This article concerns itself with the Buddhist doctrine of *upa¯ya* (“skilful means”). Rather than provide a historical analysis of the concept, this paper first of all outlines some of the presuppositions that affect both its working in a traditional Buddhist context and its interpretation in modern academic enquiry. It is argued that these contexts differ significantly and that they lead to quite different understandings of the role and function of the concept itself. Then, through reference to the Tibetan dGe lugs pa tradition and the background of Tibetan doxography, it is suggested that there are certain dangers in over-emphasizing the concept of *upa¯ya* in isolation. Most notably, if the doctrine of *upa¯ya* is simplistically posited as some sort of aphilosophical praxis against rational enquiry, then there is a danger of not taking the tradition’s own scholastic endeavours seriously enough and downplaying the status of rational enquiry in the tradition itself.

While this article is concerned with the concept of the Buddha’s skilful means (*upa¯ya*) as a hermeneutic device, it is not so much concerned with providing an extensive historical account of the doctrine itself. This has already been done extensively elsewhere by such writers as Étienne Lamotte and Michael Pye, among others. Likewise, discussions of *upa¯ya* in terms of the Buddha’s “Great Compassion” (*mahākaruṇā*) will also not be directly addressed. Nor, in addressing the issue of paradoxes am I venturing beyond their resolution in the

context of hermeneutic approaches and broad doctrinal issues; I do not venture into the thicket of specific logical issues such as the use of reductio (prasāṅga) arguments and the resolution of apparently contradictory statements in the works of thinkers such as Nāgārjuna. Rather, this article adopts more of a speculative approach, drawing attention to some of the broader assumptions implicit in the doctrine of upāya. Of particular interest are assumptions such as the notion of intentionality and the traditional hierarchical structure of authority that underpin upāya, enabling it to operate within the traditional context of Buddhist thought. Addressed as well will be some of the methodological issues, which give rise to following the sort of approach favoured by José Ignacio Cabezón in his discussion of theories of truth in Buddhist theology. I will compare these traditional assumptions within which upāya is embedded to some of the broader cultural assumptions we operate within in a modern or postmodern context. I also mention in passing some instances when these traditional assumptions do indeed come into contact with Asian modernity and some of the broader cultural implications these encounters might suggest. I will not be undertaking an extensive comparison across different Buddhist traditions, but will instead provide selected illustration from the Tibetan tradition, especially the dGe lugs pa school. It will be suggested that the contextual considerations that the concept of upāya draws attention to must also be applied to the interpretation of upāya itself. For a modern scholar working from outside the tradition, upāya is itself a context-embedded and implicitly value-laden concept. It is not context-independent and neutral, even if it derives its efficacy within the tradition from claiming not to be, that is, for its claiming to rest instead on its proximity to the universal validity of the word of the Buddha himself (buddhavacana).

I

Following the pioneering study of Étienne Lamotte, a useful template for Buddhist approaches to scriptural exegesis can be found in the Catuhpratisaranasūtra (the “Sūtra of the Four Refuges”). Itself later than earlier collections of sūtras, it is also found cited in later works. Drawing on its most succinct description of the four refuges as cited by Yaśomitra in his Sphuṭārthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā, we hear that

There are four refuges, O monks. What are the four refuges? (i) Refuge in the Dharma, not the person; (ii) refuge in the meaning, not the letter; (iii) refuge in sūtra whose meaning does not require interpretation (nītārtha), not whose meaning does require interpretation (neyārtha); (iv) direct knowledge, not discursive knowledge.

The concept of the Buddha’s “skilful means” (upāya) becomes significant in regard to the third of these four refuges or “reliances” (pratisarana), that is, the need to make the hermeneutic distinction between sūtras that are provisional or neyārtha (requiring interpretation since the meaning is unclear) and definitive or nītartha (not requiring interpretation since the meaning is clear). This distinction between nītartha and neyārtha teachings becomes particularly important in resolving apparent contradictions or paradoxes in the Buddha’s teaching. The division is applied more specifically to individual statements, and also more broadly to whole doctrinal systems such as in the controversy over resolving discrepancies between the various vehicles (yānas) of the Buddha’s teaching. For example, in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra (more famously known as the Lotus Sūtra), the earlier Śrāvakayāna (“Vehicle of the Hearers”), the Pratyekabuddhayāna (“Vehicle of Solitary Realized Buddhas”) and the Buddhayāna are said to be merely skilful means, which are ultimately reconciled in the One Vehicle (ekayāna), or the Mahāyāna (“Great Vehicle”).

Different practitioners are better suited to different vehicles depending on their different predispositions. The different variations on the teaching and apparent contradictions are not real but only appear to be the case, owing to the Buddha catering to different audiences. Such audiences are variously considered to be either inferior, intermediate, or advanced vessels or receptacles (vineya) into which the Buddha “pours” the Dharma in accordance with His wisdom, skilful means, and great compassion (prajnopayamahākāruna). Given the assumption of the Buddha’s omniscience, discrepancies, contradictions, or paradoxes within the Buddha’s teaching can, from the traditional perspective, only ever be apparent, and not ultimately real.

