

UPIAH – Skillful Means or Outreach ~Shinzen Young

00:00:00 The bell stands for upaya or karuna.
00:00:12 So karuna means compassion, but it's bigger than compassion.
00:00:16 It's really outreach.
00:00:19 That's why in the Tibetan tradition, karuna and upaya are virtual synonyms.
00:00:26 Karuna is compassion.
00:00:28 And upaya, I would translate as, it's often translated, what's the standard sort of artificial
00:00:36 Buddhist English translation of upaya?
00:00:39 Skillful means.
00:00:41 You got it.
00:00:43 So what does skillful means refer to?
00:00:47 What is the connotation of the word upaya?
00:00:50 Well, if I were to give an idiomatic translation, I would probably translate it something like
00:00:58 outreach.
00:01:00 Remember I said that when you ring the bell, you ring the bell to call people, or you ring
00:01:04 the bell to begin or end a set.
00:01:07 To me, that's like the coolest job to do because you're reaching out.
00:01:14 The bell, it calls sentient beings back to the source, back to the practice.
00:01:24 So I would say upaya is the ways that one reaches out in order to engage people in the
00:01:33 practice because just sort of trying to sell people on emptiness or suffering, that might
00:01:47 be maybe something the general public doesn't exactly relate to right off the bat.
00:01:56 Guess what?
00:01:57 I've got good news.
00:02:01 You are a soulless robot designed to suffer and too stupid to know that.
00:02:12 And the only good part is that you're going to die.
00:02:19 But that's not so great because it's almost certain that the next time around you're going
00:02:25 to be born as an even stupider soulless robot suffering even more.
00:02:33 So this is the Buddhist message.
00:02:37 And you know what?
00:02:41 There's damn good reason to say this, okay?

00:02:44 And I don't know about the reincarnation piece, but actually, yeah, I agree with the soulless

00:02:51 robot designed to suffer, but that's not exactly the whole picture, fortunately.

00:03:01 And that is certainly not a way to bring in J. Random human being to the path.

00:03:08 Just try to convince him of that.

00:03:12 That's like the Iceman cometh, you know, you're trying to sell a person on death.

00:03:18 It's like who wants to buy this product?

00:03:23 So there are more approachable ways of formulating the same thing.

00:03:36 And that's upaya.

00:03:38 So the Buddhist tradition has always thought that it's important to make, to have ways

00:03:46 that people can enter the practice.

00:03:51 Now how do you do that?

00:03:53 Well, it's been done differently in different cultures.

00:03:58 One of the ways, let's be honest, that you get people engaged is you impress them with

00:04:07 psychic powers and magic.

00:04:10 That's something people can relate to in certain cultures at certain times.

00:04:16 Most cultures in previous times, and that's where Buddhism existed in those cultures.

00:04:22 So how are you going to convince Kublai Khan to not destroy your temple, but help you build

00:04:34 it?

00:04:35 Well, you better be able to do magic better than his guys.

00:04:40 So that was one of the upayas, and it certainly is legitimate, I suppose, within a certain

00:04:49 cultural context.

00:04:53 People like to have their fortune told.

00:04:56 If you go to a Chinese, I mean, you know, fortune, I mean, we talk about fortune cookies,

00:05:04 okay, it's almost like a stereotype, but fortune telling is a really, really old trope in Chinese

00:05:12 culture.

00:05:13 Although, actually, most people don't know that fortune cookies come from Japan.

00:05:19 Originally, most people don't know that.

00:05:23 Look at the Wikipedia.

00:05:24 That is where they come from.

00:05:26 But anyway, fortunes, telling your fortune, that's the beginning of Chinese

literature.

00:05:31 That's the I Ching.

00:05:33 That's what it is.

00:05:34 It's like how to interpret these hexagrams and so forth.

00:05:40 So the culture likes to have their fortune told.

00:05:44 So every Chinese temple, if you talk to the average Chinese person, what do you do at

00:05:50 the temple?

00:05:51 Why do you go to the temple?

00:05:53 Well, you throw these pieces of wood or coconut and they fall in a certain way, and then you

00:06:02 like draw a fortune and okay, so it goes.

00:06:07 So that's a new pie that brings people into your temple.

00:06:14 Food is a big deal in Chinese culture.

00:06:17 So Mahayana Buddhism in China is about not eating meat.

00:06:26 So you develop an incredible vegetarian cuisine and the temples provide that food.

