

# **Buddhist Approach to Communication: An Overview**

**Pre-Print**

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## **1. Introduction**

Buddhism represents one of the few ancient religious traditions that has an undisputed historical founder and much of its teaching is attributed to a man named Siddhartha Gautama who lived and taught about 500 years before the birth of Christ in what is now modern-day Nepal and India. Even though there is a gap of approximately a century and a half between when the Buddha spoke and when his words were recorded in writing, what has been passed down through the generations is an enormous corpus of written records that represents forty-five years of teaching and preaching – fifteen times the length of Jesus’ public ministry on earth. Despite questions concerning accuracy that would naturally arise as a result of such a significant hiatus, we can assume that due to the strength of the oral tradition of the ancient time and people’s incredible memory that many of the Buddha’s teachings were faithfully passed down from one generation to the next. Moreover, because the Buddha taught for so many decades, his close disciples who followed him year after year would have had the opportunity to listen to his teachings repeated countless times in various circumstances, thus reinforcing their memory and understanding of these teachings.

## **2. The Buddha as Communicator**

Just as discussions on Christian and Confucian communication often begin with examining the communication style and strategy of Jesus and Confucius, the same is inevitable when it comes to Buddhism. Wimal Dissanayake (2014, p. 227) calls the Buddha a “communicator par excellence” and asserts that the success of Buddhism was owed primarily to the Buddha’s ability to communicate his teachings in such a way that his audience could easily understand. After his enlightenment, the Buddha resisted the temptation to enter directly into *nibbāna* (*nirvana*) because of his conviction that he was “born into the world for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, for the advantage, the good, the happiness of gods and men, out of compassion for the world” (Quoted from *Digha Nikaya* by Pratt, 1928, p. 9).

In his decades long mission to spread his profound teachings through various regions of India, the Buddha had encounters with a variety of individuals from ordinary villagers to ascetics to members of the social elite. He trained monks and nuns in the order that he founded, conducted public preaching, and gave individual counselling sessions. Therefore, his communication had to be tailored to the psychological, social, and intellectual background of the people to whom he was communicating. In structuring and presenting his message to the listener, the Buddha made abundant use of “parables, allegories, tropes, wit, humor, innovative narrative strategies, parallelisms” (Dissanayake, 2014, p. 227).

Some observations can be made of the Buddha's unique communication style. First, the Buddha was respectful of his listener. People came to him from near and far, and represented the full spectrum of castes and classes. However, recognizing the humanity in every individual, "The venerable Gautama bids everyone welcome, is congenial, conciliatory, not supercilious, accessible to all" (Quoted from *Digha Nikaya* by Pratt, 1928, p. 10).

Just as the Buddha was cognizant of the disposition and state of each person he encountered, he was equally aware of himself. He was forthright in stating his own superior state not out of vanity but simple objectivity. In the *Anguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha speaks of himself:

I am one whose behavior is purified and I claim: "I am one whose behavior is purified. My behavior is purified, cleansed, undefiled." My disciples do not cover me up with respect to my behavior, and I do not expect to be covered up by my disciples with respect to my behavior. (A.3.126)

The Buddha proceeded to assert the same about his livelihood, dhamma (dharma) teaching, explanations, knowledge, and vision. Nevertheless, in another situation when the disciple Sariputta extolled, "Such faith have I, Lord, that methinks there never was nor will be nor is now any other greater or wiser than the Blessed One," the Buddha was quick to remind the overly enthusiastic pupil that he had never known any other Buddha of the past, or of the future. Even the mind of Buddha that he knew in the present could not be entirely penetrated as to be able to make grand and bold claims (Quoted in Smith, 1991, p. 90).

This clear headedness, transparency, and objectivity characterized the Buddha's communication throughout his mission. At the end of his life, the Buddha affirmed, "I have not kept anything back" (quoted in Suzuki, 1981, p. 2). Nonetheless, unlike the brahmins of his time who insisted on maintaining a veil of secrecy as part of their monopoly of religious teachings, the Buddha advised his disciples to never adopt any ideas simply because they have been spoken by figures of authority or because they have been passed down by tradition (A.1.189).

