



## SKILFUL MEANS IN MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

Nguyen Thi Thuy

Ph. D. Research Scholar, Centre for Mahayana Buddhist Studies Department,  
Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India.

### ABSTRACT:

The skillful means (S. *upāya kauśalya*, P. *upāya kosalla*) is an important concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This concept is mentioned in some sutras such as the Lotus Sutra, Prajñā Pāramitā, Vimalakīrti and Upāyakāśalya Sūtra. It is understood in different ways, depending on the context.

Upāya terms there are several times appeared in the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism but these are massively out numbered by the usage in early Mahāyāna texts. "Since the Pali usage is so limited which considers the relationship between the Mahāyāna concept of skillful means and the general character of early Buddhism."

Often, skillful means are understood as a means to use by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in teaching the Dhamma to the various objects, depending on their motives, bringing them to enlightenment in a way the most effective.

As such, anyone uses skillful means is the one who can know the motives and the minds of those who need the teachings, thereby imparting them the proper teachings and methods according to their abilities. In other words, the skillful practitioner is a person who has enough wisdom and compassion: the wisdom of seeing the source of the being and passing on to them the proper teachings.

"Wisdom-perfection is a Bodhisattva's Mother,  
his father is expedient method  
For the teachers of all living beings come  
Only from these two."

In Mahayana Buddhism, wisdom, compassion and skillful means are the three indispensable qualities of a Bodhisattva. To say this, wisdom is content, compassion is the expression of that content, and skillful means are the conversion of content into a specific action. In Bodhisattva bhāṣya, Nagarjuna regards compassion as the result of the combination of wisdom and skillful means: "The wisdom of the Noble One is the mother of the Bodhisattvas, the means of skillfulness is their father, and their compassion is their daughter."

The various teachings of the Buddha, which are presented through some Mahāyāna sutras, are considered applying skillful means. In the Dasabhūmika-sūtra, when it reaches the seventh position is the dūra-gamā bhūmi, a Bodhisattva will have sufficient means to educate beings. In addition, in real life, this concept is understood in different directions, and also be "practiced" with different "purposes".

The term "skillful means" appears little in the Nikāya. In the Theragāthā of the Subcontinent, this term is mentioned in a verse:

"Rama-īyā me ku-ikā,  
Saddhādeyyā manoramā;  
Na me attho kumārīhi,  
Yesā attho tahi-gacchatha nāriyo"ti.  
"But with the help of the Buddha,  
The Kinsman of the Sun, so skilled in means,



*I practiced wisely,  
And extracted any attachment to being reborn from my mind."*

*This concept also appears in the Saṅgīti Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. If we understand the skillful means of teaching the different "skillful" of the Buddha, then this appeared in the Nikāya. In the Nikāya, we see that the Buddha used various methods to teach beings; these methods are sometimes the teachings of moral rules, sometimes pointing out specific practices, sometimes with metaphorical tales, sometimes miraculous manifestations and sometimes by silence.*

**KEYWORDS –** Mahāyāna Buddhism , Lotus Sutra, Prajñā Pāramitā, Vimalakirti.

## INTRODUCTION

A skillful means can not be applied to all cases and to all, so that the Buddha had created 84 thousand methods or 84 thousand means and also 84,000 doors to go into the house of enlightenment. We meditate, recite the Buddha, chanting, following the Four Noble Truths, the cause of all things, or Dhammapada, all means. So, all the methods of cultivation in this world are merely means, the mysterious remedies that help sentient beings to destroy dark darkness, to see the light of Truth. But the means is not the end. The means is the cause the end is the result. The means is not truth but the end is true. The greatest ignorance of man is to take the means as the end. Therefore, the Buddhist monk just based on by the means to reach the end, to follow the finger to see the moon.

But do not mislead the means, do not look at your fingers and forget the moon and do not accept the scriptures as the Truth. Do not look for the finger to show the moon but forget the great light coming from the moon. The practitioner has reached the end of the means to remove means, patients do not sick must stop medicine, To the other side, you have to leave the boat, must go to the shore of enlightenment, do not take the raft on the shoulder but add heavy suffering.

The Buddha is an altruistic teacher, who affirmed his birth because he wanted to bring happiness to gods and humans. The Buddha was born only to show that the Buddha was aware of Buddha's life with him that escape from the birth of suffering. This is determined by the Lotus Sutra. The nostalgia of the Buddhas is: "to declare the beings enter the Buddha wisdom". The Buddha used a very specific image to show us his dharma. These are a metaphor the finger is the moon.