The rise of the Prajñāpāramitā (“Perfection of Wisdom”) provides considerable need for the concept of skilful means. With its rhetoric of emptiness, Prajñāpāramitā literature is famously, and quite deliberately, replete with instances of paradox and contradiction and an overall approach that sees some sort of reconciliation of opposites. In the Heart Sūtra we hear that

> There is no ignorance and end of ignorance, no ageing and death, nor an end of ageing and death, no suffering, arising of suffering, cessation of suffering, nor path to cessation.4

Yet given that the Buddha had earlier taught the First Noble truth in which there was indeed suffering, the Second Noble truth recounting the arising of suffering, the Third Noble truth that there is a cessation to suffering, and the Fourth Noble Truth leading to this cessation, there is little wonder that some sort of interpretive strategy such as upāya might have been required to resolve such an apparent paradox.

Formulations of upāya as found in the earlier Mahāyāna can be seen in such seminal works as the Vajracchedika (Diamond) Sūtra and especially in the second chapter of the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra. Especially useful for our

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present purposes, however, is the account found in the later *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*. This text is useful in illustrating some of the complications that need to be borne in mind when dealing with *upāya*, as the text is written from a Yogācāra viewpoint and incorporates the distinctly Yogācāra understanding of the “three turnings of the Dharma” (*dharmacakrapravartitā*). It does so in order to explain how successive, and at times apparently contradictory, layers of the Buddha’s teachings are reconciled. The first turning is seen as comprising teachings found in earlier material; the second turning as comprising the Mahāyāna teachings of the Mādhyamika (“Middle Way”) school; and the third turning as explicating the teachings of the Yogācāra (“Yoga Practice”) or “Mind Only” (*cittamātra*) school. Given that the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* takes a Yogācāra position, it is unsurprising that the first and second turnings are deemed to be of merely interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*), and hence subject to dispute and modification, whereas the teaching expressed in the third turning is classified as being of definitive meaning (*niṭārtha*); it is sufficient in itself without the need for further interpretation. The precise distinction is clarified in such a way that,

Those [first and second] turnings of the Wheel of the Buddha’s Dharma have occasion for being superseded; being of interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*) they may provide a basis for dispute whereas...this Turning of the Wheel of the Buddha’s Dharma [i.e., as found here in this text] does not have occasion for being superseded; being of definitive meaning (*niṭārtha*) it ought not to provide a basis for dispute.  

It is significant that there is a degree of sectarianism implicit here in the clear distinction made between this (*di*) indisputable (*rtsod pa...ma lags*) definitive Turning of the Dharma (which we adhere to) and those (de) Turnings of the Dharma (which others adhere to), which are not definitive, but are instead interpretable; that is, susceptible to our interpretation. As Étienne Lamotte put it regarding the distinction made between *neyārtha* and *niṭārtha*, “each school tends to take literally the doctrinal texts which conform to its theses and to consider those which cause dilemmas as being of provisional meaning.”

To take another instance, in the earlier *Saddharmapuṇḍarikā Sūtra*, the Buddha is asked a question by his disciple, Śāriputra. Having first assured the Buddha that he himself is not in any doubt about the situation (a point to which we will return in the course of our analysis), Śāriputra then proceeds to ask the Buddha how the other twelve hundred bhikṣus present in the audience should now, in the light of these later Maha¯ya¯na teachings, understand the earlier teachings that the Buddha had previously set them upon. The Buddha’s response is that the Tathāgata (i.e., the Buddha Himself) teaches the Dharma using various techniques, explanations, and examples by means of beneficent skilful means (*upāyakausāla*) for the sake of the complete enlightenment


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(samyaksambodhi) of beings. In one famous example resolving the yāna controversy by explaining the revised function of the earlier teachings in the light of later developments, a father attempts to coax his three children out of a burning house by telling them that,

Outside the door of the house I have put aside all that you desire, all you find pleasant, dear and beautiful, so that you can play. Come, escape this house! — for no matter what opportunity comes about, through whatever purpose, I offer it to you.

The father is taken as representing the compassionate Tathāgata and the children as representing ordinary beings bound within the burning house of the world of samsāra. The three toys outside of the house for each of the children are taken as standing for the distinct vehicles (yānas), the śrāvaka-yāna, the pratyekabuddha-yāna, and the buddha-yāna. All three vehicles, however, are actually reconciled in the one vehicle (ekayāna) of the Mahāyāna (although there is some difficulty here, as Michael Pye points out, inasmuch as the third vehicle, the buddhayāna is also referred to as the Mahāyāna). The idea of distinct vehicles, even if only shown to be provisional, has effectively done its job of saving the children from the fire, that is, setting beings on the Path towards complete liberation.

As such an example shows, the definitive criteria sought for in the interpretation of sūtra material, what needs to be uncovered, is the Buddha’s intention (abhiprāya) (i.e., saving beings) in giving a teaching; meaning is only ever considered as “intentional” (abhiprāyika). In the hermeneutic context of Buddhist sūtra material, meaning is always considered intentionally. Obviously, this applies only to sūtras classified as neyārtha, that is, those requiring interpretation, as we only need to appeal to intention when the surface meaning is unclear or contradictory.