Because the Buddha's primary mission was to help people achieve liberation, his communication was limited to only matters that were practical and not deemed as idle theorizing and useless speculation. This is demonstrated in his parable of the man who has been struck by an arrow covered in poison. When this happens, it is useless for the physician to make inquiries about the identity, physical traits or social status of the perpetrator or the victim. Neither is it important to know about the qualities of the bow and arrow. What is important is how to save the victim from a tragic death. Therefore, metaphysical questions that are not immediately related to the matter of rebirth, old age, death, and suffering need not be considered because they are not useful for the situation at hand (*Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta 63*). Indeed, a 'noble silence' was as much a part of the Buddha's communication strategy as his spoken instructions. Sometimes the silence was because he refused to engage in fruitless speculation. Other times, the silence was due to the mental state of the person to whom he was dialoging (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2014, epub version).

### 3. Buddhist Communication Ethics

After the Buddha achieved enlightenment, the first people that he communicated his insights to were five ascetics at the deer park outside of the holy city of Banaras. To them he presented the Four Noble Truths that essentially served to diagnose the true human condition, present a vision for healing, and propose the path for the realizing of that vision. The first two Noble Truths constitute the diagnosis part of the Buddhist pedagogy. The Buddha observed that the essence of mundane life was unsatisfactory because of the existent reality of impermanence of all things in the world. By observing the processes of birth, aging, sickness, and death, etc. as well as all the other phenomenal events, the Buddha was able to give these realities a common descriptive name—suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, SN.5.11). The second truth locates the root of this unsatisfactoriness as due to the ignorance of the true nature of reality, causing one to have craving (*tanhā*) for things that do not bring about lasting happiness because they are ultimately impermanent. The Buddha listed three kinds of craving—craving for sensual pleasure, craving to become, and craving to get rid of unwanted things. Having made the diagnosis, the Buddha subsequently presented a vision of hope that is contrary to the condition of suffering that one experiences in life. That vision is stated in the third Noble Truth, which declares that human beings do not have to be enslaved to this perpetual cycle of unsatisfactoriness, that one can put an end to the suffering in one's life by achieving freedom from the various desires mentioned above. Finally, this vision of eternal bliss can be realized by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path with its threefold training of morality, concentration, and wisdom in order to attain freedom.

In the *Nidāna Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta*, the Buddha extolls the Noble Eightfold Path as the “ancient road travelled by the Perfectly Enlightened Ones of the past” which leads to cessation of aging and death, volitional formations (S.II.12). It leads to “suffering’s appeasement” (S.II.15), cessation of form, feeling, perception, consciousness, clinging (S.III.22), and cessation of *kamma* (*karma*) (S.IV.35). It is the raft that takes one to “the further shore, which is safe and free from danger” (S.IV.35). Of course, this further shore is none other than *nibbāna* itself. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, “The path translates the Dhamma from a collection of abstract formulas into a continually unfolding disclosure of truth. It gives an outlet from the problem of suffering with which the teaching starts. And it makes the teaching’s goal, liberation from suffering, accessible to us in our own experience, where alone it takes on authentic meaning” (Bodhi, 1998, p. v).

Communication in context of Buddhism is part and parcel of the Buddhist project to eliminate suffering for sentient beings as laid out in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The evaluative criteria then are whether the act of communication contributes to reducing suffering for the person performing the act as well as the person(s) affected by the act. Thich Nhat Hanh (2014) asserts that communication is not neutral because it impacts our karma. “Our communication is what we put out into the world and what remains after we have left it. In this way, our communication is our karma. The Sanskrit word karma means ‘action,’ and it refers not just to bodily action but to what we express with our bodies, our words, and our thoughts and intentions.” Therefore, communication, in the Buddhist understanding includes even thoughts that are not spoken or physically carried out. Thoughts, the moment they are produced, can have either positive or negative effect on the thinker as well as those who are around him or her. While many have emphasized on the third (right speech), fourth (right action), and fifth (right living) elements in the Noble Eightfold Path as especially pertinent to Buddhist communication ethics, the fact that

thinking is already a communicative act affirms that the first two elements of right view and right thought are equally important to a well-rounded Buddhist communication approach.

