

## Three kinds of skilful means (3 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.

### 3.4.3 Skilful means of mind

The most effective skilful means of the Buddha is surely that of *mind-reading*. One of the most famous of the Buddha's mind-readings is in connection with the conversion of the fire-worshipping matted hair ascetics, **Uruvelā Kassapa** and his two brothers. Nine months after his awakening, that is, during the first year of the ministry, the Buddha visits Kassapa at his ashram outside Uruvelā. Despite the Buddha's performing various psychic wonders (such taming a fierce serpent, parting the waters, etc) Kassapa is not impressed; that is, until finally the Buddha, *reading his mind*, tells him that he thinks himself an arhat, but the reality is that he is *not*. And so Kassapa is moved to awaken to true reality.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Buddha would often survey his audience for those who are spiritually ready for seeing the Dharma. This passage from **the Kuṭṭhi Sutta** (U 5.3) describes the process:

Then the Blessed One, with his mind, surveyed the minds of all those in the assembly, wondering, "Who now here is able to understand the Dharma?" And the Blessed One saw Suppabuddha the leper seated in the assembly and, upon seeing him, it occurred to him, "This one here is able to understand the Dharma."  
(U 5.3/48 f), SD 70.4

Then the Buddha gives the progressive talk, followed in due course by the teaching on of the four noble truths, and just as in the case of Upāli, Suppabuddha the leper, too, becomes a streamwinner [3.4.2.1].<sup>3</sup>

Mind-reading, in the Buddha's case, would work in tandem with the second of three knowledges (*vijjā*), that is, the "divine eye" or knowledge of the death and rebirth of beings according to their karma.<sup>4</sup> A modern approximate of this would be some kind of "regression therapy." The rationale for such a skill or therapy is that much of our current state is conditioned by our past karma. As such, knowing what our past life or lives are would be helpful in uplifting our present life, or solving some persistent present difficulty.<sup>5</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> See Uruvela Pāṭihāriya (Mv 1:15-21 = V 1:24-35), SD 63.2.

<sup>3</sup> For refs to mind-reading by the Buddha and by the early disciples, see Miracles, SD 27.5a (5.3.1).

<sup>4</sup> The 3 knowledges (*te, vijjā*): (1) retrocognition (*pubbe, nivāsānussati, ñāṇa*), that is, the recollection of past lives; (2) the divine eye (*dibba, cakkhu*) or clairvoyance; and (3) the knowledge of the destruction of the mental influxes (*āśava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*), that ends rebirth. (D 3:281; M 1:34; A 1:255, 258, 3:17, 280, 4:421). See Tevijja S (D 13), SD 1.8 Intro 2.2.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted however that the various forms of "regression therapy" are not an exact art (they are by no means even a science yet). At best, a past-life experience could *suggest* possible some past condition or conditions for our present state, but there are likely to be more such conditions, including the present life, that have moulded us. Better than regression therapy is a combination of breath and lovingkindness meditations under the mentorship of an experienced teacher.

### 3.4.4 Testimonies of skilful means

**3.4.4.1** The ancient texts record various testimonies of those who have benefitted from the Buddha's skilful means. A well known case is that of the love-stricken **Nanda**, half-brother of the Buddha, as recorded in **the Nanda Sutta** (U 3.2) and the Commentaries.

After becoming a monk, Nanda still harbours thoughts of his wife-to-be, the beautiful Janapada, *kalyāṇī Nandā*, and yearns to return to lay life. The Buddha, using his psychic power, transports Nanda to the Tāvātimsa heaven so that he sees five hundred divinely beautiful celestial nymphs there. When asked by the Buddha, Nanda admits that these nymphs are far more beautiful than even Janapada, *kalyāṇī*. The Buddha then promises he would win these 500 nymphs if he were to dedicate himself to the holy life. Nanda readily agrees.