Upāya is a deliberately malleable and stretchable term; this is precisely why it is able to serve the function that it does. The issue is just how far it can stretch and yet still continue to mean anything. Legislating this is perhaps only possible within the traditional context and hierarchical structure within which the doctrine of upāya is embedded. Although the Buddhist critique, particularly that implied in the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness, actively resists the reification of any metaphysically determined resolution of apparent paradoxes, this does not preclude a transcendent viewpoint, such as that of a Buddha who can resolve paradoxes. There is a clear hierarchy implied. Indeed, as the emphasis on recovering the Buddha’s enlightened intention, and analogies such as the burning house show, the doctrine of upāya makes little sense without a viewpoint that transcends our mundane viewpoint, a voice from outside the burning house coaxing us out. A transcendent bird’s eye view (or Buddha’s eye view)

8. Ibid., 71.11–13.
9. Ibid., 74.5–8.
11. Regarding the use of such an example for upāya, we might suggest that given that saying a teaching is an upāya is to say that it acts as a sort of useful example, we could say then that the many examples presented in the Lotus Sūtra to explicate the nature of upāya thus operate as second-order “meta-examples” inasmuch as they attempt to act as useful examples for how to understand the use and function of (what are revealed to be none other than) other useful examples.
is fundamental, even if a transcendent ontological level may be relentlessly undermined, or deconstructed, in the principle of the emptiness (śūnyatā) of all phenomena.

II
Now, although this principle of emptiness and its critique of substantial existence with which upāya is related may find some resonance with modern and postmodern critiques of metaphysics, and despite the fact that the doctrine of upāya itself might bear some resemblance to a somewhat (post-metaphysical) pragmatic conception of truth, the hierarchical assumptions, particularly the assumptions of intentionality, provide a significant point of departure from the contexts of modernity and postmodernity. These modern and postmodern contexts are significant in introducing the methodological component of my analysis as they inform the modern academic pursuit of Buddhist Studies and hence our own academic approach to the topic of upāya.

In both a modern and postmodern context, paradoxes show up authority claims and undermine authoritative hierarchies. Paradoxes lead to a form of exposure, especially of a fault or hypocrisy in the text. In our modern context, the point in uncovering a paradox is that the authority of the text is suddenly stripped bare and made more transparent, whereas in a traditional context, such as in the way upāya deals with apparent paradoxes in the Buddha’s teachings, the authority claim is actually, on the contrary, made that much more opaque and impervious to any criticism that grounds itself in exposing mundane paradox. The exposure of paradox that undermines an affirmed hierarchical order in a modern and postmodern context can also serve to reinstate it in a traditional context.

Current post-structural approaches to paradoxes have tended to be shaped by various trends in the humanities, such as Freudian psychoanalysis and the deconstructive analysis that has followed in its wake. Frequently, the aim of such an analysis is to use what a writer says against them. The meaning of a text need not be what a writer actually intends; indeed, it can be the very opposite of it. Meaning is shifted away from intention towards what might happen to slip out in spite of what it is intended. Such analyses tend towards exposure of paradoxes and opposites rather than seeking any attempt to resolve them, as such an attempt at resolution would itself be considered an underhand attempt at re-establishing a hierarchical order or definitive authoritative viewpoint.

At a superficial level, this deconstructive exposure of, and indeed relishing in, paradoxes, without any attempt at resolving them, may appear reminiscent of the approach taken in Buddhist Prajñāpāramitā literature. There is, however, a crucial difference. Unlike concerns in post-structural analyses, there is no problem in traditional Buddhist contexts of reifying a definitive viewpoint, as it is openly acknowledged that the Buddha himself holds, and always has held, the definitive viewpoint. Even if, from the outsider’s view of a modern academic observer or historian of religion, ongoing modification does indeed historically actually take place (in the form of a later “Turning of the Dharma,”
overshadowing an earlier Turning for example), nonetheless, from within this traditional framework, it is precisely the appeal to the Buddha’s constant authority that enables this movement from an earlier Turning of the Dharma to a later Turning to occur in the first place, or rather legitimises it. It is in fact the constancy of the Buddha’s statements and intention that allow developments within the tradition to occur rather than “progress” as such being openly acknowledged or praised for its own sake. The proximity that upāya allows to the Buddha’s actual intention makes the concept of upāya itself (from the perspective within the tradition) above context, and it is precisely this that allows it to point out the provisional exigencies of any particular context and the pragmatic considerations they necessitate. Traditionally, when it comes to a direct conflict between authoritorial intention and a paradox, intention, the Buddha’s intention, will always win out. The paradoxes of the Prajñāparamitā can actually be used, within the context of a traditional hierarchy, to consolidate the viewpoint of the authority figure, the Buddha, as “above” mundane paradox. Like all hermeneutic issues, it is as much a question of wider cultural embedding as it is a purely textual concern.12

