

## Skill and Virtuosity in Buddhist and Daoist Philosophy

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### 1. Upāya in the *Lotus Sūtra*

The idea of *upāya*, usually translated as *skillful means*,<sup>1</sup> plays a large role in Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics and epistemology, where it is used to motivate hermeneutic practice, to sort out ethical conundra, and to defend a particular approach to moral psychology and phenomenology. It comes to provide an overarching conception of what it is to live well, to live a *virtuoso* life of skilled perceptual and ethical engagement, and so can be seen as providing one vision of the nature of awakening, particularly in the context of a nondual understanding of samsara and nirvana—an understanding according to which there is no ontological difference between them.

Despite the centrality of this idea in Mahāyāna thought, it plays virtually no discernible role in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, except perhaps by implication. *Upāya* is mentioned briefly in a long list of qualities to be cultivated in the *suttanipāta* and gets one brief mention in the *Theragāta*. Beyond that, only the frequent mention of the metaphor of the raft to describe the need to discard the Buddha's teachings once one has achieved awakening, just as one discards a raft after using it to cross a river can be taken as indicating the role of *upāya* in early Buddhist teachings.

The *Lotus Sūtra*, an early Mahāyāna text (possibly 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE), is probably the earliest text that specifically thematizes *upāya* and takes it to be an essential ethical and pedagogical skill. The sutra deploys the example of a man whose children are in a burning house but who are oblivious to their danger and reluctant to leave. He lures them from the house by offering them various toys, none of which he actually can deliver to them. The sutra compares the probity of his using a falsehood to save the children's lives to a bodhisattva's use of Buddhist teachings that are not literally true to educate beginning disciples in Buddhist philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> At least in Indo-Tibetan materials, where the Tibetan *thab mkhas* has a clear positive connotation as a kind of wisdom or knowledge, as opposed to the Chinese tradition where it gets translated as *fangbian*, connoting *expediency*, with a decidedly pejorative connotation. See Garfield (2015).

The Buddhist canon contains many sets of doctrines that are mutually inconsistent, and which are canonically arranged in a hierarchy from the most elementary to the most advanced, with only the most advanced regarded as literally true, or definitive in meaning (*nithārtha*), while the others are regarded as only provisional (*neyārtha*), to be abandoned when one is sufficiently advanced to understand a higher-level teaching (much as one might be taught Newtonian physics as true, as a prolegomenon to relativistic physics). The bodhisattva's ability to select the right teaching for the right disciple, as opposed to trying to teach the definitive doctrine to everyone, is valorized in this sutra as *upāya*, skill in teaching.

But we might equally note that **the fact that** the behavior of the father is praised despite the fact that it violates the precept against lying indicates a more literal understanding of *upāya* at work, that in the ethical domain. Ethical conduct itself is regarded as requiring skill and judgment, and cannot involve merely following rules or conforming to precepts. The *Lotus* thus valorizes *upāya* in at least two domains, that of teaching doctrine, and that of ethical conduct.

So much for background. We will begin what we have to say about *upāya* with a discussion of the ways in which skill is treated in the Indian Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Buddhist traditions. We will then consider the way skill is treated in the Chinese Daoist tradition. This sets the stage for an examination of how these conceptions of skill inform the martial arts traditions of East Asia which emerge from this philosophical matrix. Finally, we turn to a treatment of the larger picture of skill as underlying an ethical life, as understood from these Asian perspectives.

## 2. Upāya in Teaching: the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* and *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*

Upāya is a central theme of two Mahāyāna sūtras.<sup>2</sup> The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (*The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, henceforth *VKN* (Thurman 1976)) takes it as its principal topic; in the *Samdhinirmocana* (*The Discourse Untangling the Thought*, henceforth *SNS* (Powers 1995)) it is introduced only as a hermeneutical device to explain the relationship between the three cycles of Buddhist teachings distinguished in that text. Although it is a later text, it will be convenient to begin with

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<sup>2</sup> Neither of these sutras is easy to date, but the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* is generally thought to have been composed in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, and the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* to have been completed in the 3<sup>d</sup> century CE, with some fragments dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

the *SNS*. The *SNS* addresses a hermeneutical question posed by the fact that Buddhist sūtra literature<sup>3</sup> is apparently an inconsistent corpus, with the Buddha asserting some things in one sūtra that he denies in others. The *SNS* resolves this conundrum by sorting this literature into three collections, referred to as the three turnings of the wheel of dharma, and by arguing that these are progressively more sophisticated articulations of Buddhist doctrine. The sūtra does not, however, argue that the Buddha's own thought evolved, since that would be to deny his omniscience; instead, it argues that the Buddha, being a highly skilled teacher, produced three sets of teachings, each ideally suited to a different audience. Skill here is explicitly pedagogical skill, and it consists in being able to adjust one's speech and approach to one's audience.

