MN 58 — Abhaya Sutta: To Prince Abhaya

English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

Completeness: ABBREVIATED. Every source-unit character is preserved, including introductions, notes and verse structure. Thanissaro's collection-level note explicitly states that repetitions were cut: https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/about.html. This is evidence about the translation method, not an assertion that every individual unit contains an omission; no repetitions reconstructed.

Text

Translator's Introduction

In this discourse, the Buddha shows the factors that go into deciding what is and is not worth saying. The main factors are three: whether or not a statement is true, whether or not it is beneficial, and whether or not it is pleasing to others. The Buddha himself would state only those things that are true and beneficial, and would have a sense of time for when pleasing and unpleasing things should be said. Notice that the possibility that a statement might be untrue yet beneficial is not even entertained.

This discourse also shows, in action, the Buddha's teaching on the four categories of questions and how they should be answered (see AN 4.42). The prince asks him two questions, and in both cases he responds first with a counter-question, before going on to give an analytical answer to the first question and a categorical answer to the second. Each counter-question serves a double function: to give the prince a familiar reference point for understanding the answer about to come, and also to give him a chance to speak of his own intelligence and good motives. This provides him with the opportunity to save face after being stymied in his desire to best the Buddha in argument. The Commentary notes that the prince had placed his infant son on his lap as a cheap debater's trick: if the Buddha

had put him in an uncomfortable spot in the debate, the prince would have pinched his son, causing him to cry and thus effectively bringing the debate to a halt. The Buddha, however, uses the infant's presence to remove any sense of a debate and also to make an effective point. Taking Nigantha Nataputta's image of a dangerous object stuck in the throat, he applies it to the infant, and then goes on to make the point that, unlike the Niganthas — who were content to leave someone with a potentially lethal object in the throat — the Buddha's desire is to remove such objects, out of sympathy and compassion. In this way, he brings the prince over to his side, converting a potential opponent into a disciple.

Thus this discourse is not only about right speech, but also shows right speech in action.

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Rajagaha in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrels' Sanctuary.

Then Prince Abhaya went to Nigantha Nataputta and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, Nigantha Nataputta said to him, "Come, now, prince. Refute the words of Gotama the contemplative, and this admirable report about you will spread afar: 'The words of Gotama the contemplative — so mighty, so powerful — were refuted by Prince Abhaya!'"

"But how, venerable sir, will I refute the words of Gotama the contemplative — so mighty, so powerful?"

"Come now, prince. Go to Gotama the contemplative and on arrival say this: 'Lord, would the Tathagata say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others?' If Gotama the contemplative, thus asked, answers, 'The Tathagata would say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others,' then you should say, 'Then how is there any difference between you, lord, and run-of-the-mill people? For even run-of-the-mill people say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others.' But if Gotama the contemplative, thus asked, answers, 'The Tathagata would not say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others,' then you should say, 'Then how, lord, did you say of Devadatta that "Devadatta is headed for destitution, Devadatta is headed for hell, Devadatta will boil for an eon, Devadatta is incurable"? For Devadatta was upset & disgruntled at those words of yours.' When Gotama the contemplative is asked this two-pronged question by you, he won't be able to swallow it down or spit it up. Just as if a two-horned chestnut[1] were stuck in a man's throat: he would not be able to swallow it down or spit it up. In the same way, when Gotama the contemplative is asked this two-pronged question by you, he won't be able to swallow it down or spit it up."

Responding, "As you say, venerable sir," Prince Abhaya got up from his seat, bowed down to Nigantha Nataputta, circumambulated him, and then went to the Blessed One. On arrival, he bowed down to the Blessed One and sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he glanced up at the sun and thought, "Today is not the time to refute the Blessed One's words. Tomorrow in my own home I will overturn the Blessed One's words." So he said to the Blessed One, "May the Blessed One, together with three others, acquiesce to my offer

of tomorrow's meal."

The Blessed One acquiesced with silence.

