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Are there Seventeen Mahāyāna Ethics?

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The Need to Study Mahāyāna Ethics

Numerous Western studies have been published on Buddhist ethics for early Buddhism and contemporary Theravāda, but surprisingly little exists for Mahāyāna ethics.¹ This is perplexing not only because Mahāyāna Buddhists are more numerous than Theravādins, but also because Mahāyāna rhetoric claims that, unlike the more conservative (“little vehicle”) Buddhists, they postpone their own nirvana in order to remain behind in the world out of compassion to help other living beings. But one must ask: if Mahāyāna Buddhism is so dominated by the rhetoric of compassion, why are the primary examples of contemporary Buddhist social activism largely found in Theravādin countries, and most studies of ethics based on early Buddhism and Theravāda? Certainly Mahāyāna scriptures abound with lofty ethical visions and universal goals that should inspire Western writings on Mahāyāna ethics.

¹ See Frank Reynolds, “Buddhist Ethics: A Bibliographical Essay,” *Religious Studies Review* 5:1 (Jan 1979): 40-48; Donald K. Swearer, “Nirvana, No-Self, and Comparative Religious Ethics,” *Religious Studies Review* 6:4 (Oct 1980): 301-306; Charles Hallisey, “Recent Work on Buddhist Ethics,” *Religious Studies Review* 18.4 (Oct 1992): 276-285; Charles Prebish, “Modern Buddhist Ethics in Asia and America,” *The Pacific World*, N.S. 8 (1992): 40-47; and “Text and Tradition in the Study of Buddhist Ethics,” *The Pacific World*, N.S., 9 (1993): 49-68. Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992): 5 has recently called attention to the striking neglect of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics by Western scholars, although he applauds Roderick Hindery, *Comparative Ethics in Hindu and Buddhist Traditions* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978) and G.S.P. Misra, *Development of Buddhist Ethics* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984) for including chapters on Mahāyāna in their books. Keown himself helps to make up for the deficiency by an extensive analysis of “Ethics in the Mahāyāna” (1992: 129-164), and then compares Mahāyāna ethics to earlier Buddhism and to Western ethical thought. However, if East Asian Buddhism is also included as Mahāyāna, then the list of works grows somewhat. See, for example, Christopher Ives, *Zen Awakening and Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992); James Heisig and John Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

There seem to be at least six reasons for the lack of Western studies on Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics: (1) most of the 200 Indian Mahāyāna ethical texts that exist are found only in Chinese and have not been translated; (2) the complexity, diversity, and vastness of these 200 Indian Mahāyāna ethical texts has made a comprehensive study difficult;² (3) the Indian Mahāyāna sponsorship of ascetic and meditative powers produced idealistic ethical visions often unrelated to social practices;³ (4) since strong Confucian-style governments in East Asia made social involvement by Buddhist clergy largely illegal, ethical guidelines on social issues beyond the monastic precepts were irrelevant;⁴ (5) until recent times, new East Asian lay Mahāyāna movements have largely adopted Confucian ethics or emulated the clergy; and (6) East Asian Buddhism often lacked sustained collaboration across sectarian and cultural boundaries, so that no institutional instrument existed (like the Vatican) to discuss and formulate common Mahāyāna ethical principles.

In spite of these obstacles, there are a number of reasons why the topic of Mahāyāna ethics is of great urgency today. Certainly one is the perplexity of Western Buddhist practitioners who see the contradictions between the teachings of early Buddhism (now readily available in English) and the Confucian institutional patterns of the East Asian

² See the next section that summarizes the findings of Ono, Hōdō, *Daijō kaikyō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Risōsha, 1954).

³ See the critique of the idealistic move in the *Avatamsaka* tradition by Luis Gomez, "Selected Verses from the *Gandavyūha*: Text, Critical Apparatus and Translation" (1967 Yale Ph.D. dissertation, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan): lxxvi-lxxxv.

⁴ This suppression of Buddhist social service by the government is documented for China by Michihata, Ryōshū, *Daijō bosatsukai no tenkai* (Tokyo: Shōen, 1985), whose findings are summarized by Whalen Lai in his article "Chinese Buddhist and Christian Charities: A Comparative History," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 5-34. In Korea, Buddhism was severely oppressed and restricted for the last five centuries during the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910). In Japan during the Tokugawa period (1600-1867), Buddhism was made an instrument of the state, and only recently has there been strong Japanese Buddhist critique as expressed by such writings as Shoko Watanabe, *Japanese Buddhism: A Critical Appraisal* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1968). The effort to recover from this government suppression is found in many new Buddhist movements, and even in efforts to revive the older traditions, for example in Zen: see Ryomin Akizuki, *New Mahāyāna: Buddhism for a Post-Modern World* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990).

