

Literal Means and Hidden Meanings: A New Analysis of "Skilful Means"

Asaf Federman

Before I begin I would like to draw on some issues from previous papers in the conference. Jan Nattier's paper in the Mahāyāna Sūtras panel point to internal evidence that may indicate the time of the composition of a certain sūtra or a portion of a sūtra. She mentions, among other things, explicit self-reference as evidence for chronological differences. To that I would like to add the implicit self-reference that can be found in the similes of the Lotus Sūtra. Jonathan Silk's discussion of intertextuality is relevant too. It has been pointed also by others that mahāyāna texts react in some way to earlier Buddhist literature. The carbon dating evidence presented by Richard Salomon and Harry Falk surely strengthen the claim that written "canonical" material existed when in the early stages of Mahāyāna, though finding a prajñāparamita fragment that early is challenging. My paper discuss the polemics of the Lotus Sūtra, and shows, I think, that at least some of it parts are designed as apologetic criticism of an existing. Buddhist textual tradition

Introduction

When Buddhists say that the Buddha used "skilful means" they usually refer to the following idea: the Buddha skilfully adapted his teaching to the level of his audience.¹ This, of course, is in agreement with the rhetoric of the Lotus Sutra and other Mahāyāna texts. However, it does not explain why there is an extensive use of the term in central Mahāyāna sūtras while non-Mahāyāna texts, like the entire Pāli Canon, are silent on this issue.

I would like to suggest that "skilful means" has not always been an all-Buddhist concept; rather, it developed by Mahāyānists as a radical hermeneutic device. This device enabled early Mahāyāna thinkers to establish their unorthodox version of Buddhism. It enabled them to advance a new religious ideology in the face of an already established canon. The way they use the concept of "skilfull means" shows awareness, which is not found in non-Mahāyāna thought, to a gap between the literal aspects of texts, and their hidden meaning.

¹ See for example Williams 1989, p. 143, Pye 1978/2003, p. 1 and Gombrich 1996, p. 17.

If this is true, then there are a few implications. First, it supports the theory that Mahāyāna began in a highly literary period when canonical manuscripts had been available. Second, it means that the authors of the Lotus Sutra were sensitive to literary aspects of the texts, and perhaps had access to written canonical material. Though not impossible, it is less likely that these authors were members of Buddhist laity.

So, what is novel about skilful means in the Lotus Sutra?

Skilful means encapsulates the following idea: in the past the Buddha had to manipulate his followers in order to help them. He told them one thing, but he meant another. Now, since the times of the Lotus Sutra, the truth comes to light. Followers of the Buddha, or shall we say followers of the Mahāyāna, are no longer manipulated by those skilful means. They are exposed to the real meaning of the teaching. Anyone who reads the Lotus Sutra enjoys this privileged access.

This message is very provocative. It suggests that the Buddha actually played tricks and deliberately deceived his followers in order to help them. Not only his words but also his actions and his biography were skilful means. The Lotus Sūtra treats both the life and the word of the Buddha as a form of educational fiction.

This idea is implicit in all instances where skilful means is mentioned in the Lotus Sūtra. I would like to discuss a few examples from the similes and from the exposition of the life of the Buddha. I would like to draw your attention to 5 features that are implicit in these examples:

- (1) There is a gap between what the Buddha knows and what his followers know.
- (2) In the past, the followers suffered from some sort of blindness or ignorance.
- (3) The epistemological gap between the Buddha and his followers allowed him to use trickery and deception for the benefit of the others.
- (4) We, the readers of the sūtra, share the same point of view with the Buddha.
- (5) The purpose of the Lotus Sūtra is to expel the old teaching, and to expose the high truth. It lets the readers see how things looked like from the point of view the Buddha.

Let's see how these features are expressed in a few of the parables of the Lotus Sūtra.

The Burning House

The most famous of all the parables is probably the story of the burning house. Here is a brief summary of the story: The house of a rich man is set on fire. His

children are playing inside the house, so focused on their games that they don't see the danger. The man thinks about different ways for saving his children like taking them by force, or directly explaining to them the danger. However, these solutions are doomed to fail because of various physical limitations and the children's blindness to the danger. Then, the man thinks: "I must now invent some skilful means* that will make it possible for the children to escape the harm"². Being aware of his children's passions, he tells them of the wonderful toys that are waiting for them outside the house — a goat-cart, a deer-cart, and an ox-cart. When the children are out and safe he gives each of them a fantastically decorated carriage pulled by white oxen — even better than what he had promised!

