

# A Study on the Concept of *Upāya-kauśalya* in Early Buddhism

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## 1. Introduction

The *upāya-kauśalya*<sup>1)</sup> (Pali. *upāya-kosalla*; *upāya-kusala*) is a term considered characteristic and significant in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This concept appears in several Mahāyāna sūtras such as *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, or the philosophical categories of *Nāgārjuna*, *Vasubandhu*.<sup>2)</sup> The concept of *upāya-kauśalya* is prevalent in the Mahāyāna sūtras, particularly in the Pāli Canon. However, it has not received the attention of Buddhist scholars.<sup>3)</sup> In fact, the term *upāya-kauśalya* belongs to the post-canonical, but the skillful means used to which it refers, the expediency of adapting speech to the audience, has been of great importance in early Buddhism.<sup>4)</sup> There are various texts in the Pāli Canon and Chinese *Āgamas* that show the thought of employing and promoting the spirit of skillful means, even though the phrase is not present there. The skillful means of basic meaning are preaching the Dharma with flexible content that changes depending on the nature of sentient beings to lead them to the truth and take that as orientation in the teaching of the Dharma.

## 2. The Significance of *Upāya-kauśalya* in the Buddha's Teaching

In the *Nāvasutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta*, the Buddha compared the wise man who knows the Dharma to a skillful boatman who can ferry others across a dangerous river.<sup>5)</sup> In other words, he showed the image of a boat equipped with all the means of solidity to transcend the waterfall of suffering and cross the river of birth and death. The person holding the boat must have adequate intelligence, energy, steadfastness, and skillful means to bring sentient beings to the light of enlightenment.

As one who, having boarded a boat firmly equipped with oars and a rudder, and knowing the method, is skillful and wise, by means of it he causes many others to cross over.<sup>6)</sup> (Saddhatissa

1998, p. 36)

Furthermore, the Buddha's teaching approach is analogous to that of a close relative of the sun of truth.

By skillful means, of Lord Buddha the kinsman of the sun; Appropriately practicing, I drew out my mind from becoming.<sup>7)</sup> (Sāmaṇera Mahinda 2020, p. 55)

The Buddha's teaching method makes it simple for sentient beings to enter the path of insight, breaking the barrier of ignorance. The Buddha's advent in this world is a practical way of supporting creatures in recognizing wholesome and unwholesome deeds, and the truth, albeit silent, is a tremendous discourse.

According to *Jātaka* 478, this story the Buddha told while dwelling at *Jetavana*, about praising of his skillful means.

Friends, the ten powers of a Perfect One, who is in the skillful means. Nanda, who is from a good family, was shown the flock of goddesses and given sainthood. To Cullapanthaka, He gave him a piece of cloth and endowed him the arahant along with the analytical knowledge. To the son of a blacksmith, he showed him a lotus flower and bestowed arhantship on him. In this way, he used various expedients to teach sentient beings.<sup>8)</sup>

### 3. The Historical of *Upāya-Kauśalya*

The Buddha seeks to find the most ideal, conspicuous, and skillful solution to this dilemma. The image of the Buddha served as the foundation for the establishment of the *upāya-kauśalya* during the early Buddhist period. In the idea of integrating two religious traditions with a long history, the image of *Brahmā* requested in the Buddha's discourse is a milestone of the concept of skillful means. Aside from that, the presence of the long-rooted religion's supreme God must compel him to propagate the Dharma, elevating the function and importance of the Buddha's teaching. His hesitancy was not unintentional; rather, it had a purpose, or, to put it another way, it served as a skillful means for those who sincerely wanted to study and practice the Dharma.

The term "*upāya-kauśalya*" (Pali. *upāya-kosalla*; *upāya-kusala*) appears many times in the Pali Canon. The *Saṅgītisutta*<sup>9)</sup> is one such case where the phrase "skillful means" was present. This discourse was given by the *Sāriputta*, with the demonstration of the Buddha resting beside him. Skillful means having been presented with such a group of skills. The

varieties of skillful means in the *Saṅgīṭisutta*, on the other hand, have not yet evolved into unambiguous conceptions or ideas but have simply halted being mentioned as names.

One such case is found in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Three terms of skillful means are utilized here that are comparable to those found in the *Saṅgīṭisutta*. The section discusses the six qualities that offer a bhikkhu the potential to gain the wholesome qualities or the ability to increase the dhammas that have already been achieved.