Mahāyāna lineages that they join (especially Zen). Another reason is the long-standing challenge of Christian social welfare programs in East Asia that makes Mahāyāna Buddhism look passive and unconcerned about social problems. A third reason is the increased social involvement of East Asian Buddhists as they explore their new freedom from government restrictions, which were removed after 1945 when many East Asian governments emulated the separation-of-church-and-state policy of the American constitution. (Of course, the notable exception to this liberalizing trend is the People's Republic of China.) As a consequence, there has been a rise of Buddhist social welfare programs in the Mahāyāna Buddhist countries of Taiwan, Korea, and Japan, and international meetings on Buddhist social welfare are now being scheduled.⁵

The Scope of Mahāyāna Ethics

Damien Keown's excellent book on *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992) provides a helpful introduction to Mahāyāna ethics by analyzing the Mahāyāna six perfections,⁶ followed by an outline of the threefold ethical structure of Mahāyāna (restraining evil, cultivating virtue, and helping others), and illustrated by a translation of the 52 rules in the Bodhisattvabhūmi-sūtra. His analysis is particularly helpful in exposing the tension between right action and saving wisdom, and the confusion caused by two different levels of skillful means (*upāya*): one which emphasizes strict obedience to institutionalized precepts by ordinary Buddhists, and the other kind of skillful means used by Buddhas and great bodhisattvas that transcends the precepts and is mythic in nature. While Keown's presentation provides some Mahāyāna materials for his larger analysis of the nature of ethical decision making

⁵ Increased communication has greatly facilitated awareness of the new experiments in Buddhist social activism, and annual international meetings have been held at the University of Hawaii (1993) and in Taipei (1994) under the sponsorship of the *Torch of Wisdom* (FAX: 886-27085054) which offers a bilingual weekly newspaper highlighting Chinese Buddhist social activism.

⁶ The "six perfections" refer to the six practices or ideals that were the core curriculum for early Mahāyāna Buddhism: namely, giving, morality, patience, zeal, meditation, and wisdom. For the classic study of these in English, see Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932): 165-269.

in Buddhism, it is based largely on monastic materials and clearly shows that it is not designed for society as a whole. Moreover, even though he begins his analysis by acknowledging that Mahāyāna ethics is complex, with a variety of developments that are occasionally contradictory, because he relies largely on the Bodhisattvabhūmi-sūtra, the full range and complexity of Mahāyāna is not shown. Other treatments of Mahāyāna ethics in the West have also been limited to selected sources.⁷

In contrast to limited Western studies of Mahāyāna ethics, in Japan, forty years ago, Ono Hōdō presented a comprehensive study of bodhisattva precepts in which he identified 86 titles of works on Mahāyāna precepts found in the ten historical catalogs of Chinese Buddhist texts. Since some of the different titles are for the same work, and many are lost, Ono found that only 32 titles survive in our existing canonical collections.⁸ In addition, Ono also found 168 other Mahāyāna scriptures that have moral and ethical principles, which brought the total of bodhisattva precept texts to 200.

Ono's foundational book is a major bibliographical achievement and makes available to us the basic sources for the study of Mahāyāna ethics. In order to correct the neglect of Mahāyāna ethics, there is no better place to start than to review these 200 sources identified by Ono in search of the ethical principles that they contain.

Charles Prebish has recently observed that many treatments of Buddhist ethics actually review only the lists of rules and do not explore the ethical principles that lie behind the precepts.⁹ This means that our task is not just to accumulate and compare the set of moral rules found in each of these 200 texts. Instead, an adequate discussion of Mahāyāna ethics requires interpreting the various lists of moral regulations found in these 200 texts in the light of the dominant worldview, values, and practices represented in each text. Even when two texts share the same

⁷ See the translation of the Bodhisattvabhūmi-sūtra by Mark Tatz, Asaṅga's Chapter on Ethics With the Commentary of Tsong-kha-pa, The Basic Path to Awakening, The Complete Bodhisattva (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1986); a translation of Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra by Stephen Batchelor, A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life (Dharmasala, 1979); Alex Wayman, Ethics of Tibet: Bodhisattva Section of Tsong-Kha-Pa's Lam Rim Chen Mo (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1991), and so forth.

⁸ Ono, Hōdō, Daijō kaikyō no kenkyū (Tokyo: Risōsha, 1954): 8-44.

⁹ See Charles Prebish, "Text and Tradition in the Study of Buddhist Ethics," The Pacific World, N.S., 9 (1993): 49-68.

rules, this need not imply a common ethic unless their underlying principles also are in agreement. Accordingly, a distinction must be made between a list of moral rules and the framework of interpretation that provides their meaning and that guides practitioners in handling conflicting values (such as the value of remaining pure by not handling money in contrast to the value of easing the suffering of others by buying medicines).

Frameworks for Mahāyāna Ethics?

The task of analyzing the lists of rules and quasi-rules from these 200 texts becomes even more staggering if each list must be placed within its framework of understanding and practice before it can be adequately compared. A promising reduction of this task is made by Ono who proposes that many of these texts can be grouped together into seventeen textual families since many texts have common associations or a common history. For example, he identified thirteen Perfection of Wisdom texts, nine texts connected with the Lotus group, fourteen texts in the Nirvāṇa-sūtra group, and so forth. These groupings imply that the texts in each group share not only a common history, but also are connected in their ideas, values, and practices, and may have originated in a common Buddhist community or tradition. (See the *Appendix* for the list of textual groups made by Ono.)

At this initial stage of investigation, however, it is important not to misrepresent the role of these seventeen textual groups as if they represented seventeen different forms of Mahāyāna ethics. Accordingly, the concern of this paper is to reflect on these seventeen groups, since they are not equally cohesive or matched.