To illustrate this point from another angle, this time a cultural one which may at first seem somewhat odd, we might also consider an instance of paradoxes and opposites in the context of Asian modernity. On two occasions which seem to have gone unremarked, once in his Buddhism in India,13 and again in an article published posthumously, Edward Conze drew attention to similarities between, on the one hand, the dialectic tension between opposites and the strategy of exposing and resolving paradoxes in Mahaśāyana thought, and, on the other hand, the theory of dialectic materialism, suggesting that the former may in some way have sown the seeds for the success of the latter in twentieth-century Asia. Conze remarks suggestively that

dialectics has been behind at least two large scale and vital historical movements which have swept much of Asia, i.e., Mahāyāna and Marxism. The cross-fertilization of these two can, incidentally, be seen in what Mao Tse Tung [Mao Zedong] wrote [in his] “About Contradictions.”14

Following Conze’s lead in examining this “cross-fertilisation” more closely, we can take an example from Mao’s “On Contradictions” itself, which becomes, in hindsight, a grotesque parody of Prajñāpāramitā-esque thought.

Mao himself assumes the Buddha-like position of authority, sitting above opposites as the charismatic human embodiment of their synthesis:


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All contrary things are interconnected; not only do they coexist in a single entity in given conditions, but in other given conditions they also transform themselves into each other. This is the full meaning of the unity of opposites...everything is turning upside down...I love great upheavals.\textsuperscript{15}

In citing this passage in his \textit{Tibet Tibet}, Patrick French remarks that this excerpt was written “in 1937, three decades ahead of Jacques Derrida.”\textsuperscript{16} French is dryly noting the irony to which we are drawing attention as well; namely, that the very blurring of opposites and the relishing in paradoxes that can be used to undermine or “deconstruct” authority claims in a post-structural environment can also be used to reaffirm and harden authority, occasionally in sinister ways. While in the pre-modern worldview in which the Mahāyāna developed, \textit{upāya} could hold paradoxes together within a traditionally bound authority structure, in a modern setting there is no such check.

We might note, in another twist, that Ian Mabbett has also drawn attention to the curious fact that “[i]n July 1992, the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party discarded its former icons Marx and Lenin and installed Nāgārjuna in their place.”\textsuperscript{17} The choice of Nāgārjuna, with his famous “tetralemma” \textit{(catuskoti)} formula whereby things are said to be neither \textit{x}, nor \textit{non-x}, nor \textit{both x and non-x}, nor \textit{neither x nor non-x}, seems a particularly curious successor to Dialectic Materialism, or perhaps a resolution of dialecticism. The issue I wish to briefly raise in drawing attention to this event is whether this replacement of Marx and Lenin with Nāgārjuna simply counts as a quaint piece of postmodern eclecticism, or whether it takes up the long-term historical dialectic that Conze has detected as being played out within, and now perhaps between, Marxism and the Mahāyāna themselves. These apparently disparate examples raise, in a more tangential way, central questions for understanding both paradoxes and their resolution as a driving force in the history of Buddhist ideas and, as a result, \textit{upāya} as a normative model for understanding this history of ideas. The acceptance of paradox is not mere postmodern ironic playfulness but the transplantation of a premodern traditional authority structure to a modern setting.

III

On the other hand, in postmodern settings, sceptical of traditional and authoritarian hierarchies, it is the paradox that remains and is held up to the light, and the traditional or authoritarian structure is undermined. The aim in the post-structural environment becomes not to recover intention but to uncover and expose latent ideological presuppositions lurking just below the surface, and one is first alerted to these by the presence of paradoxes.

In terms of literary analyses of authorship and meaning, our post-structural age perhaps owes its assumptions to the legacy of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich

\textsuperscript{16} Patrick French (2003), p. 192.
Nietzsche, to name perhaps the two most prominent in a series of influences in this regard, although Roland Barthes with his famous “Death of the Author” is also of considerable significance. In direct contrast with the driving principle of uncovering the Buddha’s intention as in a traditional framework, the assumption in a post-structural setting has come to be that whatever a writer says or might come to mean, is not just what they intend to say or mean, but, in addition to this, the very fact that they even need to say it also hints at what they intend not to say as well, or rather, what they refuse to allow to be said. As a result, the fuller meaning of what a writer says can only be recovered by considering what a writer implicitly intends to suppress by their very having to say it. By definition, this virtually becomes the very opposite to the (consciously) intended meaning. Hence, rather than resolving paradox, it is instead uncovering a paradox that almost in itself seems to become imbued with a sense of completeness as the final goal to be attained in the act of interpretation in a situation characterised by Paul Ricoeur’s eloquent notion of “the hermeneutics of suspicion.”

