

## **The Concept of Upāya (方便) in Mahāyāna Buddhist Philosophy**

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*Upāya* is a widely used term in Buddhism, commonly rendered into English by translations such as “expediency,” “skillful means” and “adapted teachings.” None of these terms is adequate or conveys the immense significance of the concept. For example, both “expediency” and “adapted teaching” bear pejorative utilitarian connotations, while “skillful means” is aoristic without further elucidation. Such renditions imply that *upāya* are inferior teachings bearing only a marginal relationship to Buddhist philosophy. In fact a number of individuals mistakenly believe this to be the case and relegate the entire concept to the realm of secondary doctrine. The purpose of this essay is to systematically analyze the role of *upāya* in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy and its relationship to Nirvana.

### **The Buddha and Upāya**

The vast system of Buddhist theology<sup>1</sup> and philosophy originated from the spiritual realization of a single man, Gotama Buddha. He was historically the first to encounter the formidable task of communicating enlightenment, which is an intuitive experience transcending conventional language and thought, to the non-enlightened. It was obvious that such communication would

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1. The term “theology” is here used in reference to Buddhism with the Tillichean connotation “a matter of ultimate concern.”

only be perfect if the listener himself could share the experience. But enlightenment is based on a comprehension of "interdependent origination" (Pali, *Paṭicca samuppāda*), which entails a radical reorientation from the accepted mode of daily life of the common man. Before this experience can be attained, a discontent with conventional life must exist, as well as a doubt of the veridical nature of common sense impressions and reasoning. This makes it nearly impossible for the individual who accepts ordinary life as the sole reality, to spiritually progress.

In an attempt to capture the import of the crucial moment when the historical Buddha decided to communicate his experience, subsequent theologians portrayed the historical Buddha in a histrionic setting wrestling with the question of devoting himself to the enjoyment of his experience of enlightenment or preaching it to an uncomprehending audience.<sup>2</sup> The deity Brahmā, symbolically representing common man, was selected by these writers to appear to the Buddha the fifth week after his enlightenment to request him to preach. At that time he acquiesced, even though he realized the doctrine was so profound and incomprehensible to ordinary men that they would probably scoff at it.

This dramatic account is exceedingly important, since it so clearly demonstrates the formidability of communicating the fruits of enlightenment. The choice of Brahmā symbolizes the human element within the historical Buddha supplicating the spirit of enlightenment. It is only possible to describe this event devotionally as a psychological struggle since, as we shall later

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2. *Vinaya* I, 4; *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 167-169; *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I, 137-141; *Dīgha Nikāya* II, 38.

see, an inevitable function of enlightenment entails its preaching. To observers from a conventional viewpoint, however, it appears that a natural conflict would exist whether to devote oneself to the arduous task of preaching to the uncomprehending or enjoying the experience of enlightenment itself.

The problem the historical Buddha faced was how to communicate his experience, and this was resolved with the nascence of *upāya*. Fully realizing the inadequacies of human language, which is based on a conceptualized view of reality, he knew that the degree a single individual would profit from his preaching was highly dependent on diverse factors such as the existent spiritual level, past experience, present environment, psychological needs, and so on. He also was aware that it was possible for a layman to benefit as much as a learned monk if the teachings were presented in a manner comprehensible to the layman; thus different varieties and intellectual modes of approaches were necessary. All these forms of communication constituted *upāya*, an exceedingly egalitarian concept that ultimately embraced every level of Buddhist teaching.

In Early Buddhism abundant evidence exists of *upāya* directed toward the conversion of non-Buddhists. The great Indra, king of the deva, was supposedly converted to Buddhism in the *Sakkhapañña Suttanta*<sup>3</sup> and subsequently became a guardian and instructor of the faith. Also the deities of the Six Directions were transformed in the famous *Singālovāda Suttanta* into Buddhist moral obligations.<sup>4</sup> It was exceedingly important that the autochthonous Indian deities, around which the theological language

3. *Dīgha Nikāya* II, 263. See also *Saṃyutta Nikāya* IV, 100.

4. *Dīgha Nikāya* III, 180 ff.

permeating Indian thought and culture took shape, be utilized as a means of Buddhist instruction.

