



Skill in Means and Mindfulness

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Abstract

An exploration of the relatively rare references to skill in means in early Buddhist texts points to a close relationship to the cultivation of mindfulness, under the overarching aim of establishing the mind in wholesome conditions and preventing the arising of what is unwholesome. At the same time, however, a particular narrative related to the Buddha's half-brother Nanda and his struggle with sensual desire testifies to incipient tendencies for the evolution of a different conception of skill in means; in fact, to some extent this episode could even be considered an instance of proto-tantra.

Key words Compassion · Nanda · Sensual lust · Skill in means · Skillful means · Tantra

In the context of a survey of Mahāyāna ethics, Keown (1992/2001, p. 157) distinguished between two kinds of skill in means. One of these is of general relevance to Buddhist practitioners and stays firmly grounded in the normative ethical framework of early Buddhism. The other, however, is relevant only to highly advanced bodhisattvas and Buddhas, who in this particular strand of Buddhist thought are considered to be capable of transgressing ethical precepts, as long as this happens out of a compassionate motivation.

As already noted by Tatz (1994/2001, p. 10), skill in means “is not a primary term of early Buddhism.” Although the idea of skill in means is indeed hardly mentioned in the early discourses, reflecting its comparatively late genesis and evolution, a closer study of the few relevant instances that can be identified may provide interesting perspectives. These instances can conveniently be grouped in accordance with the above distinction into two types, one relevant for practitioners in general and the other being more the reserve of the Buddha himself or of his highly advanced disciples.

The First Type of Skill in Means

“Skill in means” (*upāyakosalla*) features as part of a set of three skills mentioned in the *Saṅgīti-sutta* (DN 33), with the other two being “skill in progression” (*āyakosalla*) and “skill in retrogression” (*apāyakosalla*). The general function of the *Saṅgīti-sutta* is to provide a map of various doctrinal terms. These are arranged according to the number they involve along a basic grid that proceeds from ones to tens. The present set occurs in the section of threes. The parallels to the *Saṅgīti-sutta* do not have this particular set of three skills, making the occurrence of skill in means in this context a presentation specific to the Pāli version of the *Saṅgīti-sutta* and thus probably later than the material this discourse has in common with its parallels.

A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, of which no parallel is known, includes the same set of three among six qualities whose possession leads to the acquisition and strengthening of wholesome qualities. Conversely, their absence prevents such acquisition and strengthening. The relevant passage proceeds as follows:

Here, monastics, a monastic is skilled in progression, is skilled in retrogression, is skilled in means, gives rise to desire for achieving wholesome states that have not been achieved, protects wholesome states that have been achieved, and accomplishes through perseverant undertaking. Monastics, endowed with these six qualities a monastic is able to achieve a wholesome state that has not been achieved and strengthen a wholesome state that has been achieved.

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(AN 6.79: *idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu āyakusalo ca hoti, apāyakusalo ca hoti, upāyakusalo ca hoti, anadhigatānaṃ kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ adhigamāya chandaṃ janeti, adhigate kusale dhamme ārakkhati, sātaccakiriyāya sampādeti. imehi kho, bhikkhave, chahi dhammehi samannāgato bhikkhu bhabbo anadhigataṃ vā kusalaṃ dhammaṃ adhigantaṃ, adhigataṃ vā kusalaṃ dhammaṃ phātiṃ kātun ti*).

Apart from the three skills, to be explored below, the remainder of the passage could be summarized as indicating that, in order for wholesome states to arise and become strong, one needs to desire that they arise, protect them once they have arisen, and be perseverant in both respects. This thereby spells out a basic principle of mental culture.

