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Love and Enlightenment

ABSTRACT

Skilful means is an important doctrine in Mahayana Buddhism. It gives the movement its pedagogical skill in teaching Dharma and spiritual care. This paper examines the importance of the Jyotis narrative in the Skill-in-Means Sutra, in which a monk violates celibacy for the sake of a woman's happiness. This essay ties the idea of skill-in-means more intimately with modern Buddhism, examining its legitimacy as an ethical system and its role in spiritual education and care.

BIOGRAPHY

Raymond Lam is an Honours student in the Studies in Religion Discipline at The University of Queensland. His research is currently focused on an inter-religious dialogue between Thomas Merton and Shantideva, in which *agape* and *karunā* are examined together through the moral dimensions of unconditionality, positive ethics, and total empathy.

LOVE AND ENLIGHTENMENT: THE NARRATIVE OF JYOTIS IN THE SKILL-IN-MEANS SŪTRA AND SEXUALITY IN BUDDHIST CARE

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I hope to offer a narrative-themed analysis of the skill-in-meansⁱ or skilful means doctrine and its place in Buddhist education and care. Much of the Mahāyāna tradition's philosophy has already been encountered and analysed to no small degree, but as one of its crucial teachings, skilful means has remained lacking the focused attention it deserves. John Schroeder perceptively observes:

It is fair to say that... skilful means is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism. And yet, strangely enough... 'skilful means' has scarcely been attended to at all. A concept which has been used to explain the very existence of Buddhism as a functioning religious system demands closer attention.ⁱⁱ

This hermeneutic doctrine asserts that the Buddha teaches according to the different emotional, intellectual and spiritual dispositions of all sentient beings. If necessary, the Buddha is even willing to hold back the teachings or adjust them with a different spin. By recognizing the diverse inclinations and aspirations of every being and hence teaching in infinitely accommodating ways, the Buddha not only connects the Inconceivable to the world but also reveals his limitless compassion by responding concretely to the manifold sufferings of beings. This is the basic premise that encompasses scriptural *upāya* and ethical *upāya*. The first *upāya* was originally used to explain apparently contradictory or conflicting teachings in the vast corpus of Buddhist scriptures.ⁱⁱⁱ In the modern world, both conceptions of skilful means have evolved into important issues regarding the meaning of "teaching Buddhism."

This essay offers a modern orientation to the ethics of skilful means by examining the Skill-in-Means Sūtra's^{iv} story of Jyotis, a holy celibate who enters into a relationship with a woman to prevent her suicide. It is revealed at the end of the narrative that Jyotis was none other than the Buddha in a previous life many aeons ago, and that the woman was in fact his current wife, Yasodharā. By putting into perspective Jyotis' practice and the karmic consequences that follow his relationship with the young lady, light can be shed on how his particular conception of *upāya* remains pertinent to the transmission of the Buddha's Dharma, as well as the notion of spiritual care. The paper first gives an overview of the Jyotis literature, before expanding on the concept of *upāya* within the scripture. It then proceeds to highlight possible applications of the Skill-in-Means Sūtra's priorities beyond the context of Jyotis' story.

The fundamental importance of *upāya* stresses the provisional means of all teachings in order to break away from restricting boundaries of doctrine and philosophy.^v This helps the faithful to not only abandon attachment to conceptual dogmatism, but also to touch the deepest ground of suffering alongside those who are in need of care and concern. This study's objective is not only to point out the relevance of *upāya* in modern Buddhist ethics, but also to present the thinking behind the Jyotis narrative as a legitimate vision in the ideas of spiritual care and education.

JYOTIS' PREMISE

The life of Jyotis is told by Shakyamuni Buddha to a congregation of monks and celestial bodhisattvas, and is the focus of verses 32 to 35 in the first chapter of the Sūtra. Aeons ago, there lived a brahman youth called Jyotis.^{vi} He practiced celibacy in the woods for forty-two thousand years, before travelling to a capital called Surastra. Shakyamuni tells us: 'As he entered the great city, the brahman youth's fine figure was noticed by a female water-carrier^{vii}, who was lovesick and lovestruck. She ran up to the youth and threw herself before him with her mind obsessed by lust.'^{viii} The Buddha then proceeds to inform his congregation how Jyotis reacted. At first, the story seems to follow the time-honoured narrative technique in which the celibate monk denies or rebukes the female's presence:

