



Sāriputta Teaches Dhamma

Vaṅgīsa Thera (Theragāthā 1231-1233)

gambhīrapañño medhāvī
maggāmaggassa kovido
Sāriputto mahāpañño
dhammaṃ deseti bhikkhunaṃ

Profoundly wise, intelligent,
Skilled in what is and isn't the path,
Sāriputta, with great wisdom,
Teaches Dhamma to the bhikkhus.

sankhittena pi deseti
vitthārena pi bhāsati
sālikāy-iva nigghoso
paṭibhānam udīrayi

Sometimes he teaches it briefly,
Sometimes he speaks in great detail.
His eloquence, like a song bird,
Bursts forth as inspired instruction.

tassa taṃ desayantassa
suṇanti madhuraṃ giramaṃ
sarena raṇānīyena
savanīyena vaggunā
udaggacittā muditā
sotam odhenti bhikkhavo ti

As he is teaching they listen
To the sweet honey of his voice,
A sound that is most delightful,
Pleasing to hear, and lovely.
With uplifted minds the bhikkhus
All joyfully lend him their ears.

Vaṅgīsa was a poet before he went forth into the homeless life as a monk, and the verses he left behind are among the most refined in the Pali Canon. Here we find him in praise of Sāriputta, the Buddha's most important and influential Elder.

Although Vaṅgīsa is no doubt utilizing the poetic conventions of the court to express himself, with his allusions to song birds and honey, the loveliness he speaks of would not be the shallow aesthetic of meter and

metaphor common to the literary artiste, but one rooted in a more profound presentation of the truth. Sāriputta was not himself a great poet, but was known for his ability to clarify and organize the teachings. Indeed it is likely that he had much to do with setting in motion the analytical project that resulted in the Abhidhamma literature.

What is delighting the bhikkhus, therefore, is not so much the surface textures of its presentation as the

elegant structure of the Buddha's insights into the nature of human experience. On close investigation the Dhamma almost reads like a mathematical equation that simply but beautifully describes the motion of the cosmos. Guided by this teaching, one extricates oneself step by step from suffering. Upon hearing such a sound as this, who can help but give ear?

—A. Olendzki