On their return to Jetavana, the Buddha recounts the event to the eighty great disciples, and when they question Nanda, he feels greatly ashamed of his lustfulness. Mustering all his spiritual strength, he strives hard and, in no long time, becomes an arhat. Then he approaches the Buddha and absolves him of his promise.<sup>6</sup>

**3.4.4.2 The Nanda Thera, gāthā** (Tha 157 f) records Nanda's reflection and gratitude to the Buddha, thus:

<b>157</b>	<i>Ayoniso manasikārā, maṇḍanaṃ anuyuñjisaṃ; uddhato capalo cāsiṃ, kāma,rāgena aṭṭito.</i>	Because of unwise attention. I was addicted to ornaments; I was conceited and vain, and afflicted by sensual lust.
<b>158</b>	<i>Upāya,kusalenâhaṃ, buddhenâdiccabandhunā; yoniso paṭipajjitvā, bhava cittaṃ udabbahin ti (Tha 157 f)</i>	On account of skilful means by the Buddha, Kinsman of the Sun, I, practising wisely, tore my mind out of existence.

The Commentary explains the key phrase, *upāya,kusalena ... buddhena*, as follows: "On account of the Buddha, the Lord, by his wisdom in the expertise of training those disposed to training" (*upāya,kusalenā ti vineyyānaṃ damanûpāya-c, chekena kovidena buddhena bhagavatā hetu, bhūtena*, ThaA 2:32). The key word is "disposed to training" (*vineyya*).

**3.4.4.3** We also have testimonies in the form of stories, that is, accounts of past events (such as the Jātakas). **The Kaṇha Peta, vatthu** (Pv 2.6) recounts how the Buddha, surveying the world, notices that a certain lay disciple, mourning the death of his son, is ready for attaining the fruit of streamwinning. Approaching the disciple, the Buddha, after asking after him, relates a Jātaka (past-life account) of the ten Kaṇha princes of Dvāravatī, the first of whom, was Vasu, deva.

Vasudeva, overcome by the grief at his son's death, neglects his royal duties. One of his younger brothers, Ghaṭa Paṇḍita (apparently the Bodhisattva himself), decides to heal his brother by resorting to a skilful means (*upāya kosalla*, Pv 99). He feigns madness and wandering the streets, began to ask for the hare in the moon.

**3.4.4.4** Learning of Ghaṭa Paṇḍita's ravings, the rajah Vasudeva approaches him and says that he (Ghaṭa Paṇḍita) is wasting away his sweet life looking for something impossible to obtain (namely, the

<sup>6</sup> U 3.2/21-24; UA 168-179; J 1:91, 182/2:92-94; DhA 1.9/117-123; SnA 273-275.

hare in the moon). It is then that Ghaṭa Paṇḍita points out to Vasudeva that, similarly, pining for a dead son and not living in the present, too, is to waste one's life away. Ghaṭa then admonishes Vasudeva with a discourse on impermanence and so heals him of his sorrows, saying,

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| <p><b>18</b>    <i>So'haṃ abbūḷha, sallo'smi</i><br/>          <i>sīti, bhūto'smi nibbuto</i><br/>          <i>no socāmi na rodāmi</i><br/>          <i>tāva sutvāna bhāsitaṃ</i></p> <p><b>19</b>    <i>Evaṃ karonti sappañña</i><br/>          <i>ye honti anukampakā</i><br/>          <i>vinivattayati sokamhā</i><br/>          <i>ghaṭo jeṭṭhaṃ'va bhātaraṃ</i></p> | <p>Removed is the dart for me,<br/>cool am I, and cooled [extinguished],<br/>I neither sorrow nor weep,<br/>hearing your word.</p> <p>So does this wise<br/>who, out of compassion,<br/>turn us away from grief,<br/>just as Ghāta did his eldest brother. (Pv 2.6/19; PvA 93-99)</p> |
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**3.4.4.5** In all our accounts of the Buddha acts of skilful means, we see that he is firstly, moved by *compassion* to lift others out of their sufferings, or using his *wisdom* to point out the right way to the lost. In other words, both wisdom and compassion are found in the Buddha who uses either of them as an effective tool in liberating other beings. Such skill means can range from something mundane or as simple as going about looking for a handful of mustard seeds (as in the case of Kisā Gotamī) or as complicated as carefully pointing out the error of a brahmin's wrong view as shown in many of the Dīgha Nikāya suttas. The general direction of skilful means is invariably that of going from what the subject *knows* (which is still limited or in error) to the *unknown* higher knowledge that is liberating. Skilful means, in other words, is simply, the Buddha interaction with every being he meets.

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