The toy vehicles stand for the lesser vehicles — *pratyekabuddhayāna* and *śrāvakayāna* — the great oxen carriage represents the *buddhayāna*. But we must remember one thing. None of the lesser toys really exists. There is only one great toy, the white oxen-cart that represents the *buddhayāna*.

This story captures the basic idea of skilful means. The practice of deception is done for the sake of beings that are trapped in a dangerous situation without knowing it. It involves tempting and attracting them to a safe place, in which a better gain is offered. It presents the aspects of lying, motivation, and results. Damian Keown makes a helpful distinction between the intention to lie and the motivation. The motivation is surely justified while there is not doubt, according to this story, that the Buddha/father intended to lie.³ The *sūtra* claims that when the motivation and results are good, and the benefit of someone else is under consideration, lying is actually not morally wrong. This story suggests that previous teachings of the Buddha were trickery – they were not true. However, due to benevolent motivation they cannot be condemned.

The Phantom City

A similar idea is expressed in the story of the phantom city. In a nutshell, a group is journeying through the wilderness in a search for a treasure-city. When they are exhausted, their leader, who is also a magician, creates for them a resting-place.⁴ But when they indulge in their resting-place, he wipes it away and urges them to continue with him to the treasure-city.

² Watson: 57.

³ Keown 1998, 194

⁴ Watson: 135-136.

This story contains more information about the status of skilful means with regard to truth and reality. The phantom city is both real, from the perspective of the group, and unreal, from the perspective of the leader. Similarly, what the Buddha had previously taught was both true and not true. Teaching *nirvāṇa* to pratyekabuddhas and śrāvakas was not true, but also not morally wrong; it was like the creation of a phantom camp in the middle of the way to the real goal.⁵

The epistemology of the story is interesting. The group has underprivileged access to true knowledge. They want to stay in the phantom-city because they can't compare it with the real treasure-city. Only the leader, that is the Buddha, knows that the treasure-city is much better. The leader wipes away the phantom, an act that must be understood as an allegory for wiping away the previous Buddhist teaching. This is exactly what the Lotus Sūtra does when it tells us that previous Buddhist teachings were only skilful means. They were temporary and fictitious resting place on the way to the real goal.

The Lost Son

These features are found also in the story of the lost son. (JENE?) A young man leaves his father and wanders abroad for several years. In the meantime, his father has become very wealthy. The son accidentally comes to the city where his father lives. The father recognises the son, but the son does not recognise the father. The father realises the difficult situation and does not reveal to him his true identity. Instead he employs the son, slowly building up his confidence until he can treat him as an adopted son and give him responsibilities for the whole estate. At last, the father, who is near the end of his life, calls together many witnesses and reveals the true, original relationship.

As in the two previous stories there is a gap between what the chief character knows and what the others know.⁶ Trickery and disguise take place to benefit someone. We — readers of the story — share the point of view with the all-knowing character. We know what the son does not know. If only he knew the father wouldn't have had to do anything! The low position of the son could, hypothetically, be exchanged with a higher

⁵ Watson: 142.

⁶ It is also common to the two stories about the hidden jewel which are not discussed here. These stories, found in the eighth and fourteenth chapters of Kumārajīva's version, do not give new significant information about skilful means on top of what provided by the other stories. Basically, the gap between knowing and not knowing is there, as well as the fact that only if the person had known he had a jewel, his life would be different.

position at any given time, including at the very beginning. The only thing that separated the son from inheriting the property was his own ignorance (avidyā = not knowing). The allegory is clear: we are actually the sons of the Buddha although this fact has been hidden from us for a long time and for good reasons.

The last episode of the story is very revealing. The father tells everyone why he used skilful means. It is again a self-reference to the teaching of skilful means in the Lotus Sūtra. The final act is not only about the status of a previous teaching but is also about the status of this very story in this very sūtra. The father shares his point of view with the son in the same way the Lotus Sūtra shares the Buddha's point of view with the readers.

