



# “Understanding the One Vehicle for Today. Report of the International Lotus Sutra Seminar 2017”

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## **INTERNATIONAL LOTUS SUTRA SEMINAR 2017**

**June 27-July 1, 2017, RK Headquarters facilities**

**“Understanding the One Vehicle for today”**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The International Lotus Sutra Seminar is a yearly event gathering scholars from a range of nationalities and disciplinary fields, such as theology, history of religion, Buddhist studies and more, to debate about the Lotus Sutra with the purpose of advancing academic knowledge and raising awareness about the text. This year the seminar focused on the teaching of the One Vehicle, which was explored in terms of the inclusiveness and universalism of its message. The topic resonates with the origins of the seminar, which started as continuation of an interreligious dialogue between Buddhist and Christian traditions. Past sessions saw renowned scholars and young researchers participate in the dialogue on history and contents of the *Lotus* in the name of openness and constructive exchange. As stressed by Dr. Scarangelo in his initial address, the initiative is primarily conceived as a space of “encounter with the other” which embraces the creative tension emerging from such engagement.

Throughout the four days of the seminar, the ten papers presented and the subsequent discussion addressed the doctrine of the One Vehicle from a variety of perspectives, including its potential as foundation for social and environmental ethics, or its value as a message of inclusiveness in the field of interreligious dialogue. On the other hand, participants tackled inherent ambiguities of the Lotus Sutra, hidden behind the apparent simplicity of its universalistic message. The seminar also featured visits to the Nakayama Hokekyō temple and the Suginami Dharma Centre of Rissho Kosei-kai, which provided participants with the opportunity to integrate academic discussion with first-hand insights on the Nichiren Buddhist traditions and the teaching and practices of Kosei-kai.

### **SUMMARY OF PRESENTATIONS**

**“Universal Salvation, between the Lotus Sutra and the New Testament”.** Joseph S. O’Leary, Sophia University, Tokyo.

Dr. O’Leary addressed the notion of universal salvation in Christian and Buddhist traditions focusing on the three dimensions of religious universality: soteriological, epistemological and ontological. Moving between the New Testament and the Lotus Sutra, the paper investigated many possible implications that the message of universal salvation holds for religious traditions,

from serving as an instrument of control and distribution of power or as a valuable tool in sectarian competition to proving a higher, more integrated understanding of the traditions and rooting them in reality itself as what is most universal. While universal salvation is indeed an attractive idea, it also harbours many contradictions. On the soteriological level, universalistic rhetoric easily incurs in the risk of turning into a hollow slogan and “selling salvation cheap”, thus instituting a necessity for theological optimism to be based on a solid doctrinal foundation. In their epistemological aspect, claims of universality can succumb to a monochrome inclusivist outlook that suppresses genuine pluralism. Moreover, as a religious message becomes identified with affirmation of the ultimate truth, a tension emerges between the alleged universality of divine revelation and the contingency of the founding figure as a human being who lived in a specific place and time. Different traditions adopted different strategies to reconcile the contradiction between the universality of the message and the singularity of its historical bearer.

At the ontological level, Dr. O’Leary suggested that soteriological universalism could be reduced to a claim on the nature of reality as such, thus turning the historical founder and universal saviour would turn into a cipher for reality. In the Lotus Sutra, “the Buddha becomes coterminous with reality itself”, no longer limited by space and time, an embodiment of the ultimate truth of emptiness. However, this ontological vision again bears potential tensions and contradictions. As reality as such is established as supreme object of devotion, the risk for religion is to “disappear into reality”, becoming only one among its many possible accounts, not intrinsically different from those offered by art or philosophy.

**“Right Speech in the Abhaya Sutra and Skilful Speech in the Lotus Sutra”.** Kin Cheung, Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA.

What is the relationship between right speech and skilful speech? Can a lie ever be regarded as ‘right speech’? These are the questions opening the paper presented by Dr. Cheung, who investigated the meaning of deception in Buddhism. Moving from the notions of ‘right’ speech and ‘skilful’ speech as illustrated by the Abhaya Sutra and the Lotus Sutra, the author attempted to define a Buddhist approach to truth, investigated through correspondence theory and pragmatic theory of truth.

