

# Soteriological Pragmatism and Psychotherapy: The Buddhist Concept of “Means” in the Writings of the Modern Buddhist Philosopher Inoue Enryō

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IN HIS BOOK *Skillful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*, Michael Pye introduced the Western reader to the far-reaching significance that the term “means” (Skt. *upāya*; Ch. *fangbian* 方便; Jp. *hōben*), or “skill in means” (Skt. *upāya-kausālya*; Ch. *shanqiao fangbian* 善巧方便; Jp. *zengyō hōben*), has for East Asian Mahayana Buddhism. Pye pointed to a variety of philosophical implications that the Buddhist idea of “means” contains, and these have since been given further scrutiny in English-language scholarship.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the concept of “skillful means” in the *Lotus Sutra* has elicited discussion from exegetical<sup>2</sup> as well as ethical points of view.<sup>3</sup> By examining occurrences of the term in the writings of the modern Buddhist philosopher Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919), I hope to shed further light on the philosophical potential of this fascinating religious concept.

Although there exists a considerable amount of research on Inoue’s Buddhist writings,<sup>4</sup> his use of the concept of “skillful means” has not attracted any attention in English or Japanese scholarship. This is partly due to the fact that the concept is not central to, or representative of, Inoue’s Buddhist philosophy as a whole. The passages in which Inoue explicitly discusses or makes use of the concept of “skillfull means” are rather limited. This article

<sup>1</sup> Schroeder 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Reeves 2002, Federmnan 2009, Schroeder 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Keown 2002, Goodman 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See the bibliographies in “Inoue Enryo Research Database.” 2016. Compiled by Rainer Schulzer. International Association for Inoue Enryo Research. <http://www.toyo.ac.jp/site/iair/33402.html>.

will examine the most significant occurrences in Inoue's Buddhist writings. The books I cite are from different periods of his life: his early manifesto *Bukkyō katuron joron* 仏教活論序論 (Prolegomena to a Living Discourse on Buddhism) from 1887; the 1898 recorded lecture series *Bukkyō rika* 仏教理科 (Buddhist Science) and the 1904 monograph *Shinri ryōhō* 心理療法 (Psychotherapy) from Inoue's middle period; and the last part and summary of his magnum opus on Buddhist doctrine *Katsu Bukkyō* 活仏教 (Living Buddhism) from 1912. For the sake of my argument, the books will not be quoted in chronological order. Rather than an account of the development of Inoue's thought, the main purpose of this article is philosophical investigation. I will distinguish four different uses of the concept:

- (1) "Means" as a hermeneutic tool: Buddhist doctrines inconsistent with the scientific worldview can be interpreted as soteriological devices.
- (2) "Means" as a psychotherapeutic approach: faith can work as a self-fulfilling prophecy in healing.
- (3) "Means" as a pragmatic concept of religious truth: a teaching that reduces suffering is a true teaching.
- (4) "Means" as a Buddhist concept of tolerance: religious "dispositions" (Jp. *kikon* 機根) are various, therefore the teachings must be too.

I will not attempt to demonstrate that these four uses are philosophically consistent with each other. Despite the overall systematic appearance of Inoue's writings, his ultimate ambition was not to bequeath a final philosophical system. His well-structured, but sometimes overly schematic style of thinking allowed him to extend his thought into new theoretical fields and to explore the discursive space of the modern humanities. Inoue spelled out the Aristotelian paradigm of classified research areas for the first time in the history of modern Japanese humanities. In the philosophical paradigm of systematic thinking, the Buddhist concept of "means" takes on different meanings depending on the scholarly field in which it is applied or interpreted. Inoue was too absorbed by his pioneering efforts to worry about whether his interpretations of the Buddhist notion of "skillful means" in the context of psychotherapy, Buddhist hermeneutics, or Buddhist philosophy were perfectly consistent with each other. Instead of discussing his application of the concept of "means" in terms of its distortion of, or authenticity to, the Buddhist tradition, a more specific observation is possible here:

through the prism of modern scholarly diversification, the full philosophical potential and depth of this traditional Buddhist concept becomes apparent.

