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Silence and the Buddha

Spiritual liberation, the limits of language, and the Buddha's wisdom
An introduction by Piya Tan ©2007, 2014

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, davon muss man schweigen

What we cannot speak about should be left in silence.

Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

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1 The contexts of silence

1.0 This essay is an overview of the various notions and occurrences of silence that are found in the early suttas and related texts. They are reviewed in the light of the Buddha's own conduct and teaching, and how we can be inspired into Dharma practice or improving our practice by understanding the nature and manifestations of silence in early Buddhism.

This essay should be read along with that on **Unanswered questions** (SD 40a.10).

1.1 APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS

1.1.1 Ineffability and verbosity

1.1.1.1 DHARMA DIFFICULTY. The Buddha Dharma is often described as “deep, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, sublime, unattainable through discursive thought (and logic), subtle, to be experienced by the wise.”² In short, the Dharma is sometimes said to be ineffable [5.4.3], and yet Buddhism as we know it today has perhaps the largest corpus of religious literature in the world and can be as steeped in scholasticism as any system. Even the Buddha himself is said to have spent practically every day of the last 45 years of his life teaching the Dharma.

1.1.1.2 ZEN CONTRADICTIONS. Furthermore, we have Buddhist traditions, especially Zen, that claim “a special transmission outside the teachings, not dependent on words ...,”³ it is even today perhaps (besides Vajrayāna) the most prolix and ritualistic of Buddhisms.⁴ Even the Theravāda, too, has its own “technical” tradition that arose in post-Buddha times, such as Abhidhamma philosophy and scholasticism.⁵ In other words, these traditions have become book-based traditions.⁶

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921; English 1922.

² *Dhammo gambhīro duddaso duranubodho santo paṇīto atakkāvacaro nipuṇo paṇḍita,vedanīyo*, eg **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,19/1:167), SD 1.11. On *atakkāvacara*, see **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,3.1.2), SD 49.8.

³ H Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History* vol 1: India and China, 2005:85; Albert Welter, “The disputed place of ‘a special transmission outside the scriptures’ in Ch’an” 1996, “Mahākāśyapa’s smile” 2000.

⁴ See **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b.5 (5.1.2.1).

⁵ The Abhidhamma was prob composed btw 200 BCE and 200 CE. See **Dhamma and Abhidhamma**, SD 26.1 (1.0 & 2.1.3)

⁶ Such developments are, of course, not unique to Buddhism. Michel de Certeau (*The Mystic Fable, vol 1. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, tr M B Smith, Univ of Chicago Press, 1992) and David Burrell (*Knowing the*

1.1.2 Possible explanations

1.1.2.0 There are a few explanations for this apparent contradiction between the ineffable truth and its prolix expression. The simplest way to state this case is that while the ineffable truth (especially of meditative experience and nirvana) is the goal, the profuse expression in language and images are the tools or bases for the spiritual training leading to that goal.

Indeed, the ineffable truth can never be properly expressed in linguistic terms, just as tastes and feelings cannot be fully or properly experienced vicariously. In fact, there is a popular tradition, in the Buddha's time, of ascetics keeping the rule of **silence**. However, this silence has been criticized by the Buddha to be the foolish silence, that is, they do not really know the proper answers [1.1.2.2], or the self-seeking silence, that is, for impressing the pious and gullible for the sake of gains, favours and honours. [2.1.4]

1.1.2.1 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES. We might not be able to taste or feel just as another does, or make another taste or feel just the way we do. Even if another were to be given to experience the same things that we have tasted or felt (say, a dish we cooked or clothing we are wearing) it is highly unlikely that he would respond in the same way as we have done. In other words, we have the problem of "taste" itself: whether it is to that person's liking, or perhaps the taste is too strong, too flat, too sweet, too rich, too sour, too bitter, or simply tasteless, and so on.⁷

Or, we could speak or write about our experience so that the other party is able to appreciate how we really "feel." If we are eloquent enough and the other party is willing and able to listen or read, and then understand and accept what we have said or written, then we have communicated well enough. Again here we have the problems of perception and views. Most people would see things, no matter how well intended or well presented, conditioned by their own personal experiences and dominant views.

1.1.2.2 A PROTREPTEIC TRADITION. Scholars often use big words and technical terms, but where these help us understand some difficult or profound teaching, they can be very useful. Some scholars, for examples, say that the Buddha's silence is "**protreptic**."⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary gives only these two meanings of protreptic:

(1) directive, instructive, didactic.

(2) (n) A book, writing or speech intended to exhort or instruct; an exhortation, instruction.

However, I think, we can add another usage or meaning to this, that is, as an abstract noun (just like "dialectic"), meaning "the theory, method and process of instruction." In simple terms, we can take protreptic to mean "instructive, having to do with teaching."

1.1.2.3 The Buddha's silence is instructive, and teaches us about what hinders our personal progress or what liberates our hearts. Take the case of the wanderer Vaccha,gotta as an example. **The (Vaccha,-gotta) Ānanda Sutta** (S 44.10), on whether or not there is a soul, is a short but instructive discourse on "wholesome instruction." When Vaccha,gotta asks the Buddha, "Is there a soul [self] (*attā*)?" he remains silent. Then, when the wanderer asks, "Is there no soul?" the Buddha again remains silent. Vaccha,gotta then leaves.

Ānanda then asks the Buddha why he remains silent on both occasions. The Buddha's explanation is very instructive:

(1) If he were to answer, "There *is* a soul," then he would be siding the *eternalists*.

(2) If he were to answer, "There is *no* soul." then he would be siding the *annihilationists*.

Unknowable God: Ibn Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas, Univ of Notre Dame Press, 1986) have shown how, in the God-religions, serious attempts were made by such mediaeval scholastics as Moses Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas to reconcile ineffable-unknowable nature with the fact that a variety of qualities had been, and continue to be, predicated of God. A C Graham tries to reconcile this dilemma in the case of the skeptical Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi (4th century BCE): see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, Open Court, 1989:199-202; also Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism, Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition*, Princeton Univ Press, 1992. See Cabezon 1994:174.

⁷ On a broader application of those human emotions, see SD 17.3 (2).

⁸ See Ganeri 2007a:100-103.

Here, the Buddha's silence keeps to the middle way, that is, the avoiding of the extreme views of eternalism and of annihilationism.⁹ [3.2.2]

1.1.2.4 Eternalism lies at the root of beliefs in God, the soul and eternal heaven and eternal hell. In such belief-systems, there is no real self-effort, as God or some kind of universal principle is all-powerful, so that what we are and our destiny are all predestined or subject to some external agency or divine will. In such a system, man, all life and the world are all subject to the divine.

In other words, unconditional love is actually impossible because all love comes from God, and must be given back to God. We are but his creatures. These are seriously harmful wrong views which are widespread even today.

1.1.2.5 Then, there is **Buddhist eternalism**, prevalent even today in Mahāyāna and Buddhisms that subscribe to the notion of some kind of eternal Buddhas, "Buddha-womb" (*tathāgata, garbha*), and everlasting paradises. Some Mahāyāna schools or some ethnic Mahāyāna Buddhists believe that the Buddha, or any of the countless Buddhas, is eternal, that is, they have always existed. Then there is a doctrine of *tathāgata, garbha*, or "Buddha-womb," popularly known as "Buddha-seen," that is, in every one of us there is the seed of Buddhahood.

Every Buddha, according to Mahāyāna, has their Buddha-field or universe. These are like eternal paradises which contain the faithful who have faith in the Buddha who preside over that particular paradise. Then, there are the cosmic Bodhisattvas, such as Guanyin, who are also eternal in nature.

None of these teachings is found in early Buddhism. They are false views if they are seen as being eternal, which means they fall into the extreme of eternalism. Hence, the Buddha is silent on such views because they do not accord with true reality.¹⁰

1.1.2.6 Annihilationism is the notion that this is our only life, and that the self or soul is identical with the body, so that death is the end of everything, without any hereafter. Such a belief also entails that there is no karma or moral accountability and, as such, no rebirth, too. This is our only life, claims some materialists, so we should live it to the fullest no matter what. This wrong view is very common in more affluent and developed societies.

