

AN EXPLANATION TO THE BUDDHA'S UNANSWERED QUESTIONS



Sadhana Ratna Chakma

ABSTRACT

According to Buddhism, unanswered questions are relevant to speculative views. The unanswered questions at the time of the Buddha were a big philosophical matter and subsequently, after the Buddha's passing away, were debated by the different schools of Buddhism. These debates have led to disputes in modern critical Buddhist thought. Such speculative views that the Buddha had been asked by his unenlightened disciples were current at the growth of speculative philosophers in the Upaniṣadic Period. Those unanswered questions which are found in the various discourses of the Buddha are similar views of those Upaniṣadic thinkers and philosophers of the time of the Buddha. The reason why the Buddha termed all those questions as speculative is because each and every unanswered question is based on the ground of *atmavāda* doctrinal principles of the Vedas.

Keywords: Unanswered questions, wrong views, qualified questions, Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

There were ten questions which the Buddha did not answer. These ten unanswered questions are associated with the sixty-two wrong views of different religions that arose contemporaneous to the Buddha. They are as follows: that the world is eternal is associated with the eternalist's view; that a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death is associated with partial eternalism; the world is not eternal and that a Tathāgata does not exist after death are associated with the annihilationist view; that the world is finite and infinite associated with the extentionist view; the self is the same as the body; the self and the body are separate; a Tathāgata exists after death associated with immortality; a Tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death is associated with endless hedging. These ten unanswered questions are termed as metaphysics. Numerically, the first four are cosmic metaphysics and the rest of metapsychology. The modern Buddhist argument is that the Buddha did not answer those metaphysical questions because the questions were wrongly put, or not constructive, otherwise, the Buddha would have answered them. The questions lacked the correct inquiry needed to get categorical explanations from the Buddha.

The inability to answer the question sare said to be due to either their indeterminable nature or that the questions were not constructive. The researcher is more inclined to say the questions were wrongly put than that they had an indeterminable nature. All these questions must have been answered by 'yes' or 'no'. The Buddha may not have been interested in these questions that can only be answered by 'yes' or 'no'. If the Blessed One had answered these by 'yes' or 'no', still the investigators would have remained confused. A question that begins with any auxiliary verb does not apply here. This means that to begin a question with any relative pronoun such as, how, why, what etc., is considered proper. From such question, answers cannot be given by 'yes' or 'no', instead they must be given a categorical explanation. This is the way to understand anything clearly from the Buddha's teachings. Again, the Buddha's teaching is through categorical explanation; the Buddha first provides categorical insight and then gives explanation. It is evidenced that the Buddha gives answer in straightforward manner, if the person asks by what, or by why, or by how, or by where etc. If the investigator still does not understand the straightforward answers given by the Buddha, he or she immediately prepares to ask for further explanation with examples. This is the finest opportunity for the Buddha to preach the Dhamma to help the investigators achieve liberation. Therefore, the ten unanswered questions should have been asked by what,

how, why etc. The Buddha would have definitely answered in a straightforward manner. In this connection, the Buddha also reveals four ways to answers the questions: (1) There is a question to be answered categorically (*ekamsa-vyākaraṇīya pañhā*); (2) there is a question to be answered after making a distinction (*vibhajja-vyākaraṇīya pañhā*); (3) there is a question to be answered with a counter-question (*paṭipucchā-vyākaraṇīya pañhā*); and (4) there is a question to be set aside (*thapaṇīya pañhā*).¹ In this case, the ten unanswered questions fall under the category of the system of answering question by keeping them aside, number (4). Leaving a question aside can also be considered a way of explanation that the Buddha uses to facilitate investigators to understand. In this regard, some related discourses will need to be examined.

DISQUALIFIED QUESTIONS IN BUDDHISM

Unanswered questions in Buddhist scripture are referred to as speculative views (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*). Here, the researcher will first give the list of the unanswered questions which are found in the Theravāda texts, then the unanswered questions will be explained as well as the impact of antecedent speculative views adopted by the dominant Indian religious and philosophical schools at the time of the Buddha. This also had a great impact to the Buddhist Saṅgha.