The above listing of six states shows a peculiarity in the Pāli original, as only the first three are connected to each other with the conjunction “and” (*ca*), which for the sake of ease of reading has not been explicitly translated. From the viewpoint of Pāli grammar, it would be more natural if such a listing were to use this conjunction throughout or else dispense with it completely. The resultant irregularity, in the sense of combining two different styles of enumeration, gives the impression that the final presentation results from a combination of two originally separate lists (Anālayo 2014, p. 101, and Anālayo 2021a, p. 82). When evaluated from the viewpoint of content, it would seem that the desire for wholesome states to arise, together with protecting them and persevering, fits the overall topic quite well and could even be considered sufficient for the goal of achieving and strengthening a wholesome state. On this reasoning, then, it would be possible to envisage that, during the process of oral transmission, the three skills were added to the above discourse. This would concord with the impression conveyed by the comparative perspective on the *Saṅgīti-sutta* that these three skills are not particularly early.

Be that as it may, further information on the three types of skill can be garnered from the *Vibhaṅga*, a work in the Theravāda Abhidharma collection. Although in general terms Abhidharma works are later than the early discourses, the case of the *Vibhaṅga* does not always fit this pattern. A particularly striking example emerges when consulting the coverage given to the four establishments of mindfulness in two Pāli discourses, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (MN 10) and the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna-sutta* (DN 22), compared to which the treatment of the same topic in the *Vibhaṅga* appears to reflect an earlier stage in textual evolution (Bronkhorst 1985).

The exegesis of the three types of skill in the *Vibhaṅga* (Vibh 325) sees skill in progression as a form of wise understanding (*paññā pajānanā*, etc.) concerned with how paying attention in a particular way can lead to avoiding the arising of unwholesome states or to decreasing those already arisen

and can also lead to arousing and strengthening wholesome states. Skill in retrogression then concerns the complementary case, namely wisely understanding which forms of attention have the opposite effect as those described above, thereby leading to retrogression rather than progression. Regarding skill in means, the *Vibhaṅga* then offers the following succinct explanation:

And therein all wisdom of means is skill in means.
(Vibh 326: *sabbā pi tatr’ upāyā paññā upāyakosallaṃ*).

In other words, skill in means here operates in the background of the other two skills, in the sense that it refers to knowing how to direct attention and how not to direct attention. For this rather fundamental task in mental culture, the cultivation of mindfulness would be a key requirement. The cultivation of mindfulness would also provide a meaningful perspective on skill in means in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage translated above. In other words, perseverance in aspiring for wholesome states and protecting them requires that one knows how to do that, particularly through directing attention accordingly. Here, mindful supervision can provide the required feedback. On noting that wholesome states increase by attending in a particular way, such a form of attending should be encouraged. However, if another form of paying attention results in triggering unwholesome reactions, mindful recognition of this pattern can provide the indispensable feedback for being able to deploy attention differently. From this viewpoint, then, the type of skill in means described in the above passages stands in a close relationship to right effort and right mindfulness as key elements in Buddhist mental culture. Such a type of skill in means would indeed be relevant to practitioners in general. Grounded in a clear distinction between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, it would take the form of mindful monitoring to discern those conditions, in oneself and in others, that foster what is wholesome and counter what is unwholesome, followed by making an effort in support of an overall increase in wholesome states. Such skill in means would be a very practical and meaningful way of expressing compassion, in the understanding that unwholesome states cause harm for oneself and others, hence their diminishing in turn diminishes harm. This is precisely what compassion in early Buddhist soteriology is about: countering harm (Anālayo 2015).

The Second Type of Skill in Means

Whereas the two passages surveyed above, taken from the *Saṅgīti-sutta* and a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, present a form of skill in means that is of universal applicability to any practitioner of mindfulness meditation, another two passages reflect more specific concerns. The first of these

is a verse which, strictly speaking, does not involve an occurrence of the full term “skill in means,” although Pāsādika (2008, p. 439) considered this verse to be already “distinctly reminiscent of the Mahāyāna usage of *upāyakaṣālyā*.” The verse employs the similar term “knowing the means” (*upāyaññū*) and then continues by mentioning the quality of being “skilled” (*kusala*) on its own. The two terms occur consecutively in a poem whose main topic is the respect owed to a teacher of Dharma. The verse under discussion then illustrates the nature of such a teacher with the example of a sturdy boat, equipped with oar and rudder, which someone “knowing the means” and being “skilled” can employ to bring others across (Sn 321).