While common associations attract texts into most of the seventeen groups, in Group No. 14, Ono lists twenty-one texts as independent and unrelated. Furthermore, in Group No. 16, Ono lists twenty-eight texts which share the common function of repentance, but which may involve very different world views and values, as with the “independent scriptures” group. Based on their different perspectives, these repentance texts may also involve very different ethical views of right and wrong actions, as well as different understandings and practices for recovering from wrong.¹⁰

¹⁰ In an earlier paper I identified five different forms of repentance based on differences of worldviews and purposes. See “Formless Repentance in

Another problem arises in Group No. 15, where Ono places sixteen different texts dealing with the five, eight, or ten lay precepts and the ten good deeds. Ono acknowledges that almost half of these lay precept texts can also be found in Hīnayāna vinaya collections (Nos. 1476, 1478, 1471, 1472, 1474, 1475, and 1473). If these texts are so neutral or so elementary that they can serve Hīnayāna as well as Mahāyāna communities, does this mean that they lack a distinctively Mahāyāna ethic? If they lack a distinctive ethic, does this mean that they should not constitute a separate group but can be combined with other textual groups? Or does it imply that they should not be used at all as a source for Mahāyāna ethics since they do not clarify what is distinctive about Mahāyāna ethics?

Ono identifies eleven bodhisattva precept texts (Group No. 17), but separates two bodhisattva precept texts (the Brahmā-net Sūtra and the Mahāyāna Contemplation Sūtra on the Mind-stages of Previous Lives) into a separate group (Group No. 10). Although the worldview, values, and practices of these latter two texts in Group No. 10 overlap with many of the texts in Group No. 17, the textual history is very different, since the two texts in Group No. 10 were probably compiled not in India but in China, and share other common features.¹¹ Accordingly, in spite of their different textual histories, Groups Nos. 10 and No. 17 will probably have a great deal of overlap in terms of their ethical positions.

These five groups (the Independent Scriptures Group, Lay Precept Group, Repentance Group, and Bodhisattva Precept Texts—namely, Groups Nos. 14, 15, 16, 17, and 10) contain 78 texts, while the other 122 texts are placed in twelve groups that seem more coherent, since they are focused around major Mahāyāna sūtras, with the implication that the texts within each group share common worldviews, values, and practices.

Even among these major sūtra groups, however, there are some with boundaries that are unclear. For example, Ono utilizes an anthology of Mahāyāna scriptures called the Mahāratnakūta-sūtra (Great

Comparative Perspective,” in *Fo Kuang Shan Report of International Conference on Ch'an Buddhism* (Tashu, Kaohsiung, Taiwan: Fo Kuang Publishers, 1990): 251-267.

¹¹ See Paul Groner, “The *Fan-wang ching* and Monastic Discipline in Japanese Tendai: A Study of Annen's Futsū jubosatsukai kōshaku,” in Robert Buswell, ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990): 251-290; and Busshō kaisetsu daijiten VII.346c-351c.

Treasury collection) and creates a distinctive textual group using its title and including five texts from the collection that have ethical content (Nos. 13, 36, 38, 47, and 48).¹² To this core, Ono adds other translations of these selected texts (Taishō Nos. 342, 341, 345, 397 [11], 311 and 353) and two other related texts (Taishō Nos. 316 and 346). For these texts, Ono and the compiler of the Great Treasury collection are in agreement on shared principles. However, Ono then selects *eight other texts* from the Great Treasury collection and finds that they fit better in *five other groups* that he has devised, namely:

- v No. 5 is placed in Group No. 6 on Pure Land Ethics
- v Nos. 9 and 26 in Group No. 15 on Lay Precepts
- v No. 19 in Group No. 8 on Āgama Ethics
- v Nos. 23, 43 and 44 in Group No. 2 on Mahākāśyapa Ethics¹³
- v No. 34 in Group No. 3 on Vimalakīrti Ethics

Although the Pure Land text (No. 5) and the Lay Precept texts (Nos. 9 and 26) have special topics, the compiler of the Great Treasury collection felt that they did not contradict the values and worldview of his/her community, but were precious treasures. Since the Pure Land text has a focus on another world, and the lay precept texts focus on elementary practice, they could easily be reconciled within a larger Mahāyāna framework of practice. This may also be true of the other five texts, and it calls into question Ono's groupings as a basis for discussing separate ethical frameworks.

Ono also develops a textual group related to another great anthology of scriptures, the Mahāsammipāta-sūtra (the Great Assembly collection). However, there is one text in this collection (No. 11) that also exists as No. 47 in the Mahāratnakūta-sūtra (the Great Treasury collection). In this case, Ono places this text not in the Great Assembly group, but with the Great Treasury collection.¹⁴

¹² Three of these five are partially translated into English by Garma Chang, ed., A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983): 41-72, 427-468, and 363-386. The full text of No. 48 is translated in Wayman (1974).

¹³ Texts Nos. 43 and 44 have been partially translated by Garma Chang, ed., A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: 387-414 and 280-314.

¹⁴ The Baoji Pusa Pin of Dafangdeng Dajijing (T 13. 173-184) is also contained in the Great Treasury Collection as No. 47, Questions Asked by Bodhisattva Baoji Scripture (Baoji Pusa Hui) (Patna-cuda pariprcchā) (T

Obviously, the criteria used by the compilers of these collections were not shared by Ono, since he groups the texts in different ways. Just as the distinctive textual traditions of the Pure Land and Lay Precept group did not imply a separate ethical framework, the same may be true for the other texts that are placed in the Āgama, Mahākāśyapa, and Vimalakīrti groups. Obviously the compilers of the Great Treasury collection accepted all these texts as teaching a common message and set of values. Accordingly, the overlap of Groups Nos. 2, 3, 6, 8, 12, and No. 15 based on their shared presence together in the Great Treasury collection suggests that the boundaries between these different groups devised by Ono may not be ethically decisive.