The list of ten unanswered questions are given in the following, and are divided into three things: the world, the self, and the Tathāgata:

- (1) Is the world eternal?
(*sassato loko ti*)?
- (2) Is the world not eternal?
(*asassato loko ti*)?
- (3) Is the world finite?
(*antavā loko ti*)?
- (4) Is the world infinite?
(*anantavā loko ti*)?
- (5) Is the soul the same as the body?
(*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ ti*)?

¹ A II 46.

- (6) Is the soul different from the body?
(*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṇ ti*)?
- (7) Does the *tathāgata* exist after death?
(*hoti tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?
- (8) Does the *tathāgata* not exist after death?
(*na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?
- (9) Does the *tathāgata* both exist and non-exist after death?
(*hoti ca na hoti ca tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?
- (10) Does the *tathāgata* neither exist nor non-exist after death?
(*neva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?

The questions given below are asked by Vacchagotta to the Buddha. They are not qualified and are ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Because of this, Vaccha still does not understand the answers because the questions are not qualified:

“Now, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The world is eternal, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The world is eternal, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”

“Then good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The world is not eternal, this is indeed truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The world is not eternal, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”

“Now, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The world is an ending thing, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The world is an ending thing, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”

“Then, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The world is not an ending thing, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The world is not an ending thing, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”

“Now, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The life-principle and the body are the same, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The life-principle and the body are the same, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”

“Then, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The life-principle is one thing, the body another, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The life-principle is one thing, the body another, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”

“Now, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The Tathāgata is after dying, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The Tathāgata is after dying, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”

“Then, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The Tathāgata is not after dying, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The Tathāgata is not after dying...falsehood’.”

“Now, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The Tathāgata both is and is not after dying, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The Tathāgata both is and is not after dying...falsehood’.”

“Then, good Gotama, is the revered Gotama of this view: ‘The Tathāgata neither is nor is not after dying, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’?”

“I, Vaccha, am not of this view: ‘The Tathāgata neither is nor is not after dying, this is indeed the truth, all else is falsehood’.”²

Vacchagotta continued to ask the Buddha the similar non-qualified questions, but in the name of a monk:

“But, good Gotama, where does a monk arise whose mind is freed thus?”

“ ‘Arise,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”

“ Well then, good Gotama, does he not arise?”

²I. B. Horner, (ed.), **The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhimanikāya)**, vol II, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1994), pp. 162-163.

- “ ‘Does not arise,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”
- “ Well then, good Gotama, does he both arise and not arise?”
- “ ‘Both arises and does not arise,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”
- “ Well then, good Gotama, does he neither arise nor not arise?”
- “ ‘Neither arises nor does not arise,’ Vaccha, does not apply.”³

At this point, Vacchagotta becomes bewildered by the Buddha’s answers which are in the vein of “does not apply”. However, the Buddha rightly consoles him saying that it was right for him to have bewilderment since the Dhamma taught by the Buddha was not easy to understand and is difficult to see; but it was hard for him because he was of another view, another allegiance, another objective, of a different observance, and under a different teacher.

The ten unanswered questions can be found in the various discourses of the Buddha in the Pāli Canon, such as: Cūḷamālunkyaṭṭhasutta⁴, Aggivacchagottasutta⁵, Vacchagottasāmyutta⁶, Abyākatasāmyutta⁷, Nānātiṭṭhiyasutta⁸, Poṭṭhapādasutta⁹, and Pāsādikāsutta¹⁰; and the sixty-two wrong views are found in detailed explanation in the Brahmajālasutta¹¹. Furthermore, the ten unanswered questions are divided into three subjects: the world, the self, and the Tathāgata. These are shown in the below table:

| No. | 10 Unanswered Questions | No. | The 62 Wrong Views | Sources |
|-----|--------------------------|-------|--------------------|-------------|
| 1. | The world is eternal | 1-4 | Eternalism | (D I 13-17) |
| 2. | The world is not eternal | 51-57 | Annihilationism | (D I 34-36) |
| 3. | The world is finite | 9 | Extensionism | (D I 22-24) |

³ibid., p. 165.

⁴M I 426-437.

⁵M I 483-489.

⁶S III 257-263.

⁷S IV 374-403.

⁸Ud 66-70.

⁹D I 187-190.

¹⁰D III 135-136.