Early Buddhism held inconsistent theories of truth, simultaneously holding naïve interpretations of both correspondence and pragmatic theories. Approaches toward lying appear contradictory as well, in some cases condemning deception as a fundamental violation, while admitting ‘skilful lies’ – statements that are untrue but beneficial – as possible actions for a *bodhisattva*. The attempt to give a definition of ‘right speech’ adds a further layer of complexity. To navigate among many possible conceptualisations of truth, such as absence of

logical inconsistency, soteriological validity, ethical obligation, Dr. Cheung referred to Francisca Cho and Richard Squier's study on Buddhist use of language. In their analysis of the parable of the physician, the authors advanced an idea of plurality or multiplicity of truth, not ascribing to either correspondence or pragmatic theory. The relationship between true speech as part of the eightfold path and skilful speech as *upāya* or *hōben* seems to mirror the apparent contradiction between correspondence and pragmatic theories of truth.

In the following debate, convenors expanded the issues raised by the paper adding an ontological dimension. Buddhist principles such as the notions of emptiness or impermanence question the existence of an ultimate reality, or at least its accessibility by verbal means. If we define truth in terms of correspondence with reality, to state that the Dharma is only accessible through conventional and provisory statements denies the very possibility of affirming a 'ultimate truth'. If 'right speech' cannot be conceptualised in correspondential terms, it could be intended as an ethical commitment whose rightfulness depends on the intentions of the speakers. This formulation would imply a strictly pragmatic conceptualisation of truth.

**"Two Stories of a Rich Father and Poor Son. An Exercise in Interreligious Dialogue"**. Ernest Valea, Pro Vita Medica Foundation, Timisoara, Romania.

Dr. Valea presented a comparison between the Buddhist story of the rich father and poor son and Christian parable of the prodigal son, from the perspective of comparative theology. When talking about interreligious dialogue, there are three possible approaches to the salvific message of other religious traditions: pluralism, universalism, exclusivism. While each one has its own merit, they all harbour some problematic aspect. Dr. Valea finds a more constructive attitude toward interreligious dialogue in comparative theology, an alternative approach originally formulated by Francis Clooney and James Frederick in the late 1980s, whose distinctive feature lies in moving from the standpoint of one's faith. Investigating other doctrines from a specific religious background allows to acknowledge the alterity of the other without judgement, while also providing an opportunity to deepen the understanding of one's own faith.

Moving from these considerations, Dr. Valea examined the Buddhist story of the rich father and poor son found in Chapter 5 of the *Lotus* from his perspective of a Roman-Catholic Christian, dialoguing with the commentary compiled by Dr. Geene Reeves. In his analysis, he detected several points of convergence, such as the substantially positive view of the nature of human beings. Buddhist and Christian traditions share the conviction that each person is a locus of enormous potential, respectively rooted in the notion of Buddha-nature and the belief of creation in the image and likeness of God. Attitude toward neighbours can be identified as

another common trait, and one that could provide fertile ground for Christian-Buddhist cooperation in the domain of social action. In the concluding section, Dr. Valea carried on the comparativist exercise offering a possible interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son from a Buddhist standpoint.

**“Wōnhyo’s Understanding of the One Vehicle and its Application in Contemporary Korea”.**

Lucy Hyekyung Jee, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea.

The paper presented by Dr. Jee addressed two fundamental issues, our present understanding of the doctrine of the One Vehicle and its possible applications to contemporary society, investigated through the work of the Buddhist exegete Wōnhyo (617-686 BCE). Wōnhyo analysed the doctrine of the One Vehicle with two categories, the aspect of a person and the aspect of dharma or truth, which in turn is examined through four subcategories.

