Right Speech in Times of War:  
Vital Insights from the Simile of the Saw  
Resources for Sati Center for Buddhist Studies Presentation  
7-8:30pm Thursday, November 2nd 2023

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I. Introduction:

A. The Paradox of Talking about War in a Buddhist Context:

The Discourse on Pointless Talk (Tiracchānakathā Sutta) - Samyutta Nikāya 56.10 Tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi:

“Practioners (bhikkhus), do not engage in the various kinds of pointless talk, that is, talk about kings, thieves, and ministers of state; talk about armies, dangers, and wars; talk about food, drink, garments, and beds; talk about garlands and scents; talk about relations, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, and countries; talk about women and talk about heroes; street talk and talk by the well; talk about those departed in days gone by; rambling chitchat; speculation about the world and about the sea; talk about becoming this or that. For what reason? Because, bhikkhus, this talk is unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.

“When you talk, bhikkhus, you should talk about: ‘This is suffering’; you should talk about: ‘This is the origin of suffering’; you should talk about: ‘This is the cessation of suffering’; you should talk about: ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’ For what reason? Because, bhikkhus, this talk is beneficial, relevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and leads to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, an exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is suffering.’ An exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is the origin of suffering.’ An exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is the cessation of suffering.’ An exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’”

B. From Content to Context and Relationship

“The Purpose of Discussion … Lending Ear”

“For that’s the purpose of discussion, that’s the purpose of counsel, that’s the purpose of drawing near, that’s the purpose of lending ear: that is, the liberation of the heart through no clinging. (anupādā cittassa vimokkho)”

(AN 3.67)
II. The Discourse on the Simile of the Saw (Our Primary Text)
(MN 21 Excerpts - mixed translation from I.B. Horner, Bhante Sujāto and Kovilo Bhikkhu)

A. The Virtue of “Being Easy to Speak To” (Suvaca)

A.1 Suvaca in the Simile of the Saw

How Easy Are You To Speak To?

“A practitioner may be the sweetest of the sweet, the most even-tempered of the even-tempered, the calmest of the calm, so long as they don’t encounter any disagreeable speech. But it’s when they encounter disagreeable speech that you’ll know whether they’re really sweet (sorata), even-tempered (nivāta), and calm (upasanta) (gentle, unstuckup, and tranquil).

“I don’t say that a practitioner is easy to speak to (suvaca) if they make themselves easy to speak to only for the sake of [getting what they want] (literally: “robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicines and supplies for the sick”). Why is that? Because when they don’t get [what they want], they’re no longer easy to speak to. But when a practitioner is easy to speak to purely because they honor, respect, revere, worship, and venerate the Dhamma, then I say that they’re easy to speak to.

A.2 Suvaca in the Discourse on Inference (Anumāna Sutta MN 15)

Commentary:

“What, venerables, are the qualities which make one easy to speak to?
(1) Herein, one does not come to be of evil desires nor in the thrall of evil desires.
(2) one does not come to exalt himself nor to disparage others.
(3) one does not come to be wrathful, overpowering by his wrath.
(4) one does not come to be wrathful and a fault-finder because of his wrath.
(5) one does not come to be wrathful and because of his wrath takes offence.
(6) one does not come to be wrathful and because of his wrath utters words bordering on wrath.
(7) one, reproved, does not blurt out reproach against the reprover.
(8) one, reproved, does not disparage the reprover for the reproach.
(9) one, reproved, does not round on the reprover for the reproof.  
(10) one, reproved, does not shelve the question by asking the  
reprover another, one does not answer off the point, one does not  
evince temper and ill-will and sulkiness.  
(11) one, reproved, succeeds in explaining their movements to the  
reprover.  
(12) one comes to be not harsh, not spiteful.  
(13) one comes to be not envious, not grudging.  
(14) one comes to be not treacherous, not deceitful.  
(15) one comes to be not stubborn, not proud.  
(16) one does not adhere tightly to their own views, or hold on to  
them tenaciously, and they relinquish them easily.  
These, venerables, are called the qualities that make one easy to  
speak to.”

