

## Three kinds of skilful means (1 of 3)

Source: **SD 30.8 *Upāya*: skilful means, bringing the truth to the level of the people for their benefit and liberation**<sup>1</sup> by Piya Tan © 2009.

**3.4 OCCASIONS FOR SKILFUL MEANS.** We will now look at some examples of skilful means used by the Buddha. We shall group them into three kinds of skilful means, that is, of body [3.4.1], of speech [3.4.2], and of mind [3.4.3]. It should be noted that in all such examples, the dynamics underlying the skilful means is that of instruction (*anusāsana*), that is, converting the other party to the Dharma, even to awakening itself.

### 3.4.1 Skilful means of body

**3.4.1.1 THE “TIRING” THAT INSPIRE SAMVEGA.** There are a number of occasions when the Buddha uses his physical body, as it were, to instruct the audience. We shall look at two of the best known examples of such skilful means, that is, the conversions of Āṅguli, māla, of Vakkali, and of Kisā Gotamī. Both these stories show how the Buddha “tires out” (*kilamati*) the person, which is the commentarial narrator’s expression for inspiring samvega in him.<sup>2</sup>

(A) **ĀṅGULI, MĀLA’S CONVERSION.** The conversion of the serial killer, the bandit Āṅgulimāla, is recorded in detail in **the Āṅguli, māla Sutta** (M 86). The discourse records how the bandit, seeing the Buddha, stalks him, and then runs after him to attack him, but the Buddha is always some distance ahead of Āṅgulimāla. Each time, when he thinks he has reached the Buddha, he finds himself to be behind him, *the earth seems to have turned around*, as it were. Physically exhausted and befuddled by his inability to reach up to the Buddha (that is, his state of “tiring,” *kilamana, bhāva*),<sup>3</sup> Āṅgulimāla shouts at the Buddha, telling him to “stop.”

The Buddha then turns around to face Āṅgulimāla and says these “**earth-turning**” words: “I have stopped, Āṅgulimāla! You stop, too!” (*ṭhito ahaṃ Āṅgulimāla, tvaṃ tiṭṭhā ti*).<sup>4</sup> Āṅgulimāla is totally shaken up now, caught in a limbo between the virtual reality of being a serial killer and spiritual realization. While Āṅgulimāla uses the word “stop” in a worldly or conventional sense, the Buddha, using the same word, opens up Āṅgulimāla’s mind to the level of liberation.

There are actually two skilful means at work here. The first is that of the body, that is, the Buddha’s ability to stay out of Āṅgulimāla’s reach, which confuses him because he has always been able to outrun his victims. Secondly, the clincher, is the use of Dharma language, or, more specifically, **the intentional language**<sup>5</sup> the Buddha uses to raise or sublimate Āṅgulimāla’s consciousness. On account of the Buddha’s skilful instruction, Āṅgulimāla attains streamwinning, becomes a monk and in due course gains arhathood.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SD 30.8: <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/30.8-Upaya-Skillful-means.-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> In Vakkali’s conversion [3.4.1.2(B)], the high point is when the Buddha notices that he “tires” (*satthā tassa kilamana, bhāvaṃ ñatvā*, DhA 4:118). Here *kilamana* can be taken as a synonym for *saṃvega* (spiritual urgency): see Mahā Parinibbāna S (D 16), SD 9 (7f).

<sup>3</sup> See n at 3.4.1.1 Intro.

<sup>4</sup> See Miracles, SD 27.5a (7.1.2).

<sup>5</sup> See SD 26.11 (6.5); **Dh 97**, SD 10.6 esp (5); also Piya Tan, “Teaching methods of the Buddha,” Singapore, 2002 ch 18. Download from <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Teaching-Methods-of-the-Buddha.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> M 86/2:97-105 @ SD 5.11.

(B) KISĀ GOTAMĪ'S CONVERSION. The most moving account of the Buddha's skilful means of body is arguably the conversion of Kisā Gotamī (Lean Gotamī). Her concern for her status in a society that places a premium in a woman looking healthy and beautiful, and being fruitful, is devastated when her only child dies. She falls into psychological denial of her loss, and wanders about seeking a cure for her dead child.

The Buddha instructs her to fetch him a handful of mustard seeds, but *it must come from a house where no one has died*. As she goes from house to house throughout the city, the message of impermanence and death is echoed and re-echoed into her being. At the end of her Sisyphean quest, physically exhausted but spiritual awakened,<sup>7</sup> her unconscious defence of denial is raised into consciousness, so that she becomes aware of the true state of things: death is universal.

She goes into the forest and leaves her dead baby in the charnel ground, and returns to the only person who has opened her eyes to true reality. She joins the order as a nun and in due course becomes an arhat.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.4.1.2 THE BUDDHA'S SPECIAL APPEARANCES.