The first category moves from the question: who can ride the One Vehicle? In his discussion, Wōnhyo adopted an inclusivist perspective, arguing that all beings are potential subjects for enlightenment based on a logic of non-differentiation between the world of sentient beings and the world of nirvana. The second category, the dharma, deals with the content of the One Vehicle, examined through four rubrics. The principle is the nature of the One Vehicle, which ultimately consists in the truth of all sentient beings equally possessing the Buddha-nature. The teaching is the truth revealing the principle of the One Vehicle. Wōnhyo explained the existence of three vehicles as indicating a differentiation of levels, not content, and corresponding to various degrees of understanding and capacities in practitioners. The cause of the One Vehicle is the cause of becoming a Buddha, while the effect is becoming a Buddha or acquiring a Buddha-body.

Dr. Jee advanced that Wōnhyo’s interpretation, if applied to contemporary Buddhism, has the potential to promote inclusiveness and equality as well as encouraging self-affirmation and positive thinking, responding to the needs of an increasingly multicultural society. In support to her argument, she presented two cases of Korean Buddhist practitioners, the monk Pomyun and the nun Daehang, whose marked inclination toward syncretism, ecumenical dialogue and innovative approaches to practice appear in line with the thought of Wōnhyo.

**Seno’o Girō’s Buddhist Socialism, the Lotus Sutra, and the Interreligious Social Movement in 1930s-1940s.** Kunihiko Terasawa, Wartburg College, Waverly, IA.

Seno’o Girō was a Buddhist practitioner and founder of the Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei (the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism), a transsectarian movement opposing capitalism and the ultranationalist militarism of 1930s’ Japan. The front built an alliance among Buddhists,

Christians, Marxists, socialists, labour unionists, but ultimately did not succeed in its intent of reforming Japanese society, collapsing shortly after as Seno'o's arrest in 1936. As argued by Dr. Terasawa, the failure of the Youth League offers precious insights on several critical issues, such as transectarian dialogue within Buddhism and the inherent tension between nationalism and trans-nationalism, the relationship between Buddhism and Marxism in terms of socio-political reform, and interaction with Social Christianity.

Seno'o's work sheds new light on Buddhist social engagement and interreligious dialogue with Christianity. Dr. Terasawa emphasised the key role played by constant dialogue with progressive Christians in shaping his unique understanding of Buddhism. The influence of Marxism can be regarded just as relevant. Seno'o became interested in Marxism after his experience within the Nichirenshugi movement lead by Honda Nissō, which helped him realize some limitations of Buddhism in the promotion of socio-structural change. Combining Marxist socio-economic analysis with Buddhist teachings, he elaborated a new interpretation of the 'threefold refuge' (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha), which became the ideological foundation for the Youth Front. Seno'o shared Honda's ideal to return the figure of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, expected to foster a unification of Buddhism beyond transectarian boundaries. His formulation was also imbued by a strong sentiment of compassion and love for the other stemming from the principle of interdependent co-arising, and expected to foster a spirit of communitarianism within the Sangha.

His thought further developed in virtue of his encounter with the Social Christianity, in which he saw an ally to tackle social injustice. The author stressed how Seno'o did not conceive interreligious dialogue as a mere intellectual conversation, but as a "dialogue in action" aimed at practical cooperation. His example could offer a model for contemporary interreligious cooperation for social reform or critical response to controversial issues such as public support of the Yasukuni Shrine.

**"One Lesson Learned: The Burning Mansion Parable in Contemporary *Manga* and *Ehon*".**

Jon Holt, Portland State University, Portland, OR.

Across the centuries, the Lotus Sutra managed to charm countless people, including Buddhist practitioners, scholars, but also artists, performers and many others. Beyond religious and scholarly interpretations, the text was approached from of a multiplicity of perspectives, encompassing a wide range of visual adaptations. Dr. Holt chose to look at picture books (*ehon*) and comic books (*manga*), focusing on the rendition of the parable of the burning mansion.

