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9 The Dilemma of Skillful Means in Buddhist Pedagogy

Desire and Education in the Lotus Sūtra

Buddhism is a religion that starts with the Buddha's struggle with the fundamental problem of suffering in the lived experience. As a result, Buddhist teachings, despite their wide variety and heterogeneity, are primarily geared toward alleviating and overcoming suffering. The Buddha identifies ignorance and desire as the sources of suffering.[1] Removal of ignorance holds the key to reaching awakening and ending suffering. Hence, knowledge is crucial in Buddhism. However, such knowledge is not the result of metaphysical speculations. The Buddha is famous for refusing to answer metaphysical questions, which he regards as irrelevant to the spiritual life. Rather, the knowledge the Buddha teaches comes from intense scrutiny and analysis of the lived experience so as to gain an understanding of the sources of suffering. Although such analyses carry metaphysical implications that later Buddhists would explore, the primary concern on how to end suffering remains the point of departure for much of the Buddhist intellectual effort. Due to this primary concern, the knowledge that is produced by the Buddhists is meant to be transformative, not just informative. It is the kind of knowledge that should be practiced, embodied, and realized in one's experience, not just read, pondered, and memorized in one's head. As such, it requires a wide variety of methods targeting the specific practical needs of learners, since what is at stake is not simply the abstract truthfulness of the teaching, but also its meaningfulness, and thus effectiveness.

In this essay I will look into one such method by which the Buddha[2] imparts appropriate knowledge to his disciples and others, namely *upâya,* variously translated as "the skillful means," "skill in means," or "expedient device," and so on.[3] It "refers to the different pedagogical styles, meditation techniques, and religious practices that help people overcome attach-

ment, and to the way in which Buddhism is communicated to others."[4] It is the link between wisdom and compassion, arising from the idea that "wisdom is embodied in how one responds to others rather than an abstract conception of the world"[5] and reflecting "an ongoing concern with the soteriological effectiveness of the Buddhist teachings."[6]

There are several potential problems in such a pedagogy, the most serious of which is that it includes means we would normally regard as lies, misinformation, or misdirection. Therein arises a clear dilemma between the effectiveness and the truthfulness of a particular teaching as an exercise of skillful means. I will look into how modern scholars have dealt with such a dilemma and provide a possible alternative to accommodate both the concerns for effectiveness and for truthfulness, which at times might be at odds with each other.

I will argue that the truthfulness and efficacy of skillful means are unified in one of the most important insights in the Buddha's teaching, which is to expose the pervasiveness of human desire[7] constitutive of all our activities, including our pursuit of knowledge. Put simply, skillful means is meant to address this pervasive human desire, not human intellect. What appears to be a white lie for the intellect actually targets desires. In other words, human desire must be dealt with differently, not with the usual philosophical formula the intellect embraces. Viewed in this way, the truthfulness skillful means embodies in targeting human desire is best understood on a therapeutic model of truth that seeks to transform desire into motivation toward a fruitful spiritual life. That is, in order for the teaching to be both truthful and effective, it has to be meaningful to the desire. Such meaningfulness is its immediate relevancy to the beneficiary in her lived experience so that desire can be transformed into motivation toward a spiritual life. Due to the prominence of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the crucial teaching of skillful means in it, I will focus on the discussion of skillful means in this sutra.[8]

Upāya and Its Modern Critiques

The official mission of the *Lotus Sūtra* is to promulgate the teaching that there is only one vehicle toward ultimate enlightenment or Buddhahood, and this goal is accessible to all sentient beings: "Shariputra [Śārīputra], the Thus Come Ones [Tathāgatas] have only a single Buddha vehicle which they employ in order to preach the Law [*Dharma*] to living beings. They do not have any other vehicle, a second one or a third one."[9] The other three vehicles refer to the path of *śrāvaka* (voice-hearer) that leads to arhatship, that of *pratyekabuddha* who seeks enlightenment by and for oneself, and the bodhisattva path, which delivers all sentient beings to the land of enlightenment. All three are considered inferior to the ultimate single vehicle preached in the *Lotus Sūtra,* as all of them fail to deliver sentient beings to the ultimate state of Buddhahood. In fact, those three vehicles are meant

to prepare the sentient beings for the teaching of the single Buddha vehicle in the *Lotus Sūtra*. As the *Sūtra* explains, the Buddhas of past, present, and future employ "countless numbers of expedient means, various causes and conditions, and words of simile and parable in order to expound the doctrines for the sake of living beings. These doctrines are all for the sake of the one Buddha vehicle. These living beings, by listening to the doctrines of the Buddhas, are all eventually able to attain wisdom embracing all species."[10] This is the teaching of the universal accessibility of Buddhahood through the single Buddha vehicle the *Sūtra* preaches. The other earlier vehicles lead to a lesser achievement, *arhat, pratyekabuddha,* or *bodhisattva,* either for the practitioners themselves (the former two) or for all (the latter one). The superiority of the single Buddha vehicle preached in the *Lotus Sūtra* lies in its promise of helping all sentient beings to reach no less than Buddhahood.