At the lay level, the three *kathā* or graduated forms of discourse consisting of *dāna kathā* ("benefits of giving"), *sīla kathā* ("proper conduct") and *sagga kathā* ("promise of happy rebirth") were tangible inducements to practice virtue in anticipation of rewards in a better future life. The ultimate purpose of these practices was a conversion of mental attitude. Ideally, after practicing *dāna* ("giving") and *sīla* ("conduct"), the layman would discard the simplistic desire to perpetuate mundane values and seek Nirvana instead. Devotional means such as the endowment of the enlightened ones with supernatural powers (*iddhi*) and the thirty-two marks of a superman, the *Jātaka* and *Apadāna* moral tales, as well as the prayers of safety (*parittā*), all performed similar functions ideally leading to mental purification.

At the monk's level, language itself served as an *upāya*, but this was not always necessary. There was also the "wordless word" as described in the legend of the Buddha's transmission to Mahākassapa by the sign of a flower. Methods of presentation differed and at times the doctrine was set forth by means of parable, such as in the famous "Burning Sermon," or in mnemonic fashion to facilitate remembrance. Supernatural powers (*iddhi*) served as inducements for novice monks to begin the process of mental purification, and numerous practices such as meditation were devised as methods of spiritually transcending conventional reality.

The concept of *upāya* is inseparable from the notion of Buddha, since it is his means of communication with the unenlightened. It also serves as the medium whereby the individual can attain

the experience of enlightenment. We find the theoretical basis of *upāya* as a necessary function of enlightenment in Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika philosophy, which subsequently influenced virtually every school of Mahāyāna Buddhism in China and Japan.

### **Mādhyamika Concept of Śūnyatā and Upāya**

In an effort to counterbalance what he considered to be the dangerous realistic extremes of Abhidharma philosophy, Nāgārjuna of the Mādhyamika school stressed the theory of *śūnyatā* ("emptiness") as based on interdependent origination (Sanskrit, *Pratītya samutpāda*). He applied this view to human existence in the following manner:

In conventional life the human consciousness (*viññāna*) inter-reacts with the so-called objective world (*nāma-rūpa*) by grasping the world in order to affirm its own existence. "Self" is differentiated from "other," which in turn is immeasurably divided and further separated from "self." This continual differentiation creates the propensity (*vāsanā*) to cling to the "self" as an independent entity and to "others" as attributes esteemed in light of their relation to the "self."<sup>5</sup> From this mental attitude arise the common notions of "I am" and "this is mine," with the "self" (*ātman*) feeding on the outer world, like fire on firewood, in order to nourish its illusion of being.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this appetency to cling to self, possessions, and loved ones, a snowball of ignorance is begun that inevitably leads to frustration. For according to the law of interdependent origination (*Pratītya samutpāda*), an independent absolute entity such as self (*ātman*)

5. Louis de La Vallée-Poussin, ed., *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās de Nāgārjuna avec la Prasannapadā de Candrakīrti* (St. Petersburg: Bibliotheca Buddhica, 1913), p. 349.

6. Ibid., p. 214.

is an unreality; all existents are impermanent (*anitya*) and those who attempt to cling to this impermanence will inevitably experience suffering (*duhkha*). The events of human life continually thwart the individual self's desire to be absolute, while the objects he clings to in an effort to affirm his own permanence constantly undergo change and destruction until ultimately he is left grasping empty hulls. In Buddhism "ignorance" is regarded as this inability to recognize the actual interdependent and impermanent nature of existence.

According to Nāgārjuna, the only method of shattering ignorance and breaking free from the vicious cycle of suffering is to reverse the mental process creating ignorance:

If the individual self does not exist, how then will there be something which is "my own"?... He who is without possessiveness and who has no ego—He, also, does not exist... When "I" and "mine" have stopped, then also there is not an outside nor an inner self. The "acquiring" [of *karma*] (*upādāna*) is stopped; on account of that destruction, there is destruction of very existence.<sup>7</sup>

This does not mean that the individual physically becomes extinct, but rather that he ceases to exist in the cycle of ignorance. The method of attaining such freedom merely necessitates a transformation of mental attitude, but this is a change that shatters the very foundation of conventional life as grounded on categorical reasoning and on discrimination between self and others.

