



**BUDDHISM,
SKILLFULNESS
AND
MASTERING LIFE**

Dharma Stories
Ancient and Modern

Dr Stewart McFarlane

Chapter 1

Preview

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is the primary method of teaching Buddhadharma (Buddhism) through most of its history. It was a method often employed by the Buddha himself in teaching. This may be a surprise to those more familiar with the “religions of the book”, in which reading the religious text is the primary means of teaching.

Indian religious traditions reaching back to the ancient Vedas of the Brahmins valued spoken teachings, remembered and transmitted orally in formal ritualized chanting. This is still the practice of Brahmins today; as well of Buddhist monks in South East Asia. The monks memorise the sutras, albeit nowadays with the help of printed texts. Originally, in the absence of printed texts, the sutras were transmitted by the elders, who would train and drill the next generation of monks. The Buddhist sutras were transmitted entirely orally by repetition for about three centuries after the Buddha’s passing. They were only then written down, in the Pali language in the case of the Theravada texts, and in other vernacular Prakrit languages in the case of the other early schools or in Buddhist Sanskrit in the early Mahāyāna. Even after written texts were developed, the main method of transmitting the sutras was through oral recitation by groups of monks.

Interestingly the primary method of teaching Dharma in South East Asian Buddhism is not by sutra chanting, which is in the Pali scriptural language, which is unintelligible to most lay people and in fact to many monks. The main mode of teaching Buddhism to ordinary people is by little discourses and stories told by the monks, in the vernacular language. These may include stories from the canonical texts, but may equally well involve traditional folk tales and contemporary incidents, even news stories from the press or TV. Justin Thomas McDaniel’s fascinating study of how Buddhist teaching and monastic education actually operates in Laos and Thailand, shows how little use is made of the Pali texts as such, and how much vernacular stories and homilies form the core of the teaching delivered both to novice monks and to lay people. (McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words*, 2008.)

Of course in the early centuries of Buddhism in India, the languages of Pali and other Prakrits, were vernacular, spoken languages of different North Indian regions. The Buddha instructed his monks to teach Dharma in the vernacular language of wherever they were actively teaching. But in time, the languages changed, as vernacular languages do, but the scriptural language of the suttas, remained the same as it was transmitted and chanted by the monks. So what were originally vernacular languages became scriptural languages such as Pali. They did so by staying the same as they were at the time of transmission. This then meant that special training in the scriptural languages such as Pali and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit was a requirement for monks. Of course it was only the minority of scholarly monks who really mastered the scriptural language. The majority just memorised and chanted the sutras. Knowing a text by heart, so that one can chant it in a group of fellow monks, is not the same as knowing the language, in the sense of understanding the grammar, vocabulary and meaning of the text.

It is true to say that in East Asian forms of Buddhism as well as Tibetan Buddhism, the reverence for the written sacred texts, the Buddhist sutras is greater than was the case in early Indian Buddhism. This is partly for cultural reasons and partly for historical reasons. In Tibetan

and East Asian Buddhism, in China, Korea and Japan, there is a serious reverence for the written text. The reverence for the written word and the authoritative text is fundamental to Confucian Chinese culture, which strongly influenced Korean and Japanese cultures. Furthermore, it was as written texts that the substantive teachings of Buddhadharma were transmitted to China, Japan, Korea and Tibet. A period of oral transmission of the sutras was unknown in these countries. Because the texts had to be translated into Tibetan or Chinese before they could be learned studied and chanted, then these written texts were greatly revered. The ritualized chanting of texts in these countries is always with reference to a written text. Even in the case of long serving monks who know the texts by heart, they will still have the Tibetan or Chinese text open in front of them in formal ritual chanting ceremonies. It is part of the reverence for the text.

