

A love for words

The ineffable and trying to speak of it
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The Buddha, after his awakening, spent some 4-7 weeks, mostly meditating, enjoying the wake of his awakening: a wholesomely blissful “hangover” from his breakthrough into true reality and total freedom from the world. It’s like we have won the most coveted prize in the most difficult sports event whose record has remained unbroken for many generations: we have broken it! We just lie back and celebrate: there is, as it is, nothing more to do.

As the weeks passed, it is Mahā Brahmā Sahampati, who shows concern over the Buddha’s seeming inaction. Brahma, as the “lord of the world” (lokādhipati), shows great concern for the prevalence of good in this universe. Yet, astronomically long and profoundly blissful as his life may be, he is powerless to help the world as a Buddha is able to. Hence, his serious concern that the Buddha should at once teach the Dhamma.

The Buddha's hesitation¹

Now, we do have textual evidence relating to the Buddha’s initial reluctance to teach — perhaps, just a passing thought of his near the end of the 7-week respite. In a number of places both in the suttas and the Vinaya, the Buddha is recorded as stating thus:

I have discovered the truth with difficulty:
Enough with declaring it!
For it will never be easily understood [be easily awakened to]
by those lost in lust and hate.

It goes against the current, abstruse,
profound, deep, hard to see, subtle—
Those dyed in lust will not see it,
nor those shrouded in massive darkness.

Considering thus, bhikshus, my mind inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the Dharma.
(V 1:5,10 = M 1:169 = S 1:136; D 2:37 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:315)

Marathon

The Buddha’s point is quite clear: how to explain in human or unawakened language the experience and method of the awakened? Even when we do give a life-long series of great lectures on how to run the Marathon, would all, even any, in our audience be ready to run it, much less to complete it? Pre-Marathon talk should inspire others, firstly, to want to run. But to win it, we need to train.

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/12.1-Why-the-Buddha-hesitated.pdf>

Now comes the **training** in method. Less talk, more action. Hence, the Buddha was clear what he had to do. All his theoretical teachings (the doctrines, his life accounts, the stories, the language) are to inspire us to see the “**opening**” in the world, the way out, so that we can train to free ourself from suffering.

The word is not the thing

Then, comes the “**real thing**”: we need to keep to the 3 trainings: to discipline our body and speech (moral virtue), to calm and clear the mind (concentration), and to gain the wisdom for awakening. This last training is especially interesting here. The basic practice for reaching the path is that of fully understanding and accepting **impermanence**.

However, to move closer to nirvana (so to speak), we must have a clear understanding and acceptance of **non-self**. In practical terms, this means we understand that there is **no essence** in any thing, even anything, in or outside of this world; and no essence in language. Words have no meanings of their own: we give meanings to words; then, we change the meanings, or use them in other ways, despite their agreed or “inherent” meanings. Word meanings change over time and places.

The word is not the thing; the menu is not the meal; the map is not the territory. The statement is not the state; this world is not nirvana.

Polysemy

Our idea about the mind, reality (virtual and real), is easier to understand with the language and metaphor the Buddha uses to talk about awakening and to give instructions for the practice leading to it. This is because the language used by the Buddha was **flexible**, especially rich in polysemy rooted in the tradition of the **mind**, how it works, and how it is freed.

It is not the **words** that free us into some level of awakening. It is our **understanding** of what those words **mean**, where they point to, that frees us from the prison of words and ideas that is keeping us earth-bound and world-fettered.

Text and context

Hence, we often find words, sentences, verses, passages, even teachings, whose **context** need to be teased out first. Only when we understand what the Buddha means by those words, do we progress from our ignorance to some wisdom. The words themselves — even with their **etymologies** — do not always, often enough never, reflect the actual teaching of the Buddha.

If the **words** do actually free or awaken us, then, those academic scholars would be awakened like the Buddha, and we need only approach them for spiritual instructions to awakening. Scholars work and dance around Dhamma as words, even as the Word, which is helpful in their own way.

But this is only a start: the signs that point us where to go, but there are more signs. Some have been defaced, some rearranged, some destroyed. In our journey, we need to read the landscape, know the natives, and have a good sense of direction.

Close the eyes, see more

Once we start to close our eyes, we begin to see more in the silence and clarity of our mind. No words help us here: we simply must know how to gently, subtly, steer our inner course. We first move away from **words**: we renounce all that we have learned (so to speak).

What we have learned is simply to clear the path so that we get to this point, this inner path. Nothing meaningful can really be said of our experience of this inner journey — except maybe in the language of truth and beauty. It is almost impossible to **describe** the experience, much less to **define** it. However, we can **point** to it. This is what a good teacher does: he inspires his listeners to seek the joy of **inner peace**.

Entertainers

However, when he lacks this inner peace and clarity, he may end up merely entertaining his audience: then, we may be blissfully mistaken that it's the laughter that causes the joy! Indeed, even when we have had visions of awakening, our language may not be adequate enough to present its truth and beauty, enough to inspire others, caught in the net of thirst and things, to see where they really are, and where they are going.

The analytic skills

Hence, as Dhamma students, we must at first and at once work to understand the nature and meaning of **meaning** (*attha*) (such as usage, polysemy and context).

Then, we need to understand how this works with the **teachings** (*dhamma*).

This means we should not only master at least 2 languages (our own language and the translated language), but broadly understand the nature of **language**, of communication.

Finally, we should cultivate and love **wit** not only to read in between the lines, but see the Dhamma so that it penetrates the layers of our views, biases, ignorance to touch our heart and open our mind for awakening.

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

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