

Early Buddhist Rhetorics

Ian E. J. Hill, University of British Columbia

Introduction

Buddhist rhetorical history begins with the historical Buddha, who expounded the uses and transfigurations of language to test the possibilities and limitations of style and semiotics while promoting non-dualistic thinking, paradox, and inexpressible wisdom. While the earliest Buddhist writings generally lack explicit references to an overarching synonym for the term “rhetoric,” a variety of methods were developed to spread Buddhism, hone wisdom, and transform doctrine. Given a long, multifaceted history, this overview scratches the surface of Buddhist rhetorics by focusing on correct speech (*samyagvāc*), the uses and avoidance of logical disputation (*nyāya*), and expedient means (*upāya*). Ancient in origin, these concepts still pertain to current Buddhist practices, and can be adapted to a variety of contemporary contexts that devalue competition, advantage, and political power.

Samyagvāc appears in foundational Buddhist tenets like the “Eightfold Path” toward enlightenment as a means to both develop good karma and demonstrate philosophical acumen. In *The Sutta-Nipāta*’s description of the ideal sage, Buddha said, “He has no anger, no fear and no pride. Nothing disturbs his composure and nothing gives him cause for regret. He is the wise man who is restrained in speech” (Saddhatissa 100). *Samyagvāc* provides a connection to a multitude of world rhetorics that ground eloquence in the morality of interpersonal conduct, while also using a good/bad dualism to point toward its transcendence via meditative equanimity. Students can attempt to enact *samyagvāc* as an entry point into the perspectival shifts that might be necessary to begin thinking like a Buddhist.

Undergirding right speech is a philosophical mode of Buddhist logical disputation that emerged from Indian *nyāya* argumentation, but diverged from its Vedic sources to advocate an avoidance of both disputation and dogmatic truths. Nagarjuna explained that, “Those who are of excellent qualities have no position and no disputation,” and that, “Whosoever has apprehended any objective position whatsoever will be caught by the deceiver – the serpent of afflictions” (79-80). By devaluing certainty about truths, Buddhist (anti)disputation contrasts not only with its Vedic precedents but also with many Platonic and Christian Greco-Roman rhetorical traditions (e.g. beliefs in ideal forms and Biblical theological

literalism), while comparing with Greek sophism, Taoism, and postmodernism. Buddhist adaptations of *nyāya* invite students to analyze contemporary uses of logic and illogic according to the compatibility of rhetors' ideological commitments with their argumentative tactics, in addition to highlighting the frequent futility of resorting to argumentation and/or logic as a primary means of influencing others.

As Buddhism spread, multiple doctrinal dilemmas entailed conceptualizing the purposes and techniques of legitimization, motivation, and influence for specifically Buddhist rhetorical situations, from how to receive alms to how to convert entire kingdoms. For approximately the past 2,000 years, *upāya* (expedient means; skillful means; liberative technique) is the central term that best encapsulates these divergent rhetorical goals and methods. *The Lotus Sutra* defined and exemplified the capacious concept of *upāya* as the primary way that Buddha adapted discourses to differing audiences, especially when divulging the empty and impermanent character of terminology and core doctrines like nirvana. Buddha said, "The Buddhas preach the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, but the meaning is difficult to understand. Why is this? Because we employ countless expedient means, discussing causes and conditions and using words of simile and parable to expound the teachings" (Watson 31). Later, the Buddhist usage of this key rhetorical term was developed within languages and cultures that already had their own rhetorical traditions, creating a variety of different versions of *upāya* in, for instance, China, Japan, and North America. Buddhist rhetorics thus compel thinking about rhetorical history across an almost-global range of languages, cultures, and societies that might otherwise seem to be divided by geography, ethnicity, and history. With allegorical narratives and dense metaphors being central tactics of expedient means, students can use *upāya* as an analytical tool to gauge contemporary uses of compassion in a variety of cultural rhetorics.