According to the commentarial explanation, the verses were spoken by the Buddha in reference to his chief disciple Sāriputta (Pj II 325). This identification is intriguing. Whereas in the early discourses Sāriputta functions as an outstanding teacher, second only to the Buddha himself, later Mahāyāna texts portray him in a considerably more negative light (Migot 1954). From the viewpoint of such texts, to find Sāriputta/Sāriputra associated with knowledge of the means to ferry others across would certainly be highly unexpected, if not surprising. Yet, this is indeed the role accorded to him in the early discourses. Whatever way his role is conceived, however, the present verse is not of general applicability and much rather concerns the more specific case of a highly accomplished teacher.

The same holds for the other relevant occurrence, which is also in verse and in this case refers to the Buddha himself. The relevant verse occurs in the *Theragāthā*, which contains earlier and later material (Norman 1969, p. xxix, envisages a period of formation “of almost 300 years”). The stanza translated below is the second of two verses reportedly spoken by the Buddha’s half-brother Nanda, which proceeds as follows:

Due to superficial attention, I was devoted to adornment,

And I was restless and vain, afflicted by sensual lust.
Through the being skilled in means of the Buddha, the
kinsman of the sun,

Having practiced penetratively, I removed my mind
from becoming.

(Th 157: *ayoniso manasikārā, maṇḍanaṃ anuyuñjisaṃ,
uddhato capalo cāsiṃ, kāmarāgena aṭṭito.*

Th 158: *upāyakusalenāhaṃ, buddhenādiccabandhunā;
yoniso paṭipajjivā, bhava cittaṃ udabbahin ti.*

The first verse highlights Nanda’s condition of being under the influence of sensual lust. Besides creating agitation in the mind, this made him keen on adornment. The reference to superficial or unwise (*ayoniso*) attention relates to the passages surveyed above, according to which paying attention in a certain way, unwholesome states will arise and

increase. This appears to have been Nanda’s predicament. A contrast to such misdirected attention then takes the form of practice undertaken in a way that is wise or, more literally, penetrative (*yoniso*). As the passage taken up above from the *Vibhaṅga* clarifies, the shift from unwise to wise attention involves skill in means, an element that in the present case appears to have been introduced by the Buddha, presumably in the form of some instruction to Nanda. Relying on such skill in means, Nanda became an arahant, whereby he had removed his mind from future becoming in the cycle of birth and death, *samsāra*. In this way, although the contrast provided by the two verses resonates closely with the first type of skill in means, explored above, the role of the Buddha in the present context is in line with the previous instance concerning Sāriputta, in the sense that these verses concern the skill in means of a highly accomplished teacher.

Nanda’s Practice to Overcome Sensual Lust

The skill in means relevant to the case of Nanda can best be explored by surveying other discourses depicting his struggle with sensual lust. A discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* reports that on one occasion Nanda approached the Buddha carrying a shiny bowl, dressed up in ironed robes, and with his eyes painted. This description seems to relate to the reference in the first of his two verses to being “devoted to adornment.” Such misguided devotion then led to a stern rebuke by the Buddha (SN 21.8), who reportedly commended that Nanda undertakes three types of more ascetically inclined practices, presumable to wean him from his sensual inclinations and infatuations with his own beauty. These three practices are living in the seclusion of a forest; subsisting on begging for food rather than accepting invitations to meals, which will usually be more delicious than what one gets begging on the roads; and wearing robes made of rags instead of accepting gifts of ready-made robes, which will usually be of much higher quality.