1.1.2.7 Let us continue with explaining why the Buddha remains silent to **Vaccha, gotta's questions**. On a simpler level,

- (1) If he were to answer, "There *is* a soul," then it would not conduce to the arising of the knowledge that all things are non-self (*anattā*).
- (2) If he were to answer, "There is *no* soul." then the questioner, already confused, would be even more confused, thinking, "It seems that formerly I had a self but now it does not exist!"¹¹

The Buddha would clearly not answer that there is a soul or self, as a key teaching of his is that there is no self (eg, Dh 279). This is not an invented idea or dogma of the Buddha, but a realization of the nature of true reality. All phenomena (everything in the universe) are impermanent: we can deny God, but can never rightly deny impermanence. Whatever is impermanent is also unsatisfactory because it must decay, will not last, and will change into something else.

We have no control over what is impermanent and unsatisfactory. In other words, they are not entities but processes. There is also no underlying principle that is some kind of eternal version or fixed form (such as the Platonic "Form") of things somewhere in the universe or outside of it. This is the meaning of the statement "All principles are non-self" (*sabbe dhammā anattā*) (Dh 277d).¹²

In other words, there is no self or soul or abiding entity behind the principle of conditionality, that is, how all things or events are interrelated. Nothing exists in itself, but in mutual relationship and relativity to one another. All life exists in a sort of interbeing.¹³ Hence, one important reason why the Buddha an-

⁹ S 44.10 @ SD 2.16(5).

¹⁰ On the problem of eternal Buddhas, see P Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, London: Routledge, 1989:150-153.

¹¹ (**Vaccha, gotta**) **Ānanda S** (S 44.10), SD 2.16(5).

¹² See **Dhamma Niyāma S** (A 3.134), SD 26.8.

¹³ On the interbeing of the elements, see SD 17.2a (6). On biological interbeing, see SD 29.6b (7.2). On ecological interbeing, see SD 37.8 (1.2.2). On economic interbeing, see SD 31.12 (3.6).

swers Vacchagotta’s questions (on whether there is a soul or not) with *silence* is that these questions are simply unrelated to the nature of true reality or spiritual liberation.

1.1.2.8 A MISSIOLOGICAL TRADITION. Early Buddhism is simply about “suffering and its ending,” as famously stated by the Buddha [3.5.2]. “Suffering” here refers to our understanding the conditional nature of life and all things in this universe. “Its ending” refers to the path to the ending of suffering, and the goal, that is nirvana itself.

Having discovered what suffering really is and being himself fully liberated from it—*having directly known the Dharma*—his task now is to make the Dharma known. When there are 60 arhats in the world, the Buddha gives them their **great commission**,¹⁴ and sends them out singly in sixty different directions—the universal Dharma outreach—to declare the liberating Dharma to the world.¹⁵

The best outreach method used by the Buddha and these early saints is not that of hell-fire sermons or mass conversions by zealotry or subterfuge, but by their own **silent examples**. “Silent” here means not only “not talking” unless and until we are invited, or when the audience is ready, but that we are joyfully calm and radiant so that others are able to appreciate it.

1.1.2.9 THE SILENCE OF EXAMPLE. One of the best examples of a Dharma-inspired outreach based on the “silent example” is that of the elder **Assaji** (one of the first 5 monks). The Vinaya and other narrative works record that Sāriputta, upon meeting the newly awakened Assaji for the first time, is at once inspired by his peaceful demeanour. In due course, Sāriputta asks him about the Dharma. On Sāriputta’s insistence, Assaji teaches him a well known quatrain on conditionality:

Of all things that arise from a cause, their cause the Tathāgata has told,
and also how these cease to be— This too the great sage has told. (V 1:40; J 1:85)¹⁶

Hearing just the first two lines, Sāriputta becomes a streamwinner.¹⁷

Assaji is an early Buddhist example of **an inner silence** exuding his whole personality so that it is noticed by another saint-to-be. Assaji then tries to keep to **an outer silence**, humbly admitting that he is very newly ordained. Sāriputta however is even more moved by such a powerful silence that he is determined to know how it arises. In due course, Sāriputta gains his goal, that is, the silence of arhathood, the peace that comes from the abandonment of mental defilements.¹⁸

1.1.3 No “secret teachings”

1.1.3.1 If early Buddhism is a protreptic (teaching) and missiological tradition, then silence is no option. Here “silence,” of course, refers to the absence of speech. In **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), the Buddha declares his openness that he has *no silence of “secret teachings”* or “the teacher’s fist” (*ācariya,muṭṭhi*) [§2.25], and admonishes us to be our own refuge (§2.26):

“I have taught the Dharma, Ānanda, making no distinction between inner and outer: the Tathagata has no ‘teacher’s fist’ in respect of teachings

Therefore, Ānanda, dwell with yourself as an island, with yourself as refuge, with no other refuge—dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge.”

(D 16,225.1-227), SD 9

1.1.3.2 The Commentaries explain the phrase, “**making no distinction between inner and outer**” (*anantaram abāhiraṃ karitvā*) as making no distinction of either “inner or outer” by way of the Dharma

¹⁴ Mv 1.11.1 @ V 1:19 f.

¹⁵ See **The great commission**, SD 11.2.

¹⁶ See SD 5.6 (2.1) & SD 30.8 (2.2.6.4+3.4.2.2).

¹⁷ Mv 1.13.5+10 @ V 1:40,28*+41,35* (VA 5:975) = Ap 1.146/1:25 (ApA 231) = Peṭk 10 = ThaA 3:95. On Sāriputta’s conversion, see DhA 4:150 f.

¹⁸ On Sāriputta’s arhathood, see **Dīgha,nakha S** (M 74,14/1:500 f), SD 16.1.

or by way of persons. Making an “inner” of the Dharma is to teach, thinking, ‘This much Dharma I will *not* teach others.’ Making an “outer” of the Dharma is to teach, thinking, “I will teach *this* much to others.” Making an “inner” of the person means to teach, thinking, “I will teach *this* person.” Making an “outer” of the person means to teach, thinking, “I will *not* teach *that* (person).” Thus, the Buddha teaches without making a distinction.¹⁹

1.1.3.3 Further, the Commentaries explain, “**The teacher’s fist** is found amongst outside sectarians who do not tell certain things to their pupils even when they are still boys (*dahara, kāle*), who keep certain teachings for their beloved and favourite pupils, telling it to them only at the last moment from their deathbed. The Tathāgata does not hold back anything, keeping a closed fist, thinking, ‘I will teach this in my old age, at the last moment’.”²⁰

1.1.3.4 To have secret teachings or a teacher’s fist is an unwholesome, political (power-based) or money-minded silence unbecoming of a true teacher. This is the silence of holding back what is beneficial for the good and happiness of the student or seeker, giving teachings only to hold back followers, and favouring the affluent and those deemed as beneficial to ourselves.

1.1.3.5 If any silence is shown by the Buddha, it is for the benefit of the audience (which includes us who have the benefit of studying the suttas even today). This theme of the true purpose of the Dharma is closely related to **the silence of compassion**, both of which we will discuss in more detail later [3.2].

1.1.4 Limits of the teaching

1.1.4.1 What Dharma does the Buddha make no secret of, teaching it openly to all who are ready and willing to listen? Here we will see another kind of fist, partly closed, but one holding the essential teachings which are handed to us. **The Simsapā Sutta** (S 56.31) tells us that while in a forest, the Buddha holds up a handful of leaves and asks the monks, Which has more leaves: his hand or the forest? The obvious answer is *the forest*.

Even so, the Buddha’s direct knowledge (his awakening) is vast like the leaves of the forest compared to what he actually teaches. The Buddha *is* holding back some teachings here because such knowledge is either too profound for the unawakened or unnecessary for our spiritual training. The essential teaching that he teaches are like the leaves in his hands.

1.1.4.2 What is this essential teaching? It is **the 4 noble truths**, of which all his other teachings elaborate. And why does he teach only this “handful of leaves” of the Dharma?

“Because, bhikshus, they are connected with the goal, connected with the fundamentals of the holy life, and lead to revulsion, to letting go, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.”²¹

1.1.4.3 Here, we see an interesting aspect of the Buddha’s silence, that is, what he does not teach. He is silent on those teachings that do not pertain to our personal development or spiritual growth. We can, of course, say that the 10 undeclared theses (*avyākata vatthu*)²² [5] are included in this vast field of knowledge unnecessary for the spiritual path. This is a basic **silence of spiritual training**, not having anything to do with what does not help us in progressing on the noble eightfold path. [3.5.2]

1.1.4.4 How does it help us here? Distractions and speculations tend to take up our time in a big way; we get caught up with them, and kept away from what we really should be working on. Meeting distracting people saps our energies and we lose of mental focus. Doing the wrong things takes us away

¹⁹ DA 2:547 = SA 3:203. On these twofold distinction, see Miln 1145 f, 159 f.