It is also true to say that despite the roles of formal chanting and textual study even in East Asian Buddhism, the predominant method of teaching Dharma is through vernacular stories and homilies, which may draw on materials and stories in the sutras, but will also draw on oral traditions, folk tales and contemporary events. Despite the reverence for the written sutras, specialized training in the language of the Sutras either Classical Tibetan, or Buddhist Chinese, which is very different from Classical Chinese, is needed to be able to read and study them. This is also true for South East Asian Buddhists. As I have said, monks need to be given special training in Pali in the case of South East Asian Buddhism, and Classical Tibetan or Buddhist Chinese, as well detailed explanations, in order to know what the sutras are saying. As a former resident in monasteries, I can confirm that being able to chant a sutra even in Chinese or Tibetan is not the same as being able to read the sutra and understand its message. The latter requires specialist training. That is why I went to universities to learn Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese, to study the sutras and texts in their original languages. This explains why most Dharma teaching delivered by monks, especially that delivered to lay people consists of homilies, stories and discourses in the local language, and which are usually simple and easy to follow.

One of the central themes of many of the stories is that of Skillful Means (*upāya-kaushalya*). In Buddhism, this may be defined as the skill or ability of a teacher to manipulate a situation so that a being in a state of delusion or with a particular problem is brought to a higher level of greater understanding, or at least to avoid further unwholesome actions which will cause them greater suffering. In the traditional understanding, Skillful Means involve the compassionate intervention of an enlightened teacher, and their ability to understand the spiritual condition and mental state of the person, and to teach them on a level appropriate to their mental and spiritual capacity. In doing so, the teacher leads people out of states of suffering and ignorance to higher levels of understanding.

Both teachers in the first two stories in this book are employing Skillful Means and very radical forms of active learning. They do not preach to the learner about death, suffering, loss and the need for compassion. They set the learner an active task, which raises the stakes of their own personal involvement with these issues; win a game of chess with this monk, or the Zen Master will kill you. Find the right grains of mustard in order to save your child. These tasks and the context in which they are set bring the learner to a direct experiential understanding of impermanence and human mortality and to a direct encounter with their innate compassion. These two stories are vivid demonstrations of Buddhist use of Skillful Means and effective teaching.

The story of the Prodigal Son (Chapter 13) is a model for how enlightened Buddhist teachers including the Buddha himself, use gradual and indirect methods to disclose the reality of things as they are, when people are ready to understand and accept them. The story is from the Lotus

Sutra, the core text of Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) Buddhism, dedicated to the spiritual power of compassion and the effectiveness of Skillful Means. In the story, the Buddha's compassion is directly compared to the compassion of the father. The act of concealing his true identity is justified, because it arises from his compassion and love for his son. This compassion is fundamental to the Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching of Skillful Means and is implicit in all forms of Buddhism.

Subtlety, concealment and even not telling the whole truth are justified if the motivation is correct and the person using this method is sufficiently spiritually developed to use it wisely and compassionately. It is never a blanket dispensation to tell lies out of convenience or to pursue unworthy and unskillful ends. In the Sutras and Zen texts, the exemplars of Skillful Means are always advanced teachers, Bodhisattvas or Buddhas.

In many of the examples and analogy given in the Lotus Sutra it is made clear that the deception involved in exercising Skillful Means is justified because it succeeds in detaching the person concerned from their deluded condition, which can only lead them to suffering, whereas the device or deception involved in Skillful Means leads them to a higher level of understanding and reduces or removes suffering. Hence, in the Prodigal Son story from the Lotus Sutra, the father deliberately conceals his true identity from his long lost son, in order to facilitate their eventual reconciliation. Similarly in the famous, "Burning House" story in chapter three of the Lotus Sutra, the Father promises toy carts he does not have to his three young sons, to get them to leave the burning house which is about to collapse. On getting them to safety, the relieved father, rather than giving them toy carts, presents them with a full size, lavishly decorated cart, drawn by white bullocks instead. The real bullock cart represents the true Buddha vehicle, which for this sutra is also the Mahāyāna, which delivers all beings from suffering in the conflagration of worldly existence.

In the Skillful Means story of Kisagotami (Chapter Three), the Buddha shows great psychological skill by responding in the way he did. He does not lecture or sermonise to Kisagotami on the universality of death and the frailty of life. He knows that in her distracted and grieving state she needs an active task, through which she learns this lesson for herself. The logic of Skillful Means is clearly apparent in his handling of Kisagotami's plight. So according to this logic, deception, lying, being cruel to be kind are justified in the right context if they are motivated by compassion and will save the person involved from suffering. Hence in the Exorcist (Ch 12) story about Ajahn Chah, the Master's feigned indifference to the fate of the possessed woman in the Exorcist, in ordering the villagers to bury her alive, is what restores her sanity. Similarly, in the Dirty Harry story involving Harry's feigned indifference to the fate of the intended suicide is what distracts and finally restores the man to his senses and prevents his death.