All the teachings of the Buddha taught as the finger show to the moon. Fingers are the means, the moon is the truth, is true that the Buddha realized. What Buddha realized the profound miracle is what all beings have. "Sentient beings have the Buddha nature". To show for beings Buddha nature, Buddha's knowledge, the Buddha himself has used countless means to show it.

Thus, the Buddha Dharma is the means, or the other word means, the means is teaching of the Buddha. From this we can say that all the teachings of the Buddha are only means. For the purpose of reaching the ends of all beings that the Buddha has used countless means. But many beings do not know how the means of Dharma of the Buddha? Which insisted on the wrong embrace as people across the river everyone embraced the boat did not leave the docks. But many people also take advantage of the Convenient Method to seek fame.

In Sanskrit, the means is Upaya, which means that the methods applied are based on the basis, social situation, and level of all sentient beings to establish and bringing beings into the path to enlightenment is to testify Truth.

The Truth can only be realized without being able to express in the language or scriptures. So, the teachings of the Buddha do not have the purpose of presenting the Truth but merely want to use the means to guide the wise practitioner to reach the ultimate goal by himself to attain Truth.

In short, what Tathagata teach so far is just the means of teaching, not the truth. What is the truth that the Buddha wants to say here? It is the ultimate goal of a cultivator to become a Buddha, not a Srāvakayāna, a Pratyekabuddha or a Bodhisattva. Therefore, the Buddha said that 'the Lotus Sutra is a great

cause of human nature that Tathagata appears in the world to tell people that everyone can become a Buddha because they already have Buddha nature. This is the particular thought of the Lotus.

In chapter one, the conditions of this sutra are described. After talking about the cause and conditions, the introduction of the chapter means, it is the chapter important, essential of sutra. The skillful means is mentioned in many Mahayana sutras, and there are three sutras emphasizing this concept: the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra, and the Upāyakauśalya Sūtra. The concept of means only to find out in these three sutras. And the presentation here is just a summary.

### 1. Skillful means in the Saddharmapuṣṭarīka Sūtra

The Lotus Sutra is especially important for Mahayana Buddhism, and can be said to be one of the most popular sutras. In the Lotus Sutra mentioned a number of important teachings such as One Vehicle, Buddha nature and means. The Lotus Sutra expresses a sectarian harmony, wishing to bring all the sects and "yanas" to a source. Srāvakayāna, Pratyekabuddha and Bodhisattvas are just means to lead to the Buddha; and so there is nothing contradictory but temporary means on the path of practice.

The Story of the Lotus Sutra tells the story of the house being burned while the sons of the emperor keep on playing drunk inside. The prince wanted to save the children from the flames and told them to go out and promised them "deer, goat and buffalo vehicle". These different "vehicles" are just the means to get the children in the burning firehouse out. But when they got out of the firehouse, he gave them the same vehicles, big and beautiful.

The Lotus Sutra says that the final result of a practitioner is Buddhahood because all beings have Buddha-nature. But the path of the practitioner can be different because of the difference in the mind.

Because the fundamental ability of beings are not the same, the Buddha had to use different means of education. These methods will ultimately lead to a common goal, that of the Buddha. The Buddha says, 'Sāriputra, the Buddhas in the past used countless skillful means, different principles and conditions, using comparative and illustrative words to explain the teachings because benefits of beings. All living beings, by listening to the teachings of the Buddhas, can finally attain the necessary attainment.'

The Lotus Sutra presents by many different stories and metaphors to refer to the skillfulness of the means of the Buddhas. The path of reincarnation, beings must sometimes need temporary stops. There are teachings just as "the Citadel is manifested" for beings resting, then continue the journey to find the Buddha. Dhamma is "medicinal herbs", can heal the suffering of beings, but to use the "medicine" that is also the means.

The Lotus Sutra states that the appearance of the Buddhas in this world are to open up the "Buddha knowledge" for all sentient beings, to help beings see their Buddha-nature and the appearance of the Buddha in the world is a means for the benefit of beings:

Thus, we have come to realize that the skillful means has been affirmed by the Buddha in the means of the Lotus Sutra. So, everyone should find more deeply the skillful means in the Lotus Sutra and its application in the course of the practice and propagation of the bodyself.

### 2. Skillful means in the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra

The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra mentions some important doctrines, such as emptiness, duality, non-duality, and means, as well as other basic teachings such as impermanence, suffering and non-self. The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra presents a way of practicing Buddhism outside the monastic life. In other words, the Mahayana Sutra presents the way of practicing Dharma in mundane life, without barriers in any form and limit or precept.