²⁰ DA 2:548 = SA 3:203 f.

²¹ S 56.31/5:437 f (SD 21.7). On the 4 noble truths, see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (SD 56.11), SD 1.1.

²² For a full list of the 10 points, see SD 40a.10 (5.1.3). The Mahāsaṅghika (4th cent BCE onwards), an early Indian school, believed to be one of the roots of early Mahāyāna, mention not 10, but 14, theses, by extending the theses, “the world is finite” (*antavā loko*) and “the world is eternal” (*sassato loko*), into 4 logical alternatives, instead of 2. The suttas, however, do not have such an extension.

from the right ones. For a monastic and the celibate, for example, “Sex is time-consuming,”²³ which is also true for the worldly laity, even if they are not aware of it.

Speculative thinking, especially worrying about things and situations that do not really matter, or even if they do matter, is rarely helpful. It is like being locked up in a dark room and we keep knocking into things and falling over them, even hurting ourself. We need to find the door out into the bright and open space. Here, rightly, time is like money: if we do not know how to spend it wisely and how to save, we will end up being unable to buy any essentials, even being crippled by poverty.

When we know our priorities, and keep to them, then we have more time for what really matters. Obviously, what matters most is our own personal and spiritual development; then comes social growth; and, when we have the time, or it is timely, we spend wise time with the world.²⁴ This is called **the silence of priority**.

1.1.5 Silence and society

1.1.5.1 Silence is also meaningful as a social or monastic convention. We have ancient accounts of the practice of the rule of silence and of the rules of speaking even amongst the Buddha and his monastic community. The Buddha himself is, for example, often recorded as “consenting by his silence” [2.4], or responding with silence to questions that are “wrongly put” [3.1.3].

1.1.5.2 Silence also plays a vital role in monastic or ecclesiastical acts (*saṅgha, kamma*), it is accepted as consent. This is perhaps the oldest form of voting in the history of communal or democratic acts. In ordinations, for example, **the silence of the conclave** is accepted as consensus [2.5].

As these two kinds of silence are significantly common in the suttas and Vinaya, we will deal with them separately in greater detail later [2.5]. Meantime, we will continue with an overview of the types of silence found in the suttas.

1.1.6 Uncertain cases of silence

1.1.6.1 SILENCE AND THE MINORITY. Silence can also be a strategic withdrawal so as to avoid argument or tension, or it is done out of necessity, without any apparent choice. **The Cora Rāja Sutta** (A 2.39) describes how when bad monks abound, so that the good monks are in the minority and resort to remote areas (not accessible to society), the minority would remain silent—this is like *when robbers abound and the king is weak*. On the other hand, when the majority of the monastics are good, then the bad ones would have to remain silent or disperse.²⁵ This is a case of **the silence of the minority**.

1.1.6.2 Conversely, we can speak of **the “silence of the majority.”** If the good monastics and wise laypeople form this silent majority, then the *vocal* bad monastics and worse laypeople would prevail, and society would only hear the wrong voices and hold false views. On the other hand, when the good monastics and wise laypeople form the vocal majority, and they give *voice* to the true Dharma and live it themselves, then society will hear and heed them, and right view is more likely to prevail.

1.1.6.3 Even in the midst of the silent majority—which is common today where political correctness prevails over common sense—even a single voice is sufficient to break the crippling silence. When monastics and elders set bad examples, the wise and concerned Buddhist must speak out. When the silent majority wisely breaks even a moment of silence, it will somehow be heard, distinct like a firefly in the darkest of nights.

1.1.6.4 The Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta (M 26) records Mahā Brahmā, the High God himself, beseeching the Buddha: “Let the sorrow-free one behold the human race, | drowned in sorrow, oppressed by birth and decay!] ... Teach the Dharma, O Blessed One! There will be those who will understand.”²⁶ The

²³ (*Devatā*) **Samiddhi S** (S 1.20/1:8-12), SD 21.14 & SD 21.8 (3).

²⁴ See **Adhipateyya S** (A 3.40/1:147-150), SD 27.3.

²⁵ A 2.39/1:68 f (SD 47.7).

²⁶ V 1:4-7; M 26,20/1:167-69; S 1:136-39; D 2:36-40 Vipassī Buddha; Mvst 3:314-19; cf S 1:234.

Buddha, surveying the world, declares that he will teach the Dharma that he has discovered: “Free faith!”²⁷

1.1.6.5 SILENCE AND DETACHMENT. The (Sāriputta) Nirodha Sutta (A 5.166) reports how once Sāriputta, on being publicly contradicted by another monk three times, seeing that no other monk supported him, remains silent. At this point, Ānanda, having been admonished by the Buddha (that one should not to merely stand by when an elder is being harassed), intervenes and resolves the situation.²⁸ Although Sāriputta sees himself in the minority, we can take this as a case of **the silence of detachment**, as Sāriputta is already an arhat and has no negative emotions. [1.1.6.3]

1.1.6.6 The Asur’indaka Sutta (S 7.3) records how the Buddha remains silent when he is being reviled by a rude brahmin, Asurindaka Bhāra,dvāja. The brahmin thought that he has defeated the Buddha. The Buddha, however, explains that his silence here is not a sign of defeat, but an expression of his freedom from anger, his spiritual detachment.²⁹ This is an example of the silence of detachment. [1.1.6.2]

We may, of course, presume to say that Sāriputta actually *does not know how to handle the situation*. So, he consults the Buddha on what to do. The point is that we are unable to read his mind, and that we are not told about his mental state. Sāriputta, known for his great humility and compassion, perhaps takes this as an occasion to speak with the Buddha, just as old friends would share some of their most personal experiences. We can see this as a great lesson in humility in Sāriputta and his spiritual friendship with the Buddha.

1.1.6.7 The (Dasaka) Uttiya Sutta (A 10.95) records another occasion when the Buddha’s silence could have been misconstrued as admitting defeat. Ānanda then intervenes in order to clarify to Uttiya that the Buddha’s silence is not at all due to his being unable to reply, but (it is skillfully put) that Uttiya’s question is only a variation of what he has asked earlier, which were wrongly put anyway.³⁰ This silence clearly has to do with the 10 questions [5.2].

1.2 WORLDLY SILENCE

1.2.1 Types of worldly silence

1.2.1.1 HEAD-SHATTERING. The suttas give us a number of remarkable examples of silence exhibited by people other than the Buddha and his monastics. The most basic of such silences would of course be that of **the silence of defeat**, when the audience or debater is unable to reply to the opponent, usually the Buddha. The suttas often graphically describe the person fallen into such a state as being “silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, hanging his head, glum, unable to speak [at a loss for words].”³¹

1.2.1.2 Silence in a debate can also be a sign of an evasion, an unwillingness to answer, usually from a reluctance to admit wrong or defeat. If this **silence of evasion** is directed to the Buddha who is always known to ask a fair or reasonable question (*saha,dhammika pañha*), usually asked thrice, and if the other person remains silent, he risks his head “shattering into seven pieces!”³² In a few instances, a figure of Vajira,pāṇī (the thunderbolt-wielding yaksha) is said to appear to terrify the evasive non-respondent.³³ Fortunately, we do not have any actual report of such a head-shattering!

²⁷ Ie, “set faith free!” *pamuñcatu saddham* (M 26,21.5*), SD 1.11.

²⁸ A 5.166,4/3:194 (SD 47.15).

²⁹ S 7.3/1:163 (SD 97.7).

³⁰ A 10.95,3/5:194 (SD 44.16).

³¹ D 25,20/3:53,26 (the wanderer Nigrodha is silent at the layman Sandhāna’s reprimand) = M 1:132,34 = 234,4 = 258,31 = 2:154,27 = 3:298,23 ≈ A 3:57,13 (*dukkhīm dummanam patta-k,khandham* +). See **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 25,20) nn, SD 1.4.

