

## **Bent and genius of the tongue**

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One of the most remarkably unique qualities of early Buddhism is its use of simple daily language and idiom. But this simplicity is the gentle smiling face of a very profound mind and beautiful heart of the Dhamma.

The simplicity of the early Buddhist texts surely reflects the simple yet engaging way in which the Buddha and the early arhats must have taught the Dhamma. They simply speak yet directly from their experience—like a music maestro about music, without technicalities, but with passion and patience.

Post-Buddha texts, including the Abhidhamma, differ vastly from the early Buddhist texts in such simplicity. The later texts seem to compete with one another to make statements that are grander and profounder than others. Grand long titles of non-existence samadhis are displayed, like Mahā Brahmā's personal title of theistic sovereignty, only often longer. Yet, scholars soberly remind us: The statement is the not state.

Technical language is a necessity in scientific fields. Bertrand Russel, in his autobiography, writes: "Everybody admits that physics and chemistry and medicine each require a language which is not that of everyday life ... " (*My philosophical development,* 1959:178). Philosophy, too, needs technical language, he argues.

The scientific fields need technical language for a simple reason: they all are based on measurements and comparison of measurements. Philosophy is caught in between. While we need at least some technicality in, say, logic, technicality does not help very much in discussion about feelings, beauty or love, for example.

Understandably, there are philosophers like George Berkeley (1685-1753) and J L Austin (1911-1960) who believe simple daily language can work well with, even work better for, philosophy. Berkeley, for example said:

"It is impossible, even in the most rigid philosophic reasoning, so far to alter the bent and genius of the tongue we speak, as never to give a handle for cavillers to pretend difficulties and inconsistencies." (*Principles of Human Knowledge,* 1710:52)

J L Austin warns us:

"One can't abuse ordinary language without paying for it." (*Sense and Sensibilia,* 1962:15).

The 4 Nikāyas and the 5th Nikayas to a great extent, wherever they record the Buddha's teachings, show him to use the simple daily language of the people, even when it comes to difficult concepts like consciousness. To facilitate our understanding of such teachings, the Buddha makes use of the following methods:

**(1) Teaching cycles** (repetitions, like recursive cycles, nesting, and concatenation of terms) where a word, phrase or idea is stated out in full so that we become more familiar with the fullness of the teaching;

**(2) Figures and imageries**, especially the use of parable, similes and comparisons so that we can see the concept more visually, as it were.

**(3) Stories** and case-studies of other monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who excel in their Dhamma practice.

**(4) Myths**, such as accounts of non-humans and divine beings showing the benefits of their practice and the blights of their lack of practice. A myth is a narrative or personified account of patterns of human conduct, visions, strengths and weaknesses against the background of the Buddha's teachings of impermanence, suffering and non-self.

The suttas are to be read, visualized and practised. They are like beautiful poems and musical works that we listen to their truth and feel their beauty. In time we will taste their timelessness and freedom so that we move closer to the path of awakening and attain freedom ourselves like the Buddha and the arhats.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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