It is clear that the first nine sūtra collections focused on the Perfection of Wisdom, Mahākāśyapa, Vimalakīrti, Lotus, Hua-yen, Pure Land, Bodhisattvabhūmi, Āgama, and Nirvāna-sūtras represent a different kind of text from Ono's last three groups dealing with repentance, bodhisattva precepts, and lay precepts, since the former are more thematic, while the latter serve a ritual function. Accordingly, any *one Buddhist community* could use texts from several groups while still maintaining internal ethical consistency. For example, in East Asia the Brahmā-net Sūtra was used by most Buddhists as their bodhisattva precept text, while at the same time they focused on one or another major sūtra as primary, such as the Lotus or Pure Land texts. Since a single community could focus on one of the sūtra collections as primary, and at the same time also identify with one bodhisattva precept text and one repentance text, an ethical system might be shared across several of Ono's textual families.

In summary, even if most of Ono's textual groups reflect distinctive textual traditions and probably separate communities, it does not mean that they also had distinctive and competing moral systems. They could still share the same monastic and lay moral rules, as well as a similar set of ethical priorities and interpretive frameworks. Beyond identifying distinctive textual traditions and functions, primary consideration should be given to distinguishing the different internal Buddhist ethical frameworks.

11.657-672; tr. 266-313 AD).

Diversity of Ethical Frameworks

Compassion has been seen as a central value within Mahāyāna. However, in Buddhist history compassion has been interpreted in a variety of different frameworks that have been carefully distinguished. The most common appearance of compassion in early Buddhism was the practice of universal compassion as part of the four immeasurable minds.¹⁵ However, this ethic was given a very different meaning when practiced by the brahmins in contrast to the disciples of the Buddha.

In early Buddhist texts it is not uncommon for the Buddha to recommend the four immeasurable minds to brahmins to practice. In one instance (Pali *Middle Length Sayings* No. 99), instead of the values that the brahmins had been using (truthfulness, austerities, chastity, study, and renunciation) as a means for communion with the god Brahmā, the Buddha recommended universal compassion as part of the four immeasurable minds.¹⁶ As a consequence, these minds are often called the four *brahmavihāras* (*si-fan-zhu*), the “ways of living like Brahmā.” In another discourse (Pali *Middle Length Sayings* No. 97), Sāriputta taught the Brahmin Dhānañjāni how to have companionship

¹⁵ The four immeasurable minds (*si-wuliang-xin*; Pali *cattasso appamaññāyo*) are good-will (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upeksā*). For a discussion of the four immeasurable minds in early Buddhism, see Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism*: 60-77; Gunapala Dharmasiri, *Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics* (Antioch, California: Golden Leaves, 1989): 42-52. These are considered immeasurable because the Buddha gave instructions to fill each direction—north, south, east, west, as well as up, down, and across—with goodwill (*ci*), with compassion (*bei*), with sympathetic joy, and with equanimity. While practitioners were to extend these attitudes to all beings everywhere, in various early texts the Buddha implies that there are different levels for practicing these virtues. The basic practice of the four immeasurable minds was not restricted to the Buddhist community, but was also taught by the Buddha to nobles and to brahmins.

¹⁶ Zhong-ahan jing No. 152, T 1.669c4-670a7; I.B. Horner, tr., *Middle Length Sayings* (London: Luzac & Company, 1970) 2:396-397; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, tr., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995): 808; cf. Maurice Walshe, tr., *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), No. 13: 193-195.

with Brahmā by practicing the four minds. Even though the Buddha assures the monks that Dhānañjāni was reborn in the Brahmā world,¹⁷ he is also careful to point out that there is still farther to go on the path.

This warning, that the immeasurable minds might provide companionship with Brahmā but were still incomplete and subject to rebirth, is repeated in a number of other discourses.¹⁸ For example, this same distinction occurs in *The Great Steward Mahāgovinda Sutta* of the Pali *Long Discourses* (No. 19) where we read that even though the four immeasurable minds lead to union with the gods in the Brahmā realms, they do not lead to liberation:

¹⁷ Horner, *Middle Length Sayings* II:377-379; *Zhong-ahan jing* No. 27, T 1.458b; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses*: 791.

¹⁸ The Buddha in the *Shorter Discourse at Assapura* in the Pali *Middle Length Sayings* (No. 40), where he describes two levels of practicing the four immeasurable minds. If practitioners are from a noble or brahmin family and develop *cattasso appamaññāyo* to attain calm, then they are beginning to follow the proper practices of a recluse, but still must be reborn. However, if they are from any family, noble or common, and have attained the uniquely Buddhist step of achieving the destruction of attachments through wisdom, then they are recluses with the destruction of cankers, which involves no more rebirth. (Horner, *Middle Length Sayings* I: 338; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses*: 372; *Zhong-ahan jing* No. 183, T 1.725c)

Compare the Pali *Middle Length Sayings* No. 52, in which Ānanda conveys the teaching of the Buddha to a layman by explaining the first four levels of meditation, followed by the four immeasurable minds, as training toward final liberation. After recommending each of the four minds, Ānanda then qualifies his recommendation by warning that these minds are impermanent and must come to an end because they are caused and thought out. (Horner, *Middle Length Sayings* II:16; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses*: 454; *Zhong-ahan jing* No. 217, T 1.802a, cf. T 1.916.)