(1) *“Means” as a hermeneutic tool: Buddhist doctrines inconsistent with the scientific worldview can be interpreted as soteriological devices*

In his lectures in *Bukkyō rika*, Inoue discusses a great variety of Buddhist doctrines that can claim validity in the light of logic and modern science. But he also reflects on the status of those doctrines that had lost their credibility as philosophical or scientific statements about the empirical world. In the chapter on the Buddhist cosmology centered around Mt. Sumeru we find the following passage:

Philosophically, Buddhism rejects objectivity and unfolds subjectivity. It turns down materialism and takes the standpoint of idealism. Religiously, Buddhism leaves the realm of delusion and enters the realm of awakening. It escapes the realm of life and death and reaches the realm of nirvana. The doctrine of Mt. Sumeru therefore is a teaching that in the first instance must be rejected by Buddhism. If, in the context of reincarnation through the six realms, following the causal logic of good and evil it becomes necessary to teach karmic retribution in the Mt. Sumeru heaven, this is nothing else but what Buddhism calls a “means.” Although the ninety-five heterodox schools [that existed] before the Buddha were not identical, all took birth in the Mt. Sumeru heaven as the ultimate end. When the Buddha appeared in the world and wished to defeat the heterodox aberrations, he could have pointed to the fruit of awakening (*bukka* 仏果) beyond this heaven. However, toward the followers of the brahmin path who firmly believed in heavenly retribution, he did not refute the teaching [of Mt. Sumeru heaven], but rather took it as a ladder for ascending to the fruit of awakening. He realized it as a means of guidance to the [right] path and eventually started to use it. This does not mean that he acknowledged the Mt. Sumeru heaven, instead it is clear that he rejected it. . . . It is only mixed into Buddhism, like sugar is mixed into a [bitter] medicine. It is a “skillful means” directed toward the followers of the brahmin path, who do not know that there is a realm to be aspired to besides heavenly reward, because their perspective is narrow like the frog sitting in the well. . . . Stating the condition of highest happiness and

utmost blessing about the Mt. Sumeru heaven is obviously only a means of guidance appropriate to the disposition (*zuiki dōnyū* 隨機導入) [of the audience]. If the Buddhist writings were a set of books about physics, such would certainly not be forgivable, but as a type of religious writing, it might be legitimate since it is the same as attracting the lover of wine with wine, or enticing a connoisseur of crackers with crackers. However, even if we provisionally consider today the Mt. Sumeru teaching as erroneous speech and the theory that the earth is a sphere as true, wouldn't today's astronomical and geophysical theory be useless for teaching heavenly retribution to the followers of the brahmin path? This should be seen as the reason why Mt. Sumeru appears in the Buddhist writings.<sup>5</sup>

Although I am not in a position to decide whether all ninety-five schools of pre-Buddhist Indian philosophy had as their only goal karmic reward in the Mt. Sumeru heaven, on first sight this claim seems doubtful. In order to decide the historical correctness of such a proposition, nobody in Japan today would use Inoue's writings as reference works. Indian and Buddhist studies in Japan left Inoue behind a long time ago. However, in its preponderance of detailed historical and philological investigations, Japanese humanities has missed out on what can still be learned from Inoue. As an advocate of enlightenment, Inoue never puts aside the question of the validity, or in his own words, the "discussion" (*ron* 論) about the present "applicability" or "fertility" (*katsu* 活) of a certain theory. This is how the title of Inoue's magnum opus in three parts, *Bukkyō katsuron* 仏教活論,<sup>6</sup> should be interpreted. Different from the all-neutralizing eye of historical research, Inoue had the courage to express clearly which doctrines of his own religion had lost credibility in the face of modern science. Such a straightforward statement gives rise to the philosophical discussion of whether there are different hermeneutic angles to interpret otherwise obsolete doctrines. The following quotation concisely summarizes Inoue's enlightenment approach:

Insofar as we can have physical knowledge of the movements of the earth and the sky, we have to rely on objective explanations.

<sup>5</sup> *Inoue Enryō senshū* 井上円了選集 (hereafter, IS), vol. 7, pp. 417–18. All translations are by the author.

