

# **The Buddha's Compassionate Use of Skillful Means Leading to Awakening**

**By Quah Chi Boon**

## **Introduction**

In this article, I will discuss how the profound Buddha Dharma was disseminated specifically through the use of skillful or expedient means to help sentient beings (gods and humans) with diverse mental capacities and abilities to understand the teachings.

My objectives here are therefore threefold:

- i. To outline and describe the principal means or tools used such as parables and similes to explain the Dharma.
- ii. To show in a specific way why the Buddha was called the "Peerless Physician".
- iii. To show that the use of skillful means is the way forward for a better world culturally, personally and socially.

The use of similes by the Buddha to explain the Dharma has been a regular feature throughout the forty-five years of His ministry.

The Pali and Sanskrit term for simile is 'upama', (f) or 'upamana' (n). The term 'upama' is rendered as likeness, comparison, figure, allegory, parable etc.

The Pali texts of Early Buddhism and the Sanskrit texts of Mahayana are filled with various examples of similes throughout. The sole purpose of the use of similes is to facilitate the understanding of the listeners of this profound Dharma.

The following three similes were used by the then Bodhisattva to explain to his friends why he had abandoned asceticism as it was not conducive to the cultivation towards liberation.

## **The Use of Similes Before the Buddha's Enlightenment**

When the Buddha Śākyamuni, the peerless physician, the incomparable teacher of men and gods, made use of parables and similes to help sentient beings understand the profound Dharma, he was just continuing that which he had already practiced earlier in the use of similes to understand his own practice as a Bodhisattva before his awakening.

### **The First Simile<sup>1</sup>**

Two pieces of wet sappy wood cannot produce fire by being rubbed together. Just so, while still indulging in sensual desires, however strenuous someone strives, he is incapable of wisdom, insight and awakening.

### **The Second Simile<sup>2</sup>**

Even if the sycamore log is not soaked in water but still green and sappy being freshly cut from the tree, it will not produce any fire by friction, Just so, even if he has abandoned the object of sensual desires such as wife and family not near him, if he still delights in thoughts of passionate pleasure and lustful desires still arise in him, he is incapable of wisdom, insight or full awakening.

### **The Third Simile<sup>3</sup>**

Dry sapless logs of wood not soaked in water will kindle fire when rubbed against one another. Similarly, having abandoned objects to sensual desires and weaned himself of lustful thoughts and cravings, he is capable of attaining wisdom, insight and full awakening.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., "Maha-Saccaka Sutta: The Longer Discourse to Saccaka," Web, 3 March. 2016. <<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.036.than.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid: According to the commentary, this simile has a reference to the practices of Brahma Dhammīla ascetics. Those Brahmins led a holy ascetic life from youth to the age of forty-eight, but then they went back to married life in order to preserve the continuity of their clan. Thus while they were practicing the holy life, they would have been tainted with lustful thoughts.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## **The Use of Similes after the Buddha's Enlightenment**

With earnest request from Mahā Brahmā Sahampati to teach the Dharma to the world, Śākyamuni Buddha surveyed the world with his divine eyes and saw that beings with little dust in their eyes but without Dharma would perish. The use of parables and similes by the Buddha begins here as follows:-

This simile is about beings similar to lotuses, blue, red or white lotuses in a pond. Some lotuses are born in the water, grow in the water, remain immersed in the water and thrive; some grow in the water and emerged out of the water, unstained by the water.

This simile expresses the different capacities of living beings.<sup>4</sup> The Buddha surveyed the world and saw beings in their various capacities. He then declared this great compassionate proclamation: "Open to them are the Doors to the Deathless state. Let those who have ears repose confidence."<sup>5</sup> With this great proclamation, he sought ways and means (know-how) to help beings to full awakening.

## **Skillful Means in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Tradition**

The Pali term 'skillful means' is Upaya Kosalla ( Sanskrit is Upaya-kausalya). The meaning of upaya is 'means, devices, stratagems, and kausalya (Pali: kosalla) means skilful in, clever in, etc.

Literally and as a whole it is translated as skill in means, skill in devices, or skilful (expedient) means.

"The Buddha's words were medicine for a given sickness at a given time, always infinitely adaptable to the conditions of the audience".

