



## Using Skillful-Means Skillfully: Buddhist *Upaya*, Methodology and the Limits of Tradition

The concept of the Buddha's *upaya* ('skillful means') provides a crucial hermeneutic tool applied within the Mahayana tradition. Given the assumption of the Buddha's omniscience, the concept of *upaya* serves to resolve contradictions in the Buddha's teaching by dividing them into either *neyartha* statements (those whose meaning is hidden as so require interpretation) and *netartha* statements (those whose meaning is clear and so do not). Now, while there is good reason for those within a tradition to employ such a concept, and for us as academic outsiders to study *how* the tradition does so, the extent to which we, as academic outsiders can, in a normative sense, justifiably employ the concept in *our* analysis of issues within the Buddhist tradition, even where the tradition itself may not do so, is a somewhat more murky issue. This paper concerns recent academic analyses that have used the concept of *upaya*, and other Buddhist concepts, to present a 'tradition-sympathetic' analysis to various Buddhist and non-Buddhist problems. This will then form the basis for an exploration of what our exact role is as modern academic interpreters: at one extreme, are we to simply describe the tradition on historical terms? at the other, are we to export concepts from within the tradition and apply them to problems of modernity and postmodernity? Or, somewhere in between: are we to engage in a rational reconstruction of the traditional context within which the issues arose so as to better understand them? This paper will attempt to demarcate some sort of boundary between traditional and academic approaches in an often blurred area, and will end with a methodological consideration of an issue we all confront in *Studies in Religion*: the vexed but deceptively simple question of whether, when it comes to internal truth-claims, tradition can be 'wrong', what that might mean exactly, and what exactly a modern academic interpreter is meant to do about it.