The author examined textual and visual contents of four works by different authors, considering their stylistic choices in narrative flow, character design, proportion between text and pictures,

predominance of stylised over realistic imaginary and so on. Moving from Helen Kilpatrick's considerations on the relationship between text and its original source (pretext), Dr. Holt investigated how the visual medium was employed to emphasise, disclose, challenge, re-interpret the powerful message of the *Lotus*.

One of the peculiarities of hybrid media such as manga and *ehon* is the capacity of images to expand or add something to the original message of the text. Figurative language can be even used to convey individual interpretations and pursue a specific ideological agenda, as in the case of the last work examined in the paper, a commentary by Kuwata Jirō. Dr. Holt observed how Kuwata used extremely iconic images and a flowchart layout to re-code the *Lotus* and convey a philosophy based on the concept of 'spirit' (*tamashii*). These considerations brought fascinating insights not only on the relationship between the *Lotus* and the authors of its adaptations, but also on its impact on the readership, outlining a triadic relationship where author, text and audience dynamically engage with each other. Another theme outlined by the paper was the capacity of the *Lotus* to adapt to multiple forms of artistic and cultural expressions, turning into a powerful medium to convey a range of meanings which transcend its religious value.

**"Universalism or Exclusivism? *Ekayāna* in the Early Layers of the Lotus Sutra".** James B. Apple, Associate Professor, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada.

The teaching of One Vehicle is commonly interpreted in inclusive and egalitarian terms. More generally, when talking about the Lotus Sutra and the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, their universalistic stance tends to be taken for granted. The paper presented by Dr. Apple questioned such established understanding of the *Lotus*, and particularly the assumption of its total universalism, by looking more in detail at the conceptualisation of *ekayāna* (the One Vehicle) in the early layers of the text (chapters 1-10), unveiling its hidden ambiguity.

The paper opens by outlining the development of the notion of *ekayāna* in the broader Buddhist historical context of the period of the Three Vehicles, based on the use of the term in several Mahayana sutras. The gradual development of the concept within a minority of Buddhist groups was also connected to an increasing glorification of the figure of Siddhartha Gautama and the status of awakened being, which instituted a new and more prestigious religious goal. Consequently, in early *bodhisattva* sutras, the three vehicles were formulated as three paths that individuals can follow to attain three different spiritual goals (*arhat*, *pratyekabuddha* and *buddha*).

Digging in the early layers of the Lotus Sutra, Dr. Apple observed how compounds of the derogatory term *hīna* are repeatedly used in relation to the three vehicles, thus connoting them as lesser pathways. Although acknowledged, other teachings are regarded as unreal or generally

inferior to the one of the *Lotus*. The argument unveils inherent contradictions between the seemingly universalistic message of the sutra, centred on the egalitarian statement that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature and can attain Buddhahood, and an exclusivist attitude toward the message itself, recognized as the only right path to full Buddhahood, which rejects all those who do not accept it.

**“The Influence of the Concept of One Vehicle in the Lotus Sutra on Jizang’s Discussion of Universal Buddha-nature”**. Chih-mien Adrian Tseng, Fo Guan University, Jiaosi, Taiwan.

Do plants and trees possess the Buddha-nature and thus the capacity to become enlightened? The paper presented by Dr. Tseng addressed this issue through the work of the Chinese exegete Jizang (549-623 C.E.), arguing how the universalistic formulation of the Buddha-nature deriving from his understanding of the One Vehicle can be said to include non-sentient beings (plants and trees). These considerations are linked to pressing challenges faced by contemporary society, notably the impact of climate change and environmental devastation, which institute an urgent need to rediscuss the relation between nature and mankind in terms of equality rather than dominance. The author suggested that a universalistic formulation of the Buddha-nature may constitute a Buddhist response to environmental ethics, and a crucial step in that sense.