However, what interests us in this essay is the way by which the teaching is promulgated in the *Sūtra*. This is the method of skillful means mentioned in the above passage. As Michael Pye acutely observes: the very theme of the Buddha's discourse in the Lotus Sutra is supposed to be his skillful means, which is intimately connected with his Dharma and which he shares in common with all the buddhas. Apart from this theme there is indeed no particular 'content' to the teaching given. It is a sutra therefore not so much about doctrines in an assertive sense, but rather about the inner method of the Buddhist religion."[11] This means that the *Lotus Sūtra* is not really advancing any new doctrinal teaching, but is rather focusing on how the Buddhist doctrines should be evaluated and reformed with respect to their value in guiding sentient beings to the spiritual awakening. In this sense, the *Lotus Sūtra* is really about promoting the wonder of skillful means.

Pye sums up skillful means in this way:

> In Mahayana Buddhism the various forms of Buddhist teaching and practice are declared to be provisional means, all skillfully set up by the Buddha for the benefit of the unenlightened. A Buddhist who makes progress himself comes to recognise this provisional quality in the forms of his religion, and though using the means provided for him he has to learn not to be wrongly attached to them. He leaves them behind, like a raft left lying on the bank by a man who has crossed a stream and needs it no more. An advanced follower of Buddhism, usually named by Mahayana Buddhists a *bodhisattva,* continues to use such provisional means in order to lead other living things towards nirvana. A bodhisattva is skilled in allowing the Buddhist religion to be spelled out in all its detail, while not being ensnared by the false discriminations of the unenlightened.[12]

Accordingly, the postulation of the skillful means has at least two motivations. First, it is meant to be self-critical, making the Buddhists aware of

the inherent limitations of all teachings, including even the Buddhist teachings. Second, it is directed toward helping others skillfully according to their particular circumstances without oneself being entrapped. Let us look at the two in some detail.

First, one underlying intention for the teaching of skillful means is to liberate committed Buddhist practitioners from their natural attachment to various Buddhist teachings by pointing out that those teachings are provisional means to help practitioners achieve enlightenment. Once enlightenment is accomplished, those teachings, no matter how effective, should be left behind. Just like a good medicine, its value is to cure a disease, which frees a patient from depending on that very medicine. Or like a raft, it is abandoned once a person uses it to cross over to the other side of the river. Similarly, the effectiveness of a religious teaching lies in its ability to transform a practitioner in a way that liberates her from that very teaching. There is no point in attaching oneself to a teaching. The very schematization of skillful means reflects a recognition by the Buddhists of the provisional nature of Buddhist teachings, however invaluable they are *for the unenlightened*.

Second, skillful means are effective pedagogical tools at the disposal of an enlightened being for the purpose of helping sentient beings. It addresses the particular circumstances of each sentient being, taking into considerations her needs, inclinations, capacities, and lived experience. It does not provide a straightjacketed abstract teaching that suits all, respecting the genuine and vast differences among sentient beings and allowing a plurality of means to deal with those differences so as to make the teaching meaningful and effective.

However, at times the *Lotus Sūtra* contains tales that seem to suggest that the truthfulness of the teaching can be sacrificed for the sake of effectiveness. The famous "burning house" parable in chapter three of the *Sūtra,* "Simile and Parable,"[13] is a case in point. A father sees that a crumbling old house is on fire, but his children are caught up in their games, not heeding their father's order that they leave the house immediately. The father has to do something quickly in order to save his kids, so he captures their attention by promising them fantastic toys outside the house. When they come out, they find that there are no toys as promised, but do see that the house is on fire and realize that they have been saved from a devastating disaster. The father does give every one of them a big cart. Clearly the father in the parable is being compared to the Buddha, the kids to the deluded sentient beings, the house on fire to the world permeated by the fire of desire,[14] and the big cart to the single Buddha vehicle.

Now an obvious question arises: is the father/Buddha at fault in any way? The *Sūtra,* through the mouth of Śārîputra, rejects casting any blame on the father on the ground of his compassionate intention and the effectiveness of his action.[15] Therefore an apparent dilemma arises between the effectiveness and the truthfulness of a particular teaching in the exercise of

skillful means. Some scholars have come up with several ways to explain away such an apparent problem, whereas others consider the misdirection a lie regardless of the motivation involved. John Schroeder represents the most recent development in the former, while Richard Garner's "Are Convenient Fictions Harmful to Your Health?"[16] represents the latter group.