Subjective discrimination forms the basis of the conventional world since all human discourse and knowledge requires such differentiation. Each object the individual encounters he labels and in so doing separates it as being "other" than himself. Subsequently he proceeds to evaluate the "other" objects in terms

7. Ibid., p. 341. *Emptiness, A Study in Religious Meaning*, translated by Frederick J. Streng (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 204.

of "self" and his own egocentric need to affirm and perpetuate his existence. Such distortions inevitably lead to human suffering. Release is found in recognizing the true relationship between the subjective self and the so-called objective world in view of the law of interdependence. Such an understanding, which transcends common language and categorical reasoning, is known as the experience of *śūnyatā* ("emptiness").

Although *śūnyatā* has a negative connotation, it is not a negative experience. It represents an emptying out of the *false* notion of self and the world but also entails an entirely different means of viewing existence. Since the individual no longer seeks to affirm his own being by the projection of his egocentric desires on the world about him, he is now able to view the world in its as-it-isness, without distortion. *Śūnyatā* is negative only in the sense that Indian thinkers chose to define the transcendental experience by what it was not in terms of the life of ordinary man; ultimately this is one of the highest forms of affirmation.

*Śūnyatā*, as the intuitive experience of enlightenment itself, did not represent the totality of Nāgārjuna's goal. Frequently Nirvana has been misinterpreted as being a permanent transcendence or escape from human life. This is invalid since Nirvana does not represent a change of locus, but merely a transformation of mental attitude. The enlightened individual continues to live and function in the human world though he is free from the sufferings engendered by a false view of reality. If enlightenment represented a permanent transcendence, then the historical Buddha would have had no need to devote himself to the arduous task of preaching his experience; the fact that he did was of profound significance to Nāgārjuna. In fact, he

both opened and closed his famous *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* with a pledge of devotion to the Buddha who *preached* the doctrine of interdependent origination.<sup>8</sup> And Nāgārjuna well understood the difficulties of such a task since he stated:

Emptiness, having been dimly perceived, utterly destroys the slow-witted.  
It is like a snake wrongly grasped or [magical] knowledge incorrectly applied.

Therefore the mind of the ascetic [Gautama] was diverted from teaching the *dharma*,

Having thought about the incomprehensibility of the *dharma* by the stupid.<sup>9</sup>

Nāgārjuna faced the same dilemma with his own view of emptiness since it offered an enticement to the intellectual extreme of nihilism. To avoid the danger of falsely grasping a single aspect of emptiness, the Mādhyamika defined *śūnya* realization as consisting of three simultaneous inseparable aspects: *śūnyatā* (空性), *śūnyatāyām prajñānam* (空用), and *śūnyatā artha* (空義).

*Śūnyatā* represents the condition wherein the subjective clinging to the exterior world is denied and the endless cycle of clinging ceases. It is the perfect calm in which the interrelated nature of all existents can be intuitively comprehended. Logic and worldly thought are temporarily suspended in favour of the intuitive faculties. It represents what we ordinarily consider to be the experience of Nirvana, but still this is merely one aspect of enlightenment.

*Śūnyatāyām prajñānam* ("the functioning of emptiness") is the second aspect, wherein the individual surrenders his natural tendency to cling to the experience of *śūnyatā* itself. This is accomplished by means of self-reflection and represents the continual process of mental purification that is an essential attribute

8. La Vallée-Poussin *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, pp. 11, 592.

9. Ibid., p. 35; *Emptiness*, p. 204.



of enlightenment. But at the moment the tendency to cling to the enjoyment of the experience is surrendered, an awareness of the existence of other suffering sentient beings also arises. Having attained a complete comprehension of *Pratītya samutpāda*, the enlightened one immediately realizes the undifferentiated oneness encompassing himself and all other beings. This is not a feeling of "compassion" in our usual sense of the term, since he no longer has any false awareness of a separation between himself and others. He sees others as part of his own infinite being, and their suffering is now instinctively recognized and experienced as his own. Working to liberate others now means endeavoring to save part of himself and in a certain sense, his action is supra-selfish. He experiences himself as a distinct member of the whole, just as the right hand suddenly comprehends its integral and yet unique relationship to the body. He is not in effect losing "himself" but merely the false notion of an independent "self" accompanied by the realization of his specific role in the totality of existence. But this second aspect merely represents an understanding of interrelatedness, it is not complete without action and application to the conventional world.