To sum up the similes, let me repeat the five features mentioned earlier:

- (1) There is a gap between what one character knows and what the others know.
- (2) The others suffer from some sort of blindness to the situation, ignorance of some sort, fear or a limited view.
- (3) The epistemological gap between the characters allows the main character to use all kinds of trickery and deception for the benefit of the others.
- (4) We, the readers of the sūtra, share the same point of view with the all-knowing character (father, group leader).
- (5) In the end, truth is exposed with a full justification of the trickery. This reflects the status of the Lotus Sūtra itself as the expositor of high truth.

The way the similes are structured reveals great awareness of the interplay between literal expressions and their meaning. On one level the sūtra tells stories in which there is a clear gap between what was said and what was meant. On this level the distinctions are clear — the all-knowing character helps the underprivileged followers. On a higher level, a meta-textual level, the reader shares a point of view with the producer of true meaning — that is, the Buddha. The readers are thus encouraged to feel privileged in their position, because they can now see what has been previously concealed.

Skilful Means and the "Historical" Buddha

Another section of the Lotus Sūtra⁷ contains a similar attitude regarding the life of the historical Buddha. We learn that the Buddha actually attained Buddhahood before

⁷ Watson: 227

an extremely long period of time. His life span was not 80 or so years, but "immeasurable number of *asamkhya kalpas*".⁸ It fits, of course, very well with the Mahāyānic view that the Buddha is still present and can provide teachings even after his *parinirvāṇa*.⁹

The Lotus Sūtra tells us that the life of the historical Buddha was nothing but a staged act. In this way life becomes fiction, text, performance. Again there is a gap between the text (in the wider sense of the term) and its hidden meaning behind it. The Lotus Sūtra explicitly treats the life story as literary entity: "The scriptures expound by the Thus Come One are all for the purpose of saving and emancipating living beings".¹⁰

The history of the Buddha is treated as story, a fiction, something that does not represent factual reality. The life of the Buddha as a whole becomes "skilful means".

Conclusion

Let me summarize. The concept of Skilful means in the Lotus Sūtra is an apologetic instrument designed to justify a new approach to Buddhist teachings. It reads previous teachings as texts, not as facts, and offers new textual interpretations. The literal understanding of the teachings is directly criticized — they are presented as tricks, illusions, and deceptions aimed at the least capable of followers. The Lotus Sūtra tells us that the old teachings, and even the old life-story of the Buddha, should be understood as expression of skilful means. The idea that the Buddha may say one thing but intend another is new. At least I cannot find it outside the Mahāyāna. (and I suspect that even within Mahāyāna it belongs to a later, rather than earlier formations).

Why skilful means was invented in the first place? I speculate that there was a closed canon. Early Mahāyānists derived their new ideas from different origins, perhaps spiritual visions and dreams. Then, they (or their followers) had to find a way to promote their own ideology without ignoring the existing canon. Skilful means allows them to do exactly that. It explains why the old canon existed, and why it is not valid anymore.

⁸ Watson: 227 (both quotes).

⁹ Williams 2000, 108. From the point of view of the sūtra itself, there is no debate about date or place of its composition. The frame story suggests that the Buddha is speaking on this very earth during his life (and not, for example, in another heavenly place). We know that Chinese tradition did not see any difficulty in the *Lotus Sūtra's* being the last teaching of the historical Buddha before his apparent death. Nevertheless, scholars agree that it was composed somewhere between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE, several hundred years after the death of the Buddha (see Williams 2000, 169. For detailed account based of Japanese scholars see Pye 2002, 179.)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Again I have to stress that I am talking about a canon in a very loose sense of an agreed body of literature, not similar to the PTS canon that we have today.

The concept of skilful means explains why the old scriptures were there, but suggests that they are no longer valid. The phrase “thus have I heard” (evaṃ mayā śrutaṃ / evaṃ me sutaṃ) was a device of authentication in the aural tradition. But the idea of skilful means manages to undermine it. The fact that you heard something from the historical Buddha no longer guarantees that what you heard was true.

All this suggests that the idea of Skilfull Means is a hermeneutic device. It is not the simple observation that the Buddha was a very good teacher, but it is a tool created to present new religious ideology in Buddhism at time when an the tradition is already established.

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