<sup>6</sup> IS, vol. 4, Part One (1887), Part Two (1890), and Part Three (1912).

If we reach a point at which we cannot know through physics, we have to apply subjective explanations. The old Buddhists, however, take the teachings as seen in the sutras and *śāstras* as the one and only everlasting golden words, without asking if they might be metaphors or means.<sup>7</sup>

Inoue Enryō's use of the concept of "means" as a hermeneutic device has in fact certain precedents in the Buddhist tradition. Not only in the East Asian treatises on "teaching classifications" (*kyōhan* 教判), but already in the *Lotus Sutra* the term is used to reinterpret older teachings: although the literal significance of the doctrines of the "Small Vehicle" (Hinayana) is questioned, the older teachings were still admissible as crutches to attain the same end as the "Great Vehicle" (Mahayana).<sup>8</sup> This usage of the term indeed parallels Inoue's modern hermeneutic approach. The motivation for his reinterpretation, however, differs: whereas the early advocates of Mahayana Buddhism appealed to the authority of the deified Buddha, Inoue's criterion for doctrinal credibility was *external* to Buddhism. It was his enlightenment commitment to the natural sciences that forced him to review the older doctrines in a new light.

(2) "Means" as a psychotherapeutic approach: faith can work as a self-fulfilling prophecy in healing

Inoue's enlightenment conviction that many religious doctrines have no credibility as literal statements about the empirical world forced him to clarify the transforming effects faith nevertheless has on religious persons. In his 1904 work *Shinri ryōhō* he writes:

When people are cured by holy water or an illness is eased by taboos, such effects are not due to divine powers, but to the functioning of belief (*shinkō sayō* 信仰作用). This should be seen as a type of psychotherapy. However, things like holy water and taboos also cause considerable harm when superstitiously believed by uneducated people. Therefore, I advocate avoiding the harmful and selecting the beneficial; to drop the irrational and adopt the rational.<sup>9</sup>

Trust in prayers and incantations in order to cure a malady and complete reliance on [the gods of riches] Ebisu 蛭子 and Daikoku

<sup>7</sup> *Bukkyō rika*, IS, vol. 7, p. 364.

<sup>8</sup> Federman 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *Shinri ryōhō*, IS, vol. 10, p. 179.

大黒 to acquire wealth should not be seen as the same thing. The latter has no benefit whatsoever, whereas the former will certainly exhibit a [positive] influence to some degree. If the patient believes in [the effect of the prayer] and gains comfort from it, this will doubtlessly have a therapeutic effect. This effect, however, is not due to the obscure protection by gods and buddhas, but through the power of the function of the mind.<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine of Mt. Sumeru heaven might be interpreted as an illustration or a metaphor applied in spiritual guidance; yet even if the transcendent heaven is put forth in a rather literal way, the impossibility of falsifying the teaching renders the means comparably harmless. The case of magical prayers or wondrous drugs is different, however. Inoue clearly admits that their efficacy is not based on empirical mechanisms, but only due to the force of faith. Therefore, unless the believer is deceived about the real nature of the means, such faith could not exhibit its power.

An act of deception with the purpose of benefitting the deceived is called a paternalistic (or white) lie. Inoue points to the interesting parallel that paternalistic deception lends itself to being used not only by a priest or shaman, but also by a medical doctor.

If a doctor makes a house call, the patient will feel that his pain or suffering has been reduced to a certain degree. If the doctor does not make a house call, he feels that his malady is worsening. Both instances are due to the functioning of belief. Further, it is often the case that the doctor, upon examining the patient, does not tell him the truth. Although, for example, the doctor's diagnosis suggests that there is no prospect of full recovery, and the doctor possibly believes that the medicine will have no effect, he might say to the patient that taking the medicine will surely cure him in a few days. Or, a doctor, who, despite believing in his heart that there are true symptoms of tuberculosis, may tell the patient that he has a cough or bronchitis. Such [instances] are nothing else but temporary means not to cause feelings of fear, unrest, or worry in the patient's heart. It is obvious that such means are in the first place not the original intent of physiological therapy but a problem of psychological therapy. The fact that today's medical doctors use the functioning of belief to enhance the effects of therapy

<sup>10</sup> *Shinri ryōhō*, IS, vol. 10, p. 207.