Course Applicability

Undergraduate Courses

Religious Rhetorics
History and Theory of Rhetoric
Comparative Rhetorics
Literary Rhetorics

Graduate Courses

History and Theory of Rhetoric
Comparative Rhetoric or World Rhetorics
Religious Rhetorics

Philosophy & Rhetoric
 Cultural Rhetorics
 Literary Rhetorics
 Stylistics

Key Pedagogical Themes

Compassion (Sanskrit, *karuṇā*): The mindset or attitude that should guide Buddhist rhetorical pursuits is compassion, a mindset that promotes the elimination of suffering for everyone as the utmost goal. A compassionate mindset shifts the function of rhetoric away from persuasion, advantage, and control, providing students with an alternative to most conventional contemporary ethical frameworks for rhetorical theory that value the formation, maintenance, and transformation of power hierarchies.

Emptiness (Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*): The Buddhist conception that the cosmos is defined by its impermanence, especially when considered from the long view, entails that no great semantic weight should be afforded to any particular entity, concept, or term. Rather, through meditation, one seeks to transcend the artificiality imposed by the human perception of forms. Emptiness, too, is an empty form, which provides students with a way to learn about nothingness as a counterpart to everything that they might value, veering away from the entrapments of our materialistic culture.

Enlightenment (Sanskrit, *saṃbodhi*): Enlightenment cannot be put into words and is therefore an un-definable term. It can only be achieved with extensive philosophical study and/or dedicated meditation, or perhaps with a flash of insight, depending on various traditions. It might take eons of rebirths to achieve, so students won't have to demonstrate knowledge of enlightenment for the sake of the final exam! Rather, attempting to describe what cannot be described offers a fruitful topic of classroom discussion that focuses attention on both the limitations of ineffability as a rhetorical appeal and one of Buddhism's most tricky rhetorical conundrums.

Meditation: There are a variety of kinds of and terms for meditation in Buddhism. Key, though, for learning about Buddhism in a classroom setting from secondary sources, sutras, the internet, and rhetorical treatises is to remember that all schools of Buddhism require adherents to actively put theory into action, especially through calm rumination about Buddhist concepts and narratives – sometimes with the use of mantras – in one form of mediation or another. In whichever form, meditation offers students an alternative way to think through Buddhist rhetorics that doesn't resemble typical forms of application, studying, or learning.

Nondualism (Sanskrit, *advaya*): When studying Buddhist rhetorics, students should be prepared to question their beliefs, as well as their probable alternatives and any good-bad judgments whatsoever. To enter into a Buddhist “middle way” perspective, one must transcend dualistic interpretations of experience, especially of the physical entrapments of everyday life, such as family, work, politics, money, and society. The tendency to think dualistically is one of the more difficult mindsets to put aside for newcomers to Buddhist rhetoric given the centrality of antithesis to both cognition and language, but it can be framed as similar to sophistic and postmodern ways of thinking.

Essential Terminology

Bodhisattva (Sanskrit): In the *Mahāyāna* tradition, bodhisattvas are advanced devotees who seek enlightenment, and dedicate their lives (current and upcoming) to compassionately helping others attain the same goal. For instance, the historical Buddha was technically a bodhisattva before attaining final enlightenment, at which point he became a buddha. Given this mission, bodhisattvas must be skilled at all elements of rhetoric, and are the penultimate ideal rhetors (below buddhas) whose goals include perfecting *upāya* for an array of audiences.

Dharma (Sanskrit): The teachings, or doctrines, of Buddhism. In turn, *dharmaparyāya* refers to ways and methods of spreading dharma, often with the use of the non-literal rhetorical devices.

Haihui (Chinese, 海會): An oceanic audience, which is comprised of many types of sentient beings with many levels of Buddhist understanding and knowledge. An oceanic audience is often depicted at the outset of *Mahāyāna* sutras to set the scene for Buddha’s (or others’) discourses.

Jātaka (Sanskrit): Tales of the lives of the Buddha. In the later *Mahāyāna* uptake of *upāya*, these tales came to exemplify a wide variety of Buddha’s skillful means as put into practice.

Mahāyāna (Sanskrit): Literally meaning “great vehicle,” the term refers to a doctrinal transformation some four centuries after Buddha’s death that placed emphasis on the bodhisattva path. For the history of rhetoric, the development of *Mahāyāna* tenets included the theorization of *upāya* as a central component, in part to justify the reimagination of Buddhist doctrine (*dharma*).