The *VKN*, on the other hand, develops an expansive theory of *upāya* and its role in all of life. Indeed, the two central themes of the sūtra are *upāya* and nonduality, and by linking them, the sūtra makes a case for the nonduality of *upāya* and awakening, a case that sets the stage for much of the Chan/Zen tradition's discourse about the nonduality of practice and awakening, the fact that genuine practice is already a manifestation of awakening, and that awakening can only be manifested in practice. Vimalakīrti himself, the hero of the sūtra, is a layperson valorized for his mastery of *upāya*. He is a businessman, but earns money as a lesson to others, and for their benefit; he hangs out in bars and brothels, but does so to benefit others, etc... His life is described as one in which every action he performs and every word he speaks is a manifestation of perfect *upāya*; and this constitutes a complete union of ordinary life and awakened consciousness. Awakening, then, according to the *VKN* consists in a kind of spontaneous, skillful engagement in, rather than a withdrawal from, the world.

A striking illustration of this idea is the most famous moment in the sūtra—Vimalakīrti's "lion's roar of silence" at the culmination of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter. The scene for the sūtra is Vimalakīrti's house, now occupied by large assemblies of monks who follow the Śrāvakāyāna, or *disciples' vehicle* (the first turning sūtras, if we follow the classification introduced in the *SNS*) and a large assembly of bodhisattvas (followers of the second). The *VKN* itself is a second turning (Mahāyāna, or *Great Vehicle*—a term comprising the second and third turnings) text, and is part of a body

of literature that disparages the disciples' vehicle as *Hināyāya* (an inferior vehicle) and a great deal of the sūtra involves scenes that are meant to show the superiority of the bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna over the monks of the Śrāvakāyāna. These are often followed by demonstrations that Vimalakīrti, the embodiment of *upāya*, surpasses all of the bodhisattvas, enshrining the idea that skill—understood as the union of wisdom and practice—is the highest form of awakened knowledge.

Before we get to the dénouement of this chapter, let us consider a bit more context. In the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of the sūtra, an amusing episode is reported in which, in the midst of a complex philosophical debate, a goddess pops out of a closet in Vimalakīrti's house. This poses a problem for the Śrāvakāyāna monks, who are not supposed to be in houses with women present. Śāriputra, renowned as the wisest of the śrāvakas, enters into a discussion of this issue with the goddess which leads, after some amusing incidents involving flowers and miraculous gender reassignment surgery (all manifestations of the goddess' *upāya*) to Śāriputra being asked a difficult question about how long he has been awakened.

The question is skillful, because it gives poor Śāriputra no way to answer. If he speaks, he will be using language to characterize the inexpressible, and will be distinguishing awakened from non-awakened consciousness, in the context of a sūtra whose very point is the nonduality of the ordinary and the awakened states; if he is silent, he does not answer a straightforward question.<sup>4</sup> Śāriputra walks into the trap, taking the horn of silence. When the goddess chides him for not answering, he replies that since awakening is inexpressible, there is nothing he can say. She then ridicules his lack of *upāya*, noting that the Buddha himself said plenty of stuff. Silence, when you are asked a direct question, she suggests, is not skillful.