Like the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra devotes a chapter to tell about the doctrine of means. However, it is also recognized that the "means" of the spirit is present throughout this sutra. The opening paragraph of chapter Means of Introduction to the Venerable Vimalakirti, the protagonist, is also considered to be a skillful implementer of the means: *"At that time, there lived in the great city of Vaisali a certain Licchavi, Vimalakirti by name. Having served the ancient Buddhas, he had generated the roots of*

*virtue by honoring them and making offerings to them. He had attained tolerance as well as eloquence. He played with the great superknowledges. He had attained the power of incantations and the fearlessnesses. He had conquered all demons and opponents. He had penetrated the profound way of the Dharma. He was liberated through the transcendence of wisdom. Having integrated his realization with skill in liberative technique, he was expert in knowing the thoughts and actions of living beings. Knowing the strength or weakness of their faculties, and being gifted with unrivaled eloquence, he taught the Dharma appropriately to each. Having applied himself energetically to the Mahayana, he understood it and accomplished his tasks with great finesse. He lived with the deportment of a Buddha, and his superior intelligence was as wide as an ocean. He was praised, honored, and commended by all the Buddhas and was respected by Indra, Brahma, and all the Lokapalas. In order to develop living beings with his skill in liberative technique, he lived in the great city of Vaisali."*

Means is different way to convert beings. The Vimalakirti is referred to as a Bodhisattva at home in the attainment of the mundane life, but he understands and practices the Dharma ultimately; and able to use "countless means to teach Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings." His appearance as a layman, and good deeds such as participating in life's work, are the means by which he can transmit the teachings of the Buddha and benefit the living:

*"He wore the white clothes of the layman, yet lived impeccably like a religious devotee. He lived at home, but remained aloof from the realm of desire, the realm of pure matter, and the immaterial realm...He visited the fashionable heterodox teachers, yet always kept unswerving loyalty to the Buddha. He understood the mundane and transcendental sciences and esoteric practices, yet always took pleasure in the delights of the Dharma..."*

*"To train living beings, he would appear at crossroads and on street corners, and to protect them he participated in government. To turn people away from the Hinayana and to engage them in the Mahayana, he appeared among listeners and teachers of the Dharma. To develop children, he visited all the schools. To demonstrate the evils of desire, he even entered the brothels. To establish drunkards in correct mindfulness, he entered all the cabarets..."*

Bodhisattva goes into life with immeasurable compassion. With "wisdom means", Bodhisattva realized that being with beings is "non-dual". The suffering of others, as well as the suffering of oneself. Because beings are suffering Bodhisattva also are suffering, Whenever diseases of sentient beings are healed, the Bodhisattvas will heal. In other words, bodhisattvas' illness is a means by which one can show the beings suffering, the cause and the way to escape from suffering: Craving for the existence, ignorance and desire are the source of my illness. Since all beings are sick, I am sick. Everywhere beings reach the spot without disease, my disease will run out. Why? Bodhisattva, for sentient beings that go into life and death. If all sentient beings are free from suffering illness, the Bodhisattva is no longer sick. For example, the chief has only one child; When the child is sick, his parents are also sick. If it heals, his parents are fine. Also, Bodhisattva loves sentient beings as parents love children, so they are sick, the Bodhisattvas are sick; When they are gone, Bodhisattva is healthy.

Because the nature and karmic force of beings in the world are not the same, there is no form of education for all classes, no single teaching for all. Because of the suffering of beings with all kinds of images, the Bodhisattva comes into life with different means to benefit beings. And because the conditions of the nation are not the same, the deeds of the Bodhisattvas do not have the same pattern.

The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra also sees the means as a way to help the practitioner get out of attachment and clinging. Whether in the sweetness of meditation or the results of the practice are considered binding: "Therefore, Bodhisattva not to bind himself. What is bound? What is open-minded? Attending the sweetness of meditation is the bondage of the Bodhisattva. By means of rebirth, that is the bodhisattva untied. Again, no means of wisdom are bound. As mentioned above, the Vimalakirti emphasizes the practice of Buddhism in the daily life of the world.

### 3. Skilful means in the Upāyakaśālyā Sūtra.

In the Upāyakaśālyā Sūtra, the means can be divided into two parts: the life of Shakyamuni is a manifestation of skillful means, and skillful means are the special deeds of the Bodhisattvas.

