

## More than words can say

Words lie, or, worse, they tell us nothing: they are what we make of them. They are at best merely vehicles for meaning. Words easily distort or hide the truth, and fail to convey our true intentions (perhaps because it is the not the right ones?). Often, we say things to “play safe,” or to “win friends and influence people,” or because we think we are right. But in due time, we realize we have been wrong, so we change our minds. And, of course, we expect the world to change with us, too. So it often seems. Is positive communication possible, then?

Perhaps this hypothetical dialogue might help us work out a helpful answer:

- Intellectual: Every word has its own meaning. Otherwise how do we communicate?  
Buddhist: We learned certain words from young, and have agreed on their meanings. We communicate with these “conventional” terms.
- Intellectual: You mean that words do not have their own meanings?  
Buddhist: We can fix meanings of words relating to what are sensed physically, that is, things we see, hear, smell, taste or touch. So, we can say words like “light,” “sound,” “flower,” “sweet,” and “warmth.” But if I were suddenly to say, “Light!” you would not know what I’m talking about. Do I mean brightness, or opposite of heavy, or an action to start a fire, and so on. So we must know the context.
- Intellectual: But people do not always say just one word; we speak many words which gives the context of our words.  
Buddhist: True, but it is not always that we can understand a person when he speaks a lot. Often the forest of words hides the tree of truth. This is because we often create our own contexts, too.
- Intellectual: Are you saying that we cannot really communicate with words?  
Buddhist: We can, but to be more clear, we must speak with feeling. In other words, we should not just speak, but we need to communicate. The best way of communicating is to speak with feeling, to speak from the heart.
- Intellectual: Ah...feeling! You mean speak emotionally?  
Buddhist: No, not at all! I thought you said earlier every word has its fixed meaning, but you need to ask me the meaning of “feeling”!
- Intellectual: OK, so what do you mean by “feeling”?  
Buddhist: In Buddhist psychology, “feeling” refers to “direct experience.” To speak with feeling means to speak in way that reflects things as they are, as we experience them, as we know them.
- Intellectual: But most people do not speak like that, they have a motive, or they simply do not know what they are taking about.  
Buddhist: Then we should not take them seriously; that is to say, give them space, accept them as they are, with patience, compassion, and wisdom.
- Intellectual: If we cannot really mean what we say, or say what we mean, what is the point of talking, then?  
Buddhist: Very true! The point is that words do not always have fixed meanings, we often decide their meanings each time we speak. That meaning is defined by how we feel, that is, if we speak with good intentions, then the meaning is good.
- Intellectual: What if we do not have the right feeling for what needs to be said?  
Buddhist: Then, it is better to be silent, with a good intention!

**The Araṇa,vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 139) records the Buddha’s advice on how to prevent conflict in communication, such as speaking slowly and using language that the audience can understand and appreciate.<sup>1</sup> The truth lies not in the words themselves, but in our *understanding* of what they are able to

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<sup>1</sup> M 139/3:230-236 = SD 7.8: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/7.8-Aranavibhanga-S-m139-piya.pdf>

convey. In this connection, there is a saying by the Buddha recorded in **the Arahanta Sutta** (S verse 62):

A monk who has become an arhat	with influxes <sup>2</sup> destroyed, bearer of the last body,
might say thus, "I speak," or	he might say thus, "They speak to me,"
he is skillful, knowing the world's way	he would use them only as mere expressions.
	(S 1.5/1:14)

The arhat, the true saint, uses language without giving rise to conceit or misconceiving them to refer to an abiding self. So we can at least try to use words correctly, speak clearly, with a harmonious mind, and intent on conveying truth and joy.

In **the Potthapāda Sutta** (D 9), the Buddha says:

For, Citta, these are merely common names, common expressions, common usages, common designations in the world that the Tathāgata [Thus Come] uses without attachment to them [without misapprehending them]. (D 9.53/1:202 = SD 7.14)

The thing named is not the thing. The word is not the thing. In reality, there is no thing, only what we think.

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<sup>2</sup> Those states that bring about rebirth and suffering: sense-desire, desire to be, views, and ignorance.