The analysis of Jizang’s assertion of a universal Buddha-nature was articulated on two levels. From an epistemological point of view, non-sentient beings as plants and trees are perceived as being nondual with sentient beings. In an ontological perspective, instead, plants and trees can be said to possess the Buddha-nature by themselves. The author identified the peculiarity of Jizang’s approach in the combination between the teachings of the One Vehicle with the doctrine of emptiness and the Middle-Way, stated in the Nirvana Sutra. While the Nirvana sutra excludes non-sentient beings from the concept of the Buddha-nature due to their lack of consciousness, Jizang conceptualised a truly universal notion, called the “Middle-Way Buddha-nature”. His interpretation is rooted on the idea of the One Vehicle as universal true reality, understood in terms of principle and ultimately identified with the doctrine of emptiness. He also postulated the existence of two kinds of wisdom, provisional and true, which can be regarded as two aspects of reality. While ‘reality with the aspect of skilful means’ is associated with the aspect of being able to explain, involving cognitive activities, true reality is conceived as the passive condition of being explained, which lies beyond mind and consciousness. This formulation allows to define the Buddha-nature as a truly universal condition, embracing all existences.

**“Who Rides on the One Vehicle? From the Viewpoint of the Buddha”**. Munehiro Niwano, Rissho Kosei-kai Gakurin Seminary, Tokyo.

In his analysis of the teaching of the One Vehicle, Dr. Niwano shifts the focus from the vehicle itself to its passenger, the subject of the teaching. As the question of who rides the One vehicle is intrinsically connected to the Mahayana concept of Buddha-nature, this becomes an inquiry on who is acknowledged the ability to attain Buddhahood. The Lotus Sutra does not clarify who rides the vehicle, but rather focuses on the ‘destination’, i.e. the achievement that comes from riding it, that is Buddha-wisdom. The text, though, repeatedly stresses the impossibility for practitioners to comprehend the Buddha-wisdom, and the teaching of the One Vehicle itself. However, such emphasis on the inability to understand the teachings turns into as an affirmation of potential: the hidden wisdom which is not understood when it is revealed institutes a possibility of being known in the future. At the same time, this turns into an affirmation of equality among practitioners. Faced with the incomprehensible wisdom that underlies all teachings of the Buddha, they recognize that they are equal in their potential to become buddhas. In general, the One vehicle can be seen to affirm that the Buddha’s audience entirely consists of *bodhisattvas*, and that all living beings share the inherent capacity to become a Buddha, overcoming a discrimination existing in previous vehicles. The *bodhisattva* vehicle achieves that by moving from a limited focus on individual enlightenment to the greater goal of liberation of others. Such interpretation of the teaching of the One Vehicle also resonates with the thought of Niwano Nikkyō, founder of Rissho Koseikai.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Niwano wondered about possible contributions that the wisdom of the One Vehicle can offer to present society. The law of dependent origination states that existence is in constant change, reminding us that all people, even those who seem unchangeable, can be transformed. For how attractive this idea might sound, it may be hard to reconcile with some aspects of our everyday reality, such as the existence of evil. Becoming able to see everyone as a *bodhisattva*, then, becomes the first, fundamental step toward the liberation of others.

**“The Ekayāna Doctrine in the Lotus Sutra and the Humanity Quest by Two Contemporary Japanese Buddhists”.** Shinobu Arai Apple, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada.

In the present context marked by religious violence, conflict and proliferation of nuclear armaments, how can religious institutions contribute to humanitarian discourse? In the attempt to combine research on the *ekayāna* doctrine with contemporary pacifist debate, Dr. Shinobu Apple looked at conceptualisation of the One Vehicle in the thought of Daisaku Ikeda and Niwano Nikkyō, leaders of Soka Gakkai and Rissho Kosei-kai, and its application to peace building and interreligious cooperation initiatives.

In the case of Rissho Kosei-kai, the author stressed how the *bodhisattva* practice is conceptualised in terms of action, notably efforts to improve one's home, society, state and the world. In this respect, she suggested that the Donate a Meal movement constitutes a "practical life-style framework of the *bodhisattva* practice". More broadly, Koseikai's application of the *ekayāna* doctrine can be defined as a "linkage model" which aims to create a strong sense of connection between members and people in the world.

