

## Asking the right questions<sup>1</sup>

Although early Buddhism has one of the largest canonical scriptures in religious history, encompassing a wide range of human knowledge and experiences, the Buddha has only one clear and consistent message in his teachings. It is for the sake of spiritual awakening and liberation of all living beings (not just humans).

**The Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (M 63), the Shorter Discourse to Māluṅkyā,putta, is a clear statement on why the Buddha does not explain matters that are not connected with the spiritual path and goal, namely, the ending of suffering.<sup>2</sup> Like the parable of the raft,<sup>3</sup> the parable of the poisoned dart in the Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta shows the spiritual pragmatism of early Buddhism.<sup>4</sup>

The Buddha does not answer Māluṅkyā,putta's questions regarding the ten "unexplained" or "undetermined" (*avyākata*) theses<sup>5</sup> for two reasons. Firstly, they are not connected with the spiritual path and goal. In fact, such speculations distract us from our spiritual development and liberation. Secondly, these theses are, by their very nature, unanswerable -- they are *questions wrongly put*.<sup>6</sup> To answer either "yes" or "no" to any of such questions is to accept them as valid when they are really not.

This is like our answering "yes" or "no" to a question such as "Where does fire go when it is extinguished?" as shown in **the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72). There, the Buddha reminds us that such a question does "not apply," it is "wrongly put" (*na upeti*).<sup>7</sup> **Rupert Gethin** in his *Foundations of Buddhism* gives a modern example: If we answer "'yes' or 'no' to a question such as 'Are Martians green?'" we are inevitably "drawn into accepting the validity of the question" (1998:68).

A similar type of trick question is called the "double-horned question" (*ubhato,koṭṭika pañha*) or dilemma (where answering either way would bring an unwelcome conclusion), and as such does not have a definite or "one-sided" (*ekamsa*) answer, as recounted in **the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58).<sup>8</sup> In **the (Asibandhaka,putta) Kulā Sutta** (S 42.9), however, the Buddha answers the two-horned question proposed by the Nirganthas (the Jains), simply by declaring to them that it is a trick question!<sup>9</sup>

Nowadays, we often meet with zealous religious missionaries who try to trick us into being a captive audience to discuss "what do you think of my saviour?" Whether we reply that we accept or reject him, we are tricked into chatting with the missionary trained in sophistry and casuistry. The best response to such questions is to reject them and leave them unanswered, that is, to say, "Excuse me, I don't feel like talking with you. Thank you." This certainly keeps our hearts more healthy.

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection is an expansion on **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (M 63) @ SD 5.8 Intro (1).

<sup>2</sup> M 63/1:426-432 = SD 5.8.

<sup>3</sup> M 22.13/1:134 = SD 3.13.

<sup>4</sup> M 63.5.2/1:429 = SD 5.8.

<sup>5</sup> The 10 undeterminable questions: the first 4 is about whether the physical universe is eternal or nor, and finite or infinite; the next 2, about whether the soul is identical with the body or separate; and the last 4 whether, after death, a liberated saint exists, does not exist, both, or neither. See SD 5.8 (2).

<sup>6</sup> Cf U 66. See **The Buddha's silence** = SD 44.1. **Readings:** (1) Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 242 ff, 334 f, 350-352, 473 ff; (2) Collins 1982:131-138 (§4.2); (3) Harvey 1995: 83-88 (*avyākata* questions), 239-245 (on propositions 7-10 on the tathāgata); (4) Gethin 1998:66-68 (on **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S**, M 63). See also: (1) Intro to **Mahāli S** (D 6) in D:RD 1:186-190; (2) Intro to **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58) tr in SD 7.12.

<sup>7</sup> M 72.19/1:487 = SD 6.15.

<sup>8</sup> M 58.6/1:393 f = SD 7.12.

<sup>9</sup> S 42.9/4:322-325 = SD 7.11. In **Milinda,pañha**, too, the double-horned question is used skillfully by way of Buddhist apologetics. See also Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 334 f, 350-352.

However, when an honest seeker questions us about religious matters, asking, for example, “What is life? What is the purpose of life? Why is life so full of suffering? What is happiness?” we should not jump right away into giving an answer. We should first know *why* the person is asking. What is really troubling the person? Perhaps, the question needs to be rephrased and be more clear. We could even ask, “Why are you asking this question?” When the question is rightly put, we are in a better position to explore it, and come to some usual understanding, even if we do not agree on a common answer.

The Buddha’s not answering the “ten questions” does not mean that he lacks the knowledge of the answers. On the contrary, the Buddha’s knowledge is direct and vast: we might say that he fully understands what is going on after experiencing life hands-on, that is, he has both knowledge and vision (*ñāṇa, dassana*).

In **the Simsapā Sutta** (S 56.31), the Buddha declares that what he knows through self-knowledge is as great as the amount of leaves in the simsapa forest, but he has not taught these things “because they are not connected with the goal, not connected with the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to nirvana.” What he has fully and clearly taught us, that is, the four noble truths, are sufficient for self-awakening.<sup>10</sup>

There is so much we know about the world today, and so much information, good and bad, useful and useless, is easily and freely available today. Religion, too, is easily available from books, the Internet, and the numerous religious centres and speakers. An important point to remember here is that whatever we hear or receive from others, no matter how knowledgeable or respectable or powerful, are at best *opinions*, that is, another’s view. Only after we have personally experienced for ourselves that these things are true and good should we accept them.

How do we know something is really true and good? We regularly feel happy with it, without harming ourselves, or others, or the environment. In other words, we make others happy, too, with our understanding and actions. Something true and good does not depend on who speaks them, because truth and goodness are inherent in life itself.

Truth is what *frees* us from the narrowness of religion and priescraft, but keeps us *rooted* in a crowded society flushed and flooded by easy pleasures and wild knowledge. Truth helps us to think clearly for ourselves so that we are not tricked into handing over our life’s remote control to others.

Goodness frees our hearts so that we truly feel what is really beautiful in us and the world. However, the world is beautiful only when we are able to look deep into the stillness of our own hearts. For, the real world is not out there, but right here in our hearts. We create our own worlds. In this sense, we *are* the world. It is this world that is worth sharing with others, so that we become a universe of boundless happiness.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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<sup>10</sup> S 56.31/5:437 f = SD 21.7.