According to this, the life of the Buddha from entering the womb until Nirvana is a process of performing skillful means. The Upāyakaśālyā Sūtra said that the birth of the Buddha into the palace, marriage and later renunciation, are all means.

These events are meant to show that life, whether noble, wealthy and full of pleasure, but the renunciation, enlightenment into Buddha is more noble. The Buddha entered the womb and appeared in the world not because of karma, he appeared because of religious beings. Tathagata has become a Buddha from countless lives, the Buddha under the Bodhi tree is just a skillful means. Or, as the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra, "the Buddha incarnate in this evil year, present to save sentient beings."

The means of bodhisattvas is the ultimate realization of the pāramitā with the desire to attain enlightenment and save sentient beings. The Upāyakaśālyā Sūtra that a Bodhisattva, though giving a small piece of food to an animal, this has to lead the way to enlightenment and the blessing of the living beings. And by skilful means, when the Bodhisattva performs almsgiving work, he also performs the other pāramitā.

At the end of the talk about the means of the Bodhisattvas, the Upāyakaśālyā Sūtra write: "Kāśyapa, the great Bodhisattvas practicing skillful means have countless virtues. Kāśyapa, the great Bodhisattva will do nothing to harm him or harm other people, nor say harming him or harming any one. "Thus, skilful means also do not harm him or hurt other people, and more positive, is to benefit yourself and other one.

However, The Upāyakaśālyā Sūtra recounted some of the issues posed to moral and law challenges, a number of cases, the Bodhisattvas to perform skilful means for the benefit of beings, or for the benefit of the masses.

There is a story that, in a previous life, the Buddha is a Bodhisattva leading a trade delegation 500 people. And one of them was a robber, and he has wanted to kill the merchants to win the fortune. The Bodhisattva knew of the robber's mind and he thought that if he kept silent and let the robber perform the act of killing people, taking the things, he would bear the consequences of hell. And if the Bodhisattva reveals to the trader that the intent of the bandit, the trader will certainly indignant and punish the bandit. So the trader will also bear the consequences of the fall. After many nights of thinking, because of compassion, the Bodhisattva had killed the bandit, so that he and the trade union avoid bad karma, from the evil. This work of the Bodhisattva, is considered a skilful means.

The means of this sutra, as well as some of the cases that we may encounter in the Entering the Dharma realm of the Avataṛsakasūtra, have raised questions about ethics. If commandment no killing of animals has to be applied in every case, then such a killing action with any mind, also becomes false. But Mahayana's ethics are based on compassion, for the benefit of the being or the interests of the masses, so, doing skilful means in many cases is to practice a "moral situation. "

Many of the stories in this sutra pose "difficult situations" between breaking the precepts or harming compassion. That is, if the Bodhisattva practiced it, he would commit transgressions, but if he did not, he would harm compassion. A right or wrong action, as such, must be placed in each specific context or situation, and even the motives of the person who performs the action.

The means here is a flexibility in action to adapt to specific circumstances, based on wisdom and compassion. The bodhisattva perform an action, sometimes that action beyond the precepts, but for the sake of beings, the Bodhisattva decided to do.

The summary of the concept of means is mentioned in the above text, which we can summarize as follows: The means are different ways of teaching the Buddha, depending on the ability and the basis of them to give them appropriate teachings; Buddhism has different yanās, but these are just means to reach the Buddha vehicle.

The means is spirit not to attachment to the path and to attain enlightenment. The means of wisdom is to see the emptiness of the dhammas and to live in the spirit of non-attachment; the birth of the

Buddha in this life is a means for the benefit of beings; the means is to work for the benefit of others; and the means is the ability to deal with difficult situations, between breaking the precepts and harming compassion, between personal interests and the interests of others.

### METHOD OF TEACHING OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddha did not immediately turn the wheel after realization and wait until the request of the Sahamati Devi, is considered a "skillful means" in the beginning of his teaching.

Ariyapariyesanā Sutta for example, beings in the world like the lotus in the lake: a lotus rose out of the water, but also the lotus has not crossed the surface. Being in the same world, there are people "less dusty life, more dusty life, there are intelligences, of dull capacity, gentle nature, evil nature, easy to teach classes, difficult classes, and a few see the danger of reincarnation in the world and the danger of doing wrongdoing. "Because of the different sentient beings, the teachings need to be taught in different ways.