In other words, skilful means refers to the various teaching styles and pedagogical techniques used to communicate the Dharma to help beings on the path to awakening.

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<sup>4</sup> Narada Maha Thera, *The Buddha and his Teachings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.,( K.Lumpur: BMSM 1977), p.63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## **Skillful Means in the Pāli Sutta**

The Buddha had used skillful means in teaching his disciples. He will cite examples or things which his disciples would be familiar with in his discourse to them thus enhancing their understanding of the Dharma.

### **Examples of Skillful Means in the Pāli Text**

#### **Sona, the Musician<sup>6</sup>**

The Buddha's dialogue with Sona. Sona was a former musician who became a monk and had difficulty with his meditation. So he wanted to give up monkhood. The Buddha made him recall that the string of his musical instrument had to be neither too tight nor too loose in order to produce a harmonious sound. In the same way, we should practice meditation with equipoise which Sona was very familiar. Sona had to avoid the extremes of pushing too hard on one hand and lethargy on the other. Here the Buddha used the example of the lute and the string to lead Sona to enlightenment. This teaching is applicable to us in our daily work.

#### **The Horse Trainer<sup>7</sup>**

The Buddha was asked by a horse trainer how he trained gods and men. The Buddha counter questioned on how the horse trainer trained his horses. After listening to the horse trainer, the Buddha said he used similar methods to train gods and men.

The Buddha trained them both by gentle and harsh methods and in the gentle method he would tell them all the benefits of Dharma how they would get better rebirth and freedom from suffering if they practice the Dharma. He also used the harsh method by telling them that if they do not practice Dharma they may reborn in hell or as animal and so forth. If he cannot train them, he ignored them, tantamount to killing them. So the Buddha used various explicit methods.

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Peter Della Santina. *Skillful Means in the Pāli Suttas*. Transcribed Lecture Notes for International Buddhist College Students, 2005, p.5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Peter Della Santina, p.7.

Thus, we see that it is recorded in the Pāli Text that the Buddha had made good use of expedient devices and we can say confidently that he was very successful in gaining many disciples.

### **Skillful Means in the Mahāyāna Text**

‘Skillful means’ is the pivotal principle of Mahayana Buddhism and is one of the principal themes of the Lotus Sutra.

#### **The Lotus Sūtra**

It can be said that the first Turning of the Wheel of Law is the preaching of the Four Noble Truths at Varanasi. The second great Turning of the Wheel of Law is the preaching of the most profound Lotus Sūtra, the foundation Sūtra of the Mahāyāna.

The mission of the profound Dharma is aimed towards the eradication of suffering and liberating beings to Nirvana.

The Bodhisattvas are instructed and watched over by the Buddhas who have them in mind. Here, it was the opportune prophesy by Śākyamuni Buddha that Venerable Śāriputra will in future become a Buddha by the name title of Buddha Flower Light.<sup>8</sup> All the other beings rejoice with Venerable Śāriputra and that all beings with Buddha nature and Arahants will finally achieve Buddhahood. The Buddha used a parable to explain to Śāriputra and others to dispel their doubts and regrets, especially that Śāriputra had reproached himself for not entering into the Buddhayāna – Buddhahood.

The parables and similes were expounded as an expedient means by all previous Buddhas on the appropriateness of the vehicles in accord with the capability of the sentient beings and Buddha Śākyamuni expounded thus the Parable of the Burning House. The Buddha by tactful means lures all sentient beings forth and by these three vehicles –the Śrāvaka, Paccekabuddha and Bodhisattva vehicles, beings will be free independent and self-reliant.

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<sup>8</sup> Fujiwara no Motohira, *The Threefold Lotus Sutra: A Parable*, Trans., Bunno Kato, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., (Tokyo: Kosei 1975), p.81.

## **The Parable of the ‘Burning House’<sup>9</sup>**

Śāriputra rejoiced over the prediction of his Buddhahood by the Buddha but requested the Buddha to explain further to the others over the depth of his sermon. Thus Śākyamuni Buddha taught the parable of the “Burning House”.

There was a great elder, His dilapidated house was enormous but with only a single narrow door. Fire broke out and the elder begged his many children to come out but they were busy playing inside.