In such an environment, the interpreter’s attention is actively turned to what is not intended, what is taboo, or prohibited. Intention, or conscious affirmation, is only ever “half the story.” To be understood in its entirety, conscious affirmation must be seen as simply the inverse of a denial of something at a subconscious level, meaning that they must be taken as a whole. This sort of model arises out of such paradigms as Freud’s study of neuroses, in which the louder and stronger the conscious affirmation at the level of overt intention, the more this hints at how threatening its subconscious suppressed opposite must be. The conscious affirmation strives to be disentangled from its subconscious counterpart, but it never completely can be. Taking a similar snapshot from Nietzsche’s work, *Beyond Good and Evil* begins with a damnation of the “prejudices of philosophers” that also plays precisely upon this sort of principle invoking the inseparability of opposites. The significance of Freud and Nietzsche in our own modern and postmodern academic environment of interpretation goes without saying. Since their analyses, it has often become the accepted and even expected aim of analysis within the humanities

20. See, for an example of this sort of assumption, Freud “The sexual aberrations,” in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, *Freud on Sexuality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1905] 1977), p. 81: Whenever we find in the unconscious an instinct of this sort, which is capable of being paired off with an opposite one, this second instinct [the opposite] will regularly be found in operation as well. Every active perversion is thus accompanied by its passive counterpart.
For all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would still be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life might have to be ascribed to deception, selfishness and lust. It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things.
to simply unearth and expose ideology lurking just below the surface, and simply leave it at that. Attempting to actually resolve paradoxes beyond this has become a highly charged area.

The brief, and admittedly superficial, sketch is necessary as it sets the broader cultural scene for a tendency towards favouring a descriptive account of apparently paradoxical claims within religious traditions rather than attempting any normative or prescriptive analysis that attempts any metaphysical resolution to paradoxes. This also translates over into a move towards a descriptive account of religious thought as religious praxis over an evaluative analysis of metaphysical problems. In this light, there is a great attraction generally in the concept of upāya for modern academic investigators when they find themselves confronted with paradoxical claims within the Buddhist tradition. Upāya appears to be an indigenous and traditionally accepted tool for fulfilling a task that modern academic investigators engaged in the study of religion usually have to do for themselves. That is, the concept of upāya as a normative framework appears to demarcate an area in which the internal claims of the religion under examination can be considered on their own terms, and hence be made provisionally autonomous and impervious to the universalising claims of science and post-enlightenment secular modernity. Upāya, in other words, can appear to function as a kind of epoché or “bracketing off.” It provides a tool for safely relegating apparently contradictory claims to the level of praxis, thus enabling them to be held at arm’s length, a luxury that the tradition itself does not have. However, it is precisely for this reason that the concept of upāya can in fact be taken too far by a modern academic interpreter, as it in fact can for modern practitioners as well.22

Ironically, the fact that the concept of upāya is initially foreign to the outside interpreter, and originally belongs to the tradition itself, actually appears to lend a veneer of objective validity to its usage as a means of ensuring the tradition’s autonomy from the universalising claims of science. Yet, its apparent objectivity can hide the fact that the interpreter themselves may be imposing it where it was not traditionally used at all. The danger is that in attempting to make the Buddhist tradition autonomous to the claims of abstract reason and rationality, we actually run the risk of ignoring the Buddhist tradition’s own claims for reason and rationality. Operating, as we as modern academic interpreters do, outside of a traditional hierarchy, the concept of upāya can become unhinged.

IV

Now, such a tendency may be implicit in the recent full-length study of the doctrine of upāya undertaken by John Schroeder.23 Schroeder does much to

22. In a similar vein, José Ignacio Cabezón (2000, p. 140) also notes the relativistic danger of misreading upāya: “It might be claimed that the doctrine of upāya, or “skilful means” represents (or at least implies) a kind of relativism, one in which the truth of a doctrine is indexed not to cultures or historical periods but to individuals!”
illuminate the significance and widespread applicability of the concept within the Mahāyāna, and his work is of tremendous value for doing so. However, there may be the odd occasion when the Buddha’s upāya is perhaps overly regarded as the normative criterion by which philosophical encounters within Mahāyāna Buddhism need to be interpreted, rather than in terms of reason, rationality, and metaphysics.

Moreover, to simply use one traditional criterion, such as upāya, to understand internal developments within the Buddhist tradition is to downplay the diversity within the tradition itself. When upāya is used by modern scholars to validate an appeal to Buddhist praxis against metaphysics and the claims of philosophy, the danger is that this threatens to blind us to the philosophical complexity of the traditions themselves. Worse still, it can seemingly provide us with the perfect (in the sense of traditionally acceptable) means of doing so. Having acknowledged this diversity though, I must also concede that in my comments on Schroeder’s approach that follow, I will myself simply refer to the dGe lugs pa school of Tibetan Buddhism, and especially the analysis of Tsong kha pa (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419) by way of illustrating complications that arise for broadly applying the upāya model.24 This needs to be borne in mind as I simply mean to point out some instances by way of illustration in tempering Schroeder’s analysis rather than engaging in a wholesale overhaul of his approach or completely calling it, in its entirety, into question.

At one instance, Schroeder suggests that

[t]he divisions between the two Maññyamika schools that followed Nāgārjuna — the Prāsaṅgika and Svātāntrika [sic] — are separated by . . . issues of praxis, and are therefore immersed in a “skilful means debate” . . . the debate between the two Maññyamika schools is a debate about the nature and efficacy of the Buddhist system and has little to do with strictly metaphysical or logical issues.25

It is perhaps too sweeping and a little simplistic to reduce the entirety of the Svātāntrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction in early Indian Madhyamaka to simply being pedagogical and not as marking a genuine philosophical difference, or as having “little to do with strictly metaphysical or logical issues,” even if this philosophical difference was itself only superimposed in hindsight by Tibetan interpreters. If nothing else, to ignore the philosophical dimensions of this distinction is to ignore the Tibetan exegesis, which is surely just as much a legitimate component of the tradition.