Ānanda's warning is explained by the Buddha in the *Shorter Discourse at Assapura* in the Pali *Middle Length Sayings* (No. 40) where he describes two levels of practicing the four immeasurable minds. If practitioners are from a noble or brahmin family and develop *cattasso appamaññāyo* to attain calm, then they are beginning to follow the proper practices of a recluse but still must be reborn. However, if they are from any family, noble or common, and have attained the uniquely Buddhist step of achieving the destruction of attachments through wisdom, then they are recluses with the destruction of cankers which involves no more rebirth. (Horner, *Middle Length Sayings* I:338; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses*: 372; *Zhong-ahan jing* No. 183, T 1.725c.)

[the four immeasurable minds do] not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to super-knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna, but only to birth in the Brahmā-world, whereas my holy life leads unfailingly to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to super-knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is the Noble Eightfold Path. . .¹⁹

As Harvey Aronson explains, when an ordinary person cultivates the four immeasurable minds, “he is reborn in the Brahmā worlds after his death, but after the expiration of his lifetime there, he is reborn as a hell being, hungry ghost, or animal (A.ii.129).”²⁰ By contrast, disciples of the Buddha will be reborn in the Brahmā worlds after death, but will continue to practice until they experience final release and gain nirvāna. Even though practicing compassion as a part of the four immeasurable minds plays a positive role in early Buddhism, it is the larger framework of understanding and insight that determines its ultimate significance for the destiny of the practitioner.

Based on their different social obligations (caste) and goals (companionship with Brahmā), the compassion practiced by the brahmins probably led to different social decisions and had different qualities from the compassion practiced by the Buddha's disciples, who were caste-free. In other words, these different frameworks of understanding involved different relationships and values that will affect the substance and tone of practice to the degree that they can be considered different ethics. Both advocate compassion, but the quality and expressions of compassion differ.

Parallel to this twofold distinction is a similar discussion in the Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom tradition between a limited compassion and an unlimited version, but it is the compassion of the Two Vehicles which is seen as finite, whereas it is the Mahāyāna compassion that is unlimited. In the case of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, the difference is based on whether one is attached to the notion of other beings or not:

Wise Bodhisattvas, coursing thus, reflect on non-production,
And yet, while doing so, engender in themselves the great
compassion,

¹⁹ Mahāgovinda Sutta: *The Great Steward of the Long Discourses* (No. 19), Maurice Walshe tr., *Thus Have I Heard*: 313. I am indebted to Harvey Aronson, *Love and Sympathy*: 71 for this reference.

²⁰ Harvey Aronson, *Love and Sympathy*: 73.

Which is, however, free from any notion of a being.
 Thereby they practice wisdom, the highest perfection.
 But when the notion of suffering and beings leads them to
 think:
 'Suffering I shall remove, the weal of the world I shall work!'
 Beings are then imagined, a self is imagined,
 —The practice of wisdom, the highest perfection is lacking.²¹
 When he has got rid of the notion of I and the notion of other
 beings,
 Established in the perfection of morality is that Bodhisattva
 called.
 If a Bodhisattva, coursing in the path of the Jinas,
 Makes [a difference between] these beings as observers of
 morality and those as of bad morality,
 Intent on the perception of multiplicity, he is perfectly
 immoral. He is faulty in his morality, not perfectly pure in it.²²

These early Perfection of Wisdom texts supplant the normal moral distinctions with new distinctions between those attached to the notion of separate beings and those free from such notions. True and saving morality is based on being free of the notion of separate beings. Because all reality was seen as conjured like a magical illusion, bodhisattvas are able to practice what is called “great compassion” that involves different ethical options than available to the Two Vehicles:

This is the *manifestation of the great compassion* that a Bodhisattva, who courses on the pilgrimage of a Bodhisattva, thinks that “for the sake of the weal of every single being will I roast in the hells for aeons countless as the sands of the Ganges, until that being has been established in the Buddha-cognition”²³

This quotation shows that the normal space-time limits for expressing compassion were removed by the Perfection of Wisdom tradition. Also, based on the same removal of distinctions, the lines marking the violations of precepts in Mahāyāna were also sometimes

²¹ Edward Conze, tr., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973): 11-12.

²² Ibid.: 68-69.

²³ *The Twenty-five Thousand-line Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra*, Edward Conze, tr., The Large Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975): 168.

removed. Instead, wrong actions that break the rules can be reinterpreted in a context of good intent that sometimes condones them as expedient and helpful actions based on “great compassion” (compassion in the light of the wisdom of emptiness) as seen in such texts at the Upāya-sūtra and the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra.

These two levels of practice seem to parallel the two levels of skillful methods of practicing the precepts discussed by Keown above. Even though the second way is described with Mahāyāna hyperbole (language which Keown referred to as mythic), it does imply that there are different attitudes, perspectives, and different values involved in the Mahāyāna practice that were meant to shape and tone ethical decisions and behavior at the highest level. As a consequence, we can see that the same value (compassion) can function in different soteriological contexts that result in different expressions. Certainly, in these examples, the more mundane or conventional approach (whether it is by brahmins or by the Two Vehicles) is used as a foil for the higher method of practicing compassion that leads to liberation.