Because of the narrow door, he thought he would not be able to bring all the children out. He thought of some expedient devices to bring them out. He remembered that his children all like carts.

He called out to them that he had goat, deer and bullock carts that they liked. The children rushed out and escaped the burning house.

The elder instead of ordinary carts gave the best carts decorated with jewels. The children drove them away happily.

The message of the parable is :-

The great elder is the Buddha, the children are sentient beings, the ordinary people, the rundown house is our human society and the burning house is our physical and mental desires which is the cause of suffering.

One important lesson is the way the elder first thought of is to make the children to come out by themselves. Thus, if the children come out of the fire by their will or own accord they will not go back into the burning house.

If they depend on the Buddhas to save them they may lack desire and effort to cultivate their hearts and mind and to correct their conduct.

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Peter Della Santina, p.9.

Self-cultivation and self-practice through one's own free will is the way salvation is achieved.

We need to cast away the little self or ego. Faith that comes from the power within is none other than our own will and effort in taking refuge in that great life force of the universe which is the Buddha.

One of the most admirable and best known passages in the entire Mahayana Buddhist Canon is in Chapter Three:-

Now this triple world  
All is my domain;  
The living beings in it  
All are my sons.  
But now this place  
Abound with distresses;  
And I alone  
Am able to save and protect them.

What the Buddha is saying here is that there is no deliverance without casting away the self and merging with the Buddha. If we can really cast away ourselves, we may find in ourselves the great life-force of the universe that lives in all things. Then if we can gaze upon the life-force in ourselves that lives throughout the universe, our mind can in an instant go anywhere throughout that universe, and thus we may grasp the sense of what it means for the universe to be ours.

It is in this way that the mind becomes truly free. We are not hindered by anything, and acting as we will, we are always in harmony with the truth, and our acts give life to ourselves and all people (including our loved ones).

This is true compassion. It is Buddhahood itself. Coming back to the story of the ‘burning house’, the carts are the devices and the various vehicles (yānas), the Śrāvakayāna, the Pacceka Buddhayāna and the Bodhisattvayāna. The best of all yānas is the Buddhayāna. So the elder gave each of his children the most appropriate vehicle that leads to Buddhahood.

### **The Parable of the Burning House - Its Great Implications**

The rich man first used 3 types of carriages to entice his sons, but later gave them just the large carriage adorned with jewels, the safest, most comfortable kind of all.

The Buddha does the same. First, he preaches the three vehicles to attract and guide living being, but later he employs just the Great Vehicle to save them.

The rationale for this is that the Buddha possesses measureless wisdom, power, freedom from fear, the storehouse of the law. He is capable of giving to all living beings, the law of the Great Vehicle but not all are capable of receiving it.

Thus the Buddhas employ the power of expedient means. And because they do so, they make distinctions in the one Buddha vehicle and preach it as three vehicles.

After seeing that all living beings have escaped from the threefold world, the Buddha then gives the delightful gifts of the meditation, emancipation and so forth of the Buddhas – all these are uniform in characteristics, in types, praised by the sages and capable of producing pure, wonderful and supreme delight.

### **The Parable of The Magic City<sup>10</sup>**

In the parable, the leader, a man of many expedients, thinks to himself, what a pity that they the travellers should abandon the many rare treasures they are seeking and want to turn around and go back. Having had this thought he resorts to the power of expedient means and when they have gone far ahead along the steep road, conjures up a city. He says to the group,

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Peter Della Santina, *Skillfull Means as used in the Lotus Sutra*, Transcribed Lectures for IBC Students, 2005, p.11-12.



‘Don’t be afraid! You must not turn back, for now here is a great city where you can stop, rest, and do just as you please.’ If you enter this city, you will be completely at ease and tranquil. Then later, if you feel you can go on to the place where the treasure is, you can leave the city.

The Buddha knows that the minds of living beings are timid, weak and lowly, and so using the power of expedient means, he preaches two nirvāṇas in order to provide a resting place along the road. The Buddha is like that leader who in order to provide a place to rest, conjured up a great city and then when he knew that the travellers were already rested said to them, “The place where the treasure is nearby. This city is not real. It is merely something I conjured up.” The Buddha encouraged all to attain to Buddhahood and in the Lotus Sūtra the Buddha has said that all arahats will eventually become Buddhas.