¹¹D I 1.

| No. | 10 Unanswered Questions | No. | The 62 Wrong Views | Sources |
|-----|---|-------|--------------------|-------------|
| 4. | The world is infinite | 10 | Extensionism | (D I 22-24) |
| 5. | The soul is the same as the body | 19 | Immortality | (D I 30-32) |
| 6. | The soul is different of the body | 20 | Immortality | (D I 30-32) |
| 7. | Tathāgata exists after death | 19-50 | Immortality | (D I 30-33) |
| 8. | Tathāgata does not exist after death | 51-57 | Annihilationism | (D I 34-36) |
| 9. | Tathāgata both exist and non-exist after death | 5-8 | Partial Eternalism | (D I 17-22) |
| 10. | Tathāgata neither exists nor non-exists after death | 13-16 | Endless hedging | (D I 24-28) |

The sixty-two wrong-views are signified by the Buddha in the *Brahmajāla* exposition (*dvāsaṭṭhi diṭṭhigatāni brahmajāle veyyākaraṇe vuttāni bhagavatā*). They are: four eternalistic theories, four partial eternalistic theories, four finite and infinite theories, four eel-wriggling theories, two theories (of occurrences) arising without a cause, sixteen theories of having apperception, eight theories of having non-apperception, eight theories of neither apperception nor non-apperception, seven annihilationist theories, and five theories on *nibbāna* in the present existence.¹²

QUALIFIED QUESTIONS IN BUDDHISM

The Buddha refused to directly answer non-qualified questions in order to avoid getting entangled into the debate. He, however, answered them by using a simile:

“What do you think about this: This fire that is blazing in front of you – what is the reason that this fire is blazing? what would you, Vaccha, reply when questioned thus?”

“If, good Gotama, someone were to question me thus: This fire that is blazing in front of you – what is the reason that this fire is blazing? – I, good

¹² Vibh 400; cattāro sassatavādā, cattāro ekaccasassatikā, cattāro antānantikā, cattāro amarā-vikkhepikā, dve adhiccasamuppannikā, soḷasa saññīvādā, aṭṭha asaññīvādā, aṭṭha nevasaññī-nāsaññīvādā, satta ucchedavādā, pañca diṭṭhadhammanibbānavādā.

Gotama, on being questioned thus would reply thus: This fire that is blazing in front of me – this fire is blazing because of a supply of grass and sticks.”

“If, that fire that was in front of you, Vaccha, were to be quenched, would you know: This fire that was in front of me has been quenched?”

“If, good Gotama, that fire that was in front of me were to be quenched, I would know: This fire that was in front of me has been quenched.”

“But if someone were to question you thus, Vaccha: That fire that was in front of you and that has been quenched – to which direction has that fire gone here, to the east or west or north or south? On being questioned thus, what would you, Vaccha, reply?”

“It does not apply, good Gotama. For, good Gotama, that fire blazed because of a supply of grass and sticks, yet from having totally consumed this and from the lack of other fuel, being without fuel it is reckoned to be quenched.¹³

When the questions were asked rightly, the Buddha immediately gave answer in categorical explanation. Questions rightly put means that a person should refrain from using any auxiliary verb, instead should make question begin with relative pronoun, such as: what, how, why, etc.

For example, in the *Vacchagottasamyutta*, the Buddha gives detailed explanation about the reason and causes of the arising of the speculative views concerning the ten unanswered points in the *Suttas*.

The Exalted One is once staying near *Sāvathī* at the Jeta Grove in *Anāthapiṇḍika*'s Park. Then the wanderer of the Vaccha clan comes to the Exalted One, exchanges friendly greetings with him and courteous compliments, and sits down at one side. Seated at one side, the wanderer Vacchagotta thus addresses the Exalted One:

“Pray, Master Gotama, what is the reason, what is the cause why these divers opinions arise in the world?¹⁴ Such as: ‘The world is eternal,’ or ‘the

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

¹⁴ These questions are constructive, as they begin with ‘what is the reason, what is the cause, why these diverse opinions arise in the world’. They demand either categorical explanation or just explanation. There is no way to give answers by ‘yes’ or ‘no’. From these questions, the Buddha gave categorical answers.

world is not eternal,’ or ‘the world is finite,’ or ‘the world is infinite,’ or ‘what is the life, that is the body,’ or ‘life is one thing, body is another,’ or ‘the Tathāgata exists after death,’ or ‘the Tathāgata exists not after death,’ or ‘the Tathāgata does and does not exist after death,’ or ‘the Tathāgata neither exists nor not exists after death’?”

