Rare is the book that challenges us to rethink what we believe we already know and understand. This is just such a book. On one level, John Schroeder is developing a philosophical interpretation of the Buddhist notion of upāya or “skillful means,” an idea with which any student of Buddhism is probably familiar. Yet, as we read the book, we find that Schroeder has done something more profound and less expected—he has led us to a different way of thinking about Buddhism and what it is all about. He has encouraged us to see Buddhism as not primarily involved in explaining reality and knowledge, but instead as teaching the praxes that lead to such goals as mindfulness or compassion. That is, he argues that what we often take to be Buddhist metaphysics or epistemology are, instead, reflections on and within praxis (so-called “metapraxis”), thereby justifying the procedure of personalizing the teachings for the particular audience at hand. In this new light, upāya becomes not so much a doctrine that some Buddhists believe, but rather a name for an enterprise in which all Buddhists are involved in one way or another. Schroeder's thesis, in short, is that Buddhists are less interested in teaching about what reality is than they are in teaching about how we are to find awareness and compassion in our practices, in helping us live our lives skillfully.

To many readers, this might seem not new at all. Even the early commentators on Buddhism in the West, people like D. T. Suzuki, tended to say things like “Buddhism is not a philosophy; it is a way of life.” Schroeder's line of argument shows us, however, a better way of putting this. Although
Buddhism is a praxis and a way of life, such a way of life does not exclude philosophy. That is, Buddhism is not a philosophy as contrasted with a way of life. Although Buddhism may not be a philosophy as an independent academic discipline, it does not follow that there is no philosophical dimension within a Buddhist way of life. At the base of any religion, Buddhism included, is praxis. Typically, there are multiple praxes within any tradition, sometimes emphasized by different subsects of the same tradition. In explaining and justifying the praxes, various philosophical claims and arguments may be made. Such statements are indeed philosophy (Suzuki missed that point), but they are a kind of philosophizing that cannot be separated from the praxes out of which they arise (the insight behind Suzuki's comment). In my own work, I have labeled this form of philosophizing "metapraxis" to contrast it with theories about the nature of reality, "metaphysics." Schroeder has, I believe, used the distinction fruitfully in this book.

We can better grasp the point of Schroeder's emphasis on Buddhist philosophy as metapraxis by considering an analogy from a mundane kind of human experience. As I was walking through the park the other day, I stopped to watch a team of nine-year olds having a baseball practice. The coach was working with the youngsters, helping them in their batting. One girl was very aggressive at the plate, swinging hard and trying to hit a homerun every time. She consistently missed or just barely hit the ball. The coach told her, "Don't try to kill the ball; just let the bat meet the ball." On the next swing, the girl hit a nice line drive into the outfield. "That's it. Now you're getting it." The next kid was a boy who was rather timid at the plate, seemingly afraid of missing the ball and hesitating to take a full swing. The
coach yelled out encouragingly, “Don’t worry about hitting the ball; just swing away.” The lad let it rip on the next swing, missing the ball by at least two inches. The coach chimed out, “That’s it. Good. Don’t worry about missing. Just keep on swinging.” I suspect we can all think of parallel expressions used in various kinds of teaching, whether they be from sports, music performance, dance, crafts, or the arts. They are part of everyday praxis.

Suppose in our little story, however, that I were a die-hard metaphysician (or epistemologist perhaps) who had just witnessed the coach’s instructions and approached him after the practice to submit him to some tough-minded questioning. We could imagine a dialogue that might have gone like this:

Metaphysician: “I know that these are just kids, but I don’t see why you have to lie to them.”

Coach: “I didn’t lie. What do you mean?”

M: “Well, you told the girl to let the bat meet the ball and then you told the boy to swing without concern for hitting the ball. Both teachings can’t be right because they contradict each other: one says to focus on the ball and bat and the other says to focus on the swing itself without regard for the ball and bat. So, which is right? Because either one or both must be wrong, you’re lying to at least one of them. Why?”