Nirvana (Sanskrit, *nirvāṇa*): The ineffable ultimate location or state of enlightenment, and perhaps the most well-known Buddhist concept. Literally, nirvana means extinction. A key teaching of *The Lotus Sutra* and one of the most fundamental *Mahāyāna* rhetorical maneuvers is to bring followers to the understanding that the concept of nirvana is just a means to move people toward enlightenment, such that it is not the end in itself. As a means, it is an empty concept that must be abandoned on the path rather than being a point of fixation.

Nyāya (Sanskrit): In contrast to Vedic logic that sought to establish definitive philosophical truths (e.g. Gotama's *Nyāya Sutra*), Buddhist logic seeks to establish the emptiness of any concept that might be construed as truth, while still remaining rooted in experiential perceptions.

Pāramitā (Sanskrit): "Perfection" with reference to aspects of Buddhism for which advanced practitioners should aim. Most important in the older list of six perfections, the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) generated a voluminous textual history that sometimes deals with rhetorical theory, while less famously the later expanded list of ten perfections includes the perfection of *upāya*. *Upāyapāramitā*, or the perfection of Buddhist rhetorical techniques, is therefore an essential aspect of the ideal bodhisattva as they practice *dharmaparyāya*.

Samyagvāc (Sanskrit): Correct speech, as derived especially from Pāli sources. These conventional advices encourage truthfulness, sincerity, decorum, and the like, while discouraging lies, slander, insult and the like.

Upāya (Sanskrit): The skillful, expedient, and liberative means adapted for different audiences, and used to move people toward enlightenment, especially in *Mahāyāna* traditions. The full term for expedient means is *upāyakauśalya*, but it has been referred to by its shortened term, meaning means, ways, or methods, for centuries. In short, *upāya* means rhetoric in the Buddhist context.

Primary Sources

Bhikku Bodhi, ed. and trans. *The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2016.

This collection contains excerpts from texts that are considered to be some of the oldest writings in the Buddhist canon with foci on multiple topics of interest to rhetoricians. The “Proper Speech” chapter covers the basics of *samyagvāc*, while the “Disputes” and “Settling Disputes” chapters delve into the uses and avoidances of the Buddhist conceptual uptake of *nyāya*-style argumentation. These selections well exemplify the foundational rhetorical thinking that predates latter *Mahāyāna*-influenced developments, including *upāya*.

Chang, Garma C. C., ed. *A Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras: Selections from the Mahāratnakūta Sūtra*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1983.

The Great Jewel Heap Sutra is a compendium of 49 short, early *Mahāyāna* sutras, and this translation selects twenty-two of them for English readers. Most useful for rhetorical insights are “On the Pāramitā of Ingenuity” (a Chinese recension of *The Skill in Means Sutra* about the perfection of *upāya*), “A Discourse on Ready Eloquence” (a more conceptual extrapolation of *samyagvāc*) and “How to Kill the Sword of Wisdom,” which provides insights into audience analysis.

Nagarjuna. “Reasoning: The Sixty Stanzas.” In *Causality and Emptiness: The Wisdom of Nagarjuna*, 74-81. Edited by Peter Della Santina. Singapore: Buddhist Research Society, 2002.

Nagarjuna’s second century CE logical texts that adapt *nyāya* methods are difficult to penetrate, but this short treatise offers one of his more straightforward writings on the subject of “middle way” Buddhist philosophical argumentation. If the title was more accurate to its anti-rhetorical import, then it might be called “Anti-Reasoning,” as herein, Nāgārjuna proposed that, rather than leading to disputation and its resolution, reasoning ought to lead to the cessation of rhetorical situations. Reasoning is therefore not a tool of argumentation, but a means of dispensing with argumentation altogether, since the disputer, trapped in the world of suffering, must aim to transcend disputation.

Saddhatissa, H., trans. *The Sutta-Nipāta*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

This compendium of shorter texts attributed to the historical Buddha from the Pāli canon includes numerous writings about rhetorical

concepts that predate the Buddhist uptake of *upāya*. Focus your attention on “The Chapter of the Octads,” which contains several short sutras (Pāli, *sutta*) about the qualities of disputation, contention, and their avoidance (*nyāya*), as well as sutras that describe the ideal rhetorical (and other) qualities (*samyagvāc*) of monks and sages.