00:06:35 So people go, they get a good vibe, they do a good deed, they didn't eat meat, but they

00:06:42 ate something that looked and tasted exactly like meat, but was made out of tofu.

00:06:49 They reproduced all the high cuisine of China in vegetarian food.

00:06:55 It's an upaya.

00:06:56 It brings someone into the temple.

00:07:01 And then, you know, hopefully some connection will be made and from there things will happen.

00:07:10 So that's all this kind of stuff is looked upon as upaya.

00:07:14 Upaya is sort of a tricky thing, right?

00:07:17 I think you can see that there could be a little bit of a slippery slope here.

00:07:24 In terms of, well, honesty.

00:07:32 You know, people like miracles.

00:07:34 So hey, you know, miraculous things happen.

00:07:42 You know, these, what do they call them, you know, the relics and things that reproduce

00:07:55 themselves every day and get more and more and more.

00:07:58 It's like, hmm, can't help thinking that someone's manipulating that, okay?

00:08:08 But well, it's an upaya.

00:08:10 It can be justified.

00:08:12 So it's a sort of tricky thing.

00:08:14 We want to bring people in.

00:08:15 We want to make things relevant.

00:08:19 You're in 12th century Japan.
00:08:23 You just came back from China.
00:08:24 You learned this cool liberation path called Chan or Zen.
00:08:32 And who's running the show in 12th century Japan?
00:08:35 Samurai.
00:08:36 They're running the show.
00:08:40 So how are you going to get them not to beat you up, but rather to get interested in what
00:08:48 you have to say?
00:08:50 Well, what's relevant to a samurai?
00:08:55 To kill and be killed without fear or conscience is what's relevant to the job of a samurai.
00:09:04 You know what?
00:09:05 We can provide that.
00:09:06 You want that?
00:09:07 We can provide that.
00:09:08 Now, you can say, whoa, that was a bad thing to do.
00:09:13 I mean, the Buddha would like ...
00:09:16 I mean, it's like in the original rules in the Vinaya, Buddhist monks aren't even allowed
00:09:25 to talk about wars and conflicts, what to say to trained warriors.
00:09:34 On the other hand, thanks to that, there are now people in Japan who are enlightened Zen
00:09:45 masters and taught me.
00:09:48 And maybe if that hadn't happened in the 12th century, that would not have been the case.
00:09:56 I remember the first time I ever stayed in a Japanese Zen temple.
00:10:00 It was a place called Mount Pukuchi in Kyoto.
00:10:09 What I noticed was that these busloads of company workers would come in.
00:10:18 It would be like three buses and they're all workers from a certain section of a company
00:10:26 like Mitsubishi or Matsushita or one of these big Japanese companies.
00:10:34 They'd all be in suits or in their company sort of ...
00:10:41 What do we call those?
00:10:48 Like ...
00:10:49 Yeah, or the jumpsuits kind of things.
00:10:56 I noticed they'd come into the temple, what's going on?
00:11:00 So I asked the Roshi, what is this?
00:11:05 And he says, well, they send a section of workers to spend a week living in the Zen
00:11:16 temple together, essentially to do a mini session, a sort of mild retreat kind of situation,

00:11:25 but mostly just to be in the temple and see what that's like.

00:11:32 So I said, why?

00:11:34 Why do the companies do this?

00:11:39 This is a long, long time ago.

00:11:41 This is like 1969 or something.

00:11:46 1968, way back.

00:11:49 First time I was in Japan.

00:11:53 So why do the companies send their workers?

00:11:58 Well, it's a team building exercise is what it is.

00:12:03 This is Japanese team building, seven to a Zen temple, and toughen them up a little bit.

00:12:10 Well, you know, it hurts.

00:12:13 You have to sit still.

00:12:15 You're tired.

00:12:18 And you get a sort of paramilitary team building kind of experience.

00:12:25 And that's why the companies do this.

00:12:27 They pay for it because it's to their advantage as a company.

00:12:35 So okay, fine.

00:12:36 It's sort of cool, actually, in a way that that's their version of team building, sort

00:12:43 of classical.

00:12:44 On the other hand, I did ask the guy pointedly, don't you think that they're exploiting you?

00:12:54 You know, just they're using you for corporate goals.

00:12:59 You're a spiritual teacher, you're a Zen teacher.

00:13:02 I mean, you know, in those days, I was pretty rude.

00:13:05 I hadn't done much practice.

00:13:07 And I was I had a lot of chutzpah.