The third aspect of *śūnya* realization provides the practical ground for universal salvation and this is termed *śūnyatā artha* ("practice of emptiness in the conventional world").<sup>10</sup> It can also be defined as the temporal presentation of emptiness. Although the experience of *śūnyatā* transcends conventional language, the enlightened one must seek the means to teach despite the possible risk of distortion. In other words, this aspect

10. For a detailed explanation of these aspects see Yamaguchi Susumu [山口 益, *Kū no sekai* 空の世界 [The world of emptiness] (Tokyo: Risōsha, 1940), pp. 46 ff.



reverse fashion, which would correspond to the “ignorant” sentient being listening to the enlightened one’s practice of emptiness and then proceeding to the eventual experience of *śūnyatā* himself.<sup>14</sup> In this case the representation would appear as follows:

$$\textit{śūnyatā artha} \longrightarrow \textit{śūnyatā}$$

As he continued to explain: “Without reliance on the expressional [truth], the absolute is not taught; without arriving at the absolute, *nirvāṇa* is not reached.”<sup>15</sup> The late Prof. R. Robinson cogently summarized the relationship between *paramārtha satya* and *saṃvṛti satya* in a manner which nearly paraphrases the *chung-lun* (Japanese, *chūron* 中論) explanation:

Worldly, conventional, or expressional truth means language and verbal thought. The absolute is said to be inexpressible and inconceivable. Yet realization of this fact depends upon comprehension of expressional truth. All doctrines taught by the Buddhas are compatible with emptiness; emptiness characterizes every term in the system of expressional truths.<sup>16</sup>

*Samvṛti satya* or conventional truth is inseparable from *paramārtha satya* since it offers the mode by which the latter can be discursively presented. This means that there are not actually “two truths” but merely a single truth and its presentation. We cannot properly speak of a “higher” and “lower” truth or a “superior” or “inferior” truth since both are interdependently related, as Hui-yuan wrote:

According to the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise*, the ultimate principle is that there are no real objects corresponding to ideas or words, that cognition is not a relation between real objects and real perceivers. This

14. Cf. Yamaguchi Susumu 山口益 et al., *Bukkyōgaku josetsu* 佛教学序説 [Introduction to Buddhist studies] (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1961), p. 155.

15. *Early Madhyamika in India and China*, p. 49.

16. Ibid., p. 49. Cf. *chūron* 中論 in Mochizuki Shinkō, 望月信享, ed., *Bukkyō dajiten* 佛教大辞典 [Dictionary of Buddhism], vol. 3, p. 2073.

truth clears away all false notions, and enables the spirit in *samādhi* to realize its goal, which is beyond affirmations and negations. In this *samādhi*, the identity of conventional truth and absolute truth is realized, and the bodhisattva path culminates in the realization of final unity.<sup>17</sup>

Words are empty symbols “imagined” (*vikalpyate*) by the listener. There can be no question about the veridical nature of *saṃvṛti satya* as set forth by the enlightened one; false understanding is merely a result of individual misinterpretation. Words “express only metaphorically, and there is no such thing as a literal statement, because there is no intrinsic relation to mystical experience and to worldly experience, since all alike are only figured but not represented by discursive symbols.”<sup>18</sup>

It is not proper to compare *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* with the western distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal or the knowable and forever unknowable, since Nāgārjuna has clearly indicated that *paramārtha* is dependent on *saṃvṛti*. In other words, *saṃvṛti* is the means (*upāyabhūta*) and *paramārtha* the end (*upeyabhūta*) for the common man.<sup>19</sup> The reverse is true for the enlightened one who seeks to share his experience.

As a natural function of enlightenment, the enlightened one spontaneously “communicates his experience” (*upāya*), and this communication of his “inexpressible understanding of *śūnyatā*” (*paramārtha*) by discursive language is what is known as conventional truth (*saṃvṛti*). This verbal communication is made by symbols or signposts that only become distortions and *saṃvṛti*

17. *Early Madhyamika in India and China*, p. 110. The *Ninnō hannyakyō* also defines the two as inseparable oneness. Cf. Mochizuki, ed., *Bukkyō daijiten*, vol. 3, p. 2073.