This Pāli discourse has three parallels extant in Chinese, whose introductory narration differs in so far as here Nanda had been seen all dressed up by other monks, who reported this to the Buddha. Hearing their report, the Buddha called Nanda to his presence and rebuked him. Two versions found in two *Samyukta-āgama* collections report the recommendation that Nanda should become a forest dweller, subsist on begging food, and wear rag robes (SĀ 1067 and SĀ² 5). In a discourse in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, the rebuke points out that his behavior is not different from that of laypeople (EĀ 18.6). In this way, alongside exhibiting some variations, the parallels agree that Nanda behaved in ways unsuitable for one who has gone forth by indulging in adornment, and that the Buddha reacted to this by pointing out the type of

behavior he should rather adopt. The instruction exemplifies the approach to sensuality typical for early Buddhist soteriology, namely the exercise of restraint and the employment of countermeasures.

The same holds for a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (AN 8.9), which provides a detailed survey of four mindfulness-related practices whose undertaking enabled Nanda to live the celibate life of a monk in spite of his lustful disposition. One of these practices takes the form of guarding the sense doors in such a way that no unwholesome states arise. This relates well to the exposition given in the *Vibhaṅga* of skill in means, discussed above. A chief tool for such practice is mindfulness (Anālayo 2020). Another practice is moderation in eating, which also has a direct relationship to mindfulness (Anālayo 2018). In addition, the cultivation of wakefulness is mentioned, which requires purifying the mind from unwholesome states while sitting or walking in meditation during the day and the first and last parts of the night, to be combined with going to sleep mindfully in the middle of the night. This is obviously also a mindfulness-related practice. The same holds for the fourth, which takes the form of mindful contemplation of the impermanent nature of feeling tones (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā*), and thoughts (*vitakka*).

The detailed survey offered in this way stands out among Pāli discourses for its comprehensive presentation of early Buddhist methods for countering sensual desire. Mindfully guarding the sense doors serves to counter the ingrained tendency of the mind to pursue what stimulates lust; moderation with eating supports the same, as food can easily become another occasion for living out sensual tendencies. These combine with readiness to counter unwholesome states at any time and the cultivation of insight into impermanence, which naturally leads to dispassion and thereby undermines sensual passion.

Similar to the *Samyutta-nikāya* passage on Nanda dressing up, the present Pāli discourse also has parallels in two *Samyukta-āgama* collections extant in Chinese (SĀ 275 and SĀ² 6). With some minor differences in presentation, these also present the four mindfulness-related practices surveyed above, adding an injunction to the monks in the audience that they should undertake the same types of training. Clearly, Nanda was not the only one in the early Buddhist monastic community struggling with sensual desire. Sanskrit fragments have preserved parts of a version of this instruction (SHT VI 1226.3R–5V, Bechert & Wille 1989, pp. 20–22), in addition to which another parallel offering such instructions is extant in Tibetan translation (Up 2065).

Out of the above four practices, guarding the sense doors was reportedly taken up particularly well by Nanda, as the listing of outstanding disciples in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* reckons him foremost in this respect (AN 1.14.4: *etad aggamaṃ ... indriyesu guttadvārānaṃ*). The counterpart in

the *Ekottarika-āgama* could be read to imply a similar type of accomplishment, as it reckons him foremost in calmness of all faculties and an immovable mind (EĀ 4.5: 諸根寂靜, 心不變易; here this describes one of two eminencies of Nanda).

The advice that emerges from the passages surveyed above would indeed provide a range of skillful means to wean the mind from sensual lust. Hence, from this perspective, the reference in Nanda's verse to skill in means could easily be interpreted as intending the above type of instructions, even though these do not explicitly mention this particular term. In fact, as pointed out by Gombrich (1996, p. 17), the "Buddha's 'skill in means' tends to be thought of as a feature of the Mahāyāna ... but the exercise of skill to which it refers, the ability to adapt one's message to the audience, is of enormous importance in the Pali Canon." In the same vein, Jayatilke (1963/1980, p. 406) reasoned that it is the ability of "the Buddha in adjusting his sermons to suit the predilections and temperament of his listeners that comes to be known as the *upāya-kausalya* or 'the skill in (devising) means (to convert people)'." That is, even when the term is not explicitly used, the basic idea of being skilled in teaching others the means for cultivating what is wholesome and avoiding what is unwholesome can be seen to underlie a range of instructions reportedly given by the Buddha.