The 9<sup>th</sup> chapter opens with Vimalakīrti asking an assembly of bodhisattvas how one enters “the dharma door of nonduality,” that is, how one achieved a nondual understanding of reality, an understanding in which the distinction between subject and object is not thematized, and in which

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<sup>4</sup> This is the root of the Chan/Zen kōan of the man hanging by his teeth from the branch of a tree who is asked, “Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?” If he answers, he falls to his death; if he does not answer, he refuses to speak the truth.

distinctions between apparently contrary phenomena (good and bad; conventional and ultimate; freedom and bondage, etc...) are not seen as reflecting reality, but rather our conceptual superimpositions on reality. After a long sequence of perfectly good replies by the assembled adepts, Vimalakīrti turns to Mañjuśrī, the celestial bodhisattva who embodies wisdom and asks him to comment. Mañjuśrī replies that while all of the answers were fine, they are all deficient, because each of them is expressed in language, a medium that itself embodies and reinscribes duality. This in itself is an indictment of the bodhisattvas for a failure of *upāya*. The problem, Mañjuśrī indicates, is not with *what* the bodhisattvas said, but in *how* they said it. Their method undercuts their message. The only way to really communicate nonduality, he says, is to remain silent. So far, so good.

Mañjuśrī then turns to Vimalakīrti and asks him for a comment. Vimalakīrti remains silent, a silence received with enormous admiration by all present. Mañjuśrī, chiding the other bodhisattvas for undermining their own explanations through the unskillful use of language, we now see, despite having himself spoken the truth about their failure to live up to the truths they articulated was just as lacking in skill as were they, using language to say that only silence is appropriate as a way to communicate nonduality. Only Vimalakīrti, who remains silent, demonstrates real *upāya* here. Even though what he says, and what Mañjuśrī says are exactly the same, his silent affirmation is skillful; Mañjuśrī's explicit statement of exactly the same thing is not.

But wait! Wasn't Śāriputra's silence just the same? A refusal to say anything when language could only undermine what one wants to say? Why was the first silence unskillful and the second skillful?<sup>5</sup> The juxtaposition of these two silences is the heart of the sūtra. Śāriputra's silence has no context; it is unskillful because *he* is unskillful, and has been maneuvered into a spot where there is no right thing to say or to do. Vimalakīrti's silence is skillful precise because Mañjuśrī provided the context for him. His silence could be articulate because its content was already available. The silences are the same; their circumstances differ and so their meanings do as well; similarly, the meanings of Mañjuśrī's speech and Vimalakīrti's silence are the same; but in the context, only one can be skillful (and, like Śāriputra, Mañjuśrī had no good options: speaking

opened him up to Vimalakīrti's critique just as silence opened Śāriputra to that of the goddess). Everything is in the timing, the circumstance, the context. To pay attention to figure is to fail to be skillful; to pay attention to ground, though, risks making it figure.

This is meant to indicate what a virtuoso life is like. A virtuoso life is one lived effortlessly and spontaneously constantly responsive to context, and a life in which one places oneself in the right contexts. The spontaneity of Vimalakīrti's silence contrasts with Śāriputra's studied consternation; his skill in following Mañjuśrī shows that getting to the right context is half the game. The nonduality between what he expresses so articulately and Mañjuśrī does so clumsily demonstrates that real wisdom is in skill, not in declarative knowledge.

### **3. Ethical Skill, Perception and Perfection on the Bodhisattva Path**

The centrality of skill in a virtuoso life is adumbrated further in an explicitly ethical context in Śāntideva's (8<sup>th</sup> century CE) *Bodhicāryāvātāra* (*How to Lead an Awakened Life* (1995)). In this text Śāntideva characterizes ethical development as the acquisition of a suite of complex perceptual and affective skills which together transform one's experience of oneself and others. Those skills include the ability to give effectively; to concentrate and to avoid distraction; the ability to be patient; the ability to see oneself as intimately bound to others; and the ability to free oneself from egocentric attachment. One can become an effective moral agent, Śāntideva argues, if, and only if, one acquires this suite of skills. Much of his text is devoted to making that argument in detail. Here we only sketch the broad picture.

One of the skills Śāntideva argues we should cultivate is generosity. He emphasizes that to give generously is to give without attachment to what is given, to the beneficiary of the gift, to oneself, or to the act of giving. A truly generous act is a spontaneous act. He points out that this is hard, and, like any skill, requires cultivation and training. The goal is to be able to offer one's own life when appropriate. But, he suggests, this is not for beginners. They should begin with cheap vegetables, and work their way up. This way of characterizing generosity and its cultivation makes clear the model of skill development in Śāntideva's account of moral cultivation. By

suggesting that moral progress begins with easy actions and progresses to the more challenging, he allies moral maturation with the development of skill.

