

21 Words Cannot Express Truth That Which Words Express is Not Truth

“Subhuti, do not say that the Tathagata conceives the idea: I must set forth a Teaching. For if anyone says that the Tathagata sets forth a Teaching he really slanders Buddha and is unable to understand what I teach. As to any Truth-declaring Dharma, Truth is undeclarable; so “an enunciation of Truth” is just the name given to it.

Thereupon, Subhuti spoke these words to Buddha: World-Honoured-One, in the ages of the future, will there be people coming to hear a declaration of this Teaching who will be inspired with belief?”

And Buddha answered: “Subhuti, those to whom you refer are neither living beings nor non-living beings. Wherefore? Because “living beings,” Subhuti, these living beings are not really such; they are just called by that name.”

A major theme of the Sutra is that words should not be confused with what they are intended to convey. When we consider the words that we read here and elsewhere, we need to view them in the same way that we view the thoughts that come to us in meditation. That is, we do not reject them, but treat them as guests that are received with respect and attention and then go on their way. We do not follow them or attach ourselves to them. Thought and language are honoured guests, certainly, but they are not our final goal, which is awakening.

In Buddhism there is no all-powerful God who has given us holy writ in the form of divinely inspired books, stone tablets or creeds to be believed uncritically. Buddha at the time of his passing advised us to be lamps unto ourselves and to work out our own salvation.

The Indian philosopher, Krishnamurti (who was not a Buddhist) said this:

"There must be the understanding that there is nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing you can do to improve, transform or better yourself. When you understand this, you will see that there is no such entity as you.

*Then when you have given up all this ambition, you will be in the state of true meditation which comes over you spontaneously in wave after wave after wave of amazing light and bliss."*⁶

We often find words that might be echoed by Buddhists in interesting places. This is from the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein on the now moment:

*"If we think of eternity not as endless temporal duration, but as timelessness, then we see that the person who is living entirely in the present is in fact living in eternity."*⁷

This is the English poet Rudyard Kipling, from his poem "If." It refers to the illusory nature

⁶Watts, A, *In My Own Way*, Pantheon Books, 1972.

⁷Mitchell, Elsie, *Sun Buddhas, Moon Buddhas*, Weatherhill, New York, 1973.

of phenomena:

*If you can dream and not make dreams your master,
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same...⁸*

Haikus are three line Japanese poems of seventeen syllables (In the original Japanese.)

A haiku runs:

*This is all there is.
The path comes to an end,
Among the parsley.*

If we read this with mundane understanding, it has a forlorn sound, a feeling of failure. But we should look beyond this impression and see what is really implied by the idea of the path coming to an end. In fact, the path ends right here, in the now moment.

In the first chapter we have a description of Buddha performing simple actions mindfully. To live in full mindfulness is to live with the true self which is Nirvana.

⁸Kipling, Rudyard, *Rudyard Kipling: Complete Verse*, Anchor, 1988

As we seek insight we see high and low, ignorance and enlightenment, Buddhas and sentient beings, opposites everywhere, but for the awakened mind this duality does not exist.

The truth of this teaching has no place in time or space. It has no words – it precedes words. We practise only to remind ourselves of what we have; enlightenment does not come directly from this teaching, but still we do need to practise.

Student: “ Give me one word of the essence of Buddhism.”

Master: “ Goodbye.”

The student asked for one word only and that was what he received. Had the master said more, he would have said too much, he would have been trying to describe the indescribable.

Student: “What is one sentence which describes the Arahant (the unborn).”

Master: “If I tell you, one sentence becomes two.”

That is to say, as soon as an explanation is attempted, we are in the world of duality, of birth and death. Any thought that arises is a birth, and birth always goes with death.

This is why we practise in silence; if we ask for anything it means we have a thought and hence have fallen into birth and death.