

The Buddha's Strategies for Dhamma Communication

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Abstract

Communication is a fundamental aspect of disseminating knowledge and influencing understanding. In the context of religious and philosophical teachings, effective communication is crucial for ensuring that complex concepts and doctrines are accessible and impactful. All the religions in this world have their own communication methods and styles. This paper explores the strategies employed by the Buddha in communicating his core teachings. This study was conducted by examining the *Pāli Canon* as the primary source and is based on other textual studies. The objective is to analyse the strategies used by the Buddha to convey his profound teachings and the effectiveness of these methods to diverse audiences. The Buddha advised his first sixty monks to propagate the Dhamma for the well-being of many and to preach Dhamma as meaningful in the beginning, the middle and the end. Not only that, he emphasized that they should not go two in one path as it would diminish their service to many. The Buddha employed suitable communication methods tailored to the intellectual capacity, mental state, and physical condition of each individual. Examples such as *Patācārā*, *Kisāgotamī*, and Prince *Nanda*'s story illustrate this approach effectively. The stories of *Aṅgulimāla* and Queen *Khemā* illustrate how the Buddha used both verbal and non-verbal communication methods, sometimes employing his psychic powers to create visual images tailored to the situation. Additionally, the skill of using vivid similes, parables, and metaphors was another key strategy employed by the Buddha to effectively convey his message to the audience. The *Dhammapada* provides ample examples to illustrate this approach. In conclusion, by adapting his teaching to the intellectual capacity, emotional state and cultural context of his audience, the Buddha effectively conveyed profound spiritual truth. Furthermore, the enduring relevance of these strategies has contributed to the worldwide spread of Buddhism.

Key Words: Buddhism, Communication, The Buddha, The *Dhammapada*, The *Pāli Canon*

Introduction

The Buddha's approach to Dhamma Communication was both profound and methodical, tailored to reach a wide variety of audiences across diverse cultural and intellectual landscapes. As the founder of a spiritual movement that emphasized liberation from suffering (*dukkha*) and the cultivation of ethical and mental discipline; the Buddha employed strategies that were rooted in deep compassion, wisdom, and an acute awareness of his audience's capacities. His communication methods, often documented in the *Suttanta Piṭaka* in Pāli Canon, reflects a careful balance between accessibility and depth, allowing individuals of various backgrounds to understand and internalize his teachings.

Central to the Buddha's communicative approach was his ability to adapt his message according to the intellectual and emotional capacities of his listeners. This method, known as skilful means, involved the use of metaphors, similes, parables and analogies that resonated with different groups of people-whether lay practitioners, kings or ascetics. The Buddha's strategic use of dialectics, questioning, and guided reflections was integral to facilitating insight into the nature of existence, ethics and the path to enlightenment.

Furthermore, the Buddha placed great importance on interpersonal relationships in his communication, highlighting the role of patience, gentleness, and non-coercion. His emphasis on dialogue over dogma, compassion over authority, and clarity over complexity allowed his teachings to be inclusive and accessible. The Buddha's communication strategies not only served to spread the Dhamma effectively during his lifetime but have also continued to be foundational in the transmission of Buddhism across centuries.

This paper explores these core strategies, illustrating how the Buddha's timeless methods of Dhamma communication remain relevant and influential in the modern context.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology, including the historical, analytical and comparative studies of secondary data such as books, research articles, journals and You-Tube video clips. Additionally, sociological books are investigated, with Pāli Canon's and Dhammapada work being used as a primary source.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study reveal key insights into the Buddha's strategies for Dhamma communication, demonstrating the effectiveness of his methods in conveying profound spiritual teachings across diverse audiences.

The Buddha employed skillful means (*Upāya –Kauśalya*) to adjust his teachings based on the audience's intellectual capacity, social standing and emotional readiness. The stories of *Kisāgotamī* and Prince *Nanda* illustrate this point beautifully. Both individuals were at different points in their spiritual journey, yet the Buddha knew precisely how to guide them towards deeper understanding and eventually, liberation.