In his conversation with the silversmith Cunda, the Buddha gave four precepts for right speech (Bodhi & Thera, 2000 10, 17, 10 (PTS5, 262)). These include abstaining from false, slanderous, unkind speech and instead practicing truthful, peaceful, friendly, and helpful speech. While the precepts directly pertain to speech, we can easily generalize them to communication as a whole. Telling the truth (abstain from lying), refraining from exaggerating, being consistent, and using peaceful, non-violent communication are all conducive to reducing personal and collective harm and suffering. Nevertheless, from the life of the Buddha, we can see that skillful communication does not mean communicating the same way to everyone irrespective of each person's disposition and emotional and intellectual state. Neither does restructuring the message appropriate to the individual nor even silence towards a matter implies hiding or bending the truth.

The seventh element of right mindfulness in the Noble Eightfold Path has also been given much attention in the field of communication and beyond. In recent years, the notions of 'mindful communication' and 'mindful journalism' have found popularity in both Asian and Western societies. Books and research papers have been written on the subject; seminars and workshops on mindfulness have also garnered a high degree of interest in the corporate world. Apple organized a special talk on "Mindful Communication" while Google has invited guests to present on the topics of "mindful work," "mindful leadership," and "mindful connection." Thich Nhat Hanh himself was invited to give a presentation at Google on mindfulness to great enthusiasm of his audience. However, at Google, Apple as well as in many other places, mindfulness was not always explicitly presented in connection with Buddhism, even if the source of inspiration is abundantly clear.

Mindful journalism is the application of the concept of mindful communication to the field of journalism. Shelton A. Gunaratne who advocates mindful journalism says that the elements of this genre have been derived by delving into the Buddhist phenomenology found in teachings and sermons of the Buddha, the rules and regulations governing monastic life, and Buddhist commentaries that constitute the Buddhist canon (2015, p. 1). Gunaratne says that mindful journalism is "not profit making but truthful reporting without institutional restraints that might defile the clarity of the trained journalist's mind" (p. 5). Moreover, at its best, mindful journalism will co-exist with other genres and become "formidable example of enlightened journalism" for other genres that aim to produce commercially driven news (Ibid). Mark Pearson and Sugath Senarath, despite grounding their understanding of mindful journalism in fundamental Buddhist teachings readily admit that they do not propose that those who practice mindful journalism should have to become Buddhists (2015, p. 156). Rather, mindful journalism is a specific instance of mindful communication in the public interest (Pearson, 2015, p. 171).

#### **4. Buddhism and Modern Mass Communication Technology**

Religion and technology have always maintained a close relationship in their process of development. Just as the invention of the printing press profoundly impacted the propagation of Christian teachings in Europe, the development of modern communication technology has brought

about tremendous impact on all religious traditions. Not only does digital technology facilitate the propagation of religious teachings to the adherents of each respective religion, but it also allows for evangelization to non-adherents and the secular world (Le Duc, 2017, p. 44). Buddhism throughout history has proved itself to be in touch with the current technological developments in order to communicate its teachings to the masses (Daniel Veidlinger, 2016, p. 6). The Buddha himself traveled far and wide in urban centers and rural areas of India to proclaim his message of salvation to the people across classes and castes. Buddhist monks and lay missionaries also took advantage of the Silk Road to carry their message to distant lands and peoples of Central Asia and China. They also translated Buddhist teachings into a variety of languages in order to communicate more effectively to the diverse peoples they encountered. While the printing press is accepted as the first revolutionizing means of information production, it was in Chinese Buddhist monasteries during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) that printing evolved (You, 2010, p. 56–62). Mahayana texts such as the Diamond Sutra and the Lotus Sutra were carved into wooden blocks from which multiple copies were printed in what were arguably the first printed books in the world.

For centuries up until the present, books and other publications have continued to be an important way for Buddhist communicators to connect with the laity as well as appeal to potential adherents in the Western world. Many authors through their preaching and writings have found popularity among the Western audience who search for spiritualities emanating from a different worldview. On the Dalai Lama's website, there is a list of 131 books that are either authored or co-authored by him. The late Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh also published more than 100 books throughout his career. From the Theravada tradition, the Thai scholar monk Phra Prayudh Payutto wrote extensively on the Pali Canon. He also authored a number of books addressing contemporary issues such as abortion and the ecology from the Buddhist perspective.