The Buddha answers him the reasons and the causes of diverse opinions that are arising in this world are dependently originated, as follows:

Through ignorance of feeling, through ignorance of the arising of feeling, through ignorance of the ceasing of feeling, through ignorance of the way leading to the ceasing of feeling. Through ignorance of perception... Through ignorance of the activities... Through ignorance of consciousness... Through not seeing of body... Through not seeing of feeling... Through not seeing of perception... Through not seeing of the activities... Through not seeing of consciousness... Through not comprehending body... Through not comprehending feeling... Through not comprehending perception... Through not comprehending the activities... Through not comprehending consciousness... Through not understanding body... Through not understanding feeling... Through not understanding perception... Through not understanding the activities... Through not understanding consciousness... Through not penetrating body... Through not penetrating feeling... Through not penetrating perception... Through not penetrating the activities... Through not penetrating consciousness... Through not discerning body... Through not discerning feeling... Through not discerning perception... Through not discerning the activities... Through not discerning consciousness... Through not discriminating body... Through not discriminating feeling... Through not discriminating perception... Through not discriminating the activities... Through not discriminating consciousness... Through not differentiating body... Through not differentiating feeling... Through not differentiating perception... Through not differentiating the activities... Through not differentiating consciousness... Through not considering body... Through not considering feeling... Through not considering perception... Through not considering the activities... Through not considering consciousness... Through not looking into body... Through not looking into feeling... Through not looking into perception... Through not looking into the activities... Through not looking into consciousness... Through not making clear body... Through not making clear

feeling...Through not making clear perception...Through not making clear the activities...Through not making clear consciousness, through not making clear the arising of consciousness, through not making clear the ceasing of consciousness, through not making clear the way leading to the ceasing of consciousness.¹⁵

In the abyākatasamyutta, we also get similar explanation about reasons and causes by which the genesis of speculative views are taught.

WHY THEY WERE UNANSWERED

The Pāsādikāsutta tells us the reason why the Buddha is reluctant to give answer to the ten unanswered points:

‘If “the past” refers to what is not factual, to fables, to what is not of advantage, the Tathāgata makes no reply. If it refers to what is factual, not fabulous, but which is not of advantage, the Tathāgata makes no reply. But if “the past” refers to what is factual, not fabulous, and which is of advantage, then the Tathāgata knows the right time to reply.’¹⁶

However, the statements seem disputed by another Sutta when the Buddha said that he would not answer those questions because of “siding”.

As the Blessed One said to Venerable Ānanda:

‘If, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer: “Is there a self?” I had replied to him: “There is a self,” then, Ānanda, that would be siding with the recluses and Brahmins who are eternalists.

But if, Ānanda, when asked: “Is there not a self?” I had replied that it does not exist, that, Ānanda, would be siding with those recluses and Brahmins who are annihilationists.’¹⁷

¹⁵ F. L. Woodward (tr.), **Kindred Sayings (Saṃyuttanikāya)**, vol III, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995), pp. 202-204.

¹⁶ D III 134.

¹⁷ F. L. Woodward (tr.), **Kindred Sayings (Saṃyuttanikāya)**, vol IV, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1993), p. 282.