On the other hand, Ikeda Daisaku's take on the *ekayāna* doctrine is centred on the idea that all human beings inherently possess a condition of Buddhahood, but that a process of inner personal transformation is needed to bring this inner potential into life. This notion of "human revolution" is deeply embedded in Soka Gakkai's activities in the areas of peace, culture, and education on a global scale. In contrast with Koseikai's tendency to build federations and cooperative ties with other religious institutions, Soka Gakkai's approach, defined by Dr. Shinobu-Apple as "activating model" of the *ekayāna* doctrine, appears more focused on individual development and formation of global citizens. In this respect, she referred to the notion of "humanitarian competition" advanced by the organisation, defined as a "cooperative" form of competition alternative to military, political and economic competition, where one could benefit oneself by working for the sake of others. In conclusion, both approaches show that the teaching of the One Vehicle can turn into a principle for social change and peace-building, and that organisations like Soka Gakkai and Rissho-Koseikai have the potential to significantly contribute to the pacifist debate.

## **DISCUSSION – COMMON THEMES**

### **The unfading charm of the Lotus Sutra: adaptability of the text and radicalness of its message.**

Across the centuries, the Lotus Sutra managed to charm generations of practitioners and scholars, and still today continues to attract vibrant academic interest. Among the many reasons for such unfading attractiveness, the seminar drew particular attention on the high degree of adaptability of the text and radicalness of its message. The content of the *Lotus* inspired countless adaptations employing on a range of different media, as in the case of visual renditions examined by Dr. Holt. Adaptability can be regarded as an integral part of its teachings: the importance of knowing one's audience - and articulating the message accordingly - is repeatedly stated in the text, primarily in the idea that Buddha resorts to countless means to convey the truth to sentient beings depending on their characteristics and degree of understanding. We can talk about adaptability also in another sense, as the capacity of the sutra

to maintain its relevance despite the passing of time and changing historical and social circumstances, which can be attributed in great part to the radicalness of its message. The innovative strength stemming from the idea that all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature makes the *Lotus* a powerful tool for action, and across the centuries many were attracted by the text's inherent potential as a vehicle of religious and social reform. Seno'o Giro's reinterpretation of the three treasures based on combination between teachings of the sutra and Marxism offer a relevant example in this sense. The message of the *Lotus* remains valid at present, as argued by papers suggesting that it could serve to address pressing challenges such as environmental ethic (Dr. Tseng), peace work (Dr. Shinobu-Abe), or the promotion of equality as diversity in contemporary multicultural societies (Dr. Jee). Still today, the innovative power of the text remains unchanged.

### **Hidden ambiguity of the message of the *Lotus*. Contradictions within inclusivism and universalism.**

We could also think about the Lotus Sutra as a masterful piece of rhetoric seducing the reader into a narrative so fascinating that he fails to notice its inherent contradictions. As argued for example by Dr. Apple, the alleged universality and inclusiveness of the message of the *Lotus* hide some ambiguities: while claiming to transcend all sectarian differences, the sutra harbours the potential for exclusion of alternative religious traditions. The doctrine of the three vehicles is among the sources of such ambiguity, due to its contradictory interpretations. In the parable of the burning house, for example, the One Vehicle emerges as a fourth vehicle, which can be seen as either embracing all the three vehicles or emerging as a new vehicle, superior to all others. These issues are also linked to the relationship between different Buddhist traditions, since at times the doctrine of the One Vehicle and the three vehicles has been used to articulate sectarian differences and institute hierarchical classifications of Buddhist schools and teachings.

A further element of ambiguity can be identified in forms of weak and strong paternalism pervading the *Lotus*, especially in relation to discussions on the 'right way' of teaching. The use of lies and deception to convey truth, examined by Dr. Cheung, is one among many examples of paternalistic attitudes mentioned in the text. The teacher is attributed complete discretionality over what to disclose to his disciples, when and how, as seen in the parables of the burning house and the physician. The sutra itself can turn into an instrument of paternalism when used to impose a message to the readership, as suggested by Dr. Holt when arguing that Kuwara "almost turned the text into *hōben* to spread his own religious thought".