As Buddhism gained a Western following with a contingent of Westerners entering the monkhood, some have also greatly contributed to the opus of writing on Buddhism in the English language. Notable is Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American born monk who joined the Sangha in Sri Lanka in the early 1970s. Bhikkhu Bodhi translated into English four great Pali-suttas and authored many other books and essays on a variety of topics. In addition, he served as the editor and president of the Buddhist Publication Society for many years. Another monk of Western origin, Bhikkhu Nanamoli, who was born in England, translated some of the most difficult Buddhist texts into readable English. Most notable was his translation of the fifth century commentary on Buddhist teachings and practice by Buddhaghosa entitled *Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification)*. The American monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who represented the Thai forest tradition, through his writings and translations of Dharma talks, also publicized this Buddhist tradition to the world. In addition, he translated the *Dhammapada* as well as over 1000 suttas of the *Sutta Pitaka*.

In addition to print, Buddhist communicators also took advantage of modern communication technology in order to spread their teachings. Chinese Buddhist monks began to make use of radio in 1950 when the Venerable Cihang gave a Dharma talk on Taipei's Minben radio station. Soon after, the Venerable Nanting had his own regular radio broadcast called "The Voice of Buddhism" (Pham, 2017, p.49). These initial efforts would eventually result in the establishment of a Buddhist Dharma broadcasting division by the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China in 1953. The use of television would also eventually be incorporated into the communication work of Buddhist

communicators in Taiwan beginning with the Venerable Hsing Yun's Dharma program "Sweet Dew" (Pham, 2017, p. 50).

Buddhist communicators in other parts of Asia, especially in those countries not hampered by political restrictions of religious freedom, also began and continue to make use of radio and television in their communication work over the decades. In Thailand, Buddhist radio and television broadcasts by various monks and from various temples remain a staple in the life of the predominantly Buddhist country. However, Buddhist teachings are not only communicated through explicit Dhamma broadcasts. As Buddhism not only defines the spiritual but also the cultural sensibilities of the Thai people, Buddhist beliefs, images, and tropes, etc. are abundantly incorporated into the content produced for television as well as cinema. Because the life of the Thai people is closely connected with such activities as going to the temple, making merit, listening to Dhamma talks, and seeking the advice of respected monks, they are widely depicted in movies, dramas, and other television programs. In addition, one could hardly watch a Thai television drama series without hearing a reference to kamma falling off the tongue of a character commenting on life events. Through the prevalent use of the Buddhist worldview and teachings in entertainment content, Buddhism continues to play an important role in how the people understand and organize their life. Moreover, the depiction of beautiful and exotic temples and meditation centers in entertainment programs also contribute to attracting foreigners to come to Thailand for the purpose of visiting the temples and even enrolling in a short-term meditation course. This results in the introduction of aspects of Buddhism to a completely new audience.

## **5. Buddhist Communication in the Digital Age**

The Buddhist mentality to spread its teachings to distant lands in the past finds great support with digital technology in the modern age. Digital technology has now put the Theravada Pali Canon and Mahayana texts in multiple languages at the fingertip of anyone with internet access. In the scholarly community, the Journal of Buddhist Ethics established in 1994 was the first online peer reviewed journal in Religious Studies (Prebish, 2016, p. 82). Online information and Buddhist content is now abundant. A search on Google using the keyword "Buddhism" yields 327,000,000 entries while "Buddha" results in 359,000,000 entries (as of 30 June 2022). This of course, is only a search of English content and not in other languages. With the development of social media, Buddhism has made its presence online with countless programs on the various platforms in multiple languages. Numerous apps promoting Buddhist teachings, mindfulness, meditation, and inspirational sayings have also been developed and can be downloaded from app stores. Some of the more notable apps include "Insight Timer" which includes 45,000 free meditation sessions complete with ambient music. For a membership fee, the user can gain access to special meditation courses lasting 7-10 days (Maina, 2022). Another Buddhist app, "Calm" aims to do exactly what its name implies—helping users to deal with stress and sleeping problems through various calming exercises, breathing techniques, and stories recited by well-known people like Idris Elba and Matthew McConaughey (Ibid).