The particular logic of Skillful Means justifies these deceptions in the interest of helping others and saving them from suffering. (For further examples and analysis, see: Stewart McFarlane "Skillful Means, Moral Crises and Conflict Resolution" in Chanju MUN ed. *Buddhism and Peace. Theory and Practice*, 2006, Blue Pine Books, Hawaii, USA, and: Michael PYE *Skillful Means*, Duckworth, UK 1978, Routledge, UK 2003.)

In East Asia particularly, the concept of Skillful Means indirectly enters ordinary language and popular understanding so that it is even extended to contexts not related to Buddhadharma to mean, "telling white lies", usually to save face or for convenience, to maintain family or social harmony. So that among the standard definitions of the Chinese fang bian or Japanese *hōben*, 方便, which are the characters used to translate the Sanskrit *upāyakaushalya*, is "convenient" or

“convenience” or “expedient,” or sometimes “trickery”. (See Michael PYE *Skilful Means*, Ch 8 pp137-145 for further discussion of uses of ‘*hōben*’ in modern Japanese.)

The stories in this volume represent the full range of the kind of stories found in the Buddhist tradition. They include textually based stories apparently told by the Buddha himself and found in the Pali Canon. They also include folk type stories, elevated into the status of Canonical texts. Some of the Buddhist Jatakas, or stories of the former lives of the Buddha, may be seen as examples of this genre. There are also stories from later Mahāyāna texts such as the Lotus Sutra, which are regarded as the Buddha’s teaching for members of Mahāyāna lineages. In addition there are stories from the Ch’an/Zen lineages of China and Japan, which date from the about the 8th Century CE to modern times. This collection includes some traditional Thai folk tales with a distinctly Buddhist theme. There are stories about or from recent or contemporary Buddhist teachers such as Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Brahm, as well as an incident that I witnessed personally. There are stories from Hollywood movies, such as “Dirty Harry” and “The Karate Kid”, which convey a message significant to Buddhism, even if the characters are not Buddhist. Finally, there is a story from Leo Tolstoy, who was a mystically orientated Christian, not a Buddhist, but his message in the story is equally appropriate to Buddhism.

The intention behind these stories and my commentary attached to each, is to convey the central teachings of Buddhism, and also to convey a sense of the way Buddhist teachings work in practice, and what it feels like to engage with Buddhism as a living discipline and tradition.

I have extensively paraphrased or rewritten all of the stories in this collection, for emphasis and clarity, but always adhered to the central ideas and narrative. The exception to this is *The King’s Three Questions* by Tolstoy, the original title is, “*Three Questions*”. This story has only been slightly rephrased in places, and adheres closely to the English translation of the great writer’s original Russian story. Many of the stories are available in variant forms in different publications, some were first made known to me in oral versions, and I managed to identify published versions later. Where the story only exists in oral form, this is indicated. Where a story is from personal experience, this is also indicated. Stories from film narratives are also fully referenced.

CHAPTER 1

A Game of Chess

A rich young nobleman in medieval Japan experienced a sudden disappointment and began to question his life and its meaning, but was unsure what to do about his sense of unease and disappointment. A friend recommended that he visit a very wise Zen Master at his temple in the countryside. The young man went to the temple, and because of his status was quickly allowed an interview with the Master. The young man answered the Master's questions about his family and background, and explained that from what he had seen of monastic life on his visit, he doubted that he had the discipline and dedication to practice Buddhism and understand its teachings.

The Master asked him what he excelled in. The young man replied that in his life of luxury and privilege, the only interest he really pursued with any level of skill was chess, and that he was considered an excellent player. "Very good" said the Master, "then you can play chess for me". He called for a board and chessmen, set them up and called for a young monk from the meditation hall. Finally, he took down the lethal looking sword that is placed before the image of Manjushri Bodhisattva, representing the sword of wisdom with which Manjushri cuts through ignorance and delusion.