The Khuddakavatthu of the Vibhaṅga gives the names and details of many wrong-views (*micchā-diṭṭhi*). They are, namely: (1) the ‘becoming-view’ (*bhava-diṭṭhi*), which holds that the self and the world will exist again (*bhavissati attā ca loko cāti*); (2) the ‘non-becoming view’ (*vibhava-diṭṭhi*), which holds that the self and the world will not exist again (*na bhavissati attā ca loko cāti*); (3) the ‘eternalist-view’ (*sassata-diṭṭhi*), which holds that the self and the world are eternal (*sassato attā ca loko cāti*); (4) the ‘annihilationist-view’ (*uccheda-diṭṭhi*), which holds that the self and the world will cease (*ucchijjissati attā ca loko cāti*); (5) the ‘finite-view’ (*antavā-diṭṭhi*), which holds that the self and the world are finite (*antavā attā ca loko cāti*);¹⁸ (6) the ‘infinite-view’ (*anantavā-diṭṭhi*), which holds the opposite (*anantavā attā ca loko cāti*); (7) the ‘ultimate-beginning-view’ (*pubbantānudiṭṭhi*), concerning the ultimate beginning of beings; (8) the ‘ultimate-end-view’ (*aparantānudiṭṭhi*), concerning the ultimate end of beings (*aparantamārabhha*); (9) the ‘identity-view’ (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*);¹⁹ (10) the ‘self-view’ (*attānudiṭṭhi*) which is the same view as *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*; and (11) the ‘gratification-view’ (*assāda-diṭṭhi*), which holds that there is no fault in sense pleasures (*natthi kāmesu doso*).²⁰

Throughout observations, many of the Buddha’s disciples, particularly unenlightened ones, may have been influenced by the Upaniṣadic philosophical thinkers of the time conditioning so called speculative thought. The ten questions imply two basic attitudes toward the world. The Buddha speaks of these two attitudes in his dialogue with Venerable Mahākassapa, when the Buddha says that there are two basic views, the view of existence and the view of nonexistence.²¹ He said that people are accustomed to think in these terms, and that as long as they remain entangled in these two views, they will not attain liberation.

¹⁸ Vibh 358.

¹⁹ Vibh 364.

²⁰ Vibh 368.

²¹ Mrs. Rhys Davids (tr.), Assisted by F. H. Woodward, **Kindred Sayings (Saṃyuttanikāya)**, vol II, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1994), pp. 12-13: This world, Kaccāyana, usually bases on two things: on existence and on non-existence. Now he, who with right insight sees the uprising of the world as it really is, does not hold with the non-existence of the world. But he, who with right insight sees the passing away of the world as it really is, does not hold with existence of the world.

The propositions: that the world is eternal, that the world is infinite, that the Tathāgata exists after death, and that the self is independent of the body reflect the view of existence. The propositions: that the world is not eternal, that the world is finite, that the Tathāgata does not exist after death, and that the self is identical with the body reflect the view of nonexistence. These two views were professed by teachers of other schools during the time of the Buddha. The view of existence is generally the view of the Brāhmaṇical thinkers, while that of nonexistence is generally the view of the materialists and hedonists.

When the Buddha had refused to be drawn into the net of these dogmatic views of existence and nonexistence, he had two things in mind: the ethical consequences of these two views, and the fact that the views of absolute existence and nonexistence do not correspond to the way that things really are. The eternalists viewed the self as permanent and unchanging. When the body dies, this self will not die because the self is by nature unchanging. If this is the case, it does not matter what this body does since actions (of the body) will not affect the destiny of the self. This view is incompatible with moral responsibility; if the self is eternal and unchanging, it will not be affected by wholesome and unwholesome actions. Similarly, if the self were identical with the body, and when the self dies along with the body, then it does not matter what the body does. If a person believes that existence ends at death, there will be no necessary constraint upon action. But in a situation where things exist through interdependent origination, absolute existence and nonexistence are impossible.

Another example drawn from the ten unanswerable questions is that the propositions do not correspond to the way things really are. According to Buddhist teachings, the world does not exist absolutely. The world exists dependent on causes and conditions—ignorance, craving, and clinging. When ignorance, craving, and clinging are present, the world exists; when they are not present, the world ceases to exist. Hence, the question of the absolute existence or nonexistence of the world is unanswerable. Existence and nonexistence, taken as absolute ideas, do not apply to things as they really are. This is why the Buddha refuses to agree to absolute statements about the nature of things.

