



Gene Reeves, ed., *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sutra*

Tokyo: Kosei, 2002. 540 pp. \$24.95 paper, ISBN 4-333-01918-4.

THIS COLLECTION of thirty essays derives from the proceedings of the annual conferences organized by Risshō Kōsei-kai on Mount Bandai since 1984. I can only give a scanty impression here of the rich and stimulating contents.

The core of the volume is the section on “philosophical reflection.” Here Susan Mattis finds that the *Sūtra* teaches “that despite their apparent diversity, the ultimate truth of all beings is the single mark of emptiness” (243). This is incompatible with Chih-i’s identification of the ultimate truth of the *Sūtra* with the Buddha-nature, a notion from later *tāthagata-garbha* thought that is never mentioned in the *Sūtra*. Mattis thinks that Chih-i’s ontological understanding of emptiness as the “true aspect” of “phenomenal existents that arise dependent on a plurality of conditions” differs from the epistemological understanding of emptiness in Mādhyamika, in which emptiness “ultimately indicates the absence of a ground of

cognition independent of the sociolinguistic system” (252). If that currently fashionable reading of *Mādhyamika* is inadequate, as I feel it to be, then the *Sūtra*, Chih-i and *Mādhyamika* can come into closer harmony. There’s a touch of the fashionable also in John R. A. Mayer’s argument that the parable of the herbs resolves the philosophical debate between foundationalism and postmodern antifoundationalism. The rain is the single foundation of the diversity of the herbs, but the single universal truth is accessible only to the Buddha and is not within our grasp. What we can grasp is a variety of meanings or perspectives, while only the Buddha knows ultimate reality, which “is quite different from meanings, opinions, and views, and is capable of sustaining many logically incommensurable and unharmonizable ones of these” (158).

J. Douglas Wolfe, of Valley Sidewalk Astronomers, argues that the cosmology of the *Sūtra* bears an uncanny resemblance to Einstein’s! More soberly, Michael Pye shows that the language of immeasurability in Mahāyāna sūtras betokens not positive assertion but the emptiness or “positionlessness” of Buddhahood. The huge numbers serve to release the mind from finite calculation. Unlike conventional Western notions of divine eternity, the immeasurable life-span of the Buddha is coterminous with his emptiness. (Pye might wish to apply the same idea in a rethinking of divine eternity.) Lucia Dolce discusses Chih-i and Nichiren on the temporality of the Buddha in his three bodies. Japanese Tendai detemporalized the Buddha, but Nichiren partly restores a historical perspective by emphasizing not a perennial Buddha-nature but a seed of Buddhahood, the *Sūtra* itself, to be actualized in present time. Jamie Hubbard shows, against the hackneyed opposition of linear, eschatological Western and cyclical Eastern time, that in the *Sūtra* and in Nichiren the idea of the decline of the dharma gives a shape to history and an existential urgency to the present as much as biblical eschatology does. Gene Reeves reads the supernatural stories of the *Sūtra* as all tending to encourage bodhisattva practice in the present earthly world. This gives the scripture a sharpness of focus for the engaged Buddhist that is likely to be missed by the mere curious reader.

In the section on “theological reflection and dialogue,” John H. Berthrong points out that for many, “multiple religious participation enriches and transforms their understanding of their root tradition” (96), although “comparative theology as fundamental theology is a tricky business” (97). He rightly sees the new theological openness to diversity as menaced by “the Western proclivity for unity and nomos” (105). (I note that in the document *Dominus Iesus* [2001] we see Rome living up to its role as supreme bastion of this proclivity.) Berthrong believes that the *Lotus Sūtra*, along with Confucianism, can bring us to a deeper respect for diversity. Schubert Ogden, however, points out that the *Sūtra* is inclusivist rather than pluralist in its attitude to the diversity of Buddhist paths, while it ignores non-Buddhist ones. The dharma taught by the historical Buddha is “the formal norm for deciding the validity of any and all religious teachings” (111). Still, Ogden adds, since the Buddha’s teaching represents rather than constitutes the truth about human existence, there is room for a Christian to maintain that Christ also validly represents this

truth. A representativist Christology allows dialogue with Buddhism whereas the traditional constitutivist Christology excludes it. I doubt the adequacy of these categories. The last two essays in this section coincide in their grasp of Emptiness as a deep existential reality at the heart of both Buddhism and Christianity. Michael A. Fuss sees the Buddha's *upāya* and Christ's sending of the Spirit as "gifts flowing freely from the dynamism of the ultimate Reality" (120) and seeks to root mission and dialogue in a "positionless" openness to this event. Malcolm Eckel reflects on the converting and transforming power of a scriptural kerygma issuing from "the seat of Emptiness" and points to the importance of devotion (*bhakti*) for tuning in to this.

Other essays deal with the ethical and social implications of the *Sūtra* in the past and in the present. The volume as a whole shows that, contrary to the average reader's initial impressions, this scripture opens up many paths of thought, both philosophical and ethical, not only in medieval China and Japan, and not only for historians of Buddhism, but even for those wrestling with the ethical, philosophical, and theological problems of our time.

Joseph S. O'Leary
Sophia University