As Garner points out:

> Perhaps Śārīputra is confusing usefulness with truthfulness, because on any plausible account of lying I can think of, the father was guilty of falsehood. He produced a false statement intending for his children to believe it. He said there were toys when in fact there were no toys. If that isn't a lie or a falsehood, what is?
>
> It makes more sense to admit that the father did lie to his children, and then to say that his lie was completely justified. Then we can point out to Śārīputra that the question is not whether the father is a liar (one lie does not make a liar), but whether the father lied. He did.[17]

Garner represents the more critical end of the spectrum of modern interpretations of skillful means. His bottom line is that the distinction between truthfulness and the usefulness of a teaching must be maintained. Even if one has to resort to lies in an urgent and justified situation, it should nevertheless be recognized as such, hence avoiding further confusions down the line. Garner is fully cognizant that "[t]he point of the [burning house] parable, of course, is that what the Buddha offered (identified in the Lotus Sutra as 'Buddhahood') would not have been attractive to people at every level of development. So, just as with the children, it is expedient to promise less than one gives."[18] Nevertheless, he is troubled by the presumptuousness of the Buddhists who accept skillful means as a valid way of teaching: Buddhists were motivated by compassion . . . , and their expedient devices were introduced to help others avoid suffering and reach enlightenment. They believed themselves to be in possession of a teaching that was too deep and demanding for people scarred by ignorance and bad mental habits, and so they devised ways to attract adherents and to help beginners develop focused and tranquil minds."[19] He is obviously suspicious of a certain Buddhist claim that sentient beings are so blinded by their ignorance that it is virtually impossible for them to understand the profundity of the Buddhist teachings.[20] Furthermore, noble intention alone is not adequate in guaranteeing a desirable result: "We can agree that the Buddhists . . . have only the best motives. Nevertheless we also know that deception and the false beliefs that result can hurt us even when the intentions of the deceiver are good, so it is possible, even likely, that widespread acceptance of substantial false beliefs will have unanticipated bad results."[21] Garner refuses to justify any practice of deception solely on the ground of noble motives on the part of the deceiver. He does not want to see any deceptive act simply in isolation; rather, it will lead to more deceptions and confusions.

Lastly, by allowing false information to be spread for some higher purpose, the teaching of skillful means does not give the sentient beings a chance to practice courage. It has the potential of promoting some widespread false information that is ultimately detrimental to the long-term well-being of the sentient beings, any temporary, short-term gain notwithstanding:

> Any time we do not see things as they are, we are to some extent made incapable of appropriate behavior. Further, if fanciful doctrines are widely believed, people will become confused about what it takes to have a true belief, and will be encouraged to indulge in many spurious modes of cognition. A belief in karma and reincarnation, or in heaven and hell, may make us feel better about reality if our current life isn't turning out well; but by the same token, it may rob us of a chance to practice courage, and may actually discourage us from improving our lives by making us believe either that we deserve what we are getting, or that justice will be achieved in the fullness of time.[22]

Therefore, Garner warns us against ignoring "bad side effects when some presumptuous elite manipulates everyone else by promoting a version of events they know to be inaccurate."[23]

While acknowledging the potential abuse of skillful means, we need to point out that Garner's critique does not do full justice to the teaching of skillful means in Mahāyāna Buddhism in that he does not take into consideration the context within which such a teaching emerges. First of all, as I have pointed out, skillful means represents a continuing attempt by Buddhists themselves to examine critically various Buddhist teachings and practices in order to overcome the persistent problem of attachment—in this case, attachment to Buddhist teachings. The teaching of skillful means should not be taken out of such a self-critique in which Buddhists are engaged.

Furthermore, nowhere in the *Sūtra* does the Buddha proclaim that there should be a programmatic and systematic deception in order to set sentient beings on the right path. If skillful means allows deceptions on certain occasions, they are never meant to be systematic and programmatic, unlike what Plato proposes in *The Republic*. The key here is that the exercise of skillful means by an enlightened being to intervene in an urgent and disastrous situation is only justified by *particular* circumstances. Skillful means is never meant to be an absolute principle that is context-independent. Garner is committing what I would call an "absolutist fallacy." That is, skillful means can only be used under particular circumstances, and as such it cannot be universalized as some absolute principle or even doctrine. Garner's critique is based on scenarios when certain practice of skillful means become universalized and absolutized. We can clearly see the shadow of Kant in Garner's critique. His rejection of skillful means rep-

resents an absolutist attitude that refuses to consider any concrete situations.[24]

However, there is yet another important aspect in the teaching of skillful means that can be very easily missed. If the attempt to sever truthfulness and efficacy in the Buddha's teachings is troubling, we should be reminded that skillful means ultimately leads the beneficiary to see the emptiness of all teachings, including that very skillful means. In other words, deception alone, if it has to be recognized as such, is not enough. In fact, deception is neither the intention nor the objective of skillful means. The person "deceived" has to be able to realize, at the end, the very empty nature of that deceptive or misleading device.[25] To this extent, the *Sūtra* agrees with Garner that the truthfulness of teachings must ultimately be maintained.

The most comprehensive challenge to critiques like Garner's comes from the work of John Schroeder. Schroeder's monologue *Skillful Means* represents the most recent development in the defense of skillful means. Schroeder defends its teaching on the ground of religious metapraxis, which is "a form of reflection devoted exclusively to problems surrounding the nature and efficacy of religious praxis"[26] and is different from "other types of philosophical reflection—such as metaphysics—that problematize what stands behind or above religious praxis."[27] By thus contextualizing the Buddha's teaching within metapraxis, Schroeder hopes to make the case that the skillful "lies" in some of the Buddha's teachings should be understood in terms of their efficacy in bringing about the spiritual transformation of his listeners, not their ontological truthfulness regarding an objective reality.