C: “I wasn’t lying. I was just adjusting what I was saying in response to what I saw in their respective swings. Every kid is different—some are confident, some overconfident, some hesitant, some sticklers for technique, some highly intuitive. Right?”
M: “Sure.”

C: “Well, I try to factor that into what I’m saying. I’m interested in results. One way of putting things may work for one kid, but not for another.”

M: “Well, how did you know what was wrong in their swings? You must have some idea of a perfect swing that they were not attaining. If so, why don’t you just teach them that?”

C: “In a way, I am. I mean, if they take to heart my advice and my advice is good, their swings will improve. Eventually, they’ll both be swinging the right way. There may be some differences in style between them, but overall, they will have just about the same swing.”

M: “So, what you’re saying to them is just an expedience, a means to an end. Along the way, you are fudging the truth to get them to the point where you don’t have to deceive them any more. I understand your motive, but I am unhappy with it. It seems immoral. You see, I don’t believe in telling white lies, however benign the motive. When we start telling untruths, they may be efficacious in some short-term sense, but in the end, they undermine trust in the honesty of others and, maybe even more dangerously, deny the audience’s autonomy. The students can never figure out the truth on their own because they depend on the teacher’s pedagogical sequence, filled as it is with expeditious white lies. That doesn’t seem right to me.”

C: “Now wait a minute. I never said I’m telling white lies. I’m just trying to help them become better batters, to be more skillful in what they’re trying to do. I’m not
pretending to start from scratch. I'm just starting with
where they are, jumping into the situation as it presents
itself. I'm working with what I've got, what they bring to
me. I'm not trying to tell them some kind of absolute
truth about the universe; I'm just nudging them along a
path that will help them do better what they're trying
to do.”

M: “Well, maybe. I understand you’re trying to help
them—I don’t in any way question your good intentions.
But I still don't see why you just don't teach them the
perfect swing and forget all this intermediary distortion
of the final goal.”

C: “I'm not sure where you're going with this ‘final goal’
stuff. Maybe I was misleading you when I let you
characterize my goal as ‘the perfect swing.’ There is no
‘perfect swing’ that can be explained in some
unambiguous way. Even if there were such a thing as a
‘perfect swing,’ I couldn't just explain it to them. They
have to feel how it works, not abstractly understand it,
and that comes from practicing over and over again with
some good supervision. I am helping them to swing more
perfectly without having some fixed idea of a
preconceived ideal. No two ‘perfect swings’—as you call
them—are exactly alike. Yet, when I see one, I know it.”

M: “Ah, but how do you know it? What's the foundation, the
verification, of that purported knowledge?”

C: “I just know it. How? Probably because I've played
baseball almost all my life and I've watched thousands of
batters, good and bad, over the years. I've been coached
myself as a batter, and I've coached others. Basically, I
learned just the way these kids are learning.”
M: “Oh, now I see. You’re just passing down a kind of technical know-how. You’ve got no real knowledge about the way things are; you just have a set of acquired skills, a craft. Truth doesn’t even come into play.”

C: “If that works for you, I’ll accept that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I promised Samantha I’d help her with her swing after practice and she’s waiting for me.”

M: “Sure thing. Sorry to have taken up your time. I’m a philosopher and I just can’t help but ask such questions. I’ll let you go. Teach Samantha well—be crafty.”

That little dialogue can help us focus on some key points in Schroeder’s analysis. First, before the intervention of the metaphysician, the coach was simply involved in the praxis of teaching baseball skills. To the extent he is doing it well and the players improve, his teachings are expedients or “skillful means.” In Buddhist terminology, they are upāya. In coaching the youngsters, the coach simply responded to the problems each player was having with his or her swing. The situation changed, however, once the metaphysician challenged those teaching practices. The coach then began to reflect on what he was doing and how to justify it. The discussion changed from the practical to the metapractical. The coach was no longer simply practicing coaching, but also analyzing the rationale in his coaching and why its methods are effective. The metaphysician kept missing the point, however, by seeking strict logical coherence in the coach’s praxis. The metaphysician wanted the coach to have a single set of instructions or a single paradigm for the perfect swing. In response, the coach tried to explain the fluidity and apparent incoherence in his praxis as coach. The Buddhist
justification for upāya, Schroeder shows, is similar to that kind of metapraxis.