Placing the sword by the chessboard the Master said, "You will play chess with this monk. I shall take the winner on as my personal student". This is a rare privilege and a virtual guarantee of Zen Enlightenment. "The loser, I shall cut off his head with this sword". The nobleman thought, "Shit, what have I let myself in for?" It should be pointed out that in Medieval Japan, the head of a Buddhist temple had total jurisdiction and control in his own temple. If he killed a student, no legal action could follow. The young man realised that the Master meant what he said, and his own pride and sense of honour would not let him back out of the challenge. After all, he was from the elite samurai class and had entered the temple of his own volition.

He began to play. For an hour, his attention did not leave the board. The two chess players were evenly matched. The young man's focus was total. He was playing for his life. The board became his universe. Another hour passed, and the nobleman began to gain the upper hand. He had more experience as a player and could see an opening. As the moves progressed, he could see he would mate his opponent and for the first time in nearly three hours, he looked up from the board at his opponent. The young monk was completely calm, resigned to his fate, thin and drawn in the face from long hours in meditation and manual work. He displayed no fear, nor showed any resentment at his situation and imminent death. The nobleman then realised he could not take this man's life. He didn't know him, the monk had never harmed him, and he had not asked to be put in this desperate plight. Why should his life be forfeit?

The game progressed and the nobleman made one bad move after another. He was throwing away the game. Soon the tables were turned the monk was about to place his opponent in

checkmate. As the final move was about to be made, the Master stood up and kicked over the chessboard, saying,

“No winner, no loser”

He turned to the nobleman and said, “You told me that you lacked the discipline and dedication to follow the Buddhist Path. But today in this game of chess you have shown the two essential qualities for Buddhist practice: concentration and compassion. For three hours, the chessboard was your universe. The game was your life and you were totally concentrated, your mind was calm and refined. Then you showed the second quality of Buddhist training, compassion. You were not prepared to take the life of another, no matter what the cost or the reward

Remain with me a while longer, cultivate what you have learned and I promise you fulfilment in your life”.

COMMENTARY

This story gives an insight into the heart of Buddhist practice. The Zen Master neatly summarizes this as: focused concentration (*samādhi*), and the active expression of compassion (*karuṇā*). More importantly, these skills are actually facilitated by the Zen Master and are directly experienced at a high level by the young nobleman.

It further discloses the full impact of the Three Marks of Existence that are fundamental to the Buddha’s teaching. These are: suffering, impermanence and no self. The story shows how these apparently negative characteristics of human existence can be used to creatively support spiritual growth and enlightenment. The story provides an account of the real awakening in experience of the nature of Buddhist practice of meditation, as well as an experiential understanding of the central themes of Buddhist teaching.

The story also shows how a true Buddhist teacher has the skill to use virtually any situation to evoke a meditative state of mind and bring another person to a deeper understanding of his or her own life and ultimate concerns. This is called “Skillful Means” and it is a method central in Buddhist ways of teaching. The initial setting of the story may sound remote and archaic. Medieval Japanese nobility, an ancient Zen temple, and a stern Zen Master. However the young man’s dilemma and the understanding he gained are as relevant to 21st century life as to Medieval Japan. How can we drive a car safely without exercising concentration (*samādhi*) and compassion (*karuṇā*)? We need concentration to handle a potentially lethal machine without killing and injuring others. Why do we wish to drive with care? Because we don’t want to cause suffering, death or injury, to others and ourselves. Of course, I fully admit that we also may be concerned about damaging the car and losing our no claims discount, or avoiding an expensive court case or a speeding ticket. But the wish not to plough into a group of school kids or pregnant women crossing the road, or a road maintenance worker with a family of eight to support, are also considerations.