According to Schroeder, it makes more sense to understand skillful means in the context of Buddhist praxis, not some disembodied intellectual discourse on truth or reality. He adopts the theory of metapraxis, developed by Thomas Kasulis, in his ambitious effort to reinterpret Buddhism:

> Religious praxis generally has either a participatory or transformative function. It participates in, to use Rudolf Otto's term, the "numinous." It is transformative in its improving the person or community in some spiritual way (purifying, healing, reconciling, protecting, informing, and so on). Metapractical reflection inquires into the purpose and efficacy of the practice in terms of these participatory and transformative functions. Something happens, or at least is supposed to happen, in and through religious praxis. Metapraxis analyzes and evaluates that happening. What does the praxis change? Is something remembered? Reenacted? Empowered? If so, exactly how does the praxis work? And why should we prefer our traditional praxis as more effective than another?[28]

Here metapraxis is contrasted with metaphysics. While the former attends to the concrete religious praxis in bringing about spiritual transformations of practitioners, the latter focuses on working out some philosophical for-

mula that captures truth and reality in their abstraction from any particular context.

Building on Kasulis' insight, Schroeder goes on to make the case that the teaching of skillful means in Mahāyāna Buddhism is

> less about the creation of new philosophical doctrines or world-views than an attempt to restate the basic message of non-attachment. . . . In this regard, the Mahayanists argue from the perspective of *upāya,* saying there is no fixed methodology or doctrine to argue about, and that any attempt to institute a monolithic form of praxis not only violates the teachings of the Buddha, but destroys the ability to respond compassionately. In their view, the idea that one can metapractically justify a single practice for all people in all circumstances is not just anti-Buddhist and unorthodox. It is counterproductive, harmful, and ineffective.[29]

In other words, according to Schroeder the concern that skillful means addresses is metapractical, not metaphysical. On this scheme, we can see that Garner's critique of skillful means falls squarely on the side of metaphysics in insisting that skillful means meet the criterion of truth in the metaphysical sense irrespective of any circumstantial considerations. Such an absolutist attitude toward doctrinal teachings, exemplified in many Buddhists as well, is precisely what skillful means wants to overcome.

I am sympathetic to Schroeder's interpretation that skillful means does not operate on an abstract, context-independent metaphysical sense of truthfulness, but rather on the level of metapractical effectiveness. However, we still need a model of truthfulness that can better situate skillful means. Otherwise, there is a risk of interpreting skillful means as rendering truthfulness completely irrelevant to the Buddhist practitioners, which is as potentially dangerous as Garner warns. Incorporating Schroeder's insights in interpreting *upāya* as metapractical while preserving a place for truth in the teaching, I would like to propose that skillful means operates on a therapeutic model of truthfulness. In other words, the merit of skillful means lies in its therapeutic values.

To characterize skillful means as therapeutic can remind us that it addresses a concrete person in a meaningful way within a particular context. Such truthfulness in the therapeutic sense is relevant and meaningful to that person under a specific circumstance. Outside of a particular context, truth becomes distant, and oftentimes meaningless. In the following discussion, I will try to work out a therapeutic model of truth as a new way to approach skillful means so that neither truthfulness nor effectiveness is sacrificed in its exercise. I will argue that the truthfulness and effectiveness of skillful means are unified in one of the most important insights of the Buddha, that which points to the pervasiveness of desire in human existence. If we understand skillful means as therapeutic with human desire as its target, we can accommodate both its truthfulness and its effectiveness.

In other words, it is the skillful means that enables the Buddha to address desire therapeutically. It will become clear to us that in the *Lotus Sūtra* desire *is* the target of skillful means, and skillful means is the most therapeutically effective way to deal with it.

The Problem of Desire and Its Therapy through Skillful Means

The target of the skillful means is very clear in the *Lotus Sūtra*. In Chapter II, "Expedient Means," the Buddha states very explicitly why skillful means is necessary: "I know that living beings have various desires, attachments that are deeply implanted in their minds. Taking cognizance of this basic nature of theirs, I will therefore use various causes and conditions, words of simile and parable, and the power of expedient means and expound the Law for them. Shariputra [Śārīputra], I do this so that all of them may attain the one Buddha vehicle and wisdom embracing all species."[30] Here, it could be more unambiguous that skillful means is targeting desire. As Burton Watson observes in the introduction to his translation of the *Lotus Sūtra,* the text appeals "not so much to the intellect as to the emotions."[31] Such an emotional appeal obviously has a powerful resonance, thus making the *Lotus Sūtra* an extremely popular Buddhist canon in East Asia.