From about the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries in particular, dispute in Tibet over the distinction between Svātāntrikas and Prāsaṅgikas did indeed involve highly complex logical and epistemological issues, especially the issue of what metaphysical or ontological commitments might be implicit in the functioning of logical and epistemological enquiry within Madhyamaka. Indeed, part of what came to characterise the dGe lugs pa view was that Tsong kha pa, in

24. Strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to refer to Tsong kha pa as a dGe lugs pa; however, I use this designation here following the lead of the dGe lugs pa tradition which treats Tsong kha pa as its founder and most authoritative exponent.
contrast to his later Sa skya pa critics such as Rong ston pa (Rong ston she bya kun rig, 1367–1449) and Go rams pa (Go rams pa bsod nams seng ge, 1429–1489), did indeed see the Svatantrika-Prasangika distinction as involving more than just methodological approaches to emptiness, but rather as being about subtle metaphysical distinctions and the truth of exactly what emptiness properly constitutes.26 Given that the Svatantrika-Prasangika dispute is itself one that, in the form of a self-conscious doctrinal distinction, really only ever existed in Tibet,27 it would be mistaken to discount subsequent Tibetan hermeneutic and philosophical developments in favour of viewing the dispute purely in terms of upāya, as though it could be relegated to a level of aphilosophical praxis.

It is also especially important to note that the Svatantrika-Prasangika dispute comes to represent for Tibetans the most subtle of doctrinal distinctions in regard to what is regarded as the most sophisticated and fundamental expression of the Buddha’s teaching, that is, the Mādhyamika understanding of emptiness (śūnyatā). It is a doctrinal distinction placed at the very pinnacle of the doxographical system (grub mtha’, siddhānta) that systematises the Gradual Path. The issues at stake at this rarefied level are not merely expedient devices, but are fundamental issues of the ultimate truth of how things are. Useful to bear in mind in this regard is the distinction made by José Ignacio Cabezón when he succinctly notes that

\[ \text{it must be remembered that the doctrine of skilful means is essentially a doctrine related to soteriology and not (at least directly) to questions of truth...} \]

\[ \text{...many doctrines that are provisionally useful at one stage of the path will have to be repudiated in its later stages. ... But though this is the case for many doctrines, it is not the case for all. In particular, it is not the case for doctrines that are unconditionally true. The doctrine of emptiness in its most subtle formulation is one such doctrine. It is incontrovertible — that is, it is not superseded by any doctrine that contradicts it; and its understanding is a necessary and universal prerequisite for enlightenment.} \]

The Svatantrika-Prasangika dispute does have methodological implications, and it is indeed the case that a Prasangika viewpoint comes to be seen as superseding a Svatantrika viewpoint. But the dispute is also about more than just the expedience or efficacy of methodological approaches. Following Cabezón’s distinction, it is one directly related to truth rather than soteriology. The truth at stake, emptiness, is precisely one incapable of being superseded. What sets Tsong kha pa’s view of the Svatantrika-Prasangika distinction apart from his Sa skya pa critics, Rong ston pa and Go rams pa, is that he views the


Svātantrika conception of emptiness as different to that of Prāsaṅgikas. For him, the Svātantrika postulation of svatantra (autonomous) inferences still involves some subtle reification at a metaphysical level. It is not just a methodological concern, but rather it is emptiness itself, the ultimate nature of all things, that is misunderstood. Following Cabezón’s summation elsewhere, “Tsong kha pa embarks on a project of trying to show that svatantras are syllogisms that contain within them the assumption of independent existence . . . [they] are indicative of a kind of crypto-realism”. In other words, for dGe lugs pa school following Tsong kha pa, the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika dispute is an issue of truth at a metaphysical level, and not just of pedagogical approach.

V

The other instance I would draw attention to in Schroeder’s analysis is his discussion of the Buddha’s noble silence and the “unexpounded points” (avyākrta). Schroeder argues that

[...]the Buddha’s “unwillingness to answer certain questions . . . is a skilful “device” in that any answer to such questions would not relate to the soteriological practice of this particular person. From a “skilful means” perspective, the issue in the Buddha’s silence is how it relates to the needs and dispositions of a particular audience.

There is considerable merit to this approach to the Buddha’s silence and it is widely supported; however, there are also other dimensions to consider. By way of illustration, we might again draw on interpretations found in the Tibetan dGe lugs pa school. Cabezón has shown that two approaches are maintained. One, proposed by rJe btsun pa based on readings of the Abhisamayālambkāra does indeed read the Buddha’s silence as a case of skilful means, a response honed to cater for the disposition of his audience. However, in another reading, found in Tsong kha pa’s rTsa Shes tik chen in the context of the Madhyamika view, the Buddha’s silence is read in a philosophical or metaphysical sense. Tsong kha pa reads the Buddha’s refusal to either affirm or deny a question put to him as a refusal to affirm an underlying metaphysical basis, or “presuppositional ground” to which either a positive or negative predicate (“manifest propositional content”), that is a “yes” or “no” by way of response, can be applied. In so doing, He thus confirms the Madhyamika teaching of emptiness. That is, the Buddha’s silence itself provides a direct teaching of the ultimate lack of any presupposed metaphysical ground upon which any affir-
mation or denial can be predicated. It is not just an indirect strategy dependent on His audience but a direct teaching of emptiness.