All Mahāyāna must be seen in the light of the doctrine of emptiness that transforms the normal distinctions between morality and immorality at the primary level of soteriology, and it is fitting that Ono placed Perfection of Wisdom as the first group of texts. This new vision of compassionate action, which transcends the normal boundaries of space-time and right-and-wrong, became part of the shared mythic imagery of Mahāyāna. The first nine sūtra groups devised by Ono share to one degree or another in this new exuberance and differ mostly in their imagery and emphasis: namely, the Perfection of Wisdom, Mahākāśyapa, Vimalakīrti, Lotus, Hua-yen, Pure Land, Bodhisattvabhūmi, Āgama, and Nirvāna-sūtras.

Whichever textual group is chosen as primary, a major practical question still involves the ethical decisions by practitioners about how to live in our conventional world and what they reconsider to be their primary ethical responsibilities in the light of emptiness. As a basis for discussion and future analysis, I would offer four major ethical frameworks:

1. A continuation of early Buddhist monastic ethics that emphasizes nonattachment from worldly concerns expressed as the ethics of avoidance of wrong and the cultivation of kindly attitudes in retreat from the world as the best way to actualize the equalizing insight of emptiness;
2. The primacy of compassion by laity as superior to monastic withdrawal, since only the laity can use both the dharma, and very

- practical, material methods of removing the suffering of all beings based on a bodhisattva sense of affinity with them;
3. A balance between the monastic personal ethic of restraint and an awareness of the emptiness of emptiness that requires walking the middle path, embracing both emptiness and the provisional world, to exercise compassion toward all beings by actions inside and outside the monastery;
 4. Contemplative monasticism that emphasizes the primacy of the mind based on insight into the interpenetration and emptiness of all reality, which enables the awakened mind to manifest illusory forms throughout the universe to bring about the transformation and salvation of others in the midst of a world that is equally illusory.

Four Mahāyāna Ethical Frameworks

All of these four ethical frameworks—retreat, social involvement, balance, and meditative trance—are based on the Perfection of Wisdom insights and the practice of the six perfections. The first is largely the continuation of traditional monastic Buddhist priorities with the addition of a Mahāyāna metaphysics and supplemental practices. For example, even though based on the insight into emptiness, the soteriology of practitioners who use the Pure Land family of texts often lessens their urgency about saving other beings in the present, since they also feel in need of the compassionate power of Amitābha to save themselves as well as others. This reaches its extreme interpretation in Japanese Jōdōshinshū practitioners, who do not emphasize any ethical practice, in contrast to Chinese Pure Land practitioners, who were more inclined to attempt to fulfill the traditional moral injunctions.

The second option is found in new lay Mahāyāna groups, as represented by such texts as the Upāsaka Precept Scripture, and makes a clear break from traditional Buddhism. It criticizes the compassion of recluses as limited to teaching the dharma, whereas the compassion of laity is able to meet the practical needs of others by giving help to the sick, food to the hungry, and shelter to the homeless.²⁴

²⁴ See Shih, Heng-ching, tr., The Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts (Berkeley: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1991): 17 and 122-124. I have analyzed this ethic in some detail in “Searching for a Mahāyāna Social Ethic,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* (forthcoming).

The ethics of balance encompassing both the secular and the monastic, both the mundane and mystical, is perhaps represented by the Nirvāna-sūtra. This text echoes the Perfection of Wisdom distinction when it teaches that the compassion of the four immeasurable minds can be practiced either in terms of causal relations, which are limited and subject to rebirth, as done by the Two Vehicles, or in terms of the limitless and inconceivable, which is the way of the bodhisattva. (Taishō 12.695b-700c) This did not mean a denial of the status of ordinary life, nor its primacy, but the profound unity and infinity of sacred and secular life. To some degree this involves a mystical perception that embraces all life and affirms the affinity between oneself and all reality. How this was worked out in detail is not clear. One option was the ethics presented in China by Tiantai Zhiyi (538-597),²⁵ but its legacy in the “formless precepts” of Chan and the “sudden and complete precepts” of Japanese Tendai raises more questions than answers, and the Four Great Bodhisattva Vows of Zhiyi are perhaps its most positive contribution.

The fourth ethic of meditative action is very common in Mahāyāna, whose ideals are lofty and inspiring, but usually remain in the mind and cannot be practiced with the body; they are found inside the monastic walls, but cannot be related to conflicts in the street; they are generated and nurtured on the meditation cushion, but are difficult to apply in the complexities of human relationships. One of the best examples of this Mahāyāna tendency toward abstract, interior idealism is the Avatamsaka-sūtra (Ch. Huayan jing; Jp. Kegonkyō),²⁶ which is a compendium of several smaller scriptures. Even when this monumental text was the stimulus for a Buddhist doctrinal school (best represented by Fa-tsang), it was never limited to only one group, but was revered as foundational for all East Asian Mahāyāna. Certainly, in China, its images have been sculpted into temple walls, its ideas developed into devotional rituals, and its verses written as decorative slogans and wall-hangings as a result of constant study for over 1500 years.

²⁵ See my forthcoming article on “Buddhist Compassion (*cibei*) and Zhiyi's *Moho zhiguan*” to appear in a forthcoming volume celebrating the 1400th anniversary of Zhiyi's death.

²⁶ The Avatamsaka-sūtra has been translated into English by Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, 3 vols. (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 1984-1987); and by Dharma Realm Buddhist University Buddhist Text Translation Society, Flower Adornment Sūtra (Talmage, California: 1979-1982), with commentary by Tripiṭaka Master Hua.