The first question we need to deal with is: what is problematic about desire? The *Sūtra* simply assumes it is so without much elaboration. As is well known, according to the second noble truth, desire is the cause of suffering: "Dependent on eye and visible forms, eye-consciousness arises; the coincidence of the three is contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; that is how there is an origin to suffering (and so with ear . . . mind)."[32] In tracing the origin of human suffering to the aggregates that constitute the self, the Buddha is pointing to the fundamental structure of human existence. That is, human existence is characterized by suffering, and this suffering existence is structured by desire or craving (*taṇhā*). As Walpola Rahula summarizes, "the term 'thirst' includes not only desire for, and attachment to, sense-pleasures, wealth and power, but also desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, views, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs (*dhamma-taṇhā*)."[33] Desire is all-pervading[34] and cannot be escaped till the end of this world.[35]

But the question remains: why is desire regarded as the culprit of suffering? "When a person is not without lust and desire and love and thirst and fever and craving for these things, then with their change and alteration, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair arise in him."[36] That is, the problem with desire lies in the impermanent nature of the objects of desire. The Buddha's second sermon deals with impermanence in some detail: "All is impermanent. And what is the all that is impermanent? The eye is impermanent, forms are impermanent, eye-consciousness . . . eye-contact, whatever is felt as pleasant, painful or neither-pain-

ful-nor-pleasant born of eye-contact is impermanent. The ear, etc.... The nose, etc.... The tongue, etc.... The body, etc.... The mind is impermanent, mental objects... mind-consciousness... mind-contact... whatever is felt... born of mind-contact is impermanent."[37] What is impermanent is suffering, what is suffering is not-self.[38] Impermanence is one of the three characteristics of existence, the other two being suffering and no-self. In fact, the three terms are often used interchangeably in characterizing the suffering nature of existence. The most painful cases of impermanence are the impermanence of happiness, the impermanence of life, and, ultimately, the impermanence of the self:

> Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisattva, I thought: "In the case of material form, of feeling (of pleasure, pain or neither), of perception, of formations, of consciousness, what is the gratification, what the danger, what the escape?" Then I thought: "In the case of each the bodily pleasure and mental joy that arise in dependence on these things (the five aggregates) are the gratification; the fact that these things are all impermanent, painful, and subject to change, is the danger; the disciplining and abandoning of desire and lust for them is the escape.[39]

The Buddha, upon his enlightenment, realizes that even pleasure and joy are conditioned states and are therefore subject to change. He recognizes the impermanence of happiness as the danger and teaches discipline and detachment as the solution. This realization clearly points to suffering as the fundamental nature of our existence since suffering qua impermanence underlies even our cherished pleasure and joy. Such a suffering existence is structured by desire which constantly seeks to gratify itself. In order to deal with impermanence, we are driven by our desire to find comfort in permanence, hence creating various forms of attachments. This drive to find permanence in order to deal with impermanence is precisely a manifestation of desire. We desire permanence in order to solve the problems presented by impermanence. Therein lies the most central problem with desire. That is, it leads to reification:

> In the world I see this generation racked by craving for being
> Wretched men gibbering in the face of Death,
> Still craving, hoping, for some kind of being.
> See how they tremble over what they claim as "mine,"
> Like fishes in the puddles of a failing stream.[40]

This means that desire seeks to perpetuate being in the face of impermanence, and this is how the object of desire—namely being—is reified and substantialized, whereas any substantive beings that are independent of conditions do not exist, according to Buddhism. This insight is later crystallized as emptiness, *śūnyatā,* in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

However, besides its nature to reify and attach to its objects, desire is also blind and ignorant. Put bluntly, desire does not really know what it wants. One major characteristic of desire is that any gratification is only temporary, because once it is satisfied, it moves on to something else. Essentially, desire cannot be satisfied permanently, even though it craves permanence. This is the dilemma of desire; namely, desire thrives in impermanence even as it craves permanence. In the world of permanence, desire has no place. This means that what desire wants, permanence, is against its own nature, impermanence; hence it is blind, unaware of its self-contradictory character. Such blindness and ignorance of desire stand in the way of the pursuit of true knowledge that leads to the cessation of suffering, since desire does not really want suffering to end, as it thrives on and perpetuates suffering. Therefore, the major problem it presents is: how can desire be transformed in such a way that it is conducive to the pursuit of true knowledge? This is the crux of the problem that confronts the Buddha, namely, how to make desire work against itself so that it will cease to perpetuate suffering, thus putting an end to suffering.

The Buddha in the *Lotus Sūtra* finds the solution in skillful means so as to deal with desire in such a way that it can be made to contribute to the pursuit of true knowledge that leads to the ending of desire and the cessation of suffering. A natural question arises: what does the Buddha find attractive in skillful means? I would like to propose that skillful means is a kind of therapeutic practice that unsettles and disorients the desire in such a way that the desire finds nothing substantive to attach itself to, and transforms the desire in such a way that it can contribute to the seeker's enlightenment. In other words, this therapeutic practice has at least two aspects: it unsettles the desire and it transforms the desire.

First, to unsettle and disorient the desire, any attempt to substantialize and reify any object of comfort has to be guarded against, be it a concrete physical object—for example, money—or an ideal object—for example, the Buddha. Nāgārjuna puts such a therapeutic disorientation into a more philosophical formula. In Chapter 22 of the *Mūlamadhyama-kakārika* (MMK), Nāgārjuna seeks to refute the attempt to reify the Buddha:

> One who grasps the view that the Tathāgata exists,
> Having seizing the Buddha,
> Constructs conceptual fabrication
> About one who has achieved nirvāṇa.[41]

This means that our idea of the Buddha is a complete conceptual fabrication. In Chapter 23, Nāgārjuna further radicalizes the message:

> The pacification of all objectification
> And the pacification of illusion:
> No Dharma was taught by the Buddha
> At any time, in any place, to any person.[42]

Any attempt to reify the Buddha and his teaching is rejected. As a result, the desire that is in the habit of grasping is disoriented, as there is nothing to be grasped.