Nanda and Heavenly Nymphs

Another perspective on Nanda's struggle with lust emerges in a discourse extant in the *Udāna* (Ud 3.2). In general, prose narration in this collection tends to be later than the bulk of material found in the four main Pāli discourse collections, making it reasonable to place the present instance at a later time than the Pāli discourses related to Nanda surveyed above. The relevant story begins with Nanda telling other monks that he wants to disrobe. On being informed of this, the Buddha summons Nanda to his presence. Nanda reports that he keeps thinking of a beautiful fiancée from his lay life. The Buddha then takes Nanda by the arm and levitates together with him to the Heaven of the Thirty-three to show him heavenly nymphs attending on Sakka, the ruler in this heaven. Nanda admits that these heavenly nymphs are far more attractive than his former fiancée. The Buddha then promises that Nanda will gain such heavenly nymphs. On hearing this promise, Nanda is ready to continue living in robes. Later, being spurred by criticism raised by other monks of his mean motivation, Nanda makes an effort and becomes an arahant. He informs the Buddha that there is no longer any need to keep the former promise that Nanda will gain heavenly nymphs.

Shulman (2019, p. 242) apparently misunderstands this turn of events to imply that the Buddha being released from his commitment serves to express “that only awakening can be the true freedom from commitment.” Instead, the point appears to be simply that, once Nanda has become an arahant and gone beyond the prospect of future rebirth, any pledge as to what form his next rebirth will take has become irrelevant. The ruse to keep him in celibacy has worked, as by becoming an arahant he has become unable to engage in sexual intercourse (e.g., DN 29 and DĀ 17).

The *Udāna* discourse summarized above has a parallel in an *Udāna* collection extant in Chinese (T IV 739c) as well as in an *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse (EĀ 18.7). These report that, during the visit to heaven, Nanda found out that a host of beautiful nymphs, who were without any male partner, were waiting for him to be reborn in heaven in order to be able attend on him. This thereby makes explicit something that is also implicit in the Pāli version, in that the winning of heavenly nymphs concerns Nanda’s next birth. Both of the Chinese versions continue with the Buddha taking Nanda also to a visit to hell, revealing to him where he is destined to be reborn after having amused himself with the heavenly nymphs. This has the same sobering effect that in the Pāli account results from the criticism by other monks. The *Ekottarika-āgama* version agrees with the Pāli account that, once he had become an arahant, Nanda told the Buddha that the former promise of heavenly nymphs was no longer binding.

The description of the Buddha taking Nanda by the arm up to heaven appears to reflect a developed notion of physical levitation from what, at an early stage, seems to have been envisaged as acts performed with the mental body (Anālayo 2016, 2021b). In other words, although the idea that the Buddha and accomplished meditators could levitate to visit various heavens is early, for them to be able to carry someone else along reflects a more evolved conception of levitation done with the physical body rather than with the mental one.

A problematic idea in the above episode is the Buddha’s promise that, by staying in robes, Nanda can be certain that in his next rebirth he will gain the company of heavenly nymphs. The concern here is clearly with keeping Nanda in robes, *pace* Shulman (2019, p. 247), who mistook the story to mean that “Nanda will attain union with the *apsaras* [heavenly nymphs] if he practices good meditation.” No reference to meditation, good or otherwise, is found; the central idea is rather that Nanda should practice celibacy now so as to be able in his next life to indulge in sensuality in a way much superior to what would be available to him now if he were to disrobe.