Son of the family, Jyotis the brahman youth then said to the woman, 'Sister, what do you want?'
She answered him, 'Brahman youth, I seek you.'
He said to her, 'Sister, I am not eager for sense pleasures.'
She said to him, 'Brahman youth, if I cannot be with you, I will die [commit suicide].'
Jyotis the brahman youth thought to himself, 'It is not right for me to break my vow of austerility (*vrata*) today, after having kept celibacy for forty-two thousand years. He pulled himself forcibly away, rejecting the woman, and fled.^{ix}

However, the scripture's narrative suddenly changes tack, indicating its Mahāyānist sympathies. Jyotis had 'fled' for seven steps before compassion was born in his heart. He began to reconsider, and took into account the possibility that the woman would be true to her word of dying: 'I may go to hell for breaking my vow of austerity. But I can bear to experience the pain of hell. Let this woman not die, but be happy.'^x Hence he returned to her: 'Taking the woman by the right hand, he said, 'Sister, arise. I will do whatever you desire.'^{xi} They subsequently spent twelve years together in 'home life,' before Jyotis departed to continue his practice.^{xii} Although he had violated his vow of celibacy, because his sexual affair was motivated by genuine compassion, he was still able to 'generate the four stations of Brahma' (*brahma-vihara*): love, compassion, appreciation, and even-mindedness.^{xiii} After his death, he was reborn in a godly heaven,^{xiv} although he failed to achieve the highest attainment of Buddhahood.

Having told this sequence of events, Shakyamuni then concludes: 'At that time, in that life, I was none other than Jyotis the brahman youth.'^{xv} And the water-bearing woman whom he loved innumerable aeons ago was in fact his current wife, Yasodharā.^{xvi} Shakyamuni's assertion here bears a similarity to another explanation of how he came to be karmically 'resolved' with Yasodharā over different lives. They had already met a very long time ago, when the previous Buddha, Dipankara (or Dipamkara), identified a monk called Sumedha as the future Shakyamuni Buddha.

The Sakya maid Yasodharā is taken because of a previous resolve. She said [to Sumedha], "From the time of Dimpamkara up through your last lifetime, I will be your wife." A promise made to the Buddha is unbreakable, so he takes the Sakya maid Yasodharā...^{xvii}

Therefore, the Buddha is not simply telling a story, but recounting only one of many previous lives in which his resolve with Yasodharā has brought them together over countless ages. This relationship culminates in Sumedha/Jyotis' final rebirth (last lifetime) as Siddhartha Gautama, who eventually attains the supreme Enlightenment. In other words, the breaking of vows, seen otherwise as very serious, resulted in a 'happy ending' because of *upāya*. An intention of great compassion is always karmically meritorious, demonstrated by the reunion of Shakyamuni Buddha and Yasodharā after his realization of Nirvana.

It is now ideal to ask two questions as part of the discussion about the ethics of skilful means. The first question is, 'why is the Buddha (apparently) justified to violate his own teaching?' The second is, 'what does this narrative mean in practice?'

SPIRITUAL CARE WITH SKILFUL MEANS

The story of Jyotis primarily tells of an *ethical deed* constituting of skilful means. It is not so much concerned with the Buddha's words and their hermeneutical tension within the Sūtra.^{xviii} Here, I suggest that it is possible to understand the Buddha's intentions^{xix} without systematically interpreting the entire scripture.

A traditional answer awaits the first question of why the Buddha (or Jyotis) is justified to infringe on his own teaching. Schroeder asserts that the Buddha, despite being transcendent from the ultimate perspective, teaches with an almost thaumaturgic practicality (something that is attested to in many Mahāyāna scriptures^{xx}). Should it suit the sentient being, the Buddha will teach something that is apparently not 'Buddhist' in order to lead it to a higher understanding. Early Mahayana texts, according to Schroeder, were devised with a particular goal in mind and not abstract formulas to be espoused independently.