B. The Concept of Dhammic Resolutions/Affirmations:  
B.1 “Thus Should Your Train Yourselves”  
“So, practitioners, you should train yourselves: ‘We will be easy to  
speak to purely because we honor (sakkaronto), respect (garuṁ  
karonto), revere (mānento), worship (pūjento), and venerate  
(apacāyamāno) the Dhamma.’ That’s how you should train.”

B.2 Use of the Future Passive Participle (Gerundive)  
It is Future tense  
It is Passive voice  
It is a Particle (participating in being an adjective and a verb)

B.3 Other Examples of the Future Passive Participle  
“Effacement Should be Practiced Thus…” (MN 7)  
- “‘Others will speak harshly; we shall abstain from harsh speech  
here’: effacement should be practised thus.”  
- “‘Others will gossip; we shall abstain from gossip here’:  
effacement should be practised thus.”

“Thus Should You Train Yourselves” - The Book  
- “‘Our verbal conduct will be pure, clear, open, unbroken, and  
restrained. We will not exalt ourselves or disparage others on  
account of that pure verbal conduct.’ Thus, bhikkhus, should you  
train yourselves.” (MN 39)

● Mini-Meditation 2 (Hands) - “We will be easy to speak ... out of respect”
C. Five Ways of Being Spoken To and Speaking To Others

C.1 The Five Ways

“There are, monks, these five ways of speaking in which others when speaking to you (or when speaking to others you might speak) might speak:

1) At a right time or at a wrong time (kālena vā akālena vā);
2) according to fact or not according to fact (bhūtena vā abhūtena vā);
3) gently or harshly (saṇhena vā pharusena vā);
4) on what is connected with the goal or on what is not connected with the goal (atthasaṁhitena vā anatthasaṁhitena vā);
5) with a mind of friendliness or full of (secret/inner) hatred (mettacittā vā dosantarā vā).

C.2 Regardless of the Skillfulness/Rudeness of the Speaker …

“Herein, practitioners, you should train yourselves thus:

‘Neither will our minds become perverted (cittaṁ vipariṇataṁ bhavissati) nor will we utter an evil speech (pāpikaṁ vācaṁ nicchāressāma), but kindly and compassionate will we dwell (hitānukampī viharissāma), with a mind of friendliness (mettacittā), void of hatred (na dosantarā); and we will abide pervading that person with a mind imbued with loving-kindness (mettāsahagatena cetasā); and, beginning with him, we will abide pervading the all-encompassing world (sabbāvantaṁ lokaṁ) with a mind imbued with loving-kindness - abundant, exalted, immeasurable (vipulena mahaggatena appamāṇena), without hostility and without ill-will (averena abyābajjhena).’

“This is how you must train yourselves, practitioners.”

D. Abundant, Exalted, Immeasurable “Like the Earth”

“Practitioners, as a person might come along bringing a shovel and basket, and might speak thus: ‘I will make this great earth not earth’; so they dig here and there, toss it here and there, spit here and there, urinate here and there, thinking, ‘Be without earth! Be without earth!’

“What do you think about this, monks? Could that man make this great earth not earth?”

“No, Lord. What is the reason? It is that this great earth, Lord, is deep, it is immeasurable, it is not easy to make it be without earth. That person will eventually get weary and frustrated.”

“Even so, monks, are these five ways of speaking in which others when speaking to you (or you speaking to others) might speak … Herein, practitioners, you should train yourselves thus:

‘Neither will our minds become perverted nor will we utter an evil speech, but kindly and compassionate will we dwell, with a mind of friendliness, void of hatred; and we will abide pervading that person with
a mind of imbued with loving-kindness; and, beginning with him, we will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness like the earth - abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will.

This is how you must train yourselves, practitioners.

● **Mini-Meditation 3 (Root) - “Imbued With Metta like the Earth”**

**E. Abundant, Exalted, Immeasurable “Like Empty Space”**

“Practitioners, as a person might come along bringing lac or yellow or dark green or crimson, and might speak thus: ‘I shall draw pictures in space, making pictures appear there.’

What do you think about this, monks? Could that man delineate a material shape in this space, could he make material shapes appear?”

“No, Lord. What is the reason for this? It is, Lord, that this space is formless and invisible. It is not easy to draw pictures there. That person will eventually get weary and frustrated.