The ability to concentrate—to focus on a situation and on one’s own motivations—Śāntideva argues, is also essential for moral development. Otherwise, one forgets one’s own values and goals, loses discipline, and behaves in ways that are destructive, rather than constructive, creating, rather than reducing, suffering and dysfunction. For that reason, he devotes a great deal of attention to the cultivation of attention, focusing on the skill of fixing the mind on an appropriate object (*smṛti*), the skill of maintaining that fixation (*samprajañā*), and the skill of making automatic and integrating into one’s way of taking up with the world the skills one develops through meditation.

Patience is an important skill to cultivate in moral development, and Śāntideva emphasizes not only its moral importance but the fact that the cultivation of patience is a matter of practice and skill development. It requires coming to see others and ourselves differently; acquiring the habit reflecting before responding, instead of reacting; and, importantly, developing the right kinds of reflective skills to deploy in those moments. In the end, we replace the disposition to anger with the disposition to care when we or others act in harmful ways.

One of the distinctive aspects of Śāntideva’s analysis of moral development and moral perfection is his insistence on the development of new perceptual skills. Moral immaturity on his view is grounded in seeing ourselves and others as isolated individuals in competition with one another, a perceptual set that leads to fear, self-grasping, clinging to friends and aversion to those we see as adversaries, issuing in selfishness, partiality and hostility. But by cultivating, through reflection and meditation, the skill of seeing ourselves as inextricably bound to others, and our interests and values as inextricably bound to theirs, we come to respond to others with generosity, patience, thoughtfulness and care. The entire set of behavioral skills we want to cultivate, on this model, rests on a foundation of perceptual skills. These skills are revealed in the immediate categorization of others in terms appropriate to virtue, not to vice, just as a skilled botanist or an art historian’s perceptual skills are revealed in her seeing plants *as* members of a particular species, or a painting *as* an early Monet.

On this model of ethical perfection, we come to be effective moral agents not simply by becoming virtuous but by becoming virtuosos. Moral perfection is the perfection of the set of skills that constitute humanity.

#### 4. Skill in Daoist Thought

Let us turn now to Daoism. A great deal of Daoist discourse on skill, as we find it in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, is grounded in the idea of *wu wei*, or effortless action. Part of the reason for this is deeply metaphysical, reflecting a commitment to a *way (dao)* that the universe proceeds, sometimes called the *Great Dao*. Harmony with this way of things is valorized; it ensures success and happiness. It is often reflected in adages to be “like water,” flexible, flowing spontaneously in one direction, and effective—not to be inflexible, stationary, obstructive, like rock. The *Daodejing* (Red Pine 1976) observes that “only by doing nothing can everything be accomplished,” and that “ruling a great kingdom is like cooking a small fish” (be as light in touch as possible; do as little as possible).

In the context of ethics, we see the disparagement of ritual, of emphasis on rights and duties, in favor of the cultivation of an easy, spontaneous responsiveness to others and to the particulars of situations in which action is necessary. (When the Dao is lost, we find virtue; when virtue is lost; we find filial piety....) Ethical maturity is not, on this view, achieved through the understanding of one’s duties, or through internalizing a set of rules or principles; it is achieved through the cultivation of skills of perception and action that are irreducibly particular in their manifestation.

A nice metaphor for this approach is represented in the parable of Butcher Ding, in the *Zhuangzi* (2003). In this parable the king is astonished by the ease and virtuosity of the butcher who carves an ox expertly and without apparent effort. The butcher explains that while in the early stages of his craft he saw oxen, and then parts of oxen, he now sees nothing at all. His blade is thin, and the spaces in the joints are vast, allowing the blade to pass without obstruction, so that it rarely needs sharpening.

The king exclaims that he has learned about life by listening to a butcher. Indeed he has. At the early stages of moral development, we see rules and procedures, proper ways to do things, and



we apply these templates to the circumstances in which we find ourselves; later we may come to see exceptions and to treat these rules as merely *prima facie* guides. But we have developed the skills we need for our moral lives only when we respond to situations with effortless spontaneity, doing what is right because we see what is right to do, and know how to do it. Our goal is to become moral virtuosi who can pass without obstruction from situation to action.