These early texts depict Shakyamuni as a "Great Physician" who knows the different types of illnesses of sentient beings and who can therefore offer the best "medicine" to suit their needs: he knows when to hold back, when to remain silent, and when to prescribe the appropriate antidote. To preach Buddhism without such sensitivity, we are often told, is "bad medicine."^{xxi}

For Edward Conze, the Tathagāta and his omniscience is 'like a prism; perfect, impassive, with no color of its own, it is touched by the faith, the development, the questions, the intentions of sentient beings and refracts the teaching that is appropriate to each.'^{xxii} The identification with another's suffering takes the highest precedence in the Buddha's eyes as the foremost spiritual priority, and is the example disciples must follow with their intellect and their conscience. Jyotis understood that what the woman desired more than anything was not a sermon on the *Trikaya* doctrine, or a teaching on the impermanence of the body (which is how older Buddhist narratives often dealt with lustful people). From the Mahāyāna perspective, the teachings of the World-Honoured One arise spontaneously in response to the individual's needs, rather than as a result of the ordinary activities of judgement, reflection, and evaluation.^{xxiii} Left with no alternative between violating his vows and

her suicide, Jyotis would much rather hurt himself than contribute to another's death, by engaging in sexual intercourse that was motivated by the spiritual love of *upāya*.

This concept of the Tathagāta as a 'prism' reflecting teachings according to individual needs is an ideal springboard into the second question of practicing skilful means. I suggest that to teach in accordance with the diverse aspirations of different beings is directly related to loving spiritual care. The notion of flexibility complements the practice of detachment as a rubric of spiritual life. Traditionally, the Buddha has compassionately resolved to offer things that are more typically associated with happiness for those who do not share a capability or interest in true Dharma. While it is a Bodhisattva's duty to encourage interest in the teachings, suffering per se may only allow a fragmentary glimpse of such a possibility and should be accepted as such. The carer cannot impose any path on anybody – they can only suggest and illuminate it. From a more technical standpoint, it is actually the realization of interpenetration and the 'exchange of selves' that bring the Mahāyānist teaching into true fruition. The spontaneous, selfless empathy that arises from such practice provides bodhisattvas with a better understanding of what the sufferer in question really needs.^{xxiv} Jyotis' act of *upāya*, like all other cases of *upāya*, concerns how Buddhism is communicated to others and how different teaching styles, techniques and practices can help different people. This is why Shakyamuni's conclusion to his story is significant, because he reveals that his current wife Yasodharā was that celibate-loving woman, who after many aeons, came to attain Enlightenment with her husband's guidance, in a fulfilment of her vow many lifetimes ago. Love and compassion are free; they are not means to an end.

If one is to seek a response in the narrative to the suffering of persons, it becomes necessary to identify certain 'priorities' for Jyotis. The Buddha has already implied that the simplest tenet is the most important: to refrain from taking life, nor cause life to be taken. The precedence of the First Precept, according to this narrative, is absolute. Following from that, there exists a clearly tiered 'structure' of intentions when speaking of *upāya*. It can be summarized thus: if possible, a practitioner should first endeavour to lead another individual to Enlightenment (in other words, preach and teach the Dharma). If she cannot do this for whatever reason, such as a lack of capability or lack of interest on part of the recipient, she must offer more common forms of happiness to that individual instead. And if even this is not possible, at the very least, she must prevent that individual's distress, and protect her from harm and death. The last two (offering benefit and happiness, and preventing distress and death) are so important that if necessary, the happiness that can be gained through sensual pleasures is not to be discounted. Jyotis will take upon himself the pain of hell through his resolve to, 'Let this woman not die, but be happy.'^{xxv}

At this stage of reflection, there exists a possible correlation to the Greek idea of *eros*, which is commonly associated with sexual desire. However, it means more; it involves an attraction proper, a certain 'drawing to' an idea or person. It involves the desire for someone to help one attain realization.^{xxvi} *Eros* features prominently in the Jyotis story and in Shakyamuni's later revelations, where Yasodharā instantly glimpses Sumedha's enlightenment potential and swears him to matrimony through their karmic vows. The interplay of *eros* between the Buddha and his future wife is more complex than what the water-carrier lets on during her interaction with Jyotis. Therefore, the Buddhist ethics of transmitting the Dharma are themselves *upāya* and emphasize relations as a fundamental aspect of teaching and caring.^{xxvii}