Kisāgotamī was a young woman from a wealthy family who was married to an important merchant. When her only son was one-year old, he fell sick and died suddenly. The mother was struck with grief, she could not bear the death of her only child. Carrying his dead body in her arms she went along the street, going from door to door asking if anyone had the medicine that would cure her son. Finally, she came across a person who advised her to go and see the Buddha himself. She carried the dead child to the Buddha and told him her sad story. The Buddha listened the story with patience and compassion, and then said to her, "*Kisāgotamī*, there is only one way to solve your problem. Go and find me a small quantity of mustard seeds from any family in which there has never been a death". *Kisāgotamī* was filled with hope, and set off straight away to find such a household. But very soon she discovered that every family had experienced the death of one person or another. Ultimately, she understood what the Buddha had wanted her to find out for herself – that death comes to us all and suffering is a part of life. Once she accepted the fact that death is inevitable, she could stop her grieving. She took the child's body away and later returned to the Buddha and entered the order (Dhammapada-*Sahassa Vagga*: 8-13)

In contrast, the Buddha used a different approach with his half-brother *Nanda*, who was distracted by worldly desires, particularly his infatuation with a beautiful princess. The Buddha returned to his home city of *Kapilavattu*, at the request of his father, King *Suddhodana*. On the third day, the Buddha entered for alms-food, when the coronation, ceremonial entry of the royal residence and marriage ceremony of Prince *Nanda* were being celebrated. The Buddha gave this bowl into the hand of Prince *Nanda* and proceeded towards his monastery without taking back his bowl. When they arrived at the monastery, the Buddha questioned *Nanda* regarding whether he might become a monk. Even though Prince *Nanda* did not want to become a monk, he could not refuse the Buddha's request because of the great respect he had for the Buddha. However, he took ordination and joined the community of monks. But his thoughts were constantly directed towards his beautiful bride, *Janapada Kalyāni* and could not enjoy the spiritual happiness.

Learning of this, the Buddha took *Nanda* on a journey to *Tāvatiṃsa* heaven and showed him beautiful female deities who were prettier than *Janapada Kalyāni*. He promised to get them for *Nanda*, if the latter strove hard in the practice of Dhamma. Other bhikkhus ridiculed him by saying that he was like a hireling who practice Dhamma for the sake of beautiful women. He felt very much tormented and ashamed. So, in seclusion, he tried very hard in the practice of the Dhamma and eventually attained Arahantship. As an Arahant his mind was totally released from all attachments. These findings demonstrate the Buddha's profound understanding of human nature and diversity, reflecting the necessity of personalized communication in effective teaching (Dhammapada-*Yamaka Vagga*: 1-9).

The Buddha often used simple analogies drawn from everyday life such as farming, family relationships, or nature to illustrate profound truths. The Dhammapada contains many verses where the Buddha uses metaphors and analogies that are rooted in daily experiences to convey his teachings. The first chapter of the Dhammapada is named "*Yamaka Vagga*" and its first stanza is mentioned below;

“Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā - Manoseṭṭā manomayā
Manasā ce paduṭṭhena - Bhāsati vā karoti vā
Tato naṃ dukkhamanveti - Cakkaṃva vahato padaṃ”

The stanza conveys the following meaning;

“Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind, a person speaks or acts, suffering follows him, like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.”

The fifth chapter of the Dhammapada is named “*Bāla Vagga*” and it described the characteristics of the fools. The fifth stanza of this chapter states that; “though all his life a fool associates with a wise man, he no more comprehends the truth than a spoon tastes the flavor of the soup. (*dabbī sūparasam yathā*)

In the “*Puppha Vagga*” of Dhammapada, depicts a beautiful simile of how monks should behave in the village when gathering alms;

Yatāpi bhamaro puppham - Vaṇṇagandhamahethayaṃ

Paleti rasamādāya - Evaṃ game munī care

“As a bee gathers nectar from the flower and flies away without harming the flower’s beauty or its fragrance, just so the sage goes on his alms round in the village.”

In *Kasī Bhāradvāja Sutta (Saṃyutta Nikāya)*, the Buddha used the metaphor of farming to communicate the path to enlightenment.