00:13:10 And I used to like to ask impertinent questions from people.

00:13:16 But that was okay, because I actually learned a lot from the answers.

00:13:20 Because often the answers were, I was impertinent, but the answers were humble.

00:13:26 And that was a learning experience.

00:13:29 So he said, well, it's true, to a certain extent.

00:13:35 But if we get 60 people coming in here, maybe one or two of them will take to the practice

00:13:46 and will continue with it.

00:13:49 And that justifies doing it.

00:13:52 So and then he said, this is Hoben.

00:13:56 And Hoben is the Japanese word for upaya.

00:14:00 So this is the outreach.

00:14:03 So you reach out to people.

00:14:07 Zen and the art of.

00:14:10 People like to do art in Japan.

00:14:12 They like to do flower arranging and tea ceremony.

00:14:16 So you sort of make the possibility that they can get a little bit of samadhi as they are

00:14:24 doing their art, their flowers or their tea or whatever.

00:14:28 And then this makes things relevant to the culture.

00:14:31 So what I find interesting is that, of course, history repeats itself.

00:14:40 Now it's coming to the West.

00:14:45 How is it making, by it I mean Buddhism, this practice, how is it making a really, I mean

00:14:55 like really significant inroad into the culture?

00:15:01 How is that happening?

00:15:06 It's happening because of the M word and by M I don't mean meditation.

00:15:15 What's the M word that I'm thinking of?

00:15:18 Mindfulness.

00:15:19 Mindfulness.

00:15:20 Oh yeah, that one.

00:15:25 This is amazing.

00:15:29 Because that word will probably change the course of human history.

00:15:40 That word.

00:15:42 Just the way it's come down now.

00:15:47 Because mindfulness is an attentional skill set.

00:15:55 It can be translated different ways but it's an attentional skill set.

00:16:06 These attentional skills can be used for everything.

00:16:11 They can be used for everything.

00:16:13 They can be used for pain management.

00:16:15 They can be used for improving your tennis game.

00:16:22 They can be used for recovery.

00:16:25 They can be used for everything.

00:16:28 It's not terribly threatening.

00:16:31 The other M word, it's pretty accepted.

00:16:35 I mean even the AMA, if you get something, if you have heart or cancer or something,

00:16:43 you ask the AMA recommendations, that M word, the meditation word, you'll actually find

00:16:50 there.

00:16:51 So that's somewhat acceptable, the M word that means meditation.

00:16:59 But still, there are sections of society that meditation just sounds weird and an invasion

00:17:09 of my personal world.

00:17:12 It's like asking someone to pray in a certain way, you're asking them to

meditate.

00:17:17 But telling people, hey, we're going to give you some exercises that develop attentional

00:17:26 skills and then we're going to show you how to apply those attentional skills to what

00:17:31 you're interested in, what's important to you.

00:17:35 If you've got chronic pain, that's important, okay, etc., etc.

00:17:43 That's something that the average person is not going to catch in their craw.

00:17:55 It's not going to seem weird or unnatural.

00:18:00 Especially one of the things that I've been considering is to not assume that the first

00:18:07 way you train people in mindfulness is to get them to sit down.

00:18:12 Because there's really nothing that says you have to start with a seated practice or that

00:18:16 your eyes have to be closed.

00:18:30 This is really interesting, because to me, this is the modern upaya.

00:18:38 We're reaching out to people.

00:18:40 What I decided to do was, okay, if we're flying under the banner of an attentional skill set,

00:18:51 well we want them to apply these skills in a way that they're going to dramatically grow.

00:19:06 I outlined this in the What is Mindfulness, what this whole strategy is.

00:19:12 So the categories of the basic mindfulness system are designed to produce insights right

00:19:18 off the bat.

00:19:21 So that it's not just that they're going to get a little bit of concentration kind of

00:19:26 thing, but they're explicitly developing concentration, sensory clarity, equanimity, and they're

00:19:32 learning how to parse their sensory experience in such a way that the fundamental insights

00:19:40 can arise without us trying to get them to believe a certain thing.

00:19:47 So we're going to provide you with an attentional skill set, we're going to provide you with

00:19:52 a way of analyzing your sensory experience, which is, it's not any doctrine or belief

00:19:58 system, it obviously is the case that we see and we hear and we feel.

00:20:05 And then people can hopefully start to have really significant experiences.

00:20:14 So that to me is a modern and incredible opportunity for upaya.