The First Precept of 'harmlessness' is obviously the foundation of Buddhism, although the summit remains the *aspiration* (and action) of guiding fellow beings to Enlightenment as a bodhisattva. At the intermediary level, however, lie the more common methods of bringing benefit to others by soothing away distress, granting their wishes and removing discomforts. Therefore, *upāya* is by no means an excuse to indulge in sensual pleasures because it encompasses many acts of giving beyond the body. Jyotis offered to do whatever his new lover desired. On the previously mentioned hermeneutical basis of 'the Buddha's intention,' it is not unreasonable to interpret this passage literally. Jyotis' concern was her happiness and the alleviation of her distress, and on the tiered scale of *upāya* ethics, it resonates precisely with the offering of happiness and loving accommodation. This selfless sexual ethic can be, like much of Buddhist ethics, quite straightforward but difficult to practice, particularly in circumstances where there is distrust, exploitation, and conflict between the genders due to problems such as adultery, prostitution, or abuse. But even in such dire circumstances, good may be preserved. Consider Thich Nhat Hahn's words:

Sometimes, when trying to alleviate a loved one's suffering, a bodhisattva pretends to do things she does not normally do... A bodhisattva will go fishing if the person she wants to help goes fishing. She might not really want to catch fish but only to be with the one who needs her support. Or she may sit in a bar with others who are drinking. She sits there not to drink but only to help people who are drowning themselves in alcohol.^{xxviii}

In other words, *upāya* can be exercised in a climate of apparent ‘danger,’ or in places and occasions that seem uncondusive or harmful to practice. Peter Harvey has highlighted traditional situations for the application of doctrinal *upāya*. A lay Bodhisattva (my emphasis) may have sexual intercourse with an unmarried woman who strongly desires sex with him, so as to help her avoid enmity and come under the Bodhisattva’s wholesome influence.^{xxix} This is equally applicable to female laywomen, who are able to charm and allure foolish men, proceeding to enlighten them, to establish them in the Buddha’s wisdom.^{xxx} Essentially, by offering a ‘lower reward’ such as his or her own body, a Bodhisattva is able to give those who are motivated by base lust the ‘highest reward’ – the gift of Dharma. Of course, many possible dilemmas arise from misinterpretations about this idea,^{xxxi} and it must be remembered that this traditional idea was developed during the advent of the Mahāyāna. There is always the reality that in professional circumstances such as counselling and modern spiritual or pastoral care, things are simply more complex. In contexts where the power imbalance between carer and patient, client or student is too great, it is very easy to abandon the precept of refraining from sexual misconduct. This often manifests in a mistaken spirit of rationalizing inappropriate sexual encounters as being a positive or healing experience.^{xxxii}

Despite this precaution, an important point stands: those who practise authentic compassion never seek to impose the Buddha’s Dharma upon others, for there are no benefits to be gained by beings from a forced teaching. Love with delicate wisdom provides the crucial foundation for the vocation of transmitting the Buddha’s teachings. Beyond that, a disciple knows when she should speak of the Tathagāta and when she should speak of naught and remain silent. Silence is no crime, for quiet love can resonate with spiritual strength, fortitude, and inner illumination. The heirs to the Dharma should need nothing more than their caring hands, silence, and love to bring the Buddha’s message into the hearts of the suffering. Their vindication will lie in the skill of their words and actions.

CONCLUSION

The narrative of Jyotis indicates a diversification of Buddhist values compared with the much older story of Ānanda and Matanga.^{xxxiii} Matanga’s infatuation with this particular *bhikkhu* concludes in a more characteristic fashion, wherein she transforms her passionate love for Ānanda into the more typical form of detached, altruistic beneficence that calm reason tends to advocate. It is unlikely that the Jyotis narrative was written to supplant this idea in Buddhist literature, but part of its aim was to diversify the means of practice in the Bodhisattva path that was characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhist polemics.

The literature of Jyotis can be deceiving. Certainly, *upāya* is motivated by a very compassionate, loving concern that directly reflects the boundless compassion of the Buddha himself. However, it must be remembered that this scripture was composed in a distant era of history with a ‘zeitgeist’ that can be said to be quite different to the general moral spirit of the modern world. The fact that these ideas were maintained, recorded and transmitted through the Mahāyāna canon only indicate that their importance transcended culture and custom, not that the ancient Mahāyāna culture corresponded with our own. The actual deeds performed through skilful means are also supposed to be deliberated very carefully, by using both wisdom (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*) to determine the best course of action. And as I have already suggested, they cannot necessarily be applied when the imbalance of power is too great between the carer and her subject of concern.