Then Prince Abhaya, understanding the Blessed One's acquiescence, got up from his seat, bowed down to the Blessed One, circumambulated him, and left.

Then, after the night had passed, the Blessed One early in the morning put on his robes and, carrying his bowl and outer robe, went to Prince Abhaya's home. On arrival, he sat down on a seat made ready. Prince Abhaya, with his own hand, served & satisfied the Blessed One with fine staple & non-staple foods. Then, when the Blessed One had eaten and had removed his hand from his bowl, Prince Abhaya took a lower seat and sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One, "Lord, would the Tathagata say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others?"

"Prince, there is no categorical yes-or-no answer to that."

"Then right here, lord, the Niganthas are destroyed."

"But prince, why do you say, 'Then right here, lord, the Niganthas are destroyed'?"

"Just yesterday, lord, I went to Nigantha Nataputta and... he said to me...'Come now, prince. Go to Gotama the contemplative and on arrival say this: "Lord, would the Tathagata say words that are unendearing & disagreeable to others?"... Just as if a two-horned chestnut were stuck in a man's throat: he would not be able to swallow it down or spit it up. In the same way, when Gotama the contemplative is asked this two-pronged question by you, he won't be able to swallow it down or spit it up.'"

Now at that time a baby boy was lying face-up on the prince's lap. So the Blessed One said to the prince, "What do you think, prince: If this young boy, through your own negligence or that of the nurse, were to take a stick or a piece of gravel into its mouth, what would you do?"

"I would take it out, lord. If I couldn't get it out right away, then holding its head in my left hand and crooking a finger of my right, I would take it out, even if it meant drawing blood. Why is that? Because I have sympathy for the young boy."

"In the same way, prince:

[1] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[2] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, unendearing & disagreeable to others, he does not say them.

[3] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but unendearing & disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.

[4] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be unfactual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[5] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing & agreeable to others, he does not say them.

[6] In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing & agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has sympathy for living beings."

"Lord, when wise nobles or brahmans, householders or contemplatives, having formulated questions, come to the Tathagata and ask him, does this line of reasoning appear to his awareness beforehand — 'If those who approach me ask this, I — thus asked — will answer in this way' — or does the Tathagata come up with the answer on the spot?"

"In that case, prince, I will ask you a counter-question. Answer as you see fit. What do you think: are you skilled in the parts of a chariot?"

"Yes, lord. I am skilled in the parts of a chariot."

"And what do you think: When people come & ask you, 'What is the name of this part of the chariot?' does this line of reasoning appear to your awareness beforehand — 'If those who approach me ask this, I — thus asked — will answer in this way' — or do you come up with the answer on the spot?"

"Lord, I am renowned for being skilled in the parts of a chariot. All the parts of a chariot are well-known to me. I come up with the answer on the spot."

"In the same way, prince, when wise nobles or brahmans, householders or contemplatives, having formulated questions, come to the Tathagata and ask him, he comes up with the answer on the spot. Why is that? Because the property of the Dhamma is thoroughly penetrated by the Tathagata. From his thorough penetration of the property of the Dhamma, he comes up with the answer on the spot." [2]

When this was said, Prince Abhaya said to the Blessed One: "Magnificent, lord! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has the Blessed One — through many lines of reasoning — made the Dhamma clear. I go to the Blessed One for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Sangha of monks. May the Blessed One remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life."

Notes

1.

A two-horned chestnut is the nut of a tree (Trapa bicornis) growing in south and southeast Asia. Its shell looks like the head of a water buffalo, with two nasty, curved "horns" sticking out of either side.

2.

This statement is apparently related to the more abstract statement in AN 4.24, that what the Tathagata knows is not "established" in him. In other words, he does not define himself or the awakened mind in terms of knowledge or views, even concerning the Dhamma, although the knowledge that led to his awakening is fully available for him to draw on at any time.

See also: AN 4.24; AN 4.42; AN 4.183.