

# How the Buddha Spoke



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Essays on The Buddha

# How the Buddha Spoke



Much has been written about what the Buddha taught which is only right given its clarity, consistency and the fact that 2500 years later millions still accept and live by its principles. However, beyond what the Buddha said, perhaps almost as important is how we said it, i.e. the aesthetic quality of and ethical components of the Buddha speech. How someone speaks – the tone, loudness and intonation of their voice – tells us much about what their thinking, their state of mind and their personality, and can convey something to the listener quite apart from what their words alone do. Words spoken in anger or with disapproval or sarcasm, can be received quite differently if said in a gentle or calm manner. The exclamation ‘No!’ can affect the person to who it is addressed completely differently if said sharply and emphatically or slowly and gently.

We are fortunate to have a few snippets of information about how the Buddha spoke, i.e. the tone and timbre of his voice. In one passage from the Tipitaka an individual who had attended one of the Buddha’s talks described his delivery as “clear and distinct, pleasant and audible, bindu, concise, deep and resonant” (M.II,140). The word bindu means ‘round’ and in this context it is difficult to know what is meant; perhaps something like ‘well-rounded’ as we might say in English, meaning developed in all ways. Whatever the case, the impression given by this

description is of a voice that was pleasing to the ear, elegant and effective in delivered its message.

As for the ethical components of the Buddha's speech we have two descriptions – one by an admirer and another by the Buddha himself. The brahman Sonadanda who had engaged in dialogues with the Buddha on several occasions, found his speech “welcoming, friendly, courteous, genial, *uttāna mukho* and *pubba bhāsi* (D.I,116). These last two qualities need a bit of explaining. *Uttāna mukho* literally means ‘clear mouthed’ and may have meant articulate or clearly enunciated. Or it might have been a way of indicating that the Buddha said what he meant, that he was ‘a straight-talker.’ The term *pubba bhāsi* is a little more difficult to understand. *Pubba* means ‘before’ so the term literally means something like ‘speaks before’ and may mean that the Buddha would initiate the conversation with someone who had come to meet him, or that he directed any conversation taking place, stopping it getting bogged down, or keeping it from straying from the subject at hand. The first four of Sondanda's description of the Buddha's way of speaking – welcoming and friendly, courteous and genial – definitely have an ethical dimension. All of them combined would let the person who had come to talk with the Buddha know that they were respected, and that he was open to them and wished to have a friendly encounter with them. These qualities could be seen as an expression of the Buddha's general attitude of good-will and *metta*.

Once someone asked the Buddha if he would ever say anything that would upset or annoy another and he replied that he could. He then added that if he ever did such a thing his words would always be truthful (bhūta), useful (atthasmhitam), said at the appropriate time (kālena) and motivated by compassion or empathy (anukampa, M.I,395). Being a teacher, a spiritual guide to his disciples, and someone whose understanding of reality differed from many others of the time, it is only natural that the Buddha would sometimes have to reprimand or even scold some of the monks and nuns under his tutorage. It also meant that those of other views would not necessarily like hearing ideas that differed from their own. Thus there are cases in the Tipitaka when people did not like hearing things the Buddha had to say even if he said them in a moderate and balanced manner. Clearly he was aware of this, and so when delivering reprimands, or speaking truths he knew would be unwelcome, he would assess whether or not his words would be likely to bring about positive change, he would judge the best time to say them, and he would say them in a moderate non-threatening manner. Interestingly, there are two incidents in the Tipitaka, and only two, where the Buddha held his tongue when asked a question. It would seem that in both cases he decided that the questioner would neither understand or appreciate any answer he might give and so he decided that to keep quiet was the best course.

It is right to say that the Buddha became the most respected and successful teacher of his time and that this was mainly due to the scope,



consistency and logic of his philosophy. But it is equally true that how he presented his philosophy - how he communicated it, his speaking style, gave an added appeal to his Dhamma. The Tipitaka contains quite a few descriptions of the effect the Buddha's speech had on his audience. On several occasions it is said that he "delighted, inspired and uplifted his audience" and another comment recorded in the Tipitaka says that when one of his talks was over the audience rose from their seats and left reluctantly, while keeping their gaze on him (M.II,140).

It seems that public discourse nowadays – whether at political meetings, in parliament, or on television talk programs – has declined badly. It has become more acceptable to shout, interrupt another speaker, wildly gesticulate, use words laced with sarcasm and insults, and resort to exaggerations bordering on lies. Sadly, I have even heard sermons by certain religious personalities delivered in a similar ugly manner. It is almost as if such speakers believe that the louder they shout the truer their claims are. Given the power of speech to motivate people for good or evil, to make them consider carefully or unthinkingly accept whatever they hear, to obscure the truth or illuminate it; it is no surprise that the Buddha included Right Speech (*Sammā Vācā*) as one of the eight essential steps leading to human growth and freedom. But Right Speech is not just what we say but how we say it, and the Buddha have given us an excellent model of the best way to communicate with others.