The high respect given to this scripture is illustrated in the Tiantai school, where it is placed first among all the teachings of the Buddha and became identified with the teaching of the Buddha immediately after he attained enlightenment. However, while revering its profundity, Tiantai went on to argue that no one could understand the fullness of the message, so that in the next stage of his teaching career, the Buddha simplified his message and began to teach the Āgamas for those with less developed mental and spiritual capacities.²⁷ This shows the gulf that was felt between the high ideals of the Avatamsaka and the more concrete guidelines needed by ordinary humans beings.

Even though the Daśabhūmika chapters of the Avatamsaka are used in precept rituals in Tibet, there are many other parts of the Avatamsaka that seem to abandon ethical behavior in favor of internal meditative experience. This increasing abstraction and movement from morality to vision is perhaps illustrated in the following description of the bodhicitta, the mind dedicated to attaining enlightenment, as found in the Gandavyūha, the penultimate chapter of the Avatamsaka:

the mind of enlightenment—the mind of great compassion, for the salvation of all beings; the mind of great kindness, for unity with all beings; the mind of happiness, to stop the mass of misery of all beings; the altruistic mind, to repulse all that is not good; the mind of mercy, to protect from all fears; the unobstructed mind, to get rid of all obstacles; the broad mind, to pervade all universes; the infinite mind, to pervade all spaces; the undefiled mind, to manifest the vision of all buddhas; the purified mind, to penetrate all knowledge of past, present, and future; the mind of knowledge, to remove all obstructive knowledge and enter the ocean of all-knowing knowledge.²⁸

The priority given to a sense of the unlimited and cosmic over practical ethical action is supported by important philosophical assumptions that have been analyzed by Luis Gomez's study of the

²⁷ This theory that the vast quantity of Buddhist scriptures can be arranged into five different teaching periods of the Buddha's life was developed by Zhanran (711-782), and is a revision of the theory that all Buddhist texts can be divided into "five flavors" taught by Tiantai Zhiyi (538-597). See "Introduction to the *T'ien-t'ai Ssu-chiao-i*," *Eastern Buddhist*, N.S., IX.1 (May 1976).

²⁸ Cleary, *Flower Ornament Scripture*, 3: 59; BTTS, *Flower Adornment Scripture*, Chapter 39, Part II, p. 25; Taishō 10.335b.2ff.

Gandavyūha. He argues that the central doctrine of the text combines “two notions common to all Buddhists: the notion that all appearance is illusory and the traditional belief in the psychic powers attained through the exercise of asceticism.”²⁹ Although it is common to assert that Buddhist ethics cannot be fully implemented until enlightened realization that is facilitated by meditative practice, the Gandavyūha sometimes seems to equate meditative realization with ethical achievement.

In his analysis, Gomez shows that the Gandavyūha emphasizes the notion that the psychic power of advanced practitioners contains the capacity to produce an image of reality. Since, according to the Gandavyūha, our ordinary world merely consists of illusory images manifested by the dharmadhātu, then the advanced practitioner has the power to produce images that are the equivalent of our ordinary world. As a consequence, all achievement, including ethical achievement, can be accomplished with the mind alone. As the Gandavyūha states:

Having understood that the world's true nature is mind, you display bodies of your own in harmony with the world. Having realised that this world is like a dream, and that all Buddhas are like mere reflections, that all principles are like an echo, you move unimpeded in the world. In an instant you show your own body even to [all] the people in the three times. Yet, in your mind there is no [mental] process of duality and you preach the Principle in all directions.³⁰

Although it is a common Mahāyāna idea that the three worlds (of illusion and rebirth) are created by the mind, it is not agreed that the real world, seen free of delusion, is created by the mind. However, the Gandavyūha equates these two worlds, and thereby radically transforms the framework for ethics. Even though the monastic rules and lay precepts of the Gandavyūha may be shared by other texts, this radical emphasis on mystical achievement made a major difference in interpreting how the world was to be saved.

Because of the dominant role played by Confucian-style governments, East Asian Buddhists have utilized the Indian materials in selective ways. For example, because Buddhist clergy in East Asia were

²⁹ Luis Gomez, Selected Verses from the Gandavyūha: Text, Critical Apparatus and Translation (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1967; reprinted by University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1968): lxxvi.

³⁰ Gandavyūha 302.22-24.

largely confined to monastic duties and forbidden by law to be social active in the community, the Gandavyūha worldview reinforced the idea that it was not only acceptable but desirable to try to save the world only by sitting on one's meditation cushion. This is a major topic that is waiting for serious discussion.

Conclusion

Although Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism ceased to exist almost a thousand years ago, its legacy survives in East Asia and Tibet in a bewildering collection of Mahāyāna commentaries and new movements. Accordingly, in order to give a full account of Mahāyāna ethics, it is important to supplement the 200 Indian Mahāyāna texts identified by Ono with a review of East Asian texts and practices. This task will involve not just historical studies of distinctive movements, such as the Chinese Three Stages movement,³¹ but also studies of, and with, contemporary groups: the socially active Japanese Nichiren traditions, or the Buddhist vihāra movement of Higashi Honganji, or the new practices of the Taiwan Buddhist Tzu-chi Foundation, or Mahāyāna ethics for Western Buddhists.³²

While there are some general common characteristics that linked Indian Mahāyāna, there never existed an institutional or textual unity. Given the broad sweep of so many texts and movements, and the lack of any institutional integration, it seems premature to broadly talk about "Mahāyāna ethics." However, given the foundation offered by Ono, with more work we should be able at least to see the profile of "Indian Mahāyāna ethics." The proposal made by this paper is that instead of differentiating the ethical frameworks in terms of textual commonalities and traditions as used by Ono, probably a better device will be to arrange texts in terms of their primary social behavior and

³¹ See James B. Hubbard, *Salvation in the Final Period of the Dharma: The Inexhaustible Storehouse of the San-chieh-chiao* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilm International, 1986): 97-141.