Significantly, both interpretations can actually be identified in the very same passage in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* where the question arises:

If a person is merely the *skandhas*, then why did the Lord [remain silent and] not explain whether the soul is the body or other [than it]? [The answer is] because of His consideration for the disposition of the questioner. For he who asks [this does so] having [already] envisaged the person . . . as a single substance, a soul. But how might it be explained whether [the soul] has any difference or non-difference [from the body] when it has been [declared] that it does not exist at all? [It is] just as [one cannot explain whether] the end of a tortoise’s hair is hard or soft.34

We are presented here with both the audience-dispositional *upaśya* view taken in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* as well as the Mādhyamika philosophical refutation of a presuppositional ground. In this *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* passage, this refutation of a presuppositional ground for affirmation or denial takes the form of the a priori absence of a self, which can thus be neither identical to nor different from the *skandhas*. This is illustrated by the “end of a tortoise’s hair” (*kaurmasya romno ‘ntah*) which, since it is not actually there in the first place, can be neither hard nor soft, thus confirming the reading of the Buddha’s silence as indicating the lack of any underlying ground as expressed by the concept of emptiness. That both interpretations are present provides a clear instance in which the complexity and diversity of interpretations within the tradition would actually be overlooked if we simply assumed the “audience-dispositional” reading of *upaśya* in isolation.

Indeed, significantly, from the dGe lugs pa viewpoint of Tsong kha pa, and operating according to the Tibetan fourfold hierarchy of different Buddhist tenet systems (*grub mtha’, siddhānta*), an exposure to the Mādhyamika perspective comes later and is considered “higher” or “further” along the Gradual Path, operating at a more subtle level to that of the Yogācāra perspective contained in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. Thus, if anything, it is the philosophical reading of the Buddha’s silence at the Mādhyamika level focusing on the lack of a presuppositional ground that actually holds more authoritative weight than the purely pragmatic *upaśya* “audience-dispositional” reading given at the Yogācāra level. In the dGe lugs pa analysis, the operation of *upaśya* at an earlier stage is underpinned by philosophical reasoning, which can only be understood by a more advanced practitioner at a later stage, and not the other way around. This also accords with Cabezón’s point that *upaśya* is operative in terms of efficacy, which is context dependent, and not truth — here, the truth of emptiness — which is not.

VI
The hierarchical nature of this Tibetan dGe lugs pa arrangement also allows for a further insight into the nature of *upaśya* itself. It suggests that although *upaśya*

might be practically or efficaciously more operative lower down at a less sophisticated stage of the Path, it can only be consciously acknowledged as a means or practical tool “higher up,” or further along the Path. It can be used descriptively as a means of understanding what went before (and hence as a prescriptive Hermeneutic tool for describing what went before), but not as a prescriptive tool for understanding what might lie up ahead as the complexity and subtlety of the analysis increases. It is only lower down, or earlier along the Path, that we need the offer of the toys outside to draw us out of the burning house, but it is only later on that we can know their true nature. In other words, upāya is itself a provisional explanation; ultimately, upāya is itself just an upāya.

This seems an intuition implicit in David Seyfort Ruegg’s subtle distinction between the immediate audience of a given teaching of the Buddha (i.e., the teaching’s recipients, or vineya, literally, “vessels”) and the exegete, or “hermenutician, to borrow Ruegg’s term, who then later attempts to interpret the teaching on the assumption of the Buddha’s upāya, hence presupposing the Buddha’s intention as a Hermeneutic basis (abhiprāya/dgongs gzhi, dgongs pa). Ruegg observes that, in the act of interpreting the words of the Buddha, the Dhongs gzhi [the Buddha’s intention as a basis] is a kind of presupposition for the speaker — the Buddha as Teacher — when uttering an abhiprāyika [intentional] (and neyārtha) Sūtra, and even for the hermenutician — who is of course not the specific Vineya [recipient/audience] of the intentional Sūtra.35

The crucial and astute distinction Ruegg makes here is between the Buddha, along with the hermenutician on the one side, in contrast to the specific immediate audience, or receptacle, vineya, of the teaching, on the other. Moreover, Ruegg’s insight also allows us to recall our earlier citation from the Lotus Sūtra and the distinction that Śāriputra was keen to draw between himself, the proto-hermenutician, who understands the Buddha’s skilful means (and so is “free from doubt”) along with the Buddha whom he questions or interprets, on the one side, and the twelve hundred bhiksus, the specific audience, on the other, who may still be in doubt, since they do not necessarily recognise the earlier teachings as an upāya.

At an explicit level, the teachings are addressed by the Buddha to the audience (“the specific Vineya,” such as the twelve hundred bhiksus). However, they do not understand these teachings as merely a skilful means. The message of upāya itself consciously understood as “upāya” is, by contrast, addressed by the Buddha directly to the hermenutician (Śāriputra) himself, thus bypassing the (original) audience (the twelve hundred bhiksus).