³² For a list of suttas with cases of head-shattering, see SD 21.3 (4).

³³ The most famous case is that of Ambaṭṭha in **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,21/1:95), SD 21.3. See also **Cūla Saccaka S** (M 35,13-14/1:231), SD 26.5;

1.2.1.3 In the Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta (S 41.8), we have, at the Sutta's close, Citta the householder asking Nirgrantha Nāta,putta the 10 questions. However, Nāta,putta, already exasperated with Citta for shaming him before his own congregation with a trick question, does not respond to Citta's question. Nāta,putta's silence could be an angry rebuff or could be due to his ignorance of how to answer Citta's questions, or both.³⁴ In any case, we are likely to have here, in Nāta,putta's non-response, a case of **the silence of ignorance**. [Cf 2.2.]

1.2.1.4 In the Sāmañña,phala Sutta (D 2), for example, we have 3 kinds or cases of silence, that is, those of Ajāta,sattu and his ministers, of Jīvaka Komāra,bhacca, and of the Buddha himself. These cases of silence reflect the spiritual state (or its lack) in each of these three cases.

The Sāmañña,phala Sutta is about the Ajāta,sattu's meeting with the Buddha on the suggestion of his chief minister and doctor, Jīvaka. As a king, this is probably the first time, after decades, that he meets the Buddha. As a young haughty prince, he comes under the influence of Deva,datta who suggests to him that he should take over the kingdom from his saintly father, Bimbi,sāra (a streamwinner then), and he would himself seize the position of the sangha head from the Buddha.³⁵

1.2.1.5 AJĀTA,SATTU'S SILENCE. The Sāmañña,phala Sutta (D 2) opens with **king Ajāta,sattu** and his court enjoying a beautiful full-moon night of Kattikā³⁶ on the rooftop terrace of his palace. On such a bright auspicious night, he thinks of meeting some good teacher. Various ministers suggest that he meet one of the 6 heterodox teachers.³⁷ When each of these teachers is mentioned, Ajāta,sattu remains *silent*, that is, he does not approve of any of them.³⁸ This is, of course, **the silence of disapproval** [1.3].

These 6 teachers are the best examples of how rich, even bizarre, the intellectual turmoil was in the Buddha's time. According to Radhakrishnan,

There are many indications to show that it was an age keenly alive to intellectual interest, a period of immense philosophic activity and many-sided development It was an age full of strange anomalies and contrasts. With the intellectual fervour and moral seriousness were also found united a lack of mental balance and restraint of passion When the surging energies of life assert their rights, it is not unnatural that many yield to unbridled imagination.

(S Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol 1, London, 1927:272)

Hiriyāñña echoes similar sentiments,

Speculation was almost rampant in the period just preceding the time of the Buddha and an excessive discussion of theoretical questions was leading to anarchy of thought.

(M Hiriyāñña, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, London, 1932:136)

1.2.1.6 JĪVAKA'S SILENCE. All the while that the ministers are proposing to Ajāta,sattu that he meet the teachers that they esteem, not only is Ajāta,sattu silent, but his chief minister and doctor, Jīvaka, too, is silent. Evidently, Jīvaka, too, does not approve of the 6 teachers. This is an example of the silence of disapproval. [1.3]

Apparently, Jīvaka is also circumspect in maintaining his silence by not suggesting that Ajāta,sattu meet the Buddha. For, he is aware that he has in the past tried to assassinate the Buddha on the instigation of Devadatta [1.2.1.2]. Only when asked by Ajāta,sattu, he proposes that they meet the Buddha, saying, "Perhaps then he would brighten your majesty's heart (with faith and peace)." The king at once agrees (as if he were waiting for the suggestion) and they leave with the royal entourage to meet the Buddha that very night.³⁹

³⁴ **Nigaṇṭha Nāta,putta S** (S 41.8,10.4)

³⁵ See **Deva,datta**, SD 71.4.

³⁶ The 4th Indian month (mid-Oct to mid-Nov), just after the rains retreat.

³⁷ D 2,2-7/1:47 f (SD 8.10); their details are given by Ajāta,sattu himself at §§16-32 (SD 8.10).

³⁸ D 2,2-7 (SD 8.10).

³⁹ D 2,8/1:49 (SD 8.10). On Jīvaka, see (**Majjhima**) **Jīvaka S** (M 55) & SD 43.4 (2).

Here, we can describe Jīvaka's silence as **the silence of circumspection**. He does not make the initiative of suggesting that Ajāta,sattu meet the Buddha. However, when directly asked by the king himself, he knows that it is the proper time to break his silence, as, after all, the king is dissatisfied with all the 6 heterodox teachers, the leading heterodox teachers of the time. Rightly so, too, as the king enthusiastically agrees with him and they at once leave to meet the Buddha.

1.2.1.7 THE BUDDHA'S SILENCE. Then, there is an interesting turn: Ajāta,sattu experiences a mystical experience of sorts. As he approaches within sight of the Buddha and his assembly, the natural silence of the monastic ambience terrifies him, and he fears that it is actually an ambush!

My dear Jīvaka, you aren't deceiving me, are you? You aren't betraying me, are you? You aren't turning me over to my enemies, are you? How can there be such a large community of monks, 1250 in all, without any sound of sneezing, without any sound of coughing, without any sound [voice] at all? (D 2,10.3), SD 8.10

The Sāmañña,phala Sutta says that the king is "gripped with a terrible fear and paralysis, his hair standing on ends" (D 2,10.2), a sort of awe and trembling of a mystical experience. Jīvaka, however, reassures him with an interesting wordplay, thus:

Go ahead, maharajah, go ahead! Those are lamps burning in the circle of the pavilion.⁴⁰
[Those "islands" are meditating in a circle in the pavilion.]” (*Ete maṇḍala,māle dīpā jhāyantīti.*)⁴¹
(D 2,10.4), SD 8.10

Ajāta,sattu then reaches the gate leading to the pavilion where the Buddha and his congregation are "sitting in utter silence, as calm as a lake" (D 2,12). This is a visible manifestation of the famous "**noble silence**" [4], often mentioned in the suttas. However, Ajāta,sattu is unable to recognize the Buddha. Jīvaka then tells him that the Buddha is "sitting against the middle pillar, facing the east, before the community of monks" (D 2,11).

1.2.1.8 Why is Ajāta,sattu unable to see the Buddha? The simplest answer would perhaps be that he has not seen the Buddha for many years, alienated from him because he had tried to kill him. But the Buddha is a monk and it is generally easy to identify one. However, the Buddha is described as sitting before a group of 1250 monks (D 2,8).

From a distance, to Ajāta,sattu all the monks look alike, even if the Buddha is sitting at their head (on the west side, facing the east). Ajāta,sattu suffers from **psychological blindness**: perhaps on account of his guilt (having killed his own father, and also having attempted to assassinate the Buddha himself on Deva,datta's instigation). As such, even though the Buddha is within visual range, his mind somehow is unwilling or unable to see him: he looks at the Buddha but sees him not.

⁴⁰ *Abhikkama, mahā,rāja, abhikkama, mahārāja, ete maṇḍala,māle dīpā jhāyantīti. Maṇḍala,māla, v1 ~māla: D 1,1.3/1:2,8, 1.4/1:2,28, 2,10/1:50,10, 11.14/1:50,11, 16,13/2:159,23+30; S 41.1/4:281,14, 282,3+18, 56.30/5:436,22; A 6.28/3:320,5, 6.60/392,24; Sn 3.7/104,26, 105,11; U 3.9/31,4+9 kareri,maṇḍala,māle; Nm 2:374; Miln 16, 23.* Comy says that it is a "circle of pavilions" (or "circular enclosure," UA:M 495), ie a covering of grass and leaves to keep out the rain, or a bower of creepers such as the *atimuttaka* (Skt *ati,mukta*, *Dalbergia uijenensis* or *Gaertnera racemosa*), etc (UA 202 f). DPL: "A circular house with a peaked roof; a pavilion." It should be noted that such a *maṇḍala* is a circle. *Mālā* means "garland, circular ring (of things)." See **Puṇṇ'ovāda S** (M 145), SD 20.15 (1.6), where the context seems to support "a circle of pavilions." However, I think the context of **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,10/1:49) and similar suttas is the forest.