During its first contact with Europeans, Mahāyāna Buddhism was accused of being philosophically inconsistent. But at the religion’s heart is the endeavour to grapple solidly with human suffering, and by doing this transcend philosophy itself, for philosophy is merely a raft. Once it has served its purpose, any further clinging to ‘principles’ or ‘doctrine’ simply becomes another form of unwise attachment. Almost ironically, only this philosophy of compromise can bring people to personal emancipation from afflictive passions. It has been this essay’s contention that skilful means serves as an important guide within the framework of Mahāyāna Buddhist education and spiritual care.

REFERENCES

ⁱ *Upāyakausalya* in Sanskrit and *upāya* for short.

ⁱⁱ Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism*. (London: Gerald & Duckworth Co. Ltd., 1978), 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ At its most basic, *upāya* is a hermeneutical device used by Buddhist writers and commentators to discern the immediate meaning of apparently conflicting texts, and to point to their ultimate meaning beyond the Sūtra. Its message is to ‘teach sentient beings according to their inclinations and needs,’ in other words; use provisional truths that lead to an ultimate truth.

^{iv} The *Upāyakausalya Sutra* was composed around the 1st century C.E. and is known in English as the Skill-in-Means Sutra. Mark Tatz, *The Skill in Means (Upāyakausalya) Sutra*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1994).

^v Schroeder criticizes Western scholars for remaining blind to the self-reflective and critical element of Buddhism by focusing solely on its philosophy or its religious praxis, ignoring that one of the philosophies within Buddhism is to adjust its religious praxis for different people. John W. Schroeder, *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2004), 4–5.

^{vi} *Upāyakausalya Sutra*, 1. 32.

^{vii} Jyotis is a ‘brahman youth,’ of the highest caste. The woman is a water-carrier: the lower her caste, the more dramatic his eventual cohabitation with her.

^{viii} 1. 32.

^{ix} 1. 33.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} 1. 34.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} 1. 35.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} 2. 93.

^{xviii} Donald S. Lopez, Jr. “On the Interpretation of Mahāyāna Sutras,” in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Ed.) (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 50. The question of Mahayanist interpretation is immensely complex, but as long as ‘intention remains central to the process of interpretation, it is the exegete’s present description of a past intention that constitutes the goal of that process.’ 65.

^{xix} The basic premise of every ‘upayic’ act is that through their compassion, the Buddha and bodhisattvas will do *whatever is necessary* to help sentient, even if it means violating aspects of their own doctrine.

^{xx} David L. McMahan, *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism*. (New Fetter Lane, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 114–5.

^{xxi} John W. Schroeder, *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2004), 6–7.

^{xxii} Lopez, “On the Interpretation of Mahāyāna Sutras,” 48–49.

^{xxiii} McMahan, *Empty Vision* 16.

^{xxiv} *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (8.120). Shāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* Padmakara Translation Group (trans.) (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2006).

^{xxv} 1. 33.

^{xxvi} Neil Pembroke, *Renewing Pastoral Practice: Trinitarian Perspectives on Pastoral Care and Counselling*. (England: Ashgate, 2006), 86.

^{xxvii} John W. Schroeder, *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2004), 77.

^{xxviii} Thich Nhat Hahn, *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community, and the World*. (New York: Free Press, 2003), 148.

^{xxix} Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 139; Mark Tatz, *Asanga’s Chapter on Ethics, with the Commentary of Tsong-Kha-Pa*. (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 71.

^{xxx} C. Bendall and W. H. D. Rouse, (trans.) *Siksa-samuccaya: A Compendium of Buddhist Doctrine, Compiled by Santideva from the Early Mahāyāna Sutras*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1971), 291.

^{xxxi} Suppose if the person in question is in fact married? The Bodhisattva has a real headache on his or her hands: to commit sexual misconduct in a different way (by allowing the person to commit adultery) or to abandon his or her attempts at *upāya*.

^{xxxii} Gordon Lynch, *Pastoral Care and Counselling* (London; Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2002), 66.

^{xxxiii} While begging for alms, the Buddha’s cousin meets a woman at a well and requests a drink. Initially she refuses to give him water due to his status as a holy man and her low caste, but his assurance of their

fundamental equality, as well as his acceptance of her 'dirty' touch, leads her to fall in love with him.
(*Divyavadana* Story).