³² Two important Western contributions to Buddhist ethics are Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), and Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993).

community identity, since these elements are a better indicator of ethical values than the metaphysics and intergalactic imagery that proliferates in Mahāyāna texts.

Appendix

Seventeen Textual Families on Indian Mahāyāna Ethics: Based on 200 surviving Chinese translations (including different translations of the same text) identified by Ono Hōdō, Daijō kaikyō no kenkyū (Tokyo: Risōsha, 1954): 45-66.

No. 1. PERFECTION OF WISDOM TEXTS: Nos. 1-13 (13 texts)

No. 2. MAHĀKĀŚYAPA TEXTS: Nos. 14-22 (9 texts)

Includes the “Bestowing Wish-granting Gem Scripture” (Taishō 12.189-194, No. 350, Chinese tr. 179 AD) and two texts with partial English tr. by Chang, Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: 280-314, 387-414.

No. 3. VIMALAKĪRTI ETHICS: Nos. 23-35 (13 texts)

No. 4. LOTUS ETHICS: Nos. 36-44 (9 texts)

No. 5. HUA-YEN ETHICS: Nos. 45-56 (12 texts)

No. 6. PURE LAND ETHICS: Nos. 57-62 (6 texts)

No. 7. BODHISATTVA-BHŪMI: Nos. 63-65-3 texts

Taishō 30: Nos. 1581, 1582, 1583. Sanskrit. tr. by Mark Tatz, Asaṅga's Chapter on Ethics With the Commentary of Tsong-Kha-Pa, The Basic Path to Awakening, The Complete Bodhisattva (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1986): 47-89; analysis by Damien Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992): 129-164 (“Ethics in Mahāyāna”).

No. 8. ĀGAMA ETHICS: Nos. 66-72 (7 texts)

Includes Taishō No. 1488, tr. by Shih Heng-ching, The Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts (Berkeley: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1991), and the Sūtra on Bodhisattva Fasting (Taishō No. 1502).

No. 9. NIRVĀNA SŪTRA ETHICS: Nos. 73-86 (14 texts)
Taishō No. 375 tr. by Yamamoto Kosho (1973-1975).

No. 10. BRAHMĀ-NET & MIND-STAGES CONTEMPLATION SŪTRA:
 Nos. 87-88
 Two texts possibly compiled in China: Taishō Nos. 159 & 1484.

No. 11. GREAT ASSEMBLY SŪTRA: Nos. 89-105 (17 texts)
 Includes Vaipulya-mahā-samnipāta-sūtra, tr. Dharmakṣema 414-421,
 plus a new compilation (Hsin-ho ta-chi-ching) by Sengjiu in 586 AD
 (Taishō No. 397). (a) Sūtra of Inexhaustible Meaning-67 rules; (b)
Treasure Crown Sūtra-65 rules; (c) A-cha-mo jing-63 rules; (d)
Aksyamatinirdeśasūtra-65 rules (See Jens Brārvig, The Tradition of
 Imperishability in Buddhist Thought [Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1993]
 I.131-138.)

No. 12. GREAT TREASURY SŪTRA: Nos. 106-119 (14 texts)
 Based on the Mahāratnakūṭta-sūtra (Taishō 11.195-322) partially tr. in
 Garma C.C. Chang, A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras (1983). Cf. tr. of
 No. 11 (Taishō 11.294-315) by Ulrich Pagel, The Bodhisattvapitaka: Its
 Doctrines, Practices and Their Position in Mahāyāna Literature
 (1995): 327-413; No. 19, Ugrapariprcchā, tr. by Nancy Schuster, (U
 of Toronto PhD, 1976); No. 48, Śrīmālādevī Sūtra, tr. by Diana Paul
 (1980) & by Alex Wayman (1974).

No. 13. ESOTERIC ETHICS: Nos. 120-124: (5 texts)

No. 14. TWENTY-ONE INDEPENDENT SCRIPTURES: Nos. 125-145
 (21 texts)
 Unrelated texts, such as the Tun-chen t'o-lo-so wen pao ju-lai sam-mei
 ching (Taishō 15.348-367, No. 624) tr. by Lokakṣema (147-186 AD), a
 core text in 3rd century China.

No. 15. TEN GOOD DEEDS & FIVE, EIGHT, TEN LAY PRECEPTS:
 Nos. 146-161 (16 texts)

No. 16. REPENTANCE TEXTS: Nos. 162-189 (28 texts)

No. 17. BODHISATTVA PRECEPT TEXTS: Nos. 190-200 (11 texts)
 TEXTS NOT SELECTED

Ono lists various Mahāyāna Buddha Sūtras (Amida, Vairocana, Esoteric, Taishō 14, No. 449, No. 425, etc.), Bodhisattva Sūtras, Disciples Sūtras, Lay Sūtras, Women's Sūtras, Youth Sūtras, Eight-section Sūtras, Meditation Sūtras, and Wisdom Sūtras.