The idea of such a promise, regarding the definite conditions of Nanda’s next rebirth, does not sit too well with the early Buddhist theory of karma and its fruit, as expounded

in the *Mahākammavibhaṅga-sutta* and its parallels (MN 136 and MĀ 171; see also Anālayo 2011, pp. 778–780). The parallel versions of this discourse indicate that the circumstances of one’s next rebirth do not depend only on the ethical quality of one’s most recent conduct, as at times a karma from a distant past may come to fruition instead. As a result, it is in principle possible that someone observing wholesome conduct still is reborn in hell, just as someone immoral can still be reborn in heaven. In both cases, the wholesome or unwholesome conduct will have its result, but this will ripen at a later time. The quality of the present rebirth has been caused by something else, done much earlier. Thus, although appropriate conduct in combination with a strong aspiration will make it quite likely that one will be reborn in a particular heavenly realm (MN 120), this is not completely certain. The only escape from such uncertainty, envisaged in early Buddhist thought, is by way of attaining stream-entry, as this will ensure that no rebirth takes place in hell and other lower realms. From the viewpoint of the complexity of karma and its fruition, it could not really be predicted with absolute certainty that Nanda’s staying in robes will result in his next rebirth taking place in the Heaven of the Thirty-three in the company of heavenly nymphs. That is, even without the censure by others or the additional tour to hell, which in the parallel versions serve to direct him instead to the path toward transcending all types of birth, if Nanda had stayed in robe just aspiring to be united in his next life with the heavenly nymphs, it could not have been predicted with certainty that this will indeed happen.

Another and rather significant departure from early Buddhist thought emerges on contrasting the underlying approach to Nanda’s lustful tendencies with the description of how to deal with sensual desire in the passages surveyed earlier. These present countermeasures of various types, through ascetic forms of conduct and mental practices that prevent the arising of lust. The present episode, however, depicts the adoption of a substantially different approach. This can best be summarized with a quote from the *Ekottarika-āgama* version, which in this discourse occurs after the Buddha has taken Nanda to heaven and before he takes him to hell: “Now I shall extinguish Nanda’s fire through fire” (EĀ 18.7: 我今當以火滅難陀火). In its current placing, the sense appears to be that the Buddha intends to extinguish the sensual fire in Nanda’s mind through a vision of the fires of hell. However, this description would equally fit the rationale of the heavenly tour, whose purpose is to extinguish Nanda’s burning lust for his fiancée, due to which he wants to disrobe, through setting him on fire with sensual longing for heavenly nymphs (which he can only gain if he continues to live in robes).

In all versions of this episode, taking Nanda to heaven and showing him the heavenly nymphs is intentionally employed to stimulate his sensual desire even more, rather than curb it.

He is being weaned from lusting for his former fiancée not through insight into the predicament of sensuality, through realizing the limitations of physical beauty, or through arousing dispassion for what is impermanent and ultimately unsatisfactory. Instead, the tool is the stimulation of sensual passion for something even more sensually attractive than what has, up to now, been the object of his lusting. Such a procedure would be in line with the position taken, for example, in the *Hevajra Tantra* (II.ii.50), a work appearing around 900 CE (Szántó 2015), that passion itself can provide a release from the bondage of passion:

Through passion the world is bound, through passion it is freed indeed.

(Snellgrove 1959, p. 50: *rāgena badhyate loko rāgenaiva vimucyate*).

This statement is preceded by a reference to a homeopathic treatment as an illustration of how a particular problem can in this way be countered. The above indication then continues with a dismissive reference to those Buddhists who are not aware of this form of practice. Such lack of awareness would certainly hold for the remainder of early Buddhist texts, where the Nanda episode appears to be unique in reflecting this type of approach. There is, of course, the tantalizing instruction: “in dependence on craving, craving should be abandoned” (AN 4.159: *taṇhaṃ nissāya taṇhā pahātabbā ti*; with a parallel in SĀ 564: 依於愛著，當斷愛欲). However, this does not involve a recommendation to stimulate sensual craving. Instead, it commends “craving,” if it can even be called such, for liberation in order to overcome sensual types of craving. In spite of some superficial similarity to the quote from the *Hevajra Tantra*, the implication of this passage is substantially different. In other words, the Nanda episode in the *Udāna* could indeed be the earliest attested instance in Buddhist texts where sensual desire is being intentionally stimulated as a means for going beyond sensuality. From this viewpoint, then, this episode, found after all in a Pāli discourse, could be considered an instance of proto-tantra.