18. *Early Madhyamika in India and China*, p. 49.

19. A reconstruction of Candrakīrti's *Mādhamā Āvatāra*, VI, 80, quoted in T. R. V. Murti, *Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), p. 253.

(literally, “cover” or “hide”) the ultimate truth when they are falsely grasped as substantial realities or entities and understood in literal fashion. The enlightened one’s communication is not in error, merely the understanding of the listener.

The interrelationship between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* closely approximates what Nāgārjuna described so often as the identity between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. The world of enlightenment is not a spatially transcendent realm, there is no difference in locus between the world of enlightenment and the world of ignorance; the sole difference lies in the attitude of the viewer. Those who exist in the cycle of ignorant subject-object clinging perceive the world from the standpoint of *saṃsāra*, while the enlightened one, who has surrendered his clinging for the three aspects of *śūnya* realization, views the identical locus as Nirvana. In a similar situation the enlightened one, from his experience of *śūnyatā artha*, preaches the conventional truth or uses discursive language; another enlightened one can immediately comprehend the emptiness of the words and understand them as *paramārtha*. But the “ignorant” man, who clings to the words as real entities and uses them to enforce his own cycle of clinging, would indeed have “covered” the truth with his subjective mental distortions. It is solely a question of attitude. This is why there are many differences and degrees of conventional truths.

From the *standpoint of the enlightened one*, it is not possible to state that these conventional truths (*upāya*) have superior or inferior soteriological value, for the ability of the enlightened one is such that he can effectively penetrate any level of spiritual awareness and awaken the individual. In such a case, *saṃvṛti satya* actually means speaking the language the individual

can comprehend.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, from the standpoint of the individual struggling to attain *paramārtha*, the gradations of conventional truths appear to assume immense significance. This is the reason why some scholars, who approach the goal from the individual's viewpoint alone, are convinced that all conventional truths must be removed before a comprehension of the ultimate truth can be reached.<sup>21</sup> What they overlook is the fact that nothing can be metaphysically established about the nature of *paramārtha* or the means of attaining it, without language (*saṃvṛti*). Language and preaching in the conventional world are essential components of *śūnyatā artha*, which is an inseparable aspect of enlightenment. *Saṃvṛti satya* or verbal expression, in this respect, is identical with *upāya* ("means of communicating enlightenment").

### Pen-chi (本迹) and Upāya

Seng-chao (僧肇, 374-414), in an effort to resolve the Chinese Buddhist confusion of the two-fold truth with the Taoist concept of existence (有) versus non-existence (無), was one of the first Buddhist theologians to use the term *pen-chi*. In his commentary to the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* he wrote:

...in terms of essence, Buddhism is non-duality. All doctrines are the origin (*pen*, 本) of the unthinkable...Without the origin there is no manifestation (*chi*, 迹), without the manifestation there is no origin. Origin and manifestation are different but unthinkable oneness.<sup>22</sup>

This quotation was later used by Chih-i (智顗, 538-97), the

20. This is how it is described in the Anguttara Commentary. Cf. K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), pp. 364-365.

21. This is the problem T. R. V. Murti encounters, *Central Philosophy*, p. 253.

22. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 [Taishō tripiṭaka], vol. 38, p. 327c.

founder of the T'ien T'ai sect, in his commentary on the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* as a justification for dividing the sutra into sections of origin (*pen-men*, 本門) and manifestation (*chi-men*, 迹門). Chih-i, however, was not the first to use *pen-chi* methodology in relation to the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka* or *Lotus Sutra*.

Seng-jui (僧叡), a contemporary of Seng-chao, utilized the *pen-chi* theory in his analysis of the "Apparition of a Stupa" (*Stupa saṃdarśana-parivarta*) chapter of the *Lotus*.<sup>23</sup> According to his view, the protagonist of this chapter, the Eternal Buddha Prabhūtaratna (多寶佛), was the "original Buddha" while Śākyamuni, whom he invited to sit beside him in the stupa, was representative of the countless "manifestation Buddhas" preaching his doctrine in the myriads of worlds. It was not accidental that the *pen-chi* theory was first applied to this section of the *Lotus Sutra*, for in many respects, the chapter symbolically presents the doctrine of the entire sutra.<sup>24</sup>

The *pen-chi* concept as applied to the Stupa chapter and later by Chih-i to the entire *Lotus Sutra*, offers a tangible application of the two-fold truth theory.<sup>25</sup> The "original Buddha" or teach-

23. There is some debate over the identity of this individual. The division is attributed to the "Nine Aspect Priest." According to the *Fa-hua-ching-ch'uan* 法華經傳, *Taishō*, vol. 51, p. 55c, this was Seng-jui. The *Fa-hua-hsüan-lun* 法華玄論, *Taishō*, vol. 34, p. 363c states that it was Tao Yung. Chih-i believed the division should properly be attributed to Seng-jui.