“Even so, monks, are these five ways of speaking in which others when speaking to you might speak …

‘Herein, practitioners, you should train yourselves thus:

‘Neither will our minds become perverted nor will we utter an evil speech, but kindly and compassionate will we dwell, with a mind of friendliness, void of hatred; and we will abide pervading that person with a mind of imbued with loving-kindness; and, beginning with him, we will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness like empty space - abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will.

This is how you must train yourselves, practitioners.

● **Mini-Meditation 4 (Head) - “Imbued With Metta like Empty Space”**

**F. Abundant, Exalted, Immeasurable “Like the Ganges River”**

“Practitioners, as a person might come along bringing a burning grass-torch and might speak thus: ‘I, with this burning grass-torch will set fire to the river Ganges, I will make it scorch up.’

“What do you think about this, monks? Could that man, with the burning grass-torch set fire to the river Ganges and make it scorch up?”

“No, Lord. What is the reason for this? It is, Lord, that the river Ganges is deep, it is immeasurable. It is not easy to set fire to it with a burning grass-torch and make it scorch up. That person will eventually get weary and frustrated.”
“Even so, monks, are these five ways of speaking in which others when speaking to you might speak …

“Herein, practitioners, you should train yourselves thus:

‘Neither will our minds become perverted nor will we utter an evil speech, but kindly and compassionate will we dwell, with a mind of friendliness, void of hatred; and we will abide pervading that person with a mind of imbued with loving-kindness; and, beginning with him, we will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness like the Ganges River - abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will.”

This is how you must train yourselves, practitioners.

● Mini-Meditation 5  (Behind the Naval) - “Imbued With Metta like the Ganges River”

G. Abundant, Exalted, Immeasurable “Like a Catskin Bag”

“Practitioners, it is like a a catskin bag that was rubbed, well-rubbed, very well-rubbed, soft, silky, rid of rustling and crackling. Then a person comes along carrying a stick or a stone, and says, ‘I shall make this soft catskin bag rustle and crackle with this stick or stone.’

“What do you think, mendicants? Could that person make that soft catskin bag rustle and crackle with that stick or stone?”

“No, sir. Why is that? Because that catskin bag is rubbed, well-rubbed, very well-rubbed, soft, silky, rid of rustling and crackling. It’s not easy to make it rustle or crackle with a stick or stone. That person will eventually get weary and frustrated.”

“Even so, monks, are these five ways of speaking in which others when speaking to you might speak …

“Herein, practitioners, you should train yourselves thus:

‘Neither will our minds become perverted nor will we utter an evil speech, but kindly and compassionate will we dwell, with a mind of friendliness, void of hatred; and we will abide pervading that person with a mind of imbued with loving-kindness; and, beginning with him, we will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness like a catskin bag - abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill-will.”

This is how you must train yourselves, practitioners.

● Mini-Meditation 6  (Whole Body) - “Imbued With Metta like a Soft Catskin Bag”
H. Final Simile and Conclusion

H.1 Simile of the Saw

“Monks, as low-down thieves might carve one limb from limb with a double-handled saw, yet even then whoever sets his mind at enmity, he, for this reason, is not a doer of my teaching. Herein, monks, you should train yourselves thus:

‘Neither will our minds become perverted nor will we utter an evil speech, but kindly and compassionate will we dwell, with a mind of friendliness, void of hatred; and we will dwell having suffused that person with a mind of friendliness; and, beginning with him, we will dwell having suffused the whole world with a mind of friendliness that is far-reaching, widespread, immeasurable, without enmity, without malevolence.’

This is how you must train yourselves, monks.

H.2 Enduring Anything

“If you, monks, were to attend repeatedly to this exhortation on the Parable of the Saw, would you, monks, see any way of speech, subtle or gross, that you could not endure?”

“No, Lord.”

“Whatfore, monks, consider repeatedly this exhortation on the Parable of the Saw; for a long time it will be for your welfare and happiness.”

Thus spoke the Lord. Delighted, these monks rejoiced in what the Lord had said.

Resources:

Thus Should You Train Yourselves - A Compendium of Trainings from the Pāli Canon