So much is pretty orthodox interpretation of this story in the *Zhuangzi*. And we agree with it. But we also call attention to a small remark near the end of the story that has escaped the notice of commentators, and that we think makes a deep point about the role of conceptual thought and about skill in thinking. The butcher acknowledges that sometimes he comes to difficult places where the meat is knotted. Then he hesitates and his blade slows down. We propose a heterodox reading of this passage: while one aspect of skill is one's ability much of the time to manifest one's skill seemingly effortlessly, spontaneously, *without thought* (*wu wei*), another aspect is to know when to slow down, when to think, when to contemplate; and, when those times come, the expert knows *how* to think, how to contemplate, and how to guide action through that contemplation. Even knots and tangles can be handled if one knows when to slow down and how to consider them. That is, skilled behavior is not, on this view, the complete transcendence of thought and reflection; it is also coming to know when thought and reflection is necessary and when it is not, and when it is, we know precisely how to engage in and to apply the requisite thought. For this reason, higher-order skills, such as the effortless background monitoring of one's own performance, are necessary components of these life-skills.

In the context of ethical skill, this is also important. Part of manifesting moral virtuosity is the ability to see, spontaneously, what a situation demands, and to act appropriately; but another part of moral virtuosity is to know when things are hard, when one has to think, and then to know how to think, what to consider, and how to guide one's action by that thought. Nonetheless, in both kinds of situation, the point that emerges from the *Zhuangzi* and other texts in the Daoist tradition is that it is practical moral skill we develop as we mature, including both that skill that manifests as spontaneous action in which thought is not apparent, and the spontaneous decision

to think. Skill is not discursive knowledge: it is the ability to react spontaneously in an appropriate fashion.

While both Buddhism and Daoism valorize spontaneity, and while these streams of thought merge in the Chan/Zen tradition, their accounts of spontaneity are not identical, and it is worth closing this discussion with an observation about the difference between them. Daoists see spontaneity as achieved through an attunement of one's cognition and behavior to the primordial nature of reality, the great *Dao*, or the way of things. That attunement involves a paring away of the cultural accretions and prejudices that take us away from the *Dao*, and so inhibit our spontaneous action. The *Daodejing* refers to this as “losing day by day,” in contrast to training in which one gains day by day.

Buddhists after the second turning of the wheel, on the other hand, argue that there is no fundamental nature of reality, or way the world is, and so nothing like the *Dao* to which one could attune oneself. On a Buddhist view, spontaneity is achieved by study and meditative practices that lead to insight into the emptiness of all phenomena, and the absence of any self. It involves the accumulation of a set of skills, including prominently perceptual and moral skills. It is not so much a whittling away as it is a cultivation. On the other hand, there is also a negative side to this process: the cultivation of these skills is aimed at the elimination of cognitive superimpositions of fixed identity, permanence, essence, and so forth that are obstacles to awakened action. Nonetheless, this is a model of spontaneity through practice and development, not through abandonment. Part of the beauty of the Chinese tradition is that these two streams end up merging in Chan.

## 5. Skill and Karatedō

In this section, by way of illustrating a number of the themes of the preceding sections we turn to a discussion of karatedō.<sup>6</sup> Chan Buddhism—or to give it its Japanese name, Zen Buddhism, will be an important part of our story. One of the notable features of Chan Buddhism is that it is

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<sup>6</sup> Much of what follows is developed at greater length in Priest (2014).

strongly influenced by Daoism.<sup>7</sup> Hence, a number of Buddhist and Daoist themes of previous sections will become apparent in what follows.

First, some history. The origins and early evolution of karatedō are not documented.<sup>8</sup> However, fairly uncontroversially, it originated in Okinawa, the largest of the Ryukyu Islands, perhaps about five or six hundred years ago. At that time, Okinawa was not part of Japan. Karatedō was a fusion of an old Okinawan martial art, *te* (hand), and Chinese *wushu* techniques. (A number of historically significant masters of karatedō either came from China, or trained there.) It was no doubt given a boost after the invasion of Okinawa by the Satsuma Clan from the Japanese mainland in 1609. The Satsuma Clan banned the carrying of traditional weapons, such as swords. The Okinawans responded by developing traditional farming implements into weapons. This became part of traditional karatedō, though it has largely disappeared from it now. Karatedō migrated to the Japanese mainland at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and thence, because of increasing Western involvement with Japan post Second World War, to the West.

