often compared. The father in the Buddhist story takes the initiative, because we are told the son has completely forgotten who he is and what is his inheritance. It is the father who goes in search of his destitute son and who has to disguise himself, leave behind his wealth and sink to the son's level to make contact. The contact that he makes has to be adapted to his son's mental state and destitution and the father only gradually and skillfully nurtures him back to a situation where he can let him know whom he is and that he is the heir to great wealth, which is the Buddha nature.

This emphasis on adaptation, even disguise, as a skillful means is fully in keeping not only with the Buddha's teaching but with the bodhisattva path. The needs of beings are various and, in chapter twenty-five, there is the description of the ways that the bodhisattva "who observes the sounds of the world," which is the translation of the name of *Avalokiteśvara*, and *Kuan-shih-yin*, takes thirty-three forms in order to help beings. This chapter of the *sūtra* has circulated separately as a *sūtra* in its own right and is linked with the thirty-three station pilgrimage sites and links us to my next theme.

#### The *Lotus Sūtra* and the Place of Women in Buddhism

The debate about the place of women in the Buddhist traditions is now well-established, thanks to the theoretical and practical work of women



such as the Thai Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who convenes the International Association of Buddhist Women and Rita Gross, whose seminal work, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, bridges so many issues.<sup>38</sup>

Westerners who are not used to the conventions of Buddhist art often react to the rounded forms of the images of buddhas and bodhisattvas and, in the case of bodhisattvas, to their jewelled robes, with comments about their feminine appearance. It can be suggested that this sense of ambiguity is entirely appropriate since the true nature of an enlightened being is beyond sexuality, beyond the characteristics of male and female. But it can also be seen as helpful to women within the Buddhist tradition that the bodhisattva *Kuan-shih-yin* (also *Kwan-yin*, *Kanseon* and *Kannon*) is imaged as the female form of the male Avalokiteśvara, the Lord who looks down on the sufferings of the world.<sup>39</sup> This affirms that the enlightened nature belongs to women as well as men, those in female as well as male forms. This is certainly illustrated in the Pali Canon in the named examples of those women who became enlightened at the time of Gotama/Gautama Buddha.

Chapter twenty-five of the *Lotus Sūtra* is a central section and is used as a text in its own right. The transformations which it recounts of the one who hears the cries of the world into thirty-three forms, seven of which are female, has a practical outreach in the thirty-three site pilgrim routes in Japan with their different images of *Kannon*. These and other images such as the huge, free-standing figures of *Kannon* in Japan, introduce popular practices and a powerful visual dimension to set alongside the text.<sup>40</sup>

In chapter twelve of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which focuses on the story of Devadatta, bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulation asks Mañjuśrī whether there are any beings who, putting this scripture into practice, might speedily gain Buddhahood. Mañjuśrī suggests the daughter of the *Nāga* (dragon or serpent) King Sagara who is barely eight years old. When Mañjuśrī's description of her attainments is questioned she suddenly appears and recounts them for herself. At this point Śāriputra says:

You say that in no long time you shall attain the unexcelled Way. That is very hard to believe. What is the reason? A woman's body is filthy, it is not a Dharma-receptacle. How can you attain unexcelled *bodhi*? . . . Also a woman's body even has these five obstacles. It cannot become first a Brahma god king, second the god Śakra, third King Māra, fourth the sage-king turning the Wheel, fifth a Buddha-body. How can the body of a woman speedily attain Buddhahood?<sup>41</sup>

Her response to his question is to turn into a man! This causes considerable confusion and in other versions of similar stories in other Mahāyāna *sūtras*, the questioner is turned into a woman. We are left with the queries “What are these external forms that we judge so important? How do they relate to Enlightenment?” These questions are central for the Buddhist and are ones to which there is a confident answer that physical forms are illusory and insubstantial compared with the potential for Enlightenment that is within all sentient beings.

Miriam Levering has also highlighted the prediction of Buddhahood made by Śākyamuni to his aunt and stepmother Prajāpatī and his former wife, Yaśodharā, who are described as nuns in *The Assembly* of chapter one of the *Lotus Sūtra*. In chapter thirteen, it is predicted that these two women will in future attain Buddhahood and the Buddha says “I will say that in ages to come, amid the Dharmas of sixty-eight thousands of millions of Buddhas, you will be a great teacher of the Dharma and, the six thousand nuns, some still learning, some already sufficiently learned, will accompany you as teachers of the Dharma.”

Miriam Levering also refers to other Mahāyāna texts where the power to create bodies is one of the powers of a bodhisattva, allowing us to “read the story of the *nāga* princess as one of a female advanced bodhisattva simply exercising her *ṛddhibala* (powers) in creating a transformation in what she already knows to be insubstantial, as the goddess Devī in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa sūtra* does”.<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

What this paper has sought to introduce and reflect upon is not only some important ethical issues that emerge in any consideration of this important text, the *Lotus Sūtra*, but also the many different ways in which this and other questions can be approached in the study of religions. Demonstrably an area or dimension of a religion such as ethics is inextricably related to the other dimensions of religious life such as narratives, doctrines, experience, rituals and even the visual arts. It is also inextricably linked with the distinctive interpretations of the religious communities whose text it is, as well as scholarly dialogue where questions and insights may be a part of the environment within which traditions themselves skillfully adapt and change.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an exploration of the roots of phenomenology of religion see Sharpe, E. *Comparative Religion* 2nd.ed. Duckworth, 1975: chapter 10.