After his passing away, the Buddha's followers began to interpret the meaning of his silence on these questions. These speculations gave rise to different philosophical schools of Buddhism. In my view, the Buddha's main effort is to solve the fundamental problems of pain and misery in this very life, but his followers did not always adhere to his teachings. They tried to discuss these unanswerable questions, as all speculative philosophers did. But the Buddha himself always tried to make people aware of sorrow

inherent to the human condition so that they could understand its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation.²²

In the Kathāvatthu, a debate on the unanswered questions was taken place among different Buddhist schools in the third century BCE. The schools that are mentioned in the Kathāvatthu are: Theravāda, Andhakas and Uttarāpathakas. Theravāda is the adherent and Andhakas and Uttarāpathakas are the opponents. They are opponents because those unanswered questions, in their opinions, were immoral, which Theravāda rejected.²³

Their debate about unanswered questions is excerpted from Kathāvatthu, as follows:

Theravāda: Then ones must be prepared to classify it as one of the immoral categories—result, inoperative consciousness, matter, *nibbāna*, organ and object of sense—which you may not do. Ones must also be prepared to admit that other mental factors, the conscious processes or acts accompanying erroneous opinion, are immoral. Else you have this anomaly: that all these together constitute a state of immoral consciousness, while the erroneous opinion alone is immoral.

Again, the unmoral has no moral fruit or result, while erroneous opinion is of the opposite nature. Nay, were not evil views ranked as paramount offences by the Exalted One? Did he not say:

‘Wrong views, Vaccha, are immoral, right views are moral’? And did he not say also: ‘For the holder of wrong views, Puṇṇa, I declare one of two destinies, either purgatory or the animal world?’

Andhakas and Uttarāpathakas: But did not the Exalted One say:

“This Vaccha, is unsolved (*avyākata*): that the world is eternal, or that it is not eternal. This, too, is unsolved (*avyākata*), that the world is finite, or that it is infinite. And so, too, are these: that the soul and the body are the same, or are different things;

²² Rajmani Tigunait, **Seven Systems of Indian Philosophy**, (Honesdale: Himalayan Institute Press, 1983), p. 40.

²³ Shwe Zan Aung, Mrs. Rhys Davids, **Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse (a translation of the Kathāvatthu from the Abhidhammapiṭaka)**, (London: The Pali Text Society, 1915), pp. 290-291.

that a Tathāgata comes to be after death, or not, or both comes to be and does not come to be, or that neither happens”? Surely then erroneous opinions are immoral.

Theravāda: But was it not said by the Exalted One:

‘Of a person holding wrong views, *bhikkhus*, whatever karma of deed, word and thought he completes and carries out in accordance with those views, be it volition, aspiration, adjustment of mind, or other activities, all those things conduce to the undesirable, to the unpleasant, to the disagreeable, to trouble, to ill’? Hence it is surely wrong to say that erroneous opinions are unmoral.

But mostly in the discourses of the *Suttanta Piṭaka*, the unanswered questions are seen as dialogue in a friendly environment rather than a debate. The Brāhmaṇical speculative thought at the Buddha’s time was very influential. The Buddha did not answer to such Brāhmaṇical speculative thoughts in Buddhist scriptures. Therefore, such speculative thoughts are termed as ‘unanswered questions’ (*avyākata pañhā*). The philosophers from all traditions are confused, this is the reason the Buddha did not answer them.

LOGICAL AND METAPHORICAL WAYS OF EXPLANATION

In the Cūḷamāluṅkyāputtasutta, Cūḷamāluṅkyāputta approach to the Buddha was aggressive in the way he put forward illogical circumstances and questions to the Buddha. These were not constructive and he did not receive an explanation from the Buddha.

However, the Buddha refuted Cūḷamāluṅkyāputta in a logical argument:

“Did I ever speak thus to you, Māluṅkyāputta: ‘Come you, Māluṅkyāputta, fare the Brahma-faring under me and I will explain to you either that the world is eternal or that the world is not eternal...or that the Tathāgata neither is nor is not after dying?’” “No, revered sir.” “Or did you speak thus to me: ‘I, revered sir, will fare the Brahma-faring under the Lord if the Lord will explain to me either that the world is eternal or that the world is not eternal...or that the Tathāgata neither is nor is not after dying?’” “No, revered sir.”²⁴

²⁴I. B. Horner (tr.), vol II, *op.cit.*, pp. 98-99.

Then, the Buddha very correctly said, ‘I will not fare the Brahma-faring under the Lord until the Lord explains to me whether the world is eternal or whether the world is not eternal...or whether the Tathāgata neither is nor is not after dying’. In order to get clearer point of understanding, the Buddha had to give examples to Mālunkyāputta such as if a man were pierced by an arrow that was thickly smeared with poison and his friends and relations, his kith and kin, were to procure a physician and surgeon.