So how does the story illuminate the core teachings of Buddhism as well as give an understanding of Buddhist practice? It introduces a privileged young nobleman who has

suffered an unspecified disappointment in his life. As a result, he is unhappy and feels that his life is lacking. In fact, this is the first Noble Truth (Ennobling Truth) of the Buddha's teaching and the First Mark of Existence: The sense of unease, inadequacy that something is missing from our lives. Often this arises from personal loss, illness or bereavement. All these characteristics constitute what the Buddha called dukkha, usually translated "suffering", but really the whole range of experiences from mild disquiet, to unpleasantness, to sense of something lacking, through to extremes of mental torment, anguish or physical pain. The Buddha never said that life was all like this, but he did say that the fact of being alive entails some measure of suffering. In fact, in terms of the analysis of mental states, the Abhidhamma texts list far more pleasant mental states than unpleasant ones. But while this is true, it has to be admitted that it is the unpleasant ones which have the biggest impact on us.

In a way the experience of the rich nobleman in the story and Shakyamuni Buddha in his youth, were similar, both were born into privilege and luxury. Shakyamuni Buddha was a prince named Siddhartha, a member of the warrior elite of India. He was identified when still a baby as an extraordinary being with a great future, as either a great king or a great holy man. His father wanted the first option, so the king tried to protect Siddhartha from knowledge of the outside world and the unpleasant things in life, wanting him instead to remain in the palace and inherit his kingdom. Like the Japanese nobleman, the protected and privileged lifestyle made the awareness of the unpleasant facts of human existence even more intense. In young Prince Siddhartha's case, these occurred on his secret journeys from the palace. During these trips, he encountered a sick man, an old man, a corpse and a wandering holy man. Up until this point in his life he was not even aware people get old, get sick and die; so the impact and of these encounters was intense. They caused the Prince to question his whole existence and renounce his political role and his worldly power and wealth in order to pursue the path to Enlightenment. This is the kind of existential crisis, perhaps only dimly perceived and barely understood, which led our Japanese nobleman to his encounter with the Holy Man, in his case, the Zen Master in his temple.

Closely related to the fact of suffering and the sense of unease and unsatisfactoriness, is the fact of impermanence (anicca. Sanskrit: anitya). Everything changes. This is the Second Mark of Existence in Buddhist teaching. The pleasant mental states I mentioned earlier do not last and are replaced by unpleasant ones, and so we feel discomfort and unease, and immediately crave after the return of the pleasant states. The Second Noble Truth of Buddhism is that we suffer because we crave and grasp after things. These may be mental states, material objects and wealth that we mistakenly believe will bring happiness and contentment, or they may be people, or abstractions, such as security, power, status, or ideals such as international socialism, world peace, and equality. Inevitably, when these things are not attained or the people we are attached to change or die we are disappointed, grief stricken, heartbroken, we suffer.

The young man in the story was not happy despite his wealth and privilege, he craved for contentment, he craved for answers. But selfish craving for his own contentment and spiritual fulfilment only seemed to have brought him into another state of unease or suffering. His winning of the game of chess appeared to be about to cause the death of an innocent monk. So here, we have impermanence demonstrated on a number of levels. Within a three hour chess game our Japanese nobleman's discontent with his life was replaced by his mental state of satisfaction at knowing he could win the chess game and find spiritual contentment, only to be replaced by real concern that he was about to cause another person's death. The death itself is of course another form of impermanence.

On one level, everyone can accept that things change: that existence is in a state of flux. And that changes in life often give rise to suffering, especially if we are attached to things, states and people as permanent when clearly they are not. So the first two marks of existence, suffering and impermanence are to some extent common sense. Most people would agree that they are part of the facts of our existence. The third mark of existence is more problematic. It is that “all things are without self” (anattā. Sanskrit: anātman). This is the most distinctive and most difficult of the Buddha’s teachings. Many teachers and scholars have devoted many lifetimes and millions of words to grappling with this teaching. In this account of our story I am not going to attempt to grapple with the theoretical and philosophical implications of the teaching of no-self, these will be discussed in Chapter 22. Here I shall use our story of the game of chess to illustrate the experiential and practical implications of this teaching. Before the end of the three-hour game of chess, the young man had actually realised experientially no-self and had acted on it.