<sup>2</sup> A full length study can be found in Cox, J., Morgan, P. and C. Lawton. *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*. EUP, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> See Küng, H. & Kuschel. *A Global Ethic* SCM, 1992. Braybrooke, M. *Stepping Stones to a Global Ethic*. SCM, 1992. Küng, H. *Yes To A Global Ethic*. SCM, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Shinozaki, M. *The Buddhist Three Treasures in The Thought of The Lotus Sūtra*. Paper presented at the Third International Conference on The *Lotus Sūtra*, Bandaiso, Japan. July 1997: p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Niwano, Nikkyo. *Guide to The Threefold Lotus Sūtra*. Kosei Publishing, English Edition, 1981:7.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*:10

<sup>7</sup> Williams, P. *Mahāyāna Buddhism*. RKP, 1989: 141.

<sup>8</sup> Hurvitz, L. *Scripture of The Lotus Blossom of The Fine Dharma*. Columbia University Press, 1976:12 Niwano, N. *op. cit.*:12.

<sup>9</sup> Natier, J. *The Lotus Sūtra: Good News for Whom?* Paper presented at

- the Third International Conference on the *Lotus Sūtra*. July 1997: 2.
- <sup>10</sup> William, op. cit.: 142
- <sup>11</sup> Nakamura, 1980; Fijita, 1980; Pye, 1978
- <sup>12</sup> Ward, H. *Robert Elsmere*. 1888. OUP rep. 1987
- <sup>13</sup> Pye, M. tr. *Emerging From Meditation* by Tominaga Nakamoto. Duckworth, 1990: 4 and 81ff.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*: introduction: 5.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid*: 83.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid*. 86.
- <sup>17</sup> *Āṅguttara Nikāya* quoted by MacQueen
- <sup>18</sup> Williams, op. cit: 30 is quoting from Harrison, P. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1978: 9:35-57
- <sup>19</sup> Bowker, J. *The Oxford Dictionary of Religions*. OUP, 1997: 587
- <sup>20</sup> Shinozaki, M. op. cit: 16
- <sup>21</sup> There is now a solid body of writing in the field of Buddhist ethics. Examples are: Saddhatissa, H. *Buddhist Ethics*. George Allen & Unwin, 1970, Keown, D. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. Macmillan, 1992, Keown, D. *Buddhism and Bioethics*. Macmillan, 1995, Keown, D. ed. *Buddhism and Abortion*. Macmillan, 1998.
- <sup>22</sup> Keown, op. cit. 129
- <sup>23</sup> Bowker ed. op. cit.: 1008
- <sup>24</sup> Pye, op. cit: 17
- <sup>25</sup> Niwano, N. *A New Commentary on The Lotus Sūtra*.: Kosei Press, 1966:96 quoted in Pye, op. cit: 148
- <sup>26</sup> Keown, 1992:131
- <sup>27</sup> Quoted in Keown, op. cit: 132.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid*:150
- <sup>29</sup> Williams, op. cit: 144
- <sup>30</sup> Keown, op.cit.: 152
- <sup>31</sup> *ibid*. p.151
- <sup>32</sup> Williams, op. cit p. 145.
- <sup>33</sup> Fletcher, J, *Situation Ethics*. SCM, 1966
- <sup>34</sup> Keown, 1992: 18

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*: 189

<sup>36</sup> Hurvitz, L. *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> tr. Tamura and others. Kosei Press, 1997 ed: chapter 2: 31.

<sup>38</sup> Some examples of the now extensive literature are: Kabilsingh, C. *Thai Women in Buddhism*. Parallax Press, 1991; Gross, R. *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. SUNY, 1993 with extensive bibliographies. Paul, D. *Women in Buddhism*. Asian Humanities Press, 1979; Tsomo, K. L. *Sakhyadhita: Daughters of The Buddha*. Snow Lion, 1988; Batchelor, M. *Walking On Lotus Flowers*. Thorsons, 1996; Rhys Davids, C.A.F. & Norman, K.R. *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*. Pali Text Society, 1989 ed.

<sup>39</sup> Palmer, M. Ramsey, J. & Kwok, M-H *Kuan Yin*. Thorsons, 1995, gives a full account of the stories and practices surrounding this figure. Some of the pilgrim sites have a set of thirty-three images in one place, so that in visiting a single temple a pilgrim can have visited all thirty-three on a pilgrim route. For an illustration of one of the huge figures of Kannon see Bechert, H and Gombrich, R. *The World of Buddhism*. Thames and Hudson, 1984: 179

<sup>40</sup> See the magnificent volume Kurata, B. & Tamura, Y. eds. *The Art of The Lotus Sūtra*. Kosei Publishing, English Translation, 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Hurvitz, *op. cit.*: 199 - 201

<sup>42</sup> Points from Levering, M. paper, *Is the Lotus Sūtra “Good News” For Women?* delivered at The Third International Conference on The *Lotus Sūtra* Watson, 191-92, Hurvitz, L. *op. cit.* p.203.