### **The Parable of the Gem in the Knot<sup>11</sup>**

The Buddha told Mañjuśrī, suppose that there is a powerful wheel-turning sage king who wants to use his might to subdue other countries but the petty rulers will not heed his commands. At that time when the attacks began and if the king sees any of his forces won distinction in battle, he is greatly delighted and immediately rewards them with precious objects. Only the bright jewel that is in his top knot he does not give away as giving it will cause great alarm.

The Buddha is the same in that he uses the power of meditation and wisdom to win Dharma lands and become King of the threefold world. But the devil kings are not submissive.

The sage troops engage them in battle and won with distinction. The Buddha is delighted and preaches various sutras causing their hearts to be joyous culminating in their attainment of nirvāṇa. But he does not preach the Lotus Sūtra to them. When he sees a truly distinguished soldier he gives the jewel in the top knot away.

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<sup>11</sup> Dr. Peter Della Santina, *Skillfull Means as used in the Lotus Sutra*, Transcribed Lectures for IBC Students, 2005.

## **The Parable of the Lost Son<sup>12</sup>**

Chapter 4 of the Lotus Sūtra tells about a lost son who lived in poverty and ignorant of his origin. His wealthy father searched for him to hand him his rich inheritance but in futile.

The son at the end of his wanderings happened upon this place at his father's house. Seeing the splendour of the household and the respect the servants have for the master of the house, it touched on his inferiority and attempts to flee, but his father recognizes him and tried to get him back but failed. Later the father sent his men dressed in poor clothes and persuaded him to take up a job in his cowshed. As time passed, the son becomes the manager.

He began to appreciate his own capacity and ability of his work and this time the father told him the truth and the son accepted the inheritance and his nobility. Similarly, the Lotus Sūtra points out that we are all children of the Buddha who possess the Buddha nature and eventually will inherit Buddhahood. But due to our limiting beliefs, we shy away from acceptance.

The Buddha has set us disciplines to gradually develop and expand our vision towards the great awakening to Buddhahood.

## **The Mahāyāna Concept Of The Buddha**

This is another principal theme in the Lotus Sūtra. In the Theravāda, we find the Buddha is credited with the power to produce emanations for the edification of living beings. The many passages suggest the transcendental, supramundane and inconceivable nature of the Buddha.

## **The Transcendental or Eternal Buddha**

The Mahāyāna had a greater conception of the nature of the Buddha. From the Lotus Sūtra, it suggests as a whole a different concept of the Buddha in the sense of an expansion of the qualities of being extraordinary or as supramundane as stated in Theravāda.

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<sup>12</sup> Nikkyo Niwano, *A Guide to the Threefold Lotus Sutra: Faith Discernment*, translated by Eugene Langston 1<sup>st</sup> ed., (Tokyo: Kosei 1981), p. 51-57.

Here, Śākyamuni Buddha is considered one in the many manifestation of the Eternal Buddha. The birth, His Enlightenment, parinirvāṇa is just a drama put by the eternal Buddha for the emancipation of living beings.

The Lotus Sūtra, Chapter 16, advances the above idea through this parable of the wise physician. In this parable, a well-qualified and famous physician who has been away from home for a long time returns to find that his sons have taken poison and became seriously ill. He prepared the appropriate medicine for his sons. Some immediately took it and are cured of their illness. Others though anxious for their father's return, but were too deeply affected refused the cure. The father devised a way or expedient means. He told his sons, *'I am getting old, but have to go away to settle the last piece of business in a neighbouring land.'* After he went away he had someone sent a note that he had died in the foreign land. All his sons grieved especially those who were still seriously afflicted with illness. They lamented that if the father were here, they could be cured but then they remembered the medicine. They took it and were cured. The father came back and was happily reunited with the children.

The message is that if the Buddha had lived for an eon or for eternity, and if we know the where about of him we would not strive with diligence in our practice because we can always go to see him. So the lesson is that the Buddha parinirvāṇa is just an expedient device to get people into urgent practice. The poisons are greed, hatred and delusion and the remedy is the sublime Dhamma. The Sūtra says that the Buddha is actually always there with us. The historical Buddha Śākyamuni was just a manifestation of the Buddha. He was just an appearance of the transcendental Buddha.

