



Words Well Said

Subhāsita Sutta (Sutta Nipāta 451-454)

tam eva vācaṃ bhāseyya
yāy' attānaṃ na tāpaye
pare ca na vihiṃseyya,
sā ve vācā subhāsītā.

piyavācam eva bhāseyya,
yā vācā paṭinanditā,
yaṃ anādāya pāpāni
paresaṃ bhāsate piyaṃ.

saccaṃ ve amatā vācā,
esa dhammo sanantano,
sacce atthe ca dhamme ca,
āhu, santo paṭiṭṭhitā.

yaṃ Buddho bhāsati vācaṃ
khemaṃ nibbāna-pattiyā
dukkhass' antakiriyaṃ,
sā ve vācānam uttamā ti.

May we utter only such words
As do not cause ourselves anguish
And would not cause harm to others.
These indeed are words well-uttered.

May we speak only loving words,
Those words which make people happy,
Which carry no evil intent,
And speak lovingly to others.

Words of truth are truly deathless;
This is something never-ending.
Peace stands, they say, literally
And in principle, upon truth.

The words uttered by the Buddha,
Reaching safety, *nibbāna*, and
Making an end of suffering
—These are the very best of words!



These verses were offered by Vangīsa, a monk renowned in his time for his poetic skill, after hearing the Buddha talk about the qualities of good speech. No less than seventy-two stanzas of Vangīsa's have been preserved in the anthology of monks' verse known as the *Theragāthā*, more than any other monk, including Śāriputta, Ānanda, Mahā Kassapa and Moggallāna.

He tells of formerly being "drunk with skill in composing poetry" (*Thag 1253*) as he wandered from town to town, presumably earning a living as a bard. After meeting the Buddha and hearing the doctrine, he goes

on to describe a long period of working on the reduction of pride and conceit. Eventually awakened, Vangīsa ends up focusing his talent on praising the Buddha, his disciples, and the teachings that have set him free.

These thoughts about right speech are timeless, and apply as much today as ever. We are used to hearing about the need to take care our speech does not hurt the feelings or impinge upon the rights of others, but what about the more subtle point in the first stanza that what we say also has the capacity to torment ourselves?

That internal critical voice, the tough inner judge that can undermine confidence or self-esteem, is as much an obstacle to right speech as what we say to others.

Perhaps we can take on as a practice the commitment to speak more kindly, more truthfully, and more meaningfully at all times. As Vangīsa tells us in the third stanza, this is the basis upon which a peaceful mind can be established. Building upon this foundation, peacefulness can be developed in the direction of liberation from suffering.

—A. Olendzki