Second, to unsettle and disorient desire is meant to transform it in such a way that it can contribute to the seeker's enlightenment. This is the therapeutic aspect of skillful means:

> [T]he Thus Come One knows that this is the Law of one form, one flavor, namely the form of emancipation, the form of separation, the form of extinction, the form of ultimate nirvana, of constantly tranquility and extinction, which in the end finds its destination in emptiness. The Buddha understands all this. But because he can see the desires that are in the minds of living beings, he guides and protects them, and for this reason does not immediately preach to them the wisdom that embraces all species.[43]

Here the Buddha is seen as understanding sentient beings and their desires. He guides and protects them, and tries to comfort them in ways that are conducive to their spiritual growth. For this purpose, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not resort to intellectual arguments that would have been combative, like Nāgārjuna's effort. Rather, it relies on stories to convey the message skillfully and meaningfully. The heavy reliance on parables, similes, and mythologies in the *Lotus Sūtra* is a clear sign of skillful means at work,[44] and such an exercise of skillful means is to deal with desire therapeutically.

However, this therapeutic treatment of desire has one specific objective. As we shall see, it is meant to facilitate the transformation of desire in such a way that it can motivate the seeker in her spiritual quest. A perennial dilemma that faces education is the issue of motivation: how to teach someone who is not interested in learning or motivated to learn. Even a great teacher, no less than Confucius himself, laments his inability to teach someone who is like a rotten piece of wood that cannot be carved.[45] Any pursuit of knowledge has to presuppose the motivation to learn. Without any motivation, any discussion of education, no matter how great, is meaningless and cannot even get off the ground. Here I am arguing that skillful means is a pedagogy that addresses precisely such a thorny issue. The *Lotus Sūtra* sees desire as a solution to the lack of motivation. In other words, it regards desire as both the cause and the solution of suffering. The major *upāya* parables in the *Lotus Sūtra* are best seen as attempts to transform essentially blind desires into goal-oriented motivational energy for spiritual awakening that would lead to the end of suffering. In other words, the white lie or misinformation serves to transform desire into motivation. Hence, in the *Lotus Sūtra,* the therapy of desire results in its transformation into motivational energy, thus contributing to the spiritual growth of sentient beings themselves.

There are several possible relationships between knowing the true knowledge that leads to the end of suffering and acting on such knowledge: some people neither know nor act; others know but do not act on such knowledge; still others act, but their actions are not guided by proper knowledge; and lastly are the rare type who both know and act on such knowledge. The first three kinds need the Buddha's skillful intervention in order to be motivated to embark on the spiritual journey, while the last type of people do not require the Buddha's intervention through skillful means.[46] If we look at the various *upāya* stories in the *Lotus Sūtra,* we can clearly see the first three types of intervention at work.

The first category, neither knowing nor acting, includes the famous burning-house parable I examined earlier. The father has to appeal to the desire of his kids in order to interest them in his message. By promising more and better toys outside, the father is appealing to what is immediately meaningful to the kids who are engrossed in playing with toys. Any intellectual explanation at that moment would have failed to address the immediate context the children were in, hence leaving them in harm's way. However, when they come out of the house, they do not find what is promised. This is an example of using the desire to work against itself so that the deluded sentient beings can realize its blind nature. As Marjorie Suchocki observes: "The Buddha reached the children's true desires through the means of false desires, which is to say that their deepest desire was their deepest well-being, which is Buddhahood. Because their false desires blinded them, the Buddha could not reach their true desires directly, and therefore reached them indirectly through turning their false desires into skillful means."[47] Ultimately, there is nothing to be desired. This is in reference to the Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching of emptiness.

The second category, "knowing but not acting," includes parables like the Buddha's lifespan and the phantom city. In Chapter 16, "The Life Span of the Thus Come One," the Buddha declares that even though he appears to have achieved extinction and to have disappeared from this world after his final passing, he has actually never left the world. He creates such an appearance so that people will not take him for granted and will realize the urgency of their efforts to reach enlightenment. He compares himself to a father who is a medical doctor trying to cure his children who are poisoned. But his children take him for granted, thinking that he will always be there for them. As a result, the father declares that he is dying and indeed dies. Suddenly, his children realize that taking the medicine he left for them is their last chance for cure and take it immediately. After his children are cured, he appears to them again. This is a clear example of how the Buddha tries to motivate those sentient beings who might have some knowledge of the Buddha's teaching but are unmotivated to act on it, to move along the path toward enlightenment.