⁴¹ Here, there is a play *dīpā*, which can mean both "lamps" as well as "islands," and on *jhāyanti*, which can mean both "they are burning" or "they are meditating." On *dīpa*, see D 16.2.26/2:100 f & SD 9 (6); also D 26.1/3:58, 26.-27/77; S 22.43/3:42, 47.9/5:154, 47.13/5:163, 17.14/5:164. On *jhāyati*, see **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, SD 33.1b (4.4.1.3; 4.4.3). *Dīpa* can also mean "light" as in *dīpankara*, "the light-maker" (Sn 1136; cf Dh 236). Cf Steve Collins, "What is literature in Pali?" in S Pollock (ed), *Literary Cultures in History*, Berkeley, 2003:671.

Returning to the theme of silence, we see that the *Sāmañña,phala Sutta* is a record of a long discourse by the Buddha to Ajāta,sattu. Under normal circumstances, by the end of the teaching, Ajāta,sattu could have become at least a streamwinner, but because he had killed his own father, he could only marvel at the teaching (D 2,104). In short, he is unable to really *hear* or understand the Buddha due to his **karmic silence of ignorance**.

1.2.1.9 Here, too, we should note a common kind of worldly silence, where we, either out of cunning or cowardice, remain silent, when we should have spoken the truth to clear the air, or prevent a problem, or an embarrassing situation. This is the case of a **conniving silence**. A classic example of such an unskillful silence is that of the court and subjects of the emperor who wears his “new clothes.”⁴²

Such a conniving silence also includes not telling the truth, or sidelining it with praises. For example, we might be in the habit of complimenting every Buddhist preacher or speaker as having given an “excellent” talk, even when he has not. We could, on the other hand, have skillfully helped the speaker to improve his speaking style. Instead, the speaker may be deluded into believing that he is actually good, but might also wonder why ever fewer people are listening to him. On a more serious level, this false attitude of the one who freely and false praises others is called “polite fiction.”⁴³

1.2.2 King Yama’s silence

1.2.2.1 A unique kind of silence—almost one of dark humour—occurs even in the lowest of the sub-human planes, the hell states, over which, according to Buddhist mythology, king Yama lords. According to **the Deva,dūta Sutta** (M 130), those bad-doers who are reborn in hell, must all face king Yama, the lord of the hells, who asks each of them whether they have seen any of the “5 divine messengers” (*deva,-dūta*) namely, an infant, an old man, a sick man, a criminal being punished, and a corpse.

Everyone of them answers that they have. However, when asked why they, being intelligent and mature, have never thought, respectively, that “I too am subject to birth ... decay ... disease ... suffering death. I am not free from birth. Surely I had better do good through body, speech and mind” (abridged). They all replied that they have been heedless. These wretched beings are then tortured in diverse ways by the hell wardens.

After questioning the countless hell-beings and hearing the same answers of being heedless and paying the painful consequences of it, “king Yama is silent.” The Sutta does not say whether **Yama’s silence** is the result of not enjoying his job, or his having great compassion for the heedless hell-beings. Towards the close of the Sutta, we are told that king Yama thinks, “Those amongst humans who do bad unwholesome deeds indeed have all these diverse kinds of tortures inflicted on them.”

Clearly, king Yama of the hells cuts as a lonely and silent figure when he is not questioning the hell-beings. It is as if his listening to the uroboric⁴⁴ answers of the hell-beings that they have been heedless, terrifies him. Perhaps, he too might be heedless one day since he is not awakened himself.

In other words, Yama yearns for **the silence of the stereotyped answers** of the heedless hell-beings. This seems to be Yama’s own samsaric experience, a Sisyphian task: it is as if, he is himself consigned to hell, and as such is not happy with his task. We, too, may desire for this silence when we hear one person asking another, “How are you?” and the other person, routinely replies, “I’m fine,” even when he is not. Or, worse, when he does tell the truth, the first person would simply not know what to say, or perhaps feign concern, or give some unhelpful advice!

Surely, Yama, too, soon tires of daily listening to countless beings admitting to the same failure. He then makes a remarkable decision: he aspires to be reborn as a human so that he will *meet the Buddha* to

⁴² SD 40a.14 (3.1.5): An elephant in the room.

⁴³ On polite fiction, see SD 40a.14 (3.1.6).

⁴⁴ From “uroborus,” the mythical snake that keeps biting its own tail, denoting samsaric suffering: see **Yodh’ājīva S** (S 42.3), SD 23.3 Intro. On the theme of *repetition*, see **Anusaya**, SD 31.9.

listen to the Dharma. In other words, Yama himself desires to get out of the hells, and to awaken to liberation.⁴⁵

1.2.2.2 SOLITARY AND SILENT RETREATS. Hearing accounts such as that of Yama, king of the hells, we, too, would desire a silence from the uroboric voices, of being free of having to hear the foolish parroting of heedless voices, of not making personal effort when they are able to. The Buddha Word gives us the water of liberation, but we must drink it ourselves to be liberated.

There are, of course, those who do heed the 5 divine messengers [1.2.2.1]. They are amongst those who renounce the world for the sake of a truly greater good—that of full liberation, nirvana. After becoming monastics, they, in due course, go into solitary retreat to meditate and train themselves for that liberation. Living alone, they naturally keep a personal silence, a silence of the body, which also refers to keeping a morally virtuous life. Even living in a group that is intent on such a task, they keep to a communal silence.

One of the best examples of the observance of the the rule of communal silence is found in **the Cūḷa Gosiṅga Sutta** (M 31) and **the (Anuruddha) Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 128). The latter Sutta is about how three monks, who are close friends, Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila, live together, each doing his own solitary meditation retreat. Each monk would do his monastic routines and duties diligently, and if anyone should need help, he “would signal another with his hand, and by joining hands, they set them (the water-pots) up. As such, bhante, there is no cause for us to break into speech.” And the Buddha explicitly approves of their actions and praises them.⁴⁶ [1.4.4.1; cf 1.4.5]

1.3 THE SILENCE OF DISAPPROVAL

1.3.1 The Buddha’s silence of refusal

1.3.1.1 We have already noted, how in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2), silence is an expression of disagreement, that is, when Ajāta,sattu disapproves of the 6 heterodox teachers [1.2.1.3]. Here we will note a few examples of the Buddha’s silence of disapproval.

The Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta (M 85) records how, when the Buddha is invited by prince Bodhi to perform an auspicious act (of stepping on a white sheet of cloth on the ground) to bring him the blessing of a child. The Buddha, however, does not oblige and remains silent despite Bodhi requesting him to do so thrice.⁴⁷

1.3.1.2 In **the (Samudda) Uposatha Sutta 1** (A 8.20), the Buddha is recorded as keeping a silence of refusal to let the recitation of the Pāṭimokkha begin, despite Ānanda requesting for it thrice. Finally, in the early morning, upon Ānanda’s third request, the Buddha informs him that the assembly is impure.⁴⁸ When the impure false monk is removed from the conclave, the Buddha allows the recital to proceed.

Many of us would find it odd that the Buddha should remain silent for so long (the whole evening up to dawn!), when he could have simply announced that the gathering is “impure,” and that guilty monk be ejected from the conclave. The long silence clearly is meant to make a serious statement: no impure monastic should sit in conclave for such a significant event as the recital of the Pāṭimokkha.

1.4 THE PROPER USES OF SILENCE

1.4.1 Spiritual silence

The earliest monastics, including the Buddha himself, are dedicated to spiritual silence, of not speaking, except when it is proper and beneficial to the listener, even then, in a terse manner [4.1]. In

⁴⁵ **Deva,dūta S** (M 130), SD 2.23.

⁴⁶ M 31,6-9/1:206 f (SD 44.11) & M 128,14/3:157 (SD 5.18).

⁴⁷ M 85,7/2:92 f (SD 55.2).

⁴⁸ A 8.20/4:204-206 (SD 59.2).

special cases, the Buddha or a monastic would break his silence by speaking just enough to satisfactorily answer a question or sufficiently respond to a request by the questioner [5].

Keeping to this spiritual legacy of wise silence (*moneyya*), the wisdom of **the silent sage** (*muni*),⁴⁹ the monastics who follow the Buddha, too, keep to this rule of silence of “either discussing Dharma or keeping to the noble silence” [4]. Such a silence is profoundly blissful because of the saint’s liberated state, or because of the lack of distractions of those monastics who are morally virtuous and keep up their spiritual practice.