(not only in internal, but also in external treatment) and at the same time repudiate belief therapy clearly has to be called a self-contradiction.<sup>11</sup>

Inoue is not so interested in the ethical problem of paternalist deception but rather in the fact that medicine should not underestimate the healing effects of faith. In his work *Shinri ryōhō*, Inoue thereby anticipates insights that are discussed in the twentieth century under the names of “psychosomatic medicine” or “placebo-effect.”

(3) “Means” as a pragmatic concept of religious truth: a teaching that reduces suffering is a true teaching

The most abstract discussion of the status of salvific means can be found in Inoue’s early manifesto, *Bukkyō katsuron joron*. With explicit reference to the *Lotus Sutra* he claims that means are true means if they prove to be effective:

In the *Lotus Sutra* [the Buddha] exposed the [provisional] gateway of means and revealed the real truth. The *Lotus Sutra* is the truth, whereas the *Āgama* and *Prajñā* [sutras] are means. But taking them as means does not mean that these teachings are false. Means are a ladder to reach the truth. If there is an end, there necessarily must be a ladder to reach it. If the end is reached through the ladder, the means becomes true. For example, is not gaining wealth taken to be a true end? If the merchant is gaining wealth by his business strategy this strategy is true. If the farmer is gaining wealth through his agriculture his agriculture is true. What else would be the reason to distinguish between true and false among farmers and merchants? If the aspired end is reached, all means are equally true.<sup>12</sup>

Inoue’s argument in this passage has at least three problematic philosophical implications. First, one can agree that a certain method or technology proves itself right if the end for which it was applied is achieved. For example, the construction plan of an airplane is correct if the plane eventually flies. But Inoue’s comparison of soteriological means with empirical means belies the problem that in the psychological or spiritual context even means that

<sup>11</sup> *Shinri ryōhō*, IS, vol. 10, pp. 185–86.

<sup>12</sup> *Bukkyō katsuron joron*, IS, vol. 3, p. 381.

empirically do not work can have some effect. A plane, even if we firmly believe it to be a good plane, will not fly if it is constructed wrongly. A ladder, even if we firmly believe it to be a stable ladder, will not hold if it is rotten. However, a magical prayer or a placebo medicine, even if the means do not release any physiological mechanisms, can still have self-fulfilling effects on the subject believing in it.

Second, the comparison with concrete methods or technologies obscures another difficulty. Inoue pays no attention to the ethical problem that the end does not justify the means. The strategy of a merchant to deceive his business partners in order to make riches might be successful but is not legitimate. In the parable found in chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sutra*, the father, who falsely let his children believe his own death in order to make his poisoned children drink the antidote, may instead be justified.<sup>13</sup> The existence of the father appears to be the last connection his deranged children have with reality. The shock of the message about their father's death brings them back to sanity, and finally they drink the antidote he prepared.

Third, the claim that means of guidance to the religious truth are themselves true raises the question of the overall difference between means to the truth and the truth as such. The *Lotus Sutra* exposes all previous Buddhist teachings as mere means and presents itself as the ultimate sermon of the Buddha lore. Yet it is not in fact clear what the content of this ultimate verbalization of the Buddha's teaching is.<sup>14</sup> The only doctrine that is clearly stated is the promise of universal salvation for all sentient beings. The allowance for an innumerable number of salvific means appears to be the flip side of the promise of universal deliverance. There is no other message than the claim that everybody will find enlightenment thanks to the inexhaustible repertoire of means applied by buddhas and bodhisattvas. According to this interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra*, Inoue's concluding identification of means and truth is indeed plausible: "There is no truth separate from means, and no means separate from the truth. The means are the truth, and the truth is the means."<sup>15</sup>

A pragmatic theory of truth is sometimes cited as an alternative to the correspondence theory of truth, which states the common sense idea that propositions are true if they correspond to the facts. However, arguing for a pragmatic concept of truth in matters of religion does not necessarily