Continue the Buddha teaches the Yasa and his 54 friends. He came to Uruvela and was ordained 30 young men; Then the three Kassapa brothers with their 1000 disciples. These events occurred in the first year after the Buddha's enlightenment. In the second year, he is transform by instruction the Sāriputta and Moggallāna were regarded as important points in his propagation.

We can find many cases of "skillful" of the Buddha in the Buddhist scriptures.

The first, the Buddha transforms the Angulimala. Angulimala is a notorious bandit who has killed countless innocent people. He takes their stringed fingers and to bring it into his neck. The Buddha, because he wanted to convert, so, the Buddha had the power of magic to him. When he saw the Buddha walking in front, Angulimala tried to chase him in the hope of getting his last finger pierced. But he could not keep up with the Buddha.

Despairing, he screamed to Buddha to stop. The Buddha replied that, he had stopped, even though he was walking; and asked if Angulimala had stopped. Then, the Buddha explained that, he stopped by stopping the negative karma, which harmed beings; and advised Angulimala to stop, do not continue killing hominids. Buddha's compassion and skillful way of teaching have influenced Angulimala. Angulimala then went home and attained sainthood.

Another story, the Buddha help Kisa Gotami. Kisa Gotami is saddened when her young son dies. She hugged her son everywhere with the hope of finding someone who could save his poor son. She found to the Buddha.

The Buddha told her that, he would save her child if she asked anywhere for him a handful of mustard seeds in a house where no one had died. Gotami obeyed and looked for the seed of mustard at the request of the Buddha. But she could not find the seed of mustard in a family where no relatives had died and this helped her to understand that death was an unavoidable problem, different is it come sooner or later. Understand that truth, she hugged her son body into the forest buried and returned to the Buddha, to practice to the teaching of the Buddha and later proved holy fruit.

The stories mentioned above are some of the myriad tales related to the skillful ways of the Buddha. These different ways of teaching, but they are based on wisdom and compassion.

### The silence of the Buddha

The Buddha was silent before metaphysical questions, such as: the world is permanent or impermanent, boundless or infinite; life and death are one or the other; Tathagata exists after death or does not exist after death ... In some cases the Buddha also refuses the question of self or not self; and sometimes refuses to answer about the operation of karma.

On the one hand, the "silence of the Buddha" before metaphysical questions can be seen as a "skillful means" in the teachings. In the Samyutta Nikāya, when Vacchagotta asked if man had self or no self, the Buddha was silent on this question. And when Vacchagotta was gone, Ananan asked why the Buddha did not answer his questions, the Buddha replied that, if he answered with a self, it was determined that he

persistent theory permanent; and if he said, there is no self, that means he supports the destruction. So, he was silent. It is also a skillful means.

### DHAMMA IS A MEANS

In the Alagaddūpama Sutta, the Buddha taught that the disciple should apply the dharma to life in a clever and correct way. Dhamma is only a means, using that means for the purpose of freeing suffering, then that person is considered having wisdom.

In the aspect of Buddhism, the story of Buddha's predecessor, emphasizes one thing is that in order to attain Buddhahood, one must go through many bodhicitta practices with the paramita. It is not restricted to monasteries, or in some form. Bodhisattva in the story Precursor, appear in different forms. But whatever form incarnation, a Bodhisattva always shows that there is wisdom, always arises compassion and action with many "skillful means" for the benefit of others.

On the above we learn some skillful means in the Mahayana Canon. As said from the beginning, the term "skillful means" is primarily used in Mahayana Buddhism.

### REFERENCES

- (1) Robert A. F. Thurman translated, *The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*, 1976, The Pennsylvania State University.
- (2) Michael Pye, *Skilful means-A Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Second Edition, Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane, London, 2003.
- (3) Theragāthā, 158, Verses of the Senior Monks, Chapter of the Twos, 2.19. Nanda
- (4) Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, Translated from the Chinese of Kumārajīva, *The Lotus Sutra*, Published by Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007.
- (5) Thanissaro Bhikkhu translated from the Pali, *Gotami Sutta*: Sister Gotami, 1998
- (6) The Concept of Upaya in Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1, 1974
- (7) <https://www.buddhanet.net/skilful-means.htm>
- (8) [http://www.ancientdragon.org/dharma/articles/an\\_introduction\\_to\\_skillful\\_means](http://www.ancientdragon.org/dharma/articles/an_introduction_to_skillful_means)



**Nguyen Thi Thuy**

**Ph. D. Research Scholar, Centre for Mahayana Buddhist Studies Department,  
Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India.**