VII

To return to the methodological issues involved in approaches to addressing upāya in a modern academic setting, I shall return to the philosophical Madhyamika reading of the Buddha’s silence we have discussed in relation

to the dGe lugs pa interpretation. For an interpretation determined to see audience-dispositional upāya as the fundamental underlying normative criterion at work in Tsong kha pa’s analysis, it would of course be all too easy to then downplay the philosophical issues at work by responding that, although the Buddha may well have addressed philosophical issues, this is simply because the questioner’s specific affliction that needed to be cured was of a particular philosophical nature. In so doing, the philosophical complexity of the issue would be subsumed within pedagogy, which can in turn then be subsumed under skilful means.

However, such an analysis would seem to risk oversimplifying the issue. The broad nature of upāya provides a firm basis for the Buddhist exegete and comfort for the Buddhist practitioner, as well as providing modern scholarship with a fascinating object of study in its own right as a traditionally bound hermeneutic tool. However, it is precisely because of this that it ceases to be overly useful as an analytical tool that an academic outsider themselves might wield when examining developments within Buddhist thought. Because upāya is such an elastic concept and can, at least theoretically, be applied anywhere and everywhere at a meta-level behind any sort of pedagogical or philosophical debate, it can become potentially impossible to falsify, and for that reason it also becomes meaningless, for once our conclusions cease to be falsifiable, then they also cease to be verifiable. The danger is that scholarship on upāya and on strategies used within traditions to validate truth-claims can themselves hide behind such strategies. The misuse, or overuse, of upāya, especially when used in instances in which the tradition itself does not use it, appears to give us something of a carte-blanche: we are simply able to respond to every criticism with the rejoinder of “upāya” rather than actually engage with it.

But once this becomes a prerequisite for engaging in an academic discussion of Buddhism, then suddenly adhering to a particular doctrinal teaching within Buddhism becomes a necessary prerequisite for understanding any aspect of Buddhism at all, for upāya is itself already bound within, and indeed only arises out of, these sort of doctrinal distinctions and rivalries in the first place. As we saw earlier in our analysis of the Samdhinirmocana Sūtra, and as flagged by Lamotte, where one school recognises a mere upāya or neyārtha, their rival may see only a definitive nītārtha. To operate under such conditions, we would cease participating in Buddhist studies or the academic study of religion or philosophy and instead embark upon the work of systematic, and sectarian, theology. Yet without going to this extreme, it is difficult to see on what basis we as academic outsiders could actually legitimately apply the concept of upāya in places and in situations in which Buddhists themselves have not traditionally done so.

IX
Normatively deciding what is and is not skilful means can itself, at its worst, become a skilful means of covering up our own ignorance of the issues involved in the tradition and our own limitations as interpreters. Upāya is a dangerous concept to over-apply when we are not qualified to apply it at all.
The potential danger of upāya for us outsiders is that it can seem to all too readily provide an indigenous hermeneutic tool from within the tradition that can provide us with a (seemingly) plausible excuse for never actually engaging with the tradition at all. An over-application of the concept of upāya risks hindering our actual engagement with the issues to which upāya is applied. When applied too early, the deconstructive tendency implicit in skilful means, like that implicit in emptiness, can provide an excuse for never having to deal with the challenges, complexities, and difficulties in the material that the tradition presents us with; indeed at its very worst, it can allow us to avoid them altogether.

As Cabezón’s distinction between truth and efficacy makes clear, it is by no means the case that upāya necessarily is a universally applicable principle within Buddhist thought; it is precisely the point of the hermeneutic process to decide when and where upāya is applicable, what is neyārtha and what is nītārtha, implying that there are obviously occasions when it is not applicable. To venture a hypothetical appeal of our own to traditional pedagogy and praxis, it is inconceivable that a Tibetan debater could suddenly bow out of a complex logical problem by appealing to the Buddha’s skilful means whenever a fellow debater forces him into an insoluble contradiction. Georges Dreyfus, in his account of the actual practice of debate in the Tibetan monastic setting, notes that

[contradiction is central to the whole system of debate. The law of the excluded middle is seen to support the entire enquiry, though traditions disagree about its status. Whereas non-Ge-luk [= dGe lugs] thinkers might limit its application to the conventional realm, Ge-luk scholars are ready to extend it to the domain of ultimate reality as well. Moreover, this approach is far from holistic. Debate proceeds by asking more and more narrowly analytical questions, and one cannot escape by claiming some special insight or pretending that this mode of inquiry is antithetical to spiritual development. Monks who made such claims would be mercilessly ridiculed and dismissed as hopeless flakes, lacking the capacity for rigorous thinking that the tradition values.]

If we overly apply the concept of upāya on our own terms in the name of overemphasising spiritual praxis, there is the risk that we may lose sight of the significance of much rigorous analytical thought and the role it plays alongside spiritual praxis within Buddhist traditions themselves. Were we to do this, then we might be in need of an expanded conception of upāya, a skilful means more analytically rigorous, and, in the process, more hermeneutically and methodologically compassionate towards the complexity of the traditions we explore.