<sup>13</sup> T no. 262, 9:42a29–44a04. Cf. Keown 2002; Goodman 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pye 2003, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Bukkyō katsuron joron*, IS, vol. 3, p. 382.

commit to this very theory in all other scholarly contexts. Instead, I believe, the pragmatic concept of religious truth is meaningful only because correspondence is per definition ruled out in religious affairs. Insofar as religion relates to the transcendent, its propositions cannot be falsified. Teachings about heaven or protective deities can therefore be accepted as a form of religious truth if they benefit the believer.

(4) *“Means” as a Buddhist concept of tolerance: religious “dispositions” are various, therefore the teachings must be too*

Although Inoue did stress the scientific and philosophical elements in Buddhist doctrines, he did not claim that scientific explanation of the world was the main objective of Buddhism. The end of Buddhism is instead the reduction of suffering and the spiritual deliverance of human beings. In order to achieve this spiritual or psychological end, according to Inoue, it is expedient to acknowledge different approaches:

Buddhism is split up in many branches, sects, and schools, which all have different standpoints. If I were asked on what my faith relies, I would answer it relies on the True [Pure Land] school (Shinshū 真宗). Buddhism is known as a teaching that provides a remedy appropriate to the disease (*ōbyō yoyaku* 応病与薬). It allows the freedom to choose the school according to one’s disposition. Because I was born into the tradition of the True school, and first received my education inside its gates, I realize that the teaching of the True school is the religious faith best suited to my spiritual temperament (*shinshō* 信性). It is a valuable medicine appropriate to my malady. Yet, in my True school faith I am not narrow-minded and prejudiced as are other believers. On the one hand, I profess a progressive policy that allows for free philosophical investigation not only of Buddhist doctrine [in general] but also of True school beliefs. On the other hand, having faith in the True school, I do not reject others believing in other schools. It is enough if everybody receives the teaching suitable to his disposition of suffering.<sup>16</sup>

The attitude Inoue makes explicit here is one of inter-Buddhist tolerance. He dispenses with the question of doctrinal truth in favor of the pragmatic attitude that teachings that provide relief from suffering are legitimate

<sup>16</sup> *Katsu Bukkyō*, IS, vol. 4, pp. 387–88.

expressions of the Buddhist path. If Buddhism is committed to the reduction of suffering, it has to adjust to the complete variety of individual dispositions in order to live up to its promise of universal salvation.

I moreover believe that such a Buddhist concept of tolerance, which is made explicit in the passage above, is also potentially applicable in relation to other religions. Buddhism can fully tolerate other religions insofar as they contribute to the well-being of their followers and reduce suffering in the world. Herein lies a big difference to the great monotheistic religions. A God who is source, guarantor, and judge of morality cannot easily be relativized as being merely one means among others.

### *Concluding Remarks*

This essay has discussed four different uses of the Buddhist concept of “means” in the writings of Inoue Enryō. It is no coincidence that we encountered comparisons with medicine in each of the four cases. As the phrase “providing a remedy appropriate to the disease,”<sup>17</sup> found in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sutra*, suggests, there has long been an awareness in Mahayana Buddhism of the analogy between medicine and the Buddhist teaching. The analogy between the two is based on the fact that both apply certain methods to a person for the sake of that person. The problem of paternalist deception arises under this condition. For if the end of a deceptive means is not of benefit to the deceived person, the deception clearly would be illicit. Never treat a person “merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end in itself,” as Kant’s famous formula goes.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on the analogy between Buddhism and medicine, I would like to add some further reflections on the problem of paternalist deception.

The most obvious difference between medicine and Buddhism lies in the fact that medicine *primarily* wants to provide remedies for the body, whereas Buddhism *primarily* wants to provide a remedy for the mind. Despite these different starting points, both types of healing extend into the domain of the other. In the case of mere physiological suffering, which is the original domain of medicine, the problem of paternalist deception does not arise. If a certain therapy or medical drug has no physiological effects, it will not cure the body. However, if it has effects, it will not only benefit the body but also the mind. A physical ailment is a mental burden that is relieved by recovery. This interaction between mind and body works in

<sup>17</sup> T no. 475, 14:537a27.