24. For analyses of the symbolism of this chapter, see Ōchō Enichi 横超慧日, "Tahō-tō shisō no kigen" 多宝塔思想の起源 [Origin of Prabhūta Ratna stūpa thought] in *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度学仏教学研究 [Journal of Indian and Buddhist studies] 2:1 [3] (September 1953), pp. 30-36; also Miyamoto Shōson, 宮本正尊, *Daijō bukkyō no seiritsu shi teki kenkyū* 大乘佛教の成立史的研究 [Study of the historical foundations of Mahāyāna Buddhism] (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1958), pp. 323-330.

25. The *Madhyamikas* in a practical application of the theory textually divided scriptures into "direct meaning" (*nītārtha*) and "indirect meaning" (*neyārtha*) on the basis of *paramārtha* and *vyāvahārika* respectively.

ing of the origin symbolizes the inexpressible ultimate truth that becomes a conventional truth merely by being uttered. The “manifestation Buddha” represents the conventional truths that lead to the ultimate.<sup>26</sup>

Chih-i systematically applied this theory to the entire *Lotus Sūtra*: the first half of the text, pertaining to the teachings of Śākyamuni and the “manifestation Buddhas”, he termed *chi-men* and the latter portion of the text, relating to Śākyamuni as the Eternal Buddha, he called *pen-men*. Since Chih-i was particularly concerned with the struggle of the “ignorant” man to attain enlightenment, the T’ien T’ai sect emphasized the manifestation section of the sutra and Chih-i wrote:

- (1) For the sake of the true there is the provisional (爲實施權).
- (2) Open the provisional and reveal the true (開權顯實).
- (3) Abandon the provisional and establish the true (廢權立實).<sup>27</sup>

Later, the Japanese Nichiren sect was to place its stress on the second section of the sutra, dealing with the original Buddha or the process by which the enlightened one set forth his teachings for the benefit of sentient beings. These methods represented concrete applications of the two-fold truth theory and they were carried one step further in Japan with the development of the *honji suijaku* (本地垂迹 “true nature-manifestation”) theory.

The Chinese *pen-chi* (Japanese, *honjaku* 本迹) methodology as applied to the *Lotus Sutra* formed the theoretical basis for the Japanese development of *honji suijaku*.<sup>28</sup> As the theory finally developed during the late Heian or Early Fujiwara period,

26. For a further explanation of how Chih-i applied this theory to the *Lotus Sutra*, see Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1969), pp. 116-120.

27. *Hsuan-i* 玄義, *Taishō*, vol. 33, p. 682b.

28. For further explanation, see Matsunaga, *Assimilation*, pp. 211-214.



Buddhas, bodhisattvas and Indian deva were believed to manifest themselves in the form of native Japanese kami. This application was the product of diverse philosophical, devotional and political motivations, but in effect, it made the indigenous deities the theoretical equivalent of their Buddhist originals. It also represented the extension of the concept of *upāya* to the verge of its logical limits. For how can the deities of an alien religion be considered equivalent to a Buddha or bodhisattva in the process of leading an "ignorant" sentient being to enlightenment?

From a common sense view, the Buddha or bodhisattva would excel the kami as a guide to Buddhist salvation, just as from the same standpoint conventional truth would seemingly be an obstacle on the path to enlightenment. From the theological view, however, the simple process of venerating a native deity as a manifestation becomes equivalent to venerating a Buddha himself, since the basis of the ontological existence of the manifestation lies in its confrontation with its origin. Ultimately both Buddha and kami are *upāya*, since all endeavors to express the absolute truth are conventional truths. The quality of the *upāya* can only be determined by its usefulness in transforming the mind of the individual recipient. That success can be judged solely by the enlightened one and not by an individual who has himself emerged in the samsaric cycle of clinging. The *honji suijaku* theory can be regarded as a practical means of applying the concept of the two-fold truth or a tangible form of *upāya*.