In Chapter 7, "The Parable of the Phantom City," the Buddha tells the story of a leader who tries to guide a group through a long stretch of

deserted land to find treasure. When the group becomes exhausted in the middle of the path and wants to turn back, he magically creates a phantom city wherein the group can rest and regroup. The next morning the city disappears, and he tells them that the treasure is close by. Similarly, if the Buddha preaches only one ultimate Buddha vehicle, sentient beings will be discouraged, thinking it too far out of their reach. Therefore he has to preach some less lofty goals in order to provide sentient beings with a resting place along the path. This parable addresses the need for the Buddha to be attentive to the weakness in his followers' motivation to persevere in their spiritual quest and help them overcome such weakness.

The third category, "acting without knowing," includes the parable of a lost son. Chapter 4, "Belief and Understanding," tells the story of a man who abandons his father, wanders off to other places for a long time, and eventually falls into poverty. While seeking employment, he drifts to his father's house. However, after so many years of separation, he no longer recognizes his father and is actually terrified by his father's great wealth without knowing that he himself is the heir to it. When his father recognizes him, the father has to come up with ways to help his son gradually realize who he is. The father cannot tell the son who he is directly, fearing that he might be scared away. Instead he assigns him some manual work and lets him work up through the ranks in the family business in order to build his confidence gradually. At the end, before a gathering of distinguished guests, the father reveals that the man is actually his own son, the heir to his wealth. This parable addresses the ignorance and weakness of the sentient beings and the fact that they have to be guided into enlightenment gradually so as to gain confidence along the way. Otherwise they may be frightened away from the path—anxious, deluded, ignorant, and clinging to lesser doctrines.

In all of the above cases, skillful means therapeutically transforms desire into motivation. Once motivated, the seeker embarks on the spiritual journey that leads to the ultimate realization that *all* teachings are merely skillful means, including the very teaching of skillful means in the *Lotus Sūtra*.[48] Like a medicine with great therapeutic power, once the disease of suffering ends, the medicine, including skillful means, is discarded. This clearly echoes the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness that is itself empty. In a sense, skillful means is a reformulation of emptiness in the realm of Buddhist religious practices.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to tread a different path in interpreting the Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching of *upāya* in the *Lotus Sūtra* in order to resolve the tension of truthfulness and effectiveness perceived therein. I have proposed that skillful means can be better appreciated under a therapeutic model of truth that seeks to transform human desires into powerful moti-

vational energy toward achieving enlightenment. As a therapy of human desires, skillful means has to be context-specific and cannot be absolutized and universalized into a doctrine in and of itself. The pedagogical goal of skillful means is motivational only. Any attempt to make skillful means a context-independent doctrine will run into the kind of problems Richard Garner warns us against.

I have confined my study of skillful means to the *Lotus Sūtra* only. Some later Mahāyāna texts reify skillful means and make it into a doctrine in order to justify some practices of violence. In my judgment, such practices part from the letter as well as the spirit of the skillful means promoted in the *Lotus Sūtra,* which is used first and foremost for motivational purposes.

Notes

1. "What is *ignorance?* It is nescience about suffering, about the origin of suffering, about the cessation of suffering, and about the way leading to the cessation of suffering"; *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 12:2, in *The Life of the Buddha*: *According to the Pali Canon*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Seattle: BPE, 1972), p. 220; hereafter cited as Ñāṇamoli. Some scholars have pointed out that, according to the second noble truth, desire or craving is the cause of suffering—e.g., Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 43–47. Hence there is a problem of reconciling the two teachings regarding the cause of suffering. Erich Frauwallner attempts to do so by interpreting them as representing two phases of the Buddha's teaching that point to ignorance as the factor behind craving and suffering (Williams and Tribe, *Buddhist Thought,* 45–46). R. Gethin argues that ignorance and craving represent two intricately related dimensions of suffering, cognitive and affective (ibid., 46). In this essay, I will take the position that the kind of ignorance the Buddha points to is precisely ignorance of the nature of craving and that the craving is the manifestation of such ignorance, hence ignorance and craving are two sides of the same coin as the causes of suffering.

2. Here the Buddha obviously is not limited to the historical Buddha, Gautama.

3. In this essay, "skillful means" is used as an umbrella term to include Sanskrit words of *upāya* (means) and *upāya*-kauśalya (skill in means), as well as the Chinese word *fangbian* (J. *hōben*). For a more detailed discussion of the terminologies, you can consult Michael Pye's account: *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism* (London: Duckworth, 1978), pp. 10–17; *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 8–12.

4. John Schroeder, *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), p. 3.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. For the purpose of this essay, desire and craving are not distinguished. They are treated as the translation of the Pāli word, *taṇhā* (Sk. *tṛṣṇā*).