Considerations on exclusivist and paternalist undertones are also related to the discussion on potential applications of the One Vehicle to interreligious cooperation. Possible approaches to

interfaith dialogue were one of the leitmotifs of the seminar. Several papers, as those of Dr. Valea and Dr. Niwano, considered advantages and dangers of the main approaches (inclusivism, exclusivism, pluralism), which were discussed also in relation to another recurrent topic: universalism and its potential risks. The claim for universal salvation is without doubt an attractive message. However, as argued by Dr. O’Leary and further elaborated in the debate throughout the seminar, it also harbours many conceptual risks. Notably, universalising a religious message, even with the intention of promoting inclusiveness in interfaith dialogue, implies the risk of flattening out the particularities of specific religious traditions, depriving them of their own peculiar identity. Epistemological universalism harbours similar risks. Adopting an inclusive perspective when discussing religious messages as expression of ultimate truth easily leads to the assumption that all religions ultimately state the same truth, but through different formulations. Although this approach might be helpful in overcoming transsectarian divergences, the risk of nullifying the particularity of specific religious traditions remains high.

**Historicizing the *Lotus*. Influence of socio-historical circumstances on the development of the One Vehicle teaching.**

Another relevant issue emerged from the discussion is the importance of ‘historicizing’ the Lotus Sutra. Participants observed how analysis of the text tends to focus on its doctrinal contents, often failing to take into account the historical circumstances in which they were formulated and received throughout the centuries. Theological interpretations need to be integrated with awareness of the socio-economic, political, cultural circumstances of the time, as argued by Dr. Apple, whose paper underlined the influence of dynamics of interaction within Buddhist community on the compilation of the *Lotus*, arguing that the One Vehicle could be seen as an attempt to proclaim the superiority of the one path without openly questioning the *shravaka* tradition. Among other factors that contributed to shape the way teachings were articulated and interpreted, we could also list authorship and socio-economic conditions for publishing manuscripts and commentaries, or the circumstances in which the text spread across different geographical and linguistic areas, such as developments and cultural adaptations occurred in translation. Personal experiences of Buddhist exegetes and thinkers offer another perspective to reflect on the effect of historical factors on the reception of the teachings of the *Lotus*. Dr. Jee observed how Wōnhyo’s interpretation of the One Vehicle was influenced by his marked concern for the suffering of the underprivileged, probably developed in response to the rigid social stratification of his time. The influence of socio-cultural circumstances appears manifest in Seno’o Girō’s earnest social commitment and political engagement. On a slightly different note, Dr. Tseng mentioned possible pragmatic reasons behind Jizang’s universalistic

conceptualisation of the Buddha-nature: his innovative approach could have been an attempt to obtain legitimacy and state support for his school, and to make it more appealing in a context of fierce competition among Buddhist schools. In general, these examples showed how social and historical circumstances represent a key factor in the development of doctrinal interpretations and the commentary tradition.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In conclusion, the seminar showed how the teaching of the One Vehicle still today possesses a significant potential of application not only in the field of interreligious dialogue, but also in response to a wide range of pressing issues faced by contemporary societies. On the other hand, the seminar shed a new light on hidden contradictions of the Lotus Sutra, despite its apparent universalism and total inclusiveness. However, we could argue that it is precisely in virtue of its complexity that the text never ceased to charm religious practitioners and scholars alike, and continues to attract the interest of a wide range of people even centuries after its compilation.

### **BIO**

Aura Di Febo is a PhD candidate in Japanese Studies at the University of Manchester, UK. She obtained her BA and MA degrees respectively from “La Sapienza” University of Rome and “L’Orientale” University in Naples. She is primarily interested in contemporary Japanese religions and their interaction with society. Her current project focuses on social welfare activities promoted by Rissho Kosei-kai within local communities.

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