Tatz, Mark, trans. *The Skill in Means Sūtra (Upāyakaśālya)*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001.

Although somewhat obscure – it asks readers to keep its doctrine secret – this short sutra is the oldest extant and translated extended rumination on *upāya*. Conceptually, it is not as nuanced as *The Lotus Sutra*, and therefore is useful for understanding the development of Buddhist rhetoric when *Mahāyāna* rhetorical thinking was nascent. Written in dialogue form, the text raises a number of ethical questions about the justifiable means of teaching and spreading Buddhist doctrine that border on apologetics for the poor behavior of various bodhisattvas and buddhas.

Thurman, Robert A. F., trans. *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahayana Scripture*. University Park: Penn State Press, 1976.

Vimalakīrtineidesśā (approximately the second century CE) shares *The Lotus Sutra*’s organizational structure by including a second chapter focused on *upāya*, and subsequent chapters that exemplify and/or elaborate the concept. As one of the central *Mahāyāna* texts that focuses attention on expedient means, this sutra’s shorter chapter lengths could be useful for undergraduate reading assignments that could be paired with or assigned in lieu of *The Lotus Sutra*.

Watson, Burton, trans. *The Lotus Sutra*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

One of the most important and famous Buddhist sutras, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* (first to second century CE) also happens to be the key text that describes and exemplifies the *Mahāyāna* tradition’s promotion of expedient means (*upāya*) as a method for expansive audience adaptation techniques and as a justification for conceptual and ideological transformations to expand the scope of the liberative techniques already used by Buddhists. The second chapter, “Expedient Means,” is perhaps the most focused and overt discussion of Buddhist rhetorical theory, while later chapters expand upon the concept and offer a variety of exemplifications of expedient means in

action. Each chapter can be taught individually or in pairs, if time is short.

Secondary Sources

Buswell Jr., Robert E. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., eds. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

A crucial resource for both beginners and experts, this comprehensive dictionary defines and historicizes an extensive quantity of Buddhist terms, concepts, and authors from the common to the obscure, while working across a range of languages, including Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, English, and more. This is an especially useful text to have at hand when delving into an unfamiliar Buddhist treatise.

Caillat, Colette. "Prohibited Speech and Subhāsita in the Theravāda Tradition." *Indologica Taurinensia* 12 (1984): 61-73.

Caillat provides a short overview of *samyagvāc* (right speech) and its antithesis, with examples that establish its conventions. This article assumes a knowledge of common Buddhist technical terms, but should be otherwise accessible to inexpert readers.

Federman, Asaf. "Literal Means and Hidden Meanings: A New Analysis of Skillful Means." *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 2 (2009): 125-41.

By focusing on the historical usages and non-usages of *upāya* in the Buddhist canon, Federman argues that it "was developed by Mahāyānists as a radical hermeneutic device" that is exemplified by the polysemy of literal and "hidden" meanings (125). This article well explains some of the historical dilemmas introduced by *The Lotus Sutra*, but its dualistic orientations toward truth/falsehood and the in/correctness of differing historical interpretations could be misleading.

Flores, Ralph. *Buddhist Scriptures as Literature: Sacred Rhetoric and the Uses of Theory*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008.

While the bulk of Flores's monograph will mainly be useful when teaching specific texts (e.g. Buddha's biographical tales [*jātaka*], *The*

Dhammapada, The Heart Sutra), the introduction could be assigned to undergraduates to boost their confidence when reading difficult sutras, owing to its focus on the creative and interpretive ways of reading that do not depend on belief or faith in texts' truthfulness. This perspective invites readings that do not depend upon full understanding of authorial meaning. For better or worse, Flores relies on western critical theory to draw attention to the rhetorical functions of literary forms, and the introduction provides multiple examples from the Buddhist Canon.

Lopez, Jr., Donald S. *The Lotus Sūtra: A Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

Lopez's history of *The Lotus Sutra* is written in an accessible style suitable for undergraduates, and covers many topics of interest to rhetoricians hoping to contextualize the most important text about *upāya*, including its likely origins, translation history, and its more contemporary uptakes. The book also includes a short summary of *The Lotus Sutra*, which could be useful for students if one wants to teach only the sutra's "Expedient Means" chapter and/or other excerpts.