Furthermore, in our dialogue the coach ends the discussion noting that the philosopher’s interpretation may still not be perfect. Yet, at least now the metaphysician has a way of understanding why coaching statements need not have absolute consistency in the strict logical sense. Nor are they about “truth” as typically defined in metaphysics or epistemology. If ever in the position of teaching someone to hit a baseball, that metaphysician would (because of the interpretation developed here) be freer to teach without concern for tight logical consistency. In his own terminology, the metaphysician would be teaching the know-how of a craft instead of the knowing-that of metaphysics or epistemology. In that respect, the coach’s metapractical discussion with the metaphysician was also upāya: the coach did not insist on defining the one and only, absolute, unqualified metapractical theory of how to coach batting. Instead, he let his interlocutor go off with an understanding that “works for you.” By helping the metaphysician realize how metaphysics does not apply in this case, the coach coached the philosopher as well as Samantha.

In this book, John Schroeder shows how much of Buddhist philosophizing can be understood along similar lines. In doing so, he cuts against the grain of much common buddhological scholarship. (1) He shows that the general idea of upāya, though not necessarily the term itself, is found in both the Early Buddhism and Abhidharma Buddhism as well as Mahāyāna. (2) He shows that in Mahāyāna sūtras like the Vimalakirti the emphasis and use of narrative is given a metapracatical justification of sorts as part of its larger acceptance of the techniques of upāya. (3) He argues that
Nāgārjuna's philosophy is best understood as metapractical rather than metaphysical or mystical. That is, Schroeder's view is that Nāgārjuna's arguments are always targeted to a particular audience whose praxes are corrupted by unskillful philosophical theories. By that account, we could say Nāgārjuna is philosophizing, but only in the upāya-like metapractical sense, rather than the metaphysical or epistemological sense. Just as the coach used philosophy in talking with a philosopher, Nāgārjuna used philosophical arguments in talking with philosophers, but that in itself does not make either the coach or Nāgārjuna a "philosopher" in some definitive sense. For Nāgārjuna to make philosophy itself a path to skillful practice would be as silly as the baseball coach trying to articulate a "perfect swing." (4) Schroeder articulates a metapractical reason for why Ch'ān/Zen and Pure Land Buddhism could be practiced together in some East Asian contexts. If we take the Ch'ān/Zen idea of nothingness and the Pure Land idea of Amida's saving grace as metaphysical teachings, there is no room for practicing the two together. However, if we take those teachings to be more metapractical than metaphysical, there is room for the practical confluence of the two traditions, just as there is room on a baseball team for different players to follow different instructions in their individual practice.

In summation, through his synoptic vision of the Buddhist tradition, Schroeder shifts our understanding of upāya from being a particular doctrine in certain schools of Buddhism to being a way of thinking about praxis found in virtually all schools of Buddhism. For me at least, this suggests that there is nothing wrong in studying Buddhist controversies as philosophical disagreements as long as we
remember that they are based in and ultimately about Buddhist praxis. They are always used in particular, not universal, contexts. Nor does Schroeder's approach commit us to saying that all Buddhists agree on philosophical matters. They often disagree, just as coaches may disagree among themselves, but the philosophical point of contention is metapractical, not metaphysical. Metapraxis, like any philosophical enterprise, has restrictions, a need for consistency, for instance. For example, our batting coach might have said seemingly inconsistent things to different players, but his metapractical justification (differences are necessary to adapting the message to the temperament, habits, and readiness of each player) was itself consistent.

John Schroeder has given us a fascinating and provocative study. Even for those who might disagree with some detail in the argument, the overall thesis remains engaging and leads us to a more fruitful level of discussion. Schroeder is urging us to formulate our buddhological and philosophical questions in a new way and in so doing, opens up new vistas on the tradition. Buddhist scholarship itself is, after all, a praxis. Schroeder makes us philosophically reflect on that praxis and thereby makes us more skillful at what we do.

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