Buddhist leaders of all levels have also been taking to the internet to spread the dhamma. Most well-known is the Dalai Lama who is present on multiple platforms, including social media. The Dalai Lama joined Twitter in February 2010 and amassed 55,000 followers after the first two days

on the microblog. The Dalai Lama's audience is international, interreligious, and intercultural. Thus, it is not surprising that the Buddhist leader mostly uses his Twitter platform to promote Buddhist inspired humanistic and spiritual values across cultures and religions, which enable his tweets to be well-received by his followers. For example, the Dalai Lama's tweet on January 6, 2020 states: *As human beings, all 7 billion of us are born the same way and die the same way. Physically, mentally and emotionally we are the same. We all want to live a happy life and avoid problems, but in a materialistic culture we overlook the importance of love and affection.*

This tweet, like the vast majority of his tweets, are non-religion specific, aimed at common human issues, concerns, and aspirations, and therefore reverberates easily with a global audience. The Dalai Lama's strategy of appealing to people of all religions (and non-religion) and cultures are highly conducive to promoting interculturality where people are inspired to relate to each other first and foremost as human beings with specific and profound similarities rather than based on superficial exterior differences (Le Duc, 2020, p. 112). When the coronavirus pandemic broke out causing global havoc and concerns, the Dalai Lama sent out the following message on April 14, 2020, succinctly putting the pandemic into a wider perspective to encourage his followers to see beyond present hardships and obstacles. He writes, "As a Buddhist, I believe in the principle of impermanence. Eventually, this virus will pass, as I have seen wars and other terrible threats pass in my lifetime, and we will have the opportunity to rebuild our global community as we have done many times before" (Quoted in Le Duc, 2020, p. 121). Despite the global preoccupation with the Covid-19 pandemic the last several years, almost all of the Dalai Lama's tweets to his nearly 20 million followers are meant to speak to any human situation, culture, and time. For example, the tweet on August 10, 2020 states: "As soon as I wake up in the morning, I remind myself that nothing exists as it appears. Then I think about sentient beings who want happiness, but experience suffering. I generate compassion for them, determined to help them as much as I can to eliminate their negative emotions" (Ibid).

Indeed, the Dalai Lama is not alone in recognizing the potential of information and communication technology to promote Buddhist thought and teachings to the masses. For Buddhist leaders, the ongoing communication of Buddhist teachings to a new generation is a special preoccupation. In this regard, a number of studies have been implemented in order to determine effective ways to appeal to the next generation. For example, in Thailand where Buddhism accounts for 90 percent of the population, many Buddhist-oriented schools have been researching how to adapt the dhamma to the contemporary milieu in order to generate greater accessibility and garner more interest from younger audiences (Schedneck, 2021, p. 285). In Thai media, there are 'monk celebrities' who try to appeal to a wider contemporary audience with more entertaining content and humor. However, the reception of their communication strategies has been mixed (Schedneck, 2021).

In his study of Buddhist communication to the new generation in Thailand, Nattapong Yamcharoen (2014) found that Thais tend to follow Buddhist personalities that appeal to them. The young audience who mostly access Buddhist content via mobile phones also prefer interesting and simplified content rather than abstract and dry presentations of Buddhist teachings. Moreover, the younger generation also wants to have content that are relevant to their contemporary life situations. The study also revealed that because much of the Thai youth is now online and receiving Buddhist content via digital media, there needs to be more effective strategies to disseminate

information from Buddhist individuals and institutions on digital platforms. In addition, Yamcharoen also identified long-term pattern of Buddhist communication, including: 1) Supporting Buddhist individuals and organizations in promoting Buddhist values; 2) Providing Buddhist communicators with better technological skills; 3) Promoting knowledge of integrated communication and increasing proactive public relations via integrated online communication; 4) Producing a new generation of Buddhist communicators to the society; 5) Working to reduce the rural-urban digital divide to ensure more equal access to online Buddhist content; and 7) Encouraging the older generation to be good role models in display of faith and behavior.

Thus, the history of Buddhist communication has always played out on a variety of highways and byways, from the ancient paths of India, the Silk Road of Central Asia, to the information highway of the digital age. In every instance, the purpose has remained the same—to eliminate suffering in the world and to support the human desire to achieve lasting happiness and liberation.

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