Though again, documentation is very hard to come by, it is pretty certain that Buddhism, and especially Zen, had an important influence on karatedō. Legend has it that the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism was Bodhidharma, an Indian missionary who took up residence at the Shaolin Temple. Legend has it that the same Bodhidharma was the founder of the Shaolin *wushu*. Whatever the history, the Shaolin Temple is famous for producing Chan Buddhist monks who are also *wushu* practitioners. The connection goes far beyond this, though. Many samurai, such as the legendary Musashi Miamoto (who also practiced Zen calligraphy), were Buddhists, and saw their Buddhism and their martial practice as deeply connected.<sup>9</sup> The Zen Buddhist monk Takuan Sōhō is

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<sup>7</sup> See Mou (2009), pp. 15-17.

<sup>8</sup> Good (objective and reliable) histories of karatedō are therefore hard to find. Bishop (1999) is one of the most authoritative we know.

<sup>9</sup> See King (1993). On Musashi specifically, see the last chapter of his *Book of Five Rings* (Cleary (1993)), 'The Book of Emptiness'.

well known for having written letters to martial practitioners giving them Zen advice.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in traditional dōjō, training sessions begin and end with short *zazen* (kneeling meditation) sessions. The Buddhist connection is also evident in popular martial arts books,<sup>11</sup> and Buddhist ideas are evident in the thought of many great karate masters.<sup>12</sup>

With this background, let us now turn to karatedō itself. Whatever else it is, karatedō is a practice of self-defence. Sometimes the best form (and even the only form) of self-defence is attack. So karate skills teach one to neutralise attacks using techniques, some of which can cause the attacker serious injury, and perhaps even death.

Two standard parts of training are kata and kumite.<sup>13</sup> Kata<sup>14</sup> are series of movements. These are something like a dictionary of techniques. They need to be mastered, and their applications understood. Kata vary from the very simple to the very complex. They are repeated over and over again until they can be done without thought, though with acute psychological focus. That is, one does not have to think about what to do next. It just happens. There is, however, intense one-pointed attention on the present action, an attention in which all sense of self can disappear. This develops, amongst other things, powers of intense concentration. Kumite is sparring. Again, this may vary from very simple forms, where each person knows exactly what the other is going to do, to free sparring, where each person attacks and defends as best they can. Techniques are pulled just short of the point where they cause serious damage to one's practice partner.

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<sup>10</sup> See Cleary (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Such as such as Hyams (1982).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Funakoshi (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Increasingly, karate is coming to be seen as a sport, where one's aim is simply to win a prize by scoring points in a certain way. However, competition was not a part of traditional karatedō, but started only around the middle of the 20th Century. With the emphasis on sports training, a number of the more traditional aspects of karatedō are, in fact, being lost.

The aim of both kata and kumite is to develop the skill of self-defence which, if it is deployed, is completely spontaneous and natural (in the sense of being unforced). One does not think about what to do, one just reacts appropriately to the situation. Thinking about matters slows things down and makes one less effective. One aims to develop what Zen Buddhists call *mushin* (no mind) and Daoists call *wuwei* (no—premeditated—action). Of course, this spontaneity is the product of many hours of wiring the brain by constant repetition.

Another thing that a good karate training develops is awareness. In the first instance, this is an awareness of one's opponent. One learns to read them instinctively. But the awareness carries over to one's environment quite generally. One learns how not to put oneself (or others) in harm's way. So, for example, one may see when an interaction with someone (perhaps in a pub) could turn nasty, and take action to defuse the situation. Or when walking, one might perceive possible trouble ahead (perhaps a group of people who could mean no good), and just walk another way. And if trouble does loom, one becomes mindful of exit opportunities, things that might serve as a weapon of self-defence, and so on. In short, one's training affects how one perceives one's environment.