He might speak thus:

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the man who pierced me whether he is a noble or brahman or merchant or worker.’ He might speak thus: ‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who pierced me.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the man who pierced me whether he is tall or short or middling in height.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the man who pierced me whether he is black or deep brown or golden skinned.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the man who pierced me to what village or market town or town he belongs.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the bow from which I was pierced whether it was a spring bow or a cross-bow.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the bow-string from which I was pierced whether it was of swallow-wort or of reed or sinew or hemp or a tree.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the shaft by which I was pierced whether it was of reeds of this kind or that.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the shaft from which I was pierced what kind of feathers it had: whether those of a vulture or heron or hawk or peacock or some other bird.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the shaft from which I was pierced with what kind of sinews it was encased: whether those of a cow or buffalo or deer or monkey.’

‘I will not draw out this arrow until I know of the arrow by which I was pierced whether it was an ordinary arrow or some other kind of arrow.’²⁵

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

From this example, the question is what he should do. The answer is he should pull out the arrow immediately because otherwise he will die. In the *Simsapāsutta* the Exalted One was staying at Kosambī in *Simsapā* Grove.

Then the Exalted One, gathering up a few leaves in his hand, said to the monks²⁶:

‘What think ye monks? Which are the more numerous, just this mere handful of *Simsapā* leaves I have here, or those in the Grove overhead?’ ‘Very few in numbers, Lord, are the leaves in the handful gathered up by the Exalted One: much more in number are those in the Grove overhead.’ ‘Just so, monks, much more in number are those things I have found out, but not revealed; very few are the things I have revealed. And why, monks, have I not revealed them? Because they are not concerned with profit, they are not rudiments of the holy life, they conduce not to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to full comprehension, to the perfect wisdom, to *nibbāna*. But what is it, monks, that I have revealed? Just that this is Ill. This is the arising of Ill. This is the ceasing of Ill. This is the practice that leads to the ceasing of Ill. Because, monks, this is concerned with profit. It is the rudiments of the holy life. It does conduce to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to full comprehension, to the perfect wisdom, to *nibbāna*.²⁷

DISCUSSIONS

T. R. V. Murti, in his book *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System*, has brought an admirable discussion of the Upanishads and Buddhism in which he makes some judicious criticisms of Mrs. Rhys Davids for holding to the view that primitive Buddhism affirmed that the existence of a soul because the Buddha was silent when he was asked of the indeterminate points.²⁸

Noa Ronkin, in his “Early Buddhist Metaphysics:

²⁶ F. L. Woodward (tr.), *Kindred Sayings (Saṃyuttanikāya)*, vol V, (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1994), p. 370.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System*, (London: Routledge, 1955), pp. 10-28.

The Buddha, as he is portrayed in the *Nikāyas*, rejects purely theoretical questions known as the undeclared or indeterminate (*avyākata*) questions those that are to be set aside on the grounds that they are not conducive to *nibbāna*, and the Dhamma is accordingly presented as a therapeutic way of life rather than a system in the traditional sense. The Buddha's interest is in gaining insight into the conditions of sentient experience in *saṃsāra*, namely, in experience as lived, not in its foundation in reality, and he suspends all views regarding the nature of such reality, of the person and his or her relation to the environment, and of the ontological status of the encountered world. His teaching is therefore portrayed as pragmatic, empirically focused, concerning itself with the cessation of *dukkha* and to that end emphasizing issues of cognition, psychology, epistemology and soteriology.²⁹

Rajmani Tigunait has also discussed this issue in his "Seven Systems of Indian Philosophy":

The Buddha realized the Truth within and he understood the importance of ethical and moral teachings. He was primarily an ethical teacher and a social reformer rather than a metaphysician. His message addressed the problem of how to lead one's life in order to cross the ocean of suffering and misery. Whenever questions pertaining to the soul and its conditions after death were asked, Buddha always remained silent because he considered such speculation to be useless. For him, the most urgent imperative in life is to analyse the existence of suffering so as to put it to an end. He felt that a person who indulges in theoretical speculation while suffering with worldly problems is behaving nonsensically; such behaviour can be linked to that of a person shot by an arrow who, instead of trying to pull it out immediately, wastes his time on idle speculation regarding the origin, the maker, and the shooter of the arrow.³⁰

K. N. Jayatilleke, in his book, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, gave some important questions in relation to those unanswered questions. That is, on what grounds were those questions unanswered and have shown that those unanswered questions were

²⁹ Noa Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The making of philosophical tradition*, (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005), pp. 4-5.