### **From Prajñā to Karuṇā, the Bodhisattva Way**

The evolution of the concept of the bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism was the product of diverse philosophical, historical

and social developments. Predominant among these was the growth of *bhakti* ("devotion") in accompaniment with the idealization of the Buddha.<sup>29</sup> As the notion of Buddha became universalized and equated with the ultimate truth in writings such as the *Lotus Sutra*, it was necessary for devotional purposes to discover more tangible objects of veneration. At the same time, Abhidharma scholars, with their intense philosophical speculation, ostensibly lost interest in the soteriological aspects of Buddhism and became vastly alienated from the needs of the masses. When they did speak of Nirvana, it was as an individual goal with no apparent concern for universal attainment. This extreme philosophical speculation and neglect of the necessary soteriological function of enlightenment prompted the Mahāyāna followers to claim that the Arhat goal was an inferior stage of spiritual realization.<sup>30</sup> This is undoubtedly why Nāgārjuna both opened and closed his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* with homage to the Buddha who *preached* the law of interdependent origination. New emphasis had to be placed on this integral function of enlightenment.

The theological basis for the development of the bodhisattva is found in the Mādhyamika view of *śūnya* realization. As discussed earlier, the realization of *śūnyatā* or enlightenment automatically leads to a concern for others, since with a complete comprehension of interdependent origination, all existents are recognized as inseparably entwined to form part of the enlightened one's larger self. This concern is expressed by tangible

29. Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), p. 31.

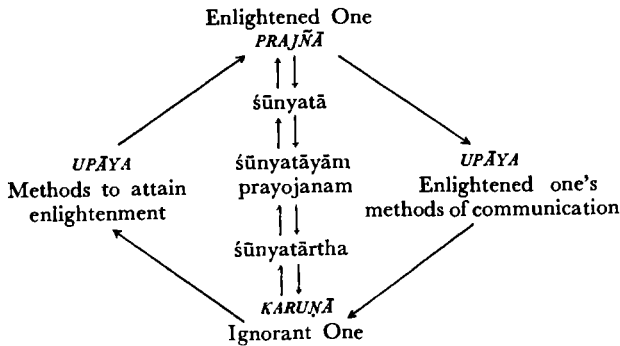
30. For further practical application, see Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Concept of Hell* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), pp. 49-73.

efforts in the conventional world to communicate enlightenment (*upāya*, *śūnyatā artha*). The temporal presentation became the task of the bodhisattva, devotionally represented by the figure of an individual who delays his own enjoyment of enlightenment in order to aid other sentient beings. Experientially, the inseparable relationship between the three aspects of *śūnya* realization are identical to the process leading from *prajñā* ("wisdom") to *karuṇā* ("compassion") in the life of the bodhisattva.

In the Buddhist tradition, *prajñā* (Pali, *paññā*) denotes the ability to "perceive things as they really are" which refers to the recognition of the non-substantiality of existents resulting from the law of interdependent origination. But in Mahāyāna, greater emphasis was placed on this concept and it became identical to the experience of *śūnyatā* or comprehension of the ultimate truth.

From a devotional aspect, *karuṇā* is generally translated as "compassion" for it appears to those submerged in *samsāra* that the bodhisattva is bestowing his compassion on them in his attempt to lead them to enlightenment. As we have previously seen, from the standpoint of the enlightened one, this is merely a natural function of enlightenment. The bodhisattva is no more motivated by pity or kindness than is the hand when it disentangles the foot from a snarl of vines. This is an instinctive aspect of self-preservation and the bodhisattva has simply realized his self in the form of all existence. *Karuṇā* thus is the conventional name given to *śūnyatā artha* ("the temporal presentation of emptiness") and it is equivalent to *upāya* or the communication of enlightenment. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that primarily it is how the "ignorant" sentient being perceives *upāya*. As such it can serve soteriologically as the means by which the "ignorant"

individual attains enlightenment. The following diagram illustrates this process in detail:



The *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* speaks of the inseparable unity of *prajñā* and *upāya* in the following terms:

Wisdom-perfection [*prajñā-pāramitā*] is a Bodhisattva's Mother,  
his father is expedient method [*upāya*],  
For the teachers of all living beings come  
Only from these two (*upāya* and *prajñā*).<sup>31</sup>

For the masses, the bodhisattva concept introduced vital new means of religious practice. As a "Buddha-to-be" the term applied both to the individual who, from a devotional standpoint, appeared to delay his enjoyment of Nirvana in order to assist others, as well as to every sentient being as a potential Buddha. The Six Pāramitās, *dāna* ("giving"), *śīla* ("proper conduct"), *kṣānti* ("patience"), *vīrya* ("endeavor"), *dhyaṇa* ("meditation") and *prajñā* ("the resulting wisdom"),<sup>32</sup> became bodhisattva practices or spiritual exercises for those who aspired to attain enlightenment. The mythical figures of the bodhisattvas, devised to

31. *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, translated by Lu K'uan Yü (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1972), p. 86.

32. These were later expanded to ten *pāramitās* adding: *upāya* (in this instance, "means of aiding others"), *praṇidhāna* ("vow"), *bala* ("power"), and *jñāna* ("knowledge"). These four additions further emphasized the function of assisting others along the pathway beyond the attainment of *prajñā*.

symbolically represent virtues and philosophical concepts, fulfilled the *bhakti* needs of the masses and served as *upāya* leading to the first stages of awakening.

Among the myriads of bodhisattvas that subsequently developed in Mahāyāna Buddhism, two pair symbolically represented the relationship between *prajñā* and *karuṇā*: Mañjuśrī (文殊) and Samantabhadra (普賢), on the one hand, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (勢至) and Avalokiteśvara (觀音) on the other. These are constantly linked in iconography and literature. For instance, the first pair play a crucial role in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and the second are attendants of Amitābha in the Pure Land triad. This latter grouping and the role of Amitābha represent one of the most perfect expressions of the bodhisattva theory.

Buddhist theologians place the origin of Amitābha (Japanese, *Amida* 阿彌陀) Buddha in a dramatic setting in the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* (大無量壽經). There Dharmakāra (Japanese, *Hōzō* 法藏) bodhisattva made his famous vow that he would not enter enlightenment unless all sentient beings who invoke his name with sincere faith<sup>33</sup> are assured of attaining his Pure Land. The bodhisattva's subsequent enlightenment as Amitābha Buddha finalized his vow from a devotional standpoint. This vow of Amitābha represents the supreme emphasis on the enlightened one's function of saving sentient beings in the conventional world (*śūnyatā artha*). We can properly view the entire drama theologically by reversing the order and saying that it was actually the enlightened Amitābha who assumed the form of Dharmakāra bodhisattva in order to lead sentient beings

33. "Sincere faith" (信心) refers to mental purity.

to enlightenment. As long as a single individual remains unenlightened, he will continue to offer his vow and the means of invoking his name. Amitābha's attendants, Mahāsthāmā-prāpta (Japanese, *Seishi* 勢至) and Avalokiteśvara (Japanese, *Kannon* 觀音), representing respectively the twin aspects of *prajñā* and *karuṇā*, further emphasize this active function of enlightenment.

In summary, as we view the development of *upāya* in Mahāyāna Buddhism, we note that it has a dual connotation, being both:

- (1) A method for the enlightened one's communication of his experience, and
- (2) A method of spiritual awakening for the "ignorant" sentient being.

As a method of communication, it represents the conventional truth taught by the enlightened one, the manifestation of the origin or true nature of enlightenment and the apparent compassion of the bodhisattva. Each of these functions in turn can serve as a means for the "ignorant" sentient being to attain enlightenment. The ultimate *upāya* in Mahāyāna Buddhism is the bodhisattva way, founded on the concepts of *prajñā* and *karuṇā*. This is the method *par excellence* of communicating the fruits of enlightenment to beings in the conventional world and at the same time serves as a pathway for individual spiritual progress. In this manner, *upāya* becomes not a mere "device" or secondary teaching, but rather represents the most crucial concept of Mahāyāna philosophy: the integral aspect of enlightenment that spontaneously necessitates the enlightenment of all existents as symbolized by the bodhisattva.