### **The Mahāyāna Concept of the Three Dimensions of Buddha**

The Lotus Sūtra and Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra suggest the doctrine of Trikāya:-

The Dhammakāya – it is transcendental, the truth body is beyond forms and names. It exists simultaneously with the Sambhogakāya and Nirmāṇakāya.

The Sambhogakāya – it is celestial, the bliss body manifests itself only to the spiritually advanced in the form of Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara.

The Nirmāṇakāya – it is terrestrial, the transformational that appears in countless forms like Buddha Śākyamuni, a drunkard, gambler and bodhisattvas who can assume form of inanimate things like food, clothing, medicine, a bridge, road and others.

Śāntideva in his book on the Practice of the Bodhisattva where he expounds beautifully that he prays that he may become food for the hungry, medicine for the ill and shelter for the homeless. Our Śākyamuni Buddha manifested himself in human form. He can manifest in different forms to teach the Truth. Thus the three dimensional nature of Buddhahood reflects freedom.

### **The Importance of Skillful Means in the Understanding and Spreading of Buddha's Teachings**

The Buddha taught the doctrine of the three vehicles earlier as the followers were not ready for the highest truth.

Therefore, he had to employ what he terms as an expedient means in order to lead them gradually along the road to greater understanding.

He then illustrates his point through the famous parable of the burning house.

1) The expedient means thus helped many to understand the doctrine and thus many became protectors and propagators of the Dharma.<sup>13</sup>

2) The passing away of the Buddha is also another expedient means to encourage the followers to make urgent effort to strive for liberation. This is the power of the transcendental Buddha.

3) With the aid of expedient means the Theravāda Sūtras and Lotus Sūtra could be explained in a clearer manner for understanding and practice. The profound effect of this is that the religious and cultural life of the countries of eastern Asia were greatly influenced.

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<sup>13</sup> In chapter 15 of the Lotus Sutra, we are told how a vast multitude of bodhisattvas spring up from the earth in a miraculous manner in order that they may undertake the task of transmitting and protecting the teaching of the Buddha.

4) All the beautiful expedient means which incorporates memorable parables and similes and others were born from the great compassion of the Buddha. Thus, this compassion with wisdom and great tactfulness influence many beings to walk the path to Buddhahood.

5) Using skillful means the Buddha help the cultivators to have a correct attitude, conduct and thus nurture the spirit of self-reliance. The expounding of Buddha nature in us gives relevance to “Dharma Teacher” especially to women who help each other to grow in Buddha Dharma. All are learners and teachers in social standing.

Without exception through the explanation from the use of expedient means like parables, the Buddha stressed the quality of egalitarianism where all sexes are capable of Buddhahood and also without rank or social standing in society all can achieve the great awakening.

This can be verified when one centers on a Bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara also known as Kuan-Yin in China, Kannon in Japan and Chengrizi in Tibet.

This great compassionate Bodhisattva is a source of joy for all levels and walks of life for her selfless assistance.

The renown simile in the Alagaddupama Sutra (MN. 22) describes the teaching as ‘upaya’ in the form of a raft for the purpose of crossing a river. Here, skillful means of the Alagaddupama Sutra reminds us that the Dharma is not a static set of dogmas and rules but is an expedient method.

It is this dynamic offering of guidelines and lessons that we can apply to whatever situation we find ourselves in culturally, personally and socially.

And just as the raft of Dharma has to be used for crossing over, and not to be retained, so should the adept eventually abandon even right mental objects (such as the desire for calm and insight).

## **Conclusion**

The excellent practice of using skillful means by world religious leaders to spread their message to their followers leading them to perfect happiness has been seen during the past few thousand years.

One interesting feature is that the stories, parables, similes, use of metaphors, and many other expedient means used have become timeless moral classics especially the parables that gave moral messages to humankind.

In the present turbulent world, what is needed is that new innovative skillful means should be developed and used for the benefit of mankind especially in resolving religious egotism, hatred, confusion and wars.

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