From what we have said so far, it might seem that karatedō is simply about the use and avoidance of violence; but when it is taught with a certain (and traditional) spirit it can be much more than this. Karatedō is a *dō*, that is, a way. All the Japanese *dō*—*iaidō* (swordsmanship), *shodō* (calligraphy), *chadō* (tea service)—can be seen as practices which inform and develop a way of being in the world. Most of the great karatedō masters saw their practices in this way. Not that these things are usually taught in the *dōjō*. It is the practice itself which develops these virtues. A good karate training develops, amongst other things: perseverance, self-discipline, mindfulness, patience, modesty, a respect for others, a respect for oneself, an awareness of what one owes to others, and of what one can give to others.

We might also add to the list non-violence. This may seem a rather odd thing, given that karatedō is undoubtedly a training in violence. However, a good karatedō training engenders an attitude of peace. Its techniques are only ever to be used for defensive purposes, and then only as a last

resort. One should use no more violence than necessary; and it is better to use none at all, simply by avoiding situations where it might be required. It teaches one, so to speak, to win without having to win.

What we have seen in the present section, then, is that and how the Buddhist and Daoist ideas about spontaneity, concentration, and an ethics—a way of being in the world—are integral to the practice of good karatedō.<sup>15</sup> We have examined karatedō because, like so many specific traditions developed in the Buddhist world (and more specifically in the Daoist-inflected East Asian Buddhist world) its pursuit is in part aimed at cultivating a specific skill—in this case skill in self-defense—but also aimed at cultivating much more general skills, applicable outside the dōjō, and particularly the development of spontaneous dispositions to action in the context of highly practiced perception. In this respect, it is not so different from the cultivation of moral skills as adumbrated in texts such as *Bodhicāryāvatāra*, in which practice in perception and practice aimed at the cultivation of spontaneous moral response are both adumbrated.

## 6. Skill, Spontaneity and the Virtuoso Life

As we have seen, the cultivation of skill as it is seen in the Buddhist and Daoist world of East Asia is not understood as restricted to specific domains. Nonetheless, it may be cultivated in a specific domain such as self-defense, tea preparation, calligraphy, gardening, etc... as a more general exercise that enables one to cultivate skill in one's life more broadly. On this understanding of the good life, the good life is a highly skilled life—a virtuoso life, as opposed to a merely virtuous life. That is, the highly skilled karateka effortlessly (but as a consequence of the prior exertion of great effort), spontaneously (but only following decades of studied practice) perceives and reacts to those around them as potential threats, allies, and so forth. Similarly, the highly skilled calligrapher or gardener effortlessly and spontaneously perceives the affordances for and executes highly skilled actions in the situations appropriate to them. In each case, the rel-

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<sup>15</sup> Intuitively, it might seem that spontaneity and concentration are incompatible. As we have seen, they are not. The spontaneity of a trained martial artist, jazz musician, rock climber, etc, is possible only because of their total concentration on the “flow” of the moment. It may even be possible to see this in the face: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPeXVzn-UcI>.

evant spontaneity is achieved through extended practice.

It is often emphasized that these actions are performed without thought (*nirvikapla/mushin*), or without deliberation (*wu wei*). And there is a sense in which this is true: spontaneity and lack of premeditation is essential to skilled action as it is understood in this tradition. This in turn is grounded in the nonduality of consciousness that emerges from the lack of thematization of one-self as subject, of one's materials or tools as instruments, and the other as object in such skilled activity, a state referred to in contemporary psychology and sport as *flow*.<sup>16</sup> That nondual experience is important not only because it makes action more fluent, but also because it frees one from the dualism of self and other that distinguishes between subject and the world, occluding one's basic immersion in the world and from the superimposition of conceptual categorization on a world that is primordially uncategorized.

But one should not press this point too far, lest one construct one more duality: that between thought and no-thought. For thinking and deliberating are activities in which one can engage skillfully or unskillfully. Moreover, they are important activities not only in their own right, as so much of our life can only proceed well if it is done with a certain amount of deliberation, but also because, as we have seen, deliberation and thought are required in order even to achieve the ability to engage in thoughtless, spontaneous activity. Thought is hence not a ladder to be discarded, but rather one to be used when necessary, and stored carefully so as to be ready to hand when needed.