³¹ Rajmani Tigunait, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

both answerable and unanswerable.³¹ He has observed that scholars in their endeavour have not been careful in distinguishing and explaining why the Buddha set aside those questions.

However, K. N. Jayatilleke would also seem to follow Arthur Keith's solution:

It is quite legitimate to hold that the Buddha was a genuine agnostic, that he had studied the various systems of ideas prevalent in his day without deriving any greater satisfaction from them than any of us today do from the study of modern systems, and that he had no reasoned or other conviction on the matter.³²

He is silent, not merely because knowledge of these matters does not tend to *Nirvāṇa*, but because men hold various opinions regarding them that is not true. The Buddha certainly says that men hold various views regarding these questions, which result in violent controversies, but he does not say that he left them unanswered. Keith bases this conclusion on the Canonical sources.

Apart from the foregoing discussions at the beginning, the researcher has pointed out that those unanswered questions were not qualified questions. Canonical references have justified that this may have led to those questions being unanswered by the Buddha. This shows that the Buddha enthusiastically sought the questions from which a categorical answer can be given from a qualified question. When the Buddha was been asked a qualified question, the Buddha showed no hesitation to answer or give explanation.

CONCLUSION

The discourses of the Buddha from the Pāli Canon show that the Buddha had been asked many non-constructive questions. In the Aggivacchagottasutta, along with other Suttas in the Pāli canon, Vacchagotta is told that the Buddha does not approach any of these views because they are speculative, which is accompanied by anguish, distress, misery and fever; they are not conducive nor to *nibbāna*. Categorical answers were given by the Buddha when Vaccha asked qualified questions.

³¹ K. N. Jayatilleke, **Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge**, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 472.

³² Arthur Berriedale Keith, **Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon**, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), p. 63.

Many scholars are also of the view that those unanswered questions would be answerable but the questions must have been made into qualified ones. This paper has separately shown the data containing questions and answers of so-called unanswered questions into “disqualified” and “qualified” questions in order to understand why the Buddha did not answer the questions. The discourses of the Buddha also shows examples like that of Māluṅkyāputta and Vaccha were enlightened by the Buddha’s categorical answers and explanation since the questions asked were valid or qualified.

REFERENCE

1. Primary Sources

1.1 Pāli

Aṅuttaranikāya. vols. I-II. R. Morris (ed.). Warder (revised). Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1989.

Dīghanikāya. vols. I-II. T. W. Rhys Davids and Carpenter (ed.). Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1982-1995.

Dīghanikāya. vol. III. Carpenter (ed.). Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1992.

Majjhimanikāya. vol I. Trencker (ed.). Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1993.

Saṃyuttanikāya. vols. II-V. M. Leon Feer (ed.). Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1975, 1990, 1991, 1994.

Udāna. P. Steinthal (ed.). Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1982.

Vibhaṅga. Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids (ed.). Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1904.

1.2 Translations

Aung, Shwe Zan and Rhys Davids, Mrs. (trs.). **Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse (a translation of the Kathāvatthu from the Abhidhammapiṭaka).** London: The Pali Text Society, 1915.

Rhys Davids, Mrs. (tr.), Assisted by F. H. Woodward. **Kindred Sayings (Saṃyuttanikāya).** vol II. Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1994.

Horner, I. B. (tr.). **The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhimanikāya)**. vol II. Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1994.

Woodward, F. L. (tr.). **Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta-Nikāya)**, vols. III-V. Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995.

2. Secondary Sources

Jayatilke, K. N. **Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge**. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963.

Keith, Arthur Berriedale. **Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923.

Murti, T. R. V. **The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System**. London: Routledge, 1955.

Ronkin, Noa. **Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The making of philosophical tradition**. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.

Tigunait, Rajmani. **Seven Systems of Indian Philosophy**. Honesdale: Himalayan Institute Press, 1983.