The early Buddhist monastics, in other words, have nothing to say, but essentially teach the benefits and bliss of spiritual silence, an inner stillness that frees us from suffering. Their joy and wisdom do not go unnoticed as, when very quickly the word of their remarkable spirituality spreads, many are attracted to the Buddhist life. There are also requests by others (such as king Bimbisāra) [1.4.3.1] that Buddhist monastics reach out to society, or, at least, break their silence when it is wholesome or beneficial to do so.

1.4.3 Breaking the silence

1.4.3.1 Although religious silence is popular amongst the religions of the Buddha’s time, there are also “wanderers of other sects, (who) having gathered together on the 14th, the 15th and the 8th days of the fortnight, speak (their) teaching” (V 1:101). The devout king Bimbisāra notices that sects that gather at such Dharma talk sessions gain the people’s affection, win their faith, and so their numbers increase. So, the king proposes to the Buddha that he allows the monastics to gather together on the 14th, the 15th and the 8th days of the fortnight (but without any mention of “speaking Dharma”). The Buddha obliges.⁵⁰

1.4.3.2 However, when the monastics assembled on these “observance days” (*uposatha*),⁵¹ that is all they actually do, that is, they assemble in silence, as they are wont to be. When people come to hear the Dharma [1.4.3.1], they are disappointed and criticize the monastics for merely sitting in silence “like dumb pigs (*mūga, sūkara*)”!⁵²

In response to the public criticism and expectation, the Buddha then allows the monastics who assemble on these days to speak Dharma.⁵³ In due course, he also allows them to perform the “act of observance” (*uposatha, kamma*), highlighted by the recital of the monastic code (*pātimokkha*) in conclave.⁵⁴ Thinking that the Buddha has allowed the recital of the Patimokkha, diligent monks began to recite it *daily*. The Buddha then rules that it should only be done on the observance days.⁵⁵

1.4.3.3 The rest of **the Mahā, vagga** (“the great chapter”), the second chapter of the Vinaya, aptly entitled “the group on the observance” (*uposatha-k, khandha*), records various other rulings made by the Buddha regarding the observance and related “ecclesiastical acts” (*kamma*), such as the location of the assembly and so on.

In all such acts, the monks of the same parish, delimited by a “border” (*sīmā*), would vote in conclave on such issues, brought up before them, in very much the same manner as our modern parliamentary acts,

⁴⁹ He is of course the Buddha, who is thus well known as *sakya, muni*, “the silent sage of the Sakyas”: **Ratana S** (Khp 4b/6,4* = Sn 225b/39*), SD 101.2; **Chatta Māṇava Vimāna, vatthu** (Vv 881b/53,1/80*), SD 101.3; **Nanda-ka Peta, vatthu** (Pv 698/38,42/82*), SD 101.4; Ap 1:41*, 42*; Nc:Be 207*; V 1:310*, 5:86*.

⁵⁰ Mv 2.1 (V 1:157-159).

⁵¹ In the Buddha’s time and thereafter, the word refers to the day *preceding* the 4 stages of the moon’s waxing and waning, viz, the 1st, the 8th, the 15th, and the 23rd nights of the lunar month, that is to say, a weekly sacred day. See **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9 (7b) n on “the monthly 8 observances.”

⁵² This expression should not be taken in a modern sense, where in some cultures or circles, it is taken to be derogatory and abusive. Here, in ancient Indian idiom, the pig is seen as dumb in terms of sound as well as intelligence. As such, the criticism is an expression of disappointment. The monks could have spoken for the benefit of the people’s wisdom.

⁵³ Mv 2.2 (V 1:102).

⁵⁴ Mv 2.3 (V 1:102 f).

⁵⁵ Mv 2.3 (V 1:103).

with readings and motion (*ñatti*).⁵⁶ Such acts are carried by consensus denoted by *silence*, that is, the silence of consensus, with only those with any reservations speaking up. [2.4]

1.4.4 Monastic rule of silence

1.4.4.1 We have noted the case where three monks (Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila), living together in silent retreat (except for their weekly all-night Dharma discussion) are explicitly approved and praised by the Buddha [1.2.2.2]. These three monks, in fact, go on to become arhats as a result of such efforts. This shows that the Buddha sees nothing objectionable in the actual act of observing silence itself.

1.4.4.2 In fact, after the Buddha's time, the (Mūla) Sarvāsti, vāda,⁵⁷ in their Vinaya, ruled that those monks might observe **the vow of silence** when living together, so as to avoid criticizing each other, even in the case of a breach of discipline.⁵⁸ This is a helpful clue which suggests that the Buddha's criticism is directed to the unwise notion that harmony in a community entails a disregard for improper conduct!⁵⁹

1.4.4.3 From the various criticisms voiced by the Buddha in the Mahā, vagga [1.4.3.3], it is clear that silence must be tempered with wisdom. Such a notion is well supported by such texts as **the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta** (M 10), which states that clear comprehension (*sampājañña*) should be practised even when keeping silent.⁶⁰ As **the Dhammapada** says:

*Na monena muni hoti
mūḷha, rūpo aviddasu
yo ca tulaṃ 'va paggayha
varam ādāya paṇḍito*

Not merely by silence is one a sage,
one who is confused and ignorant.
For, like one holding a balance
is the wise, one taking up what is noble. Dh 268⁶¹

*pāpani parivajjeti
sa muni tena so munī
yo munāti ubho loke
munī tena pavuccati*

He avoids (all) that which are bad,
he is a sage; by that he is a sage.
One is a sage regarding both worlds,⁶²
hence, one is called a sage. Dh 269

1.4.5 When silence is no option

1.4.5.1 From what we have discussed then [1.4.4], silence observed for its own sake, without wisdom (for example, as a ritual) is unhelpful, even harmful (when, for example, there is a disregard for misconduct). On the other hand, silence properly observed becomes conducive silence, which helps in our spiritual practice and the attaining of the spiritual goal, as in the case of Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila [1.4.4.1].

1.4.5.2 The Sajjhāya Sutta (S 9.10) recounts the complaints of a deva against a monk who has earlier on been regularly reciting the Dharma, but has abruptly fallen silent. The Buddha then reassures the

⁵⁶ While the modern democratic parliament (from Old French, *parlement*, "speaking") is often characterized by intense debates and political drama, the process of ecclesiastical acts are, as a rule, quietly conducted, with any objection or suggestion done most civilly, if they do arise. Indeed, such acts are more like rituals of good governance.

⁵⁷ An early pre-Mahāyāna mainstream school of Indian Buddhism centred around Mathura in north-central India. Their Vinaya is the basis for the monastic practice of Tibetan Buddhism that is still followed today.

⁵⁸ T22.1044c16 or Derge 'dulba ka 222a1. For a detailed study, see Ann Heirman 2009.

⁵⁹ See Analayo 2008:373.

⁶⁰ M 10,8(7)/1:57 (SD 13) = D 2:292: see SD 13.1 (3.6.1+2+3).

⁶¹ These 2 verses are also at Nc:Be 74.

⁶² "Both worlds" here refers to the internal aggregates and external aggregates (DhA 3:396). However, if we invoke **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1, we can also say that the phrase refers to the internal sense-bases and the external sense-objects: they are the "all" (*sabba*) that is our world(s).

deva that the reciting has stopped because the monk has realized his spiritual goal.⁶³ In this case, the deva objects to the monk's being silent, mistaking his reciting as an end in itself. The Buddha implies that the reciting is only a means to a spiritual end, that of mental cultivation fruiting in liberation.

1.4.5.3 The Nava Bhikkhu Sutta (S 21.4) gives a similar lesson. A newly ordained monk, it is reported, after his almsround would enter his dwelling, have his meal, and pass the time in silence without rendering any help to the community or any other monk. His colleagues complain to the Buddha, who clarifies that he is an adept dhyana-attainer who has attained the goal of renunciation (that is, he has become an arhat).⁶⁴

1.4.5.4 The point of such accounts of saints who enjoy solitude and silence is that spirituality does not stand on ceremonies and rituals. They tend to be rigid and repetitive, keeping their performers "in the loop," caught in a rut of activity that is almost mechanical.⁶⁵ However, when a helpful ritual (such as reciting the Dharma or teachings) helps us progress spiritually,⁶⁶ it should be practised, just as a raft is useful in helping us cross a dangerous stretch of water.⁶⁷ The reason for the saint being quite contented in himself is simply that he has attained the highest silence, the silence of awakening.