<sup>18</sup> Kant 1785, p. 433. Translation by the author.

both directions and is the reason why the problem of paternalist deception arises in medicine. As Inoue points out, proficient medical doctors often withhold the truth from their patients or make use of placebo drugs because doctors know that the mental state of their patients influences their health condition. In the twentieth century, the interaction between mind and body became firmly established as a medical field in its own right under the name of “psychosomatic medicine.” Buddhism, which approaches physiological suffering from the mental side, does not promise that all diseases are cured by spiritual means. But due to its awareness of mind-body interaction, Buddhism will not preclude the possibility that even severe illnesses like cancer can be overcome through mental power.

Regarding the healing of mental suffering, psychotherapy has established itself in the repertoire of modern medicine in the same way that psychosomatic medicine has. Due to its commitment to science, medical psychotherapy relies as much as possible on methods that can not only be empirically justified to the scientific community, but can also be rationally explained to the patient. Methods like guided self-reflection, hypnosis, auto-suggestion, or meditation presuppose the conscious cooperation, if not the initiative, of the patient. In this regard, they differ from the concealed application of placebo drugs. Psychotherapy will hesitate to make extensive use of placebos for at least three reasons: first, the potential harm the concealed application of placebos can do to the trust relationship between therapist and patient; and second, the risk of reverse effects when the non-empirical character of the placebo medicine is eventually revealed to the patient. Last but not least, insofar as the effect of the placebo presupposes the patient’s ignorance about the character of the medicine, the application contradicts the principle of informed consent.<sup>19</sup>

It appears that Mahayana Buddhism takes a different stance here. Mahayana Buddhism does not only abstain from informing the individual about its beneficial self-deceptions, but makes allowance for a paternalist attitude that furthers them. Almost all schools of Japanese Buddhism, even the Japanese Zen sects, sell charms or encourage prayers to the bodhisattva Kannon 觀音 (Skt. Avalokiteśvara) for worldly benefit. From this perspective, Mahayana Buddhism itself appears to be a broad array of deceptive

<sup>19</sup> For a thorough discussion of these complex problems and for further literature see “Placebo Effects in Guidelines, Practice, and Patient Choice: Beginning a Conversation about an Under-recognized Therapeutic Tool.” 2014. Program in Placebo Studies White Paper. Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center of Harvard Medical School. [http://programinplacebostudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/RWJ\\_Placebo\\_White-Paper\\_v5.pdf](http://programinplacebostudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/RWJ_Placebo_White-Paper_v5.pdf).

means with soteriological purpose. The pragmatic attitude regarding religious truth sanctifies the deception of the individual for their own good.

In Kantian terminology this can be analyzed as follows: deception is by definition the treatment of a person *merely* as a means, because the person is deprived of their right to consent. The paternalist deception of Mahayana Buddhism might only be thought of as legitimate insofar as the purpose of the deception is the benefit of the deceived. Although the person is treated *merely* as a means (*qua* the application of a deceptive device), the person is at the same time also treated as an end insofar as freedom from suffering can be presupposed as a universal human good. Moreover, if the salvific detour is thoroughly transcendent, no reverse effects from disillusion are to be expected. Unlike placebo drugs which are always in danger of being debunked as empirically anchorless, faith in transcendent deities or fortunate rebirths can never be falsified.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- IS *Inoue Enryō senshū* 井上円了選集 (Inoue Enryō Selected Writings). 25 vols. Ed. Tōyō Daigaku sōritsu hyakunen shūnen ronbunshū hensan iinkai 東洋大学創立100周年記念論文集編纂委員会 (vols. 1–3); Inoue Enryō senshū henshū nado iinkai 井上円了選集編集等委員会 (vols. 4–7); Inoue Enryō kinen gakujutsu sentā 井上円了記念学術センター (vols. 8–25). Tokyo: Tōyō Daigaku, 1987–2004.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 85 vols. Ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–32.

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