By the end of the game, he had ceased to place his own personal interests first. He no longer only considered himself and no longer assumed that his own life was of greater value than that of the monk. He had lost self-importance, something rare and difficult for a Japanese nobleman to do. Furthermore, he had acted on his insight before he really knew he had it, and had acted selflessly, being prepared to die himself rather than see the monk die for him. In acting from no-self he had actively manifested supreme compassion. This is exactly what traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching states: that the highest form of compassion arises from no-self or emptiness. The brief text known as the Heart Sutra or Xin Jing (Chinese or Hannya shingyo in Japanese) which is recited in Zen temples in Japan every day, makes this quite clear. It is a theme further developed in the Diamond Sutra and other Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) sūtras. These provide much of the theoretical basis of Zen teaching and methods. (Translations of both these important texts and many other key Buddhist texts can be found at <http://www2.fodian.net/world>.)

But how did this remarkable transformation in the young man’s consciousness come about? It begins with the young man’s motivation, his coming to the Zen monastery in the first place. We are not given the details; just that he had suffered a disappointment in his life. The key here is that he “suffered”. In other words, he experienced dukkha, which because of his privileged and protected lifestyle had a profound and disturbing impact on him. Rather as the painful facts of human existence had a huge impact on the mind of the young Siddhartha when he was a privileged prince in India. So our young nobleman goes to see the Zen Master in search of answers and to put an end to his suffering or unease. What he encounters there is apparently an even greater and more immediate problem, not just his suffering, but also the prospect of death if he loses the game of chess.

Like the young Shakyamuni’s encounter with suffering, old age and death, this concentrates his mind wonderfully. He is totally focused; he is playing for his life. For almost the entire three hours of the game, there is only the chessboard and his next moves and the possible counters of his opponent. He is totally absorbed. This absorption is called “right concentration” (sammā samādhi) and it is the basis of Buddhist meditation practice. According to traditional Buddhist teachings, the systematic training of one pointedness or concentration of mind, equips the practitioner with the mental skill and acuity to open their mind and start to see things as they are. Fundamental to this process is the mental calming and quietening (samatha), which flows from sustained concentration (samādhi). For our young man, the calming and quietening of his mind arising from his focused absorption in the game, gives him the mental breathing space in which the normal self-interested thought processes and emotional reactions are suspended, long enough for him to begin to see things as they really are. That he is not the centre of the universe, that his personal interest and pursuits do not necessarily override those of the monk

opposite. In other words, he sees things in terms of “no-self” (anattā). Seeing things as empty of self, oneself included frees you from them. So the wisdom or insight into no-self or the emptiness and insubstantiality of things frees you from attachment to them. So liberating insight or wisdom (paññā/prajña) frees you from craving and attachment. By losing his self-importance, and preparing to lose the game and his own life, the young man had acted from no-self or supreme compassion. He was prepared to lose all, the game, his life his opportunity to end his unease by studying with a top Zen Master. He achieved non-attachment at a high level.

According to traditional Buddhist methods focused concentration and absorption while they do always produce calmness, they do not automatically produce insight into “no-self” or the full wisdom of seeing things as they are. The context has to be right. In this story, an advanced teacher, who can read the mental state and motivation of the young nobleman, understands the whole situation. The Zen Master is there to provide the right context. That is his Skillful Means. He knows that in a life and death situation of real intensity, the absorption and mental calm of the young man will assist the turning around deep in his consciousness, and the opening of insight.

The young nobleman’s willingness to let go of his own life, and his own selfish interests, in order to avoid the death of another, reflected a high level of compassion and also of wisdom. At its highest level, this liberating wisdom is Nibbāna/Nirvāna, the complete cessation of craving and attachment. The highest attainment in Mahāyāna and Zen Buddhism is normally described as Supreme Awakening or Enlightenment (sambodhi). The apparently contradictory process of pursuing self-interests and then abandoning them, and exercising supreme wisdom and compassion in the process, is beautifully described by another Japanese Zen Master, Dōgen Zenji from the 13th century,

“To study the way of the Buddhas is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things; and this enlightenment breaks the bonds of clinging to both body and mind; not only for oneself but also for all beings. If the enlightenment is true it wipes out all clinging, even to enlightenment.” Dōgen Zenji – Genjo Koan

End of Preview