2 Approval and decorum

2.0 In this section, we shall examine the key mundane forms of silence, that is, its worldly occurrences, or expressions outside of the spiritual training, or as a prelude to some spiritual purpose.

2.1 THE SILENCE OF CONCEIT

2.1.1 Silence can also, negatively, be an expression of anger. **The Potaliya Sutta** (M 54) records that when the Buddha addresses Potaliya in a manner that the latter regards as inappropriate, he reacts irritably with silence. Potaliya, a "household" (*gaha,pati*) who owns a house, land, property and wealth, fancies himself a "renunciator," a holy man of sorts. Hence, when the Buddha addresses him as "household," he takes offence by remaining silent, when the Buddha thus invites him thrice to sit down.

This is a case of **the silence of anger**.⁶⁸ However, since Potaliya thinks highly of himself, fancying himself to be a holy man, and so should be properly addressed, his angry silence is also **the silence of conceit**. This is also the kind of silence that a conceited person would keep before another whom he regards as being from a lower class.⁶⁹

The Buddha, however, explains to Potaliya that "leaving behind all worldly affairs" or renouncing requires more than simply handing over his wealth to his children, and living merely on what he needs to subsist. Potaliya is keen to hear the Buddha's explanations (§3.8). At the close of the teaching, he goes for refuge.⁷⁰

2.1.2 Another similar case is found in **the Bilaṅgika Sutta** (S 7.4) which describes how an angry brahmin, Bilaṅgika Bhāra,dvāja, approaches the Buddha and simply stands before him in utter silence. He is terribly upset by the fact that so many members of the Bhāra,dvāja clan have gone forth into the Buddh-

⁶³ S 9.10/1:202 (SD 86.9).

⁶⁴ S 21.4/2:277 f (SD 72.13).

⁶⁵ On the problem of being attached to rituals, see **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8 (5).

⁶⁶ On the various ways helpful to spiritual progress, see **Vimutt'āyatana S** (A 5.26), SD 21.5.

⁶⁷ See the parable of the raft, **Alaggadūpama S** (M 22,12-14/1:134 f), SD 3.13.

⁶⁸ M 54,3/1:359 (SD 43.8).

⁶⁹ The silence of conceit or the "silence of class" is commonly seen even today amongst the elite in ethnic Buddhist circles, who would avoid speaking or be reticent with those of a "lower class." The purpose of this observation is that such an embarrassing aberration should be pointed out so that it is effectively corrected.

⁷⁰ M 54/1:359-368 (SD 43.8).

ist order. Presumably, he is so angry so that he is at a loss for words! This, too, is clearly a silence of anger.

The Buddha calmly tells him that if we were to wrong the innocent, the bad would only fall back upon us, like our throwing fine dust against the wind. Surprisingly, Bilaṅgika is impressed, joins the order, too, and in due course becomes an arhat.⁷¹

2.1.3 The (Aṭṭhaka Assa) Kḥaluṅka Sutta (A 8.14) discusses 8 kinds of negative responses (by way of what we now know as “psychological defence mechanisms”) of a monk who has been reprovved of breaking a rule. In one case, being thus reprovved, he denies committing any such wrong, and reacts with silence, thus vexing the order.⁷²

Psychologically, such a **defensive silence** is a reaction of the unconscious defence mechanism of **denial**. The monk refuses to see his own offence and may sincerely believe that he is innocent. In this case, there is also a significant level of repression. All this may have aroused some emotional tension in him resulting in his silence. He refuses to discuss the problem, since he does not dare to even direct his own consciousness to the problem. However, if he is clearly *aware* that he has committed the offence but refuses to own it up, then, it is technically not a defence mechanism, but he is blatantly lying.

2.1.4 The Sarabha Sutta (A 3.64) records how a wanderer Sarabha deceptively joins the order to spy on its success for the wanderers. After a short time, he gives up monkhood, and goes about claiming that he has mastered the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha then approaches him and questions him whether what he says is true and whether he has even completed the Dharma training.

Sarabha now refuses to answer and remains silent. This is **the silence of contempt**. Then, some wanderers urged him to answer as the Buddha has asked him thrice (perhaps fearing the consequence of his action) [1.2.1]. Sarabha then sits “hanging his head, glum and at a loss for words.” The Buddha then admonishes the monks. Later, the wanderers themselves give Sarabha a good tongue-lashing for embarrassing them!⁷³

2.2 THE SILENCE OF DISTANCE

2.2.1 Silence can also be an expression (conscious or unconscious) of social or emotional distance, a lack of empathy, sympathy or connection with the other party or a situation. Its occurrence is attested in this stock passage, here describing how Soṇa,daṇḍa and his retinue sit down before the Buddha:

Having approached the Blessed One, he [Soṇa,daṇḍa] exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, he sat down at one side.

Some of the brahmin householders of Campā, too, exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, they sat down at one side.

Some greeted him with their palms together, and then sat down at one side.

Some announced their name and clan before the Blessed One, and then sat down at one side.

Some kept silent and sat down at one side.⁷⁴

Soṇa,daṇḍa Sutta (D 4,9/1:118), SD 30.5

⁷¹ S 7.4/1:64 (SD 98.10).

⁷² A 8.14,16/4:194 (SD 7.9).

⁷³ A 3.64/1:185-188 (SD 94.6). For detailed n, see **Mahā Taṇha,saṅkhaya S** (M 38,6.2) n + SD 7.1.

⁷⁴ *Appekacce tunhī, bhūtā ekam-antam nisīdimsu*. Also at **Kūṭa,danta S** (D 5,8,2/1:134), SD 22.8; **Paṇḍita S** (D 23,4/2:319), SD 39.4; **Āṭṭhaka S** (D 32,1/3:194, 11/206×2), SD 101.1; **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35,8/1:229), SD 26.5; **Sāleyyaka S** (M 41,3/1:285, 291), SD 5.7; **Apaṇṇaka S** (M 60,3/1:401), SD 35.5; **Raṭṭha,pāla S** (M 82,3/2:55), SD 92.5; **Brahm’āyu** (M 91,25/2:141), SD 63.8; **Nagara,vindeyya S** (M 150,3/3:291), SD 96.6; **Veḷu,dvāreyya S** (S 55.7,3/5:353), SD 1.5; **Venāga,pura S** (A 3.63,2/1:181), SD 21.1; **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65,1.5/1:188), SD 35.4a; Mv 1.22.3 @ V 1:36,7 (the Buddha’s first meeting with Bimbisāra after the awakening). See also SD 38.41 (5.3.1.1).

2.2.2 Most of us, if not all, feel somewhat appalled (at the apparent rudeness), even suspicious (at the furtiveness), of someone who talks with us but refuses to tell us his name. In fact, introducing ourselves by name is a common courtesy, once we feel we have known someone well enough. Those in the congregation described above “kept silent” probably because they are compelled to be so (thus, with some unwillingness) to tag along because the whole village has come, led by the village leader or local headman. Or, they simply do not have the same view as the Buddha or the Buddhists, or they are there for some other personal agenda.

There is also the possibility that those who “kept silent” have issues of conceit [2.1]. This is especially the case if they are brahmins and regard the Buddha as a non-brahmin, and so perceive themselves as being “superior” to him. However, they have to show deference to their leader or headman, and also to appear civil in the eyes of their colleagues.⁷⁵

2.2.3 Most Chinese, especially the English-educated of modern times, who have to deal with westerners or the westernized society, would adopt a western, westernized or contrived name, while maintaining their surname, so as not to be embarrass themselves or to embarrass a potential client (and so lose him) with a name that is tonal, pictographic, and “inferior.” It is also difficult for others to remember such a name. Some would simply introduce themselves only by their surname (often adding the title “Mr,” “Miss,” etc, before it), which apparently protects them with a veil of acquaintance while maintaining a significant anonymity and social distance (perhaps to save their “face” in embarrassing situations). In short, it is unlikely that we can ever be friends with them! This is an expedient silence.