As an example of the case in point, consider the skilled mathematician trying to solve a problem, such as proving or rejecting a conjecture. The mathematician will have spent many years honing their skills in focussing on key elements of a situation, making appropriate mathematical constructions, and so on. When faced with a new problem, these skills are deployed. Thought is certainly required in the matter; but the skills are deployed naturally and without being forced—in the way that a skilled jazz musician, but not the novice, plays. Moreover the phenomenology is

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion, see Krein and Ilundáin (2014).

quite distinctive. There is no longer a duality of the mind of the mathematician, and the object at which it is directed. There is simply problem-solving going on. The mathematician may, in fact, “awaken” after some time, realising that they have been “lost in thought”.

When we think skillfully, just as when we do anything else skillfully, we do so spontaneously, effortlessly, in a state of flow; if we are truly skilled thinkers, we do not deliberate or think about when or how to deliberate or think, nor in our thought do we thematize the duality of self and object of thought; we just think, paradoxically, in *mushin*. To recognize this fact is to recognize the nonduality of thought and no-thought. That no-thought is not *thoughtlessness*, but simply spontaneous engagement, which can be cognitive as well as physical, and to recognize that skillful activity requires the thorough interpenetration of thought and its transcendence.

We should acknowledge at this point that there is a tension in the Buddhist tradition. Following the metaphor introduced by Candrakīrti in *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvātāra)* of the strong potter who sets his wheel in motion and then effortlessly produces pots while it continues to spin without his impelling it, and reflecting the idea that Buddhas have no conceptual thought or explicit intention, some have argued that Buddhas do not act at all, and have no attitudes, and no awareness. There is a strain of thought in classical Buddhist literature along these lines (the 15<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan philosopher Gorampa Sonam Sengye, for instance defends this view), and it has received endorsement more recently by such philosophers as Dunne (2017) and Siderits (2011), who has characterized Buddhahood as being a zombie-like state of being, the so-called “robo-buddha” model. On the other hand, other Buddhist philosophers (including the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa) emphasize that the Buddha is aware of all phenomena, and is simultaneously aware of the two truths, that the Buddha constantly acts from care, etc... **[cross-ref to Gallagher]**

Our purpose in this essay is not to adjudicate this dispute. We simply note here that we find the latter proposal more plausible as an account of a soteriological goal, as well as more consistent with the extensive literature on the path to awakening, and the manifold texts that ascribe quali-



ties to buddhas that require agency, motivation, knowledge, etc.... If buddhahood is to be worth striving for, and if a buddha is to serve as a moral and epistemological exemplar, the robo-buddha view seems far too thin, and too much canonical literature requires dismissal if we take that view. We think instead that, while buddhas are agents and are conscious, their agency and consciousness is non-dual, non-conceptual, and spontaneous; that is, absolutely skillful. They are thus the kinds of exemplars towards which it is worth striving.

## 7 Conclusion

We have been examining two streams of thought in Asian reflection on skill and spontaneity: one emerging in the Indian Buddhist tradition, and one in the classical Chinese Daoist tradition.

These streams converge in Chan and in turn feed the developments of the practice and theory of the martial arts. There is an important set of insights about skill carried along these streams: One insight is the sheer ubiquity of skill in our lives. Upāya comprises not only physical but hermeneutical and pedagogical skill, as well as moral and perceptual skill. While many might hold that maturation consists primarily in acquiring discursive knowledge, these traditions take it that the practical knowledge embodied in skill is our principal cognitive achievement, and that discursive knowledge may be nothing more than the cognitive equipment we use in manifesting that skill, just as a hammer is important to a carpenter, but only as equipment useful in manifesting her skill in building.

Second, skill is deeply bound up with spontaneity. In learning to lead our lives skillfully we free ourselves from the need to deliberate and from the conceptual mediation between ourselves and our worlds that deliberation entails. We learn to improvise as ensemble players, contributing to the joy and success of social performance. The achievement of that easy but focused and attentive spontaneity, or naturalness in our engagement with the world and with our fellows, is the mark of human maturity.

But finally the nonduality between subject and object, agent and patient, self and world that characterizes the experience of acting without thought also applies to thought and action: skill, as

it is understood in these Asian traditions is not the *abandonment* of thought but the skillful use of thought, when, and only when it is appropriate. Just as silence can speak volumes—at the right moment—careful deliberate thought can be a spontaneous response to a situation and can facilitate action—at the right moment. Life is improvisation, and improvisation requires practice.

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