8. In my essay, I will use Burton Watson's translation, *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

9. Ibid., p. 31.

10. Ibid.

11. Pye, *Skilful Means* (2003), p. 19.
12. Ibid., p. 1.
13. Watson, *Lotus Sutra,* pp. 56–62.
14. The Buddha's Fire Sermon is known for comparing desire to fire.
15. Watson, *Lotus Sutra,* p. 58.
16. Richard Garner, "Are Convenient Fictions Harmful to Your Health?" *Philosophy East and West* 43.1 (1993): 87–106.
17. Ibid., p. 91.
18. Ibid., pp. 91–92.
19. Ibid., p. 95.
20. We might be reminded that, according to the legend, the Buddha, upon his enlightenment, was hesitant to teach precisely because he thought his teaching would not be understood. It was only at the request of the Hindu deity Brahma that the Buddha decided to share his experience with the world.
21. Garner, "Convenient Fictions."
22. Ibid., p. 97.
23. Ibid., p. 102.
24. Truth can have several dimensions too. As Marjorie Suchocki Suchocki ("Skillful in Means: The Buddha and the Whiteheadian God," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 28.4 (2001): 415–428) astutely observes: "Truth is the 'isness' of things in which one is a participant as well as a knower; in this sense, truth relates to approximations of conformity between knower and known. That is, there is a basis for some degree of conformity between thought and object. But truth, as in the Lotus Sutra, is more than a statement about relations between events of the past. Truth is also created in the movement toward a novel future, for that which is real is continuously being created. In a sense, one form of truth relates to knowledge about events that are now past, but another form of truth relates to actualization of things that might yet be. Truth is created in the creation of the actual out of the possible, for this movement is itself a new form of 'isness' entering into its own fleeting moment in the universe" p. 420. In other words, truth is not just about statements of affairs regarding essentially past events, but can also be about a creative movement toward a future with its infinite possibilities.
25. Skillful means might have one of its roots in the early Vedic scriptures. For example, in the Chandogya Upaniùad the great teacher Prajapati is known for "misleading" his two disciples, Indra and Vairocana. The two disciples went to study with Prajapati in order to know Ātman. Instead of telling them what ātman "really" is, Prajapati first told them ātman is the physical body. Vairocana was apparently delighted with such a teaching, took it with him, and returned to the demonic world! Indra did not take it and asked Prajapati for more. After 101 years, Prajapati went through the dreaming self, the dreamless self, and finally the supreme spirit that transcends the empirical world.
26. Schroeder, *Skillful Means,* p. 5.
27. Ibid.
28. Thomas Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," in *Discourse and Practice,* ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 178, quoted in Schroeder 2001, p. 6.
29. Schroeder, *Skillful Means,* pp.87–88.
30. Watson, *Lotus Sutra,* p. 32.
31. Ibid., p. xx.

32. *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 12:43; Ñāṇamoli, p. 220.

33. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 30.

34. Ibid., p. 29.

35. *Anguttara-nikāya* 4:46; Ñāṇamoli, p. 206.

36. *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 22:2; Ñāṇamoli, p. 237.

37. *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 35:43; Ñāṇamoli, p. 229.

38. *Saṃyutta-nikāya* 35:1; Ñāṇamoli p. 229.

39. *Saṃyutta-nikāya*a 22:26; Ñāṇamoli, p. 28.

40. Sutta-nipàta 4:2; Ñāṇamoli, p. 228.

41. MMK 22:13, in *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā,* translated with introduction and commentary by Jay Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 62; hereafter cited as Garfield.

42. MMK 23:24; Garfield, p. 76.

43. Watson, *Lotus Sutra,* p. 100.

44. Paradoxically, however, the Buddha's skillful means does appear to have its limits. In the first chapter, the *Sūtra* reveals that right before the Buddha starts preaching the ultimate teaching of the one vehicle of achieving Buddhahood at the persistent request of his disciple Śāriputra, some five thousand monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen in the assembly stand up and withdraw (Watson, *Lotus Sutra,* 30). The reason given is that they are deluded by their overbearing arrogance. However, this begs the question as to why the Buddha is not skillful enough to address their arrogance. Instead, the Buddha remains silent and does not try to stop them (ibid.). When compared with some later parables, it is indeed puzzling why the Buddha does nothing to address the situation. This might tell us that ignorance is not the worst enemy of enlightenment, as in the case of the children in the burning house who do not know that the house is on fire. Rather, arrogance is the worst form of ignorance, and even the Buddha is powerless in front of arrogant people! Hence the Buddha only preaches to those who believe him. Again, this contradicts the burning-house example, since there the father (the Buddha) cannot get the children (sentient beings) to believe him that the house is on fire. The burning-house example does not presuppose the necessity of faith in the Buddha's teaching in order for it to be effective. This inconsistency cannot be easily overlooked, as one points to an apparent failure on the Buddha's part while the other celebrates his skillful means. Another interpretation is that this segment of the text addresses the sectarian interest the *Sūtra* represents, namely, to challenge the earlier Buddhist teachings in order to pave the way for the Mahāyāna teachings the *Sūtra* is trying to promote. So in this case the expedient device is seen as a means to challenge those Buddhist teachings.

45. Confucius, *Analects*, 5.10.

46. Those who left before the sermon even began seem to belong to this category of disciples. Here the Buddha's skillful means appears to have fallen short. Even though there are many possible interpretations of this, if we take it at face value, the *Sūtra* seems to suggest that if one is well-learned but arrogant, even the Buddha cannot do much about it.

47. Marjorie Suchocki, "Skillful in Means: The Buddha and the Whiteheadian God," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 28.4 (2001): 420.

48. Pye, *Skilful Means* (2003), p. 46.