(A) THE 8 ASSEMBLIES. One of the best known examples of the Buddha's skilful means in bodily action for the sake of teaching the Dharma, is his appearances before the 8 assemblies (*aṭṭha parisa*), as recounted in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), thus:

**3.21** <sup>9</sup>Now, Ānanda, there are these eight assemblies?

What are the eight?

- (1) The kshatriya assembly [noble class],
- (2) the brahmin assembly [priestly class],
- (3) the householder assembly,
- (4) the recluse assembly,
- (5) the assembly of the 4 great kings,
- (6) the assembly of the 32 gods,
- (7) Māra's assembly, and
- (8) the assembly of Brahmās.

**3.22** Ānanda, I recall having approached a kshatriya assembly of many hundreds, assembled with them before, and conversed with them before, and engaged in discussion with them before. Whatever their colour was then, so was my colour, too. Whatever was their voice then, so was my voice, too. I instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk.

But even as I was speaking, they knew me not, wondering, "Who could this be who speaks? A deva or a human?"

And having instructed, inspired, roused and gladdened them with Dharma talk, I disappeared. And when I have disappeared, they wondered, "Who is this who has disappeared? A deva or a human?" (D 16,3.21-23/2:110 f), SD 9

The same is then said for each of the other seven kinds of assembly. Although this is apparently an account of a psychic display or miraculous appearance to teach the Dharma, we may also take it as an

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<sup>7</sup> This is her state of "tiring" (*kilamana, bhāva*) or samvega: see n at 3.4.1.1 Intro.

<sup>8</sup> See Kisā Gotamī, SD 43.2 & Miracles, SD 27.5a (8.6.3).

<sup>9</sup> These sections are also in Parisā S (A 8.69/4:307 f) and nearly identical to a passage in Maha Sīhanāda S (M 12,29/1:72).

account of *a skilful means of the body* for the purpose of effectively admonishing a non-Buddhist assembly.<sup>10</sup> This is an example of a skilful teaching method of the Buddha, that is, to wholesomely interact at the level of the audience. We could describe it in Rhys Davids' words in terms of demythologization, as follows:

When speaking on sacrifice to a sacrificial priest, on union with God to an adherent of the current theology, on Brahman claims to superior social rank to a proud Brahman, on mystic insight to a man who trusts in it, on the soul to one who believes in the soul theory, the method followed is always the same. Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner. (D:RD 1899 1: 206 f) [1.1]

(B) VAKKALI'S CONVERSION. The young man Vakkali falls in love with the Buddha's physical beauty, and becomes a monk just to spend his time gazing at the Buddha. When the Buddha enters into the rains retreat, Vakkali despairs at not seeing the Buddha for the three months of the retreat. Out of depression and desperation, he decides to throw himself off Mt Vulture Peak.<sup>11</sup> At that moment, the Buddha sends forth a radiant image or hologram of himself,<sup>12</sup> pronouncing, "Come, Vakkali! Fear not ... I will free you!" Even while in mid-air, Vakkali suppresses his intense joy and reflecting on the Buddha's words, becomes a full-fledged arhat, and descends to the ground.

This is one of the rare stories where the Buddha comes close to the Mahāyāna notion of skilful means where compassion apparently over-rides moral virtue.<sup>13</sup> In his great compassion, the Buddha closely monitors Vakkali's mental state, and at the right moment, heals him forever of his lustful fever. The Buddha, skilfully interceding just at the right time, enables Vakkali to completely let go of *his mentally constructed Buddha*, an object of his desire, so that he meets the true Buddha, and so becomes an arhat.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The miraculous tone of this record was probably the work of the reciters, who had dramatized it to hold the attention of the Indian audience during the recital of this Sutta. Cf Lotus Sutra, ch 25 [5.3].

<sup>11</sup> As in other dramatic intercessions of the Buddha, such as the conversions of Aṅgulimāla and of Kisā Gotamī [3.4.1.1], the high point is when the Buddha notices the person state of "tiring" (*satthā tassa kilamana, bhāvaṃ ñatvā*, DhA 4:118). Here *kilamana* can be taken as a synonym for *saṃvega* (spiritual urgency): see Mahā Parinibbāna S (D 16), SD 9 (7f).

<sup>12</sup> *Attānaṃ dassetuṃ obhāsaṃ muñci*, "he projected [emitted] a radiance to show himself" (DhA 4:118; J 5:289).

<sup>13</sup> This story is actually commentarial. The canonical accounts lack any such angle.

<sup>14</sup> Vakkali Thera Vatthu (DhA 25.11/4:118 f), SD 8.8; cf Vakkali S (S 22.87/3:119-124), SD 8.8; also Ap 2:465 f; AA 1:248-251; ThīA 2:146-150; Vism 4.45/129. See also Miracles, SD 27.5a (7.1.1).