The remarkable nature of this approach has not been lost on the commentary on the *Udāna* discourse, which devotes some effort to explaining why the Buddha made Nanda, who already had a lustful mind, look at heavenly nymphs (Ud-a 172: *kasmā pana bhagavā avassutacittaṃ āyasmantaṃ nandaṃ accharāyo olokāpesi?*). The attempt at explaining this unusual procedure employs the illustration of a skilled (*kusala*) physician who treats a person with excessive bodily humors by first exacerbating the condition in order to then be able to remove it. This illustration is similar to the one employed in the *Hevajra Tantra*. The Pāli commentary argues that, in a comparable way, the Buddha, as one who is skilled (*kusala*) in taming persons to be guided, intentionally exacerbated Nanda’s condition. Another commentary then

identifies this procedure as an instance of the Buddha’s skill in means (Pj II 274: *upāyakusalatāya*). The same identification recurs in the introductory narration to one of the *Jātaka* tales, which in general reflect a late level of textual development comparable to the just-mentioned commentary (and thus later than the *Udāna* tale). The narration in question mentions several instances of the Buddha’s skill in means (Jā IV 224). Notably, the tale of Nanda is the only such instance found among the discourses, as the other examples are known only from commentarial texts.

Although Federman (2009, p. 126) has a point in warning against reading too easily the Mahāyāna concept of skill in means into early Buddhist texts, in this particular case it seems indeed that, as noted by Pye (1978/2003, p. 134), “the story of Nanda ... probably comes nearest to the Mahayana sense of skilful means” among this type of Pāli sources. The somewhat unique approach to dealing with defilements that emerge in this way may well be a central factor in turning the narrative of Nanda’s dedication to the monastic life in order to win heavenly nymphs into a lasting inspiration in Buddhist art (Zin 2006, pp. 167–190) as well as in Buddhist narrative traditions. The latter finds reflection in a range of different versions of this tale (see Lamotte 1944/1981, p. 118 and Yamasaki 2009), even to the extent of motivating the celebrated Buddhist poet Aśvaghōṣa (active around the second century CE) to compose a whole work on Nanda, the *Saundarananda* (Salomon 2015). Notably, the *Saundarananda* also contains a version of the simile of the physician to illustrate the Buddha’s approach (X.43; Johnston 1928), showcasing the continuity of the felt need to explain this type of method.

Further developments along the lines of the already remarkable nature of the Nanda episode can be seen even in the Pāli tradition. The commentary on the *Dhammapada* provides an extended version of the *Udāna* tale, adding that the Buddha had tricked Nanda into going forth (Dhp-a I 115). The story goes that the Buddha handed his bowl to Nanda at the end of a meal and did not take it back, thereby forcing Nanda to follow him up to the monastery. Once they had arrived at the monastery, the Buddha told him to ordain, which out of respect Nanda was unable to refuse. A similar tale can be found in the version of the Nanda tale reported in the Chinese *Udāna* collection (T IV 739b).

This Pāli commentarial tale stands in some degree of contrast with a detail in the *Samyutta-nikāya* report of the Buddha’s rebuke of Nanda’s dressing up, discussed above. This rebuke explicitly notes that Nanda went forth out of confidence or faith (SN 21.8: *saddhā*). At the time of this discourse, Nanda was evidently still seen as having decided to become a monk by his own inspiration, rather than being deceived into going forth by the Buddha. The same indication can be found in the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to this discourse as well as in the parallel in the same collection to

the *Udāna* tale of Nanda being promised heavenly nymphs (EĀ 18.6 and EĀ 18.7: 以信).

As pointed out by Kalupahana (1992/1994, p. 117) in the context of a discussion of skill in means, “deception in any form, whether intended to achieve good or bad ends, is not condoned in [early] Buddhism.” The above tale does not fit particularly well with such an attitude. Schroeder (2004, p. 15) reasoned that stories of this type, which abound in later texts, “not only go against orthodox Buddhist doctrine, they seem philosophically inconsistent. That the Buddha can ... cheat to help others attain liberation ... seems like sophistry.”