McPhail, Mark Lawrence. *Zen in the Art of Rhetoric: An Inquiry into Coherence*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.

With a focus on explicating a Buddhist non-dualistic worldview, the "Introduction" makes useful connections between Buddhism, the Zen school, Greek sophistry, and postmodernism that might help ground comparisons between Buddhist rhetorics and the Greco-Roman tradition. Most of the middle chapters reverse the direction of critical analysis found in the other secondary sources annotated here by applying Zen rhetorical practice and the pursuit of non-argumentation as a means to analyze non-Buddhist North American discourses, such as the rhetorics of racism, physics, postmodernism, and education. Perhaps more useful to undergraduate readers, the last chapter examines student composition and compares rhetoric to martial arts.

Pye, Michael. *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003.

First published in 1978, Pye's monograph is the first English-language book dedicated to *upāya*, and as such, it provides a foundational analysis of the key texts, terminology, and usages of expedient means. The introduction includes a detailed philology of *upāya*, and latter chapters situate the importance of it in various key texts and

their historical uptake, which could be assigned individually for undergraduates who might find the primary sources to be challenging reading.

Schroeder, John W. *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

Schroeder's tracing of *upāya*'s import to the development of different Buddhist schools is almost a continuation of Pye's more terminological and text-centric approach, meaning Schroeder's approach is more philosophically oriented in contrast to Pye's more descriptive approach to the key sutras and their linguistic transformations. The book contains chapters on Nagarjuna and the relationship of *upāya* to Zen that, individually, could be useful to pair with primary source readings.

Spellmeyer, Kurt. "Rhetoric and Buddhism Unchained." In *Rhetoric and Religion in the Twenty-First Century: Pluralism in a Postsecular Age*, pp. 173-94. Edited by Michael-John DePalma, Paul Lynch, and Jeff Ringer. Southern Illinois University Press, 2023.

Spellmeyer's chapter should be accessible to most undergraduate readers, and could be assigned as an introduction to the topic of Buddhist rhetorics since it delineates some ways that the term rhetoric both applies and does not apply to Buddhism, provides a bit of historical, conceptual, and terminological context, associates ancient concepts to twentieth century critical theory, and, moreover, ends with a helpful reorientation of the student-teacher relationship.

Stcherbatsky, Fyodor Ippolitovich. *Buddhist Logic*, Vol. 1. New York: Dover, 1962.

For instructors looking for a deep dive into the complexities of Buddhist logical systems and their adaptation of *nyāya*, this tome is an invaluable resource.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some similarities and differences between Buddhist conceptions of correct speech versus our contemporary society's?
2. Can you think of anyone from the realm of popular culture who seems to use the tactics of Buddhist correct speech and expedient means in their rhetoric?

3. How would contemporary politics operate if politicians enacted compassion as their central rhetorical ethos?
4. How might the internet and digital culture alter the characteristics and functions of Buddhist rhetoric?
5. Putting aside the question of historical context and even Buddhism, how useful are *upāya*'s techniques for current day-to-day rhetorical situations?
6. Several of the key sutras about *upāya* indicate that the concept should be kept a secret, aside from only being revealed to advanced bodhisattvas. Why would sutra authors want to keep these teachings hidden from everyone else?
7. *Upāya* compels a confrontation with the philosophically timeless ends-versus-means debate. For those seeking to compassionately liberate living creatures from suffering (the ends), what are the ethical limits to acceptable persuasive techniques (the means)? How does the "trolley problem" apply to the path to enlightenment? More bluntly, is Buddha a liar?
8. What advantages and disadvantages arise from the injunction to avoid disputations about doctrine?
9. How do the concepts of reincarnation and karma affect how an audience (individual and/or multitude) is understood?
10. In contrast to other traditions that elevate rhetorical theory and practice as important, if not timelessly functional forms, what is the upshot of Buddhism's exhortation to consider words and *upāya* as empty and as transitory as all other forms, like a raft to be abandoned upon reaching the other shore?



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