

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 23, 2016

Inaugural Conference on Buddhist Ethics: A Report

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Inaugural Conference on Buddhist Ethics: A Report

Daniel Cozort¹

In what may be the first in a series of conferences on Buddhist ethics, twenty-two invited scholars gathered in mid-June in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for three days of discussion and camaraderie. The Conference, held at Dickinson College June 14-16, was organized by former and present editors of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*: Daniel Cozort, the host, and James Mark Shields, Barbra Clayton, and Christopher Ives.

The Conference's aims were simple: to provide a venue for open discussion of several main topics in Buddhist ethics while encouraging the growth of a community that might result in further collaborations. It was kept deliberately small and the list of invitees was structured to balance considerations such as specializations and stages of careers. Most of the participants slept in a Dickinson dormitory and ate breakfast and lunch in the Dickinson dining hall, minimizing the expense of the conference and encouraging conversations between sessions. In addition, conferees attended two dinners together.

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Three three-hour sessions were held on June 15th and 16th to discuss “Buddhist Ethics on Environment and Sustainability,” “Buddhism, Violence, and War,” and “Buddhism, Society, and the Future.” The sessions were held around a rectangle of four tables in a side-room of the Dickinson student union building. All three sessions alternated small group discussions with whole-group exchanges.

The first session was organized and led by Stephanie Kaza, professor emeritus of Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont. Her first question was: “How can Buddhist ethics/philosophy be helpful in deconstructing the following common environmental thought tropes?” (“Apocalyptic,” “the Fall,” “technological fix,” “denial,” etc.) How can such an ethical effort open up creative possibilities in addressing complex environmental concerns? Another question was: “Which principles or concepts in Buddhist ethics can make a useful contribution to discussions of justice principles raised in relation to climate responsibility?” A final question, based on the section headings of Moore and Nelson, *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, was: Which of these arguments are most strongly aligned with Buddhist ethical principles? How could Buddhist ethics strengthen the persuasive power of these arguments? (These arguments included: “for the survival of humankind”; “for the sake of the Earth itself”; and “for the full expression of human virtue.”)

The second session, led by Stephen Jenkins of Humboldt State University, also revolved around three parts. The first, “How should we approach the study of the Buddhist ethics of violence?” raised questions of methodology such as: “Do the categories that we bring to bear obfuscate our efforts to understand Buddhist ethics? In particular, are the concepts ‘violence’ and ‘nonviolence’ misleading categories?” The second part considered “Buddhist responses to violence” and included questions such as “What are the key considerations for warranted ‘vio-

lence”? “What are the key considerations for warranted warfare?” “Is ‘saving Buddhism’ or maintaining Buddhist cultural dominance ever a correct motivation for violence?” The third part raised questions about the image of Buddhism as a pacifist religion, such as: “How has the image of an original or normative Buddhist pacifism distorted the perception of Mahāyāna and, in turn, Tantric ethics?”

The final session, led by Ken Kraft, professor emeritus of Lehigh University, reflected on the shape of a Buddhist utopia. Once again the session was organized into three sub-topics: the role of mindfulness training in society; the possibility of “collective awakening”; and what might be the shape of a “dharmic society.”

A survey of participants after the conference revealed widespread satisfaction with its content and format, and much enthusiasm for further gatherings. However, there were diverging opinions on whether they should take place annually or biennially, whether they should have single or multiple themes, what those themes should be, whether the format should be somewhat changed, and how to provide assistance for those who would like to attend but who either do not have current university affiliation or whose universities would not support their attendance. If readers have suggestions, they can be posted as comments on this article or sent to any of the Conference organizers.