“Saddhā bījam tapo vuṭṭī - Paññā me yuganaṅgalam

Hirī isā mano yottaṃ - Sati me pālapācanaṃ”

The stanza conveys the following meaning;

“Faith is my seeds, austerity the rain, wisdom is my yoke and plow, modesty is the pole, mind the strap and mindfulness is my plowshare and goad.” This analogy made the abstract concepts of the Noble Eightfold path understandable to a farmer who could relate to the elements of agriculture.

By framing complex philosophical ideas in familiar terms, the Buddha democratized access to Dhamma.

According to the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* in *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha used the simile of the raft to explain the philosophical concept that the Dhamma should not be clung to once it has served its purpose. Just as a raft helps you cross a river, but once you across, you don’t carry it

with you, so too should the Dhamma be used to cross the river of suffering and then let go of when no longer needed. In the same sutta, the Buddha provides the simile of the snake to indicate the danger of misinterpretation of the Dhamma. The correct understanding and application of the Dhamma is critical; it should not be misinterpreted or used for the wrong purpose. The Buddha used the simile of the snake to explain that, just as a snake must be grasped correctly to avoid being bitten, the Dhamma must be understood and practiced correctly to avoid harm.

This use of metaphor helped diverse audiences, regardless of educational background, internalize the teachings.

The Buddha strategically adapted his teachings based on whether his audience comprised laypeople or monastics. For lay practitioners, he often emphasized practical, ethical teachings that aligned with their daily lives, while for monastics, he delved deeper into the philosophical aspects of renunciation and mental discipline. This dual-mode of teaching underscores the Buddha's nuanced understanding of different life paths. His ability to switch between pragmatic ethical guidance and deep spiritual instruction ensured that the Dhamma remained relevant and impactful for all followers.

The story of Queen *Khemā* illustrates how the Buddha used both verbal and non-verbal communication methods, sometimes employing his psychic powers to create visual images tailored to the situation. *Khemā* is the queen of King *Bimbisāra* and she was extremely beautiful. She was very conscious of her beauty. She did not want to see the Buddha or hear Dhamma. But King *Bimbisāra* was a devoted follower of the Buddha, wanted the Queen to listen to the Buddha's teaching. He thought of a plan to entice her to visit the monastery in which the Buddha was residing. King *Bimbisāra*'s musicians describe in song the natural beauty of the Grove in which the Buddha was residing. By listening to this song, *Khemā* decided to visit the Monastery.

The Buddha was giving a discourse to a large gathering, when he saw *Khemā* in distance, approaching the monastery. With his psychic power he created a vision of a beautiful maiden by his side. *Khemā* noticed the beautiful maiden who was fanning the Buddha. The Buddha then made the beautiful maiden age slowly before her eyes. She saw the maiden's skin wrinkle, her hair change to grey and her body age. After that she saw the body collapse with age and passed away, leaving behind just a corpse which in turn changed to a heap of bones. Understanding that all conditioned

phenomena were impermanent, *Khemā* realized that the same would happen to her. Finally, she listened the Dhamma and attained Arahantship (Dhammapada- *Tanhā Vagga*: 24-5).

The Buddha's adaptable communication strategies can be applied to modern teaching, leadership, and counseling practices. In today's interconnected world, the ethical foundations of the Buddha's communication strategies, particularly Right Speech (*Sammā Vācā*) can inform how we approach communication in digital spaces-emphasizing kindness, truthfulness and responsibility. Furthermore, the adaptability of Buddha's teachings allowed Buddhism to flourish in various cultural settings without losing its core message. This adaptability could be compared with how modern religious or philosophical movement use communication strategies to reach global audiences. These strategies offers significant insights into modern interpersonal communication, particularly in conflict resolution, counseling and therapy.

Conclusion

The Buddha's strategies for Dhamma communication exemplify a masterful approach to conveying profound spiritual teachings with clarity, compassion and adaptability. His reliance on analogies and parables drawn from everyday life simplified complex ideas like impermanence, non-self and dependent origination, making them accessible to individuals from varying intellectual and social backgrounds. By employing skillful means, he ensured that his teachings resonated with diverse audiences. Moreover, the Buddha's communication strategies not only facilitated the effective transmission of the Dhamma during his lifetime but also contributed to the global spread and enduring influence of Buddhism.

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