What six? (1) Here, a bhikkhu is skilled in gain, (2) skilled in loss, (3) skilled in means; (4) he generates desire for the achievement of wholesome qualities not yet achieved; (5) he guards wholesome qualities already achieved; (6) he fulfills his tasks through persistent effort. Possessing these six qualities, a bhikkhu is capable of achieving a wholesome quality that he has not yet achieved and of strengthening a wholesome quality that has already been achieved.<sup>10)</sup> (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2012, p. 492)

#### 4. Conclusion

The Buddha employed a variety of images, illustrations, poems, and verses to inspire his disciples to propagate the Dharma through skillful means during the early Buddhist period. He was the one who pioneered the use of the trinity of compassion, wisdom, and skillful means to disseminate Buddhism throughout India, breaking free from the shackles of slavery, incorrect beliefs, and antiquity. The historical highlight of the concept of skillful means by which this theory was founded and then expanded through the profound thought of the Mahāyāna sūtras is the portrait of *Brahmā* requesting for the Buddha to preach the Dharma to sentient beings. It can be said that understanding the history and teachings of skillful means in early Buddhism will guide Buddhist researchers to the core of the tree in a series of thought forests of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

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#### Notes

- 1) The compound *Upāya-kausalāya* consisting of two words, *upāya* and *kausalāya*; *upāya* is derived from the root *upa√i*, “to go” and connote an “approach”, “that by which one reaches one’s aim, a means or expedient” (MW., p. 214, 1); the term *kausalāya* indicates “cleverness”, “skillfulness”, “experience” (MW., p. 318, 1). 2) Schroeder 2004, pp. 46-47. 3) Pye 2003, p. 1. 4) Gombrich 2006, p. 17. 5) Michael Pye 2003, p. 120. 6) Sn II 321 p. 56: *Yathā pi nāvaṃ daḷhaṃ āruhitvā, piyen’ arittena samaṅgibhūto, so tāraye tattha bahū pi aññe, tatrūpayaññū kusalo mutimā*. 7) Thag 158, p. 21: *upāyakusalena^ahaṃ buddhenādiccabandhunā; Yoniso paṭipajjitvā, bhve cittaṃ udabbahin ti*. 8) Jāt IV p. 224: *Passathāvuso dasabalassa upāya-kosallaṃ, nandassa kulaputtassa*

accharāṇaṃ dassetvā arahattaṃ adāsi, cullapanthakassa pilotikaṃ datvā saha paṭisambhidāhi arahattaṃ adāsi, kammāraputtassa padumaṃ dassetvā arahattaṃ adāsi, evaṃ nānāupāyehi satte vinetīti. 9) DN III p. 220: Tīṇi kosallāni. Āya-kosallaṃ, apāya-kosallaṃ, upāya-kosallaṃ. “Three skills: in going forward, in going down, in means to progress” (Walshe 2012, p. 48) 10) AN III pp. 431–432: Katamehi chahi? Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu āyakusalo ca hoti, apāyakusalo ca hoti, upāyakusalo ca hoti, anadhigatānaṃ kusalaṇaṃ dhammānaṃ adhigamāya chandaṃ janeti, adhigate kusale dhamme sārakkhati, sātaccakiriyāya sampādeti. Imehi kho bhikkhave chahi dhammehi samannāgato bhikkhu bhabbo anadhigataṃ vā kusalaṃ dhammaṃ adhigantaṃ adhigataṃ vā kusalaṃ dhammaṃ phātikātun ti.

### Abbreviations and Primary Sources

- AN *The Aṅguttara Nikāya*. Vols. II & III. Ed. R. Richard Morris and E. Hardy. London: Pali Text Society, 1976.
- DN *The Dīgha Nikāya*. Vol. III. Ed. J. Estlin Carpenter. London: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Jāt *The Jātaka with Commentary*. Vol. IV. Ed. V. Fausbøll. London: Pali Text Society, 1991.
- MW Monier-Williams, M. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically And Philologically Arranged With Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899.
- Sn *Sutta-Nipāta*. Ed. Dines Andersen and Helmer Smith. London: Pali Text Society, 1990.
- Thag *The Thera- And Therī-Gāthā*. Ed. Hermann Oldenberg and Richard Pischel. London: Pali Text Society, 1990.

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**Key words** *upāya-kauśalya*, early Buddhism, *Nikāyas*, significance, Historical.

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