Although the idea of Nanda being cajoled into going forth further enhances the remarkable transformation of a person completely in the grip of sensual lust into an arahant, the net result is that the Buddha appears in a substantially different light from the way his personality and moral integrity emerge in other early discourses. As noted by McClintock (2011, p. 103), the Nanda tale is one of several later narratives in which the Buddha features as a “compassionate trickster.” In this way, a proto-tantric approach can be identified already among the Pāli discourses, which a Pāli commentarial tale then combines with an employment of skill in means (explicitly recognized as such by the Pāli commentarial tradition) that no longer fits comfortably into the ethical framework that is otherwise so pervasive in early Buddhist thought.

The tale of Nanda thereby showcases the beginning stages of a problem that becomes considerably more pronounced in later tradition, regarding the scope of “means.” As pointed out by Jackson (2004, p. 872), this tendency “defines virtue in terms of motive rather than conduct.” Such a shift in perspective is not without its challenges. In the words of McGarrity (2009, p. 202): “*Upāya* is a deliberately malleable and stretchable term ... The issue is just how far it can stretch and yet still continue to mean anything.” This is indeed the question: At what point has the scope of “means” been stretched to such an extent that it no longer concords with the alternative, and in the early texts more prominent, sense of the term translated as “skill,” *kusala/kuśala*, namely as a referent for what is ethically “wholesome”?

Whatever the reply may be, the above exploration shows the basic problem that emerges in this way to be a pan-Buddhist one, rather than being confined to the Mahāyāna traditions.

Mindfulness

Based on the above exploration, it seems that the early Buddhist type of skill in means that is of general relevance to any practitioner would call for a firm grounding in mindfulness and a clear orientation toward fostering what is wholesome and overcoming what is unwholesome. In a way, the

ethical skill, if it can be called such, that is enshrined by the nuance of being “wholesome,” is arguably a skill of primary importance in early Buddhist soteriology and hence also of the employment of mindfulness. This involves returning attention again and again to the basic contrast between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, which revolves around the question of whether something is harmless or harmful, be it for oneself or for others. As noted by Hick (1991, p. 143), “the idea of means implies the idea of an end.” The end of such skillful means would be to foster what is wholesome and to counter what is unwholesome, thereby decreasing harm to others and oneself. Such an end would be a natural and obvious expression of being firmly rooted in compassion.

Of relevance here is also the position taken by Kabat-Zinn (2011, p. 281) that “mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) was developed as one of a possibly infinite number of skillful means for bringing the dharma into mainstream settings.” Maex (2011, p. 167) reasoned: “What Jon Kabat-Zinn did, is in line with a long-standing Buddhist approach called *upāya*, usually translated as ‘skillful means’ ... Jon Kabat-Zinn has done nothing else but continue that tradition and restate the teaching in a way that makes it acceptable to the medical and the scientific world.”

Skill in means as closely interrelated with teaching and undertaking mindfulness practices would indeed provide a natural relationship to compassion. Moreover, the actual meditative cultivation of compassion, as described in early Buddhist texts, relies on mindfulness, as is also the case for the other three immeasurable or boundless states (Anālayo 2019). Understood in this way, such skill in means would re-establish a basic and ancient connection that harks back to the early stages of the development of Buddhist thought and practice.

Abbreviations AN: *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; DĀ: *Dīrgha-āgama* (T 1); DhP-a: *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*; DN: *Dīrgha-nikāya*; EĀ: *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); Jā: *Jātaka*; MĀ: *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*; Pj II: *Paramatthajotikā*; SĀ: *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99); SĀ²: *Samyukta-āgama* (T 100); SHT: Sanskrithandschriften aus den Turfanfunden; SN: *Samyutta-nikāya*; Sn: *Sutta-nipāta*; T: Taishō edition; Th: *Theragāthā*; Ud: *Udāna*; Ud-a: *Paramatthadīpanī*; Up: *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*; Vibh: *Vibhaṅga*.

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