2.3 THE SILENCE OF DEFERENCE.

2.3.1 We have already mentioned that when the Buddha asks a reasonable question in a debate with a non-Buddhist, the opponent must answer it, or admit defeat [1.2.1.1]. However, the situation is different when the Buddha questions the monks themselves (and where the monks are not debating with the Buddha). When the monks remain silent to such a question, it is **a silence of deference**, although perhaps tinged with some embarrassment or apprehension (at not knowing the answer or what to say).

2.3.2 In the **Naḷaka, pāna Sutta** (M 68), the Buddha thrice asks the assembled monks whether they know that the “sons of family” (that is, Anuruddha, Nandiya, Kimbila, Kaṅkhā Revata and Ānanda) who are renunciants in their midst “delight in the holy life.” Thrice the assembly remains silent.⁷⁶ Apparently, they dare not presume to speak for such elders who are before them or they do not know what to say (perhaps because they are unable to read those monks’ minds).

The Buddha then asks Anuruddha the same question and he answers in the affirmative. The Buddha then goes on to instruct on the destinies of true disciples and the true purpose of the holy life.⁷⁷

2.3.3 In the Buddha’s last days, as recorded in the **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) and its close parallel, the **Kusinārā Sutta** (A 4.76), the Buddha asks the monks assembled before him if they have any questions to ask him before he dies. Thrice the Buddha asks them and thrice they are silent, as in the Naḷaka, pāna Sutta (M 68) [2.3.2].

Then, the Buddha uncharacteristically asks a fourth time, this time giving us a hint of the assembly’s state of mind: “If, bhikshus, you do not ask out of respect for the Teacher, then, bhikshus, let a friend tell it to another friend.” The assembly still keeps the silence of deference. Ānanda then tells the Buddha that he has faith in the order that it has no doubt or misgiving regarding the Buddha, the Dharma or the Saṅgha.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ On conceit, see “Me”: The nature of conceit, SD 19.2a.

⁷⁶ M 68,3/1:463 (SD 37.4).

⁷⁷ M 68/1:462-468 (SD 37.4).

⁷⁸ D 16,6.5-6.6/2:154 f (SD 9) = A 4.79,2-4/2:79; see also **Devatā S** (A 9.19/4:392), SD 57.4.

2.3.4 In our own times, **the silence of deference** should be shown to our teachers and to elders. When we think that a teacher has erred in making a statement, especially in a Dharma talk, our first impulse is not to confront him, but to give him the benefit of the doubt. We should hear him out, so that we could perhaps clear our doubts from the context of his talk or teaching. We could, of course, approach the teacher at a right time to ask for clarification. Such an approach is often likely to be instructive, even when the teacher is actually wrong.

We should also show the silence of deference to the elderly when they presume to know more or better than we do. The elderly sometimes need to express themselves because the ravages of aging can trouble the elderly with sense of losing self-confidence. As such, the elder's behaviour could have been impulsive rather than an affront toward us. At the right time, we could casually chat with the elder to clarify the problem for his benefit, if there is a need to.

2.3.5 Silence and interruption

2.3.5.1 Clearly, a disciple or student would respectfully listen to the Buddha or a teacher when he is instructing the Dharma. A well known example here is that of Pukkusāti, as recorded in **the Dhātu Vibh-aṅga Sutta** (M 140), who is instructed by the Buddha on their first meeting in a potter's shed. Midway through the instruction, he recognizes the Buddha as the teacher he is looking for. However, out of deference, he remains silent.

Only when the Buddha has finished his teaching, Pukkusāti then salutes the Buddha and apologizes for not recognizing him at first. Even by that time Pukkusāti recognizes the Buddha, he has already become a non-returned as he listens to the Buddha.⁷⁹

2.3.5.2 In the case of Vekhanassa, as recorded in **the Vekhanassa Sutta** (M 80), however, we have the wanderer Vekhanassa excitedly interrupting the Buddha while he is in the midst of instructing him. Vekhanassa, who has some undefined notion of "perfect beauty," mistaking what the Buddha has not finished teaching as being an endorsement of his own views, interrupts the Buddha and expresses his approval, saying that the Buddha is speaking his mind.

The Buddha, however, corrects him, saying that he has yet to understand what is being said. Only the arhats, who are fully awakened, can understand the meaning of perfection in terms of beauty, that is, nirvana. Vekhanassa seems convinced by the Buddha, goes for refuge, but no spiritual attainment is recorded to his benefit.⁸⁰

2.4 THE SILENCE OF ACCEPTANCE

2.4.1 The most common occurrences of silence as an expression of agreement in the suttas are when the Buddha accepts (*adhivāseti*) an invitation, usually for a meal (*bhatta*) or to go to a certain place. This is **the silence of acceptance** or assent. In **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3), for example, the brahmin Pokkharasāti says, "Might the master Gotama, together with the community of monks, accept a meal for today." The Blessed One assented by being silent."⁸¹

2.4.2 In **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), Ānanda suggests to the Buddha that they go to Ramamaka's hermitage as it is a pleasant place. The Buddha agrees by being silent. Ānanda's purpose is to give the monks an opportunity to hear the Buddha teaching the Dharma at a conducive place.⁸²

As already stated, the most common occurrences of the silence of acceptance is when the Buddha accepts a meal invitation, but such invitations are also extended to the monks.⁸³ And to a lesser extent,

⁷⁹ M 149,22.2/2:244 (SD 4.12).

⁸⁰ M 80, 14/2:43 (SD 40a.15).

⁸¹ D 3,2.19.3/1:109 (SD 21.3).

⁸² M 26,3.4/1:161 (SD 1.11).

they get invitations to teach the Dharma,⁸⁴ to go to a certain place,⁸⁵ to meet someone,⁸⁶ to a house-warming,⁸⁷ or simply to assent to some request.⁸⁸

2.5 THE SILENCE OF CONSENT

We have briefly mentioned that in monastic or ecclesiastical acts (*saṅgha,kamma*), silence is accepted as consent, or if the whole conclave is silent, there is a consensus. This is perhaps the oldest form of voting in the history of communal or democratic acts. In ordinations, for example, the silence of the conclave is accepted as consensus

Such an ecclesiastical or legal process of “**silence procedure**” was known in the mediaeval west, too, where we have the French term, *procédure d'approbation tacite*, or the better known Latin phrase, *qui tacet consentire videtur*, “he who is silent is taken to agree” or “silence means consent.” This procedure is also observed in international law.⁸⁹ This is technically the **silence of the conclave**. [1.1.5.2]

2.6 THE SILENCE OF DECORUM

2.6.1 Silence is a vital aspect of proper monastic conduct. A monastic almsround, as a rule, is done in total silence. When a monk stands before a house door, waiting for someone to offer some alms, he does not say a word.⁹⁰ After receiving the offerings, too, he maintains his silence. Traditionally, at the end of the meal, the monks would recite a thanksgiving for their donors and supporters.

⁸³ Accepting a meal invitation: **D 3**,2.19/1:109, 1:125, 1:148, 1:225, 2:88, 2:95; **M 35**,27/1:236 (from Saccaka), **58.4**/1:393 (from prince Abhaya), **81**,15/2:50 (past Buddha Kassapa), **82**,19/2:63 (Raṭṭha,pāla from his father), **85**,4-/2:91 = **V 2:127** (Buddha from prince Bodhi), **M 91**,37/2:145 (from Brahmāyu), **127**,2/3:145 (Anuruddha from carpenter Pañcakaṅga); **S 35.133**/4:122+123 (Udāyī from Verahaccāni brahminee); **A 5.33**/3:37 (Buddha from Ugga-ha), **8.12**,10/4:187 = **V 1:237** (from general Sīha); **U 4.3**/38 (from a cowherd), **8.5**/81 (from Cunda the smith), **8.6**/89 = **V 1:229** (from Sunidha and Vassakāra); **Sn 3.7**/p104 = **V 1:246** (from Keṇiya); **V 1:17** (from Yasa’s father), **1:38** (from Bimbi,sāra), **1:213** (from a certain brahmin), **1:217** (from lay disciple Suppiya), **1:231** (from courtesan Amba,pālī), **1:243** (from houselord Meṇḍaka), **1:290** (from lady Visākhā), **2:147** (from Rāja,gaha seth), **2:157+ 164** (from Anātha,piṇḍika), **3:11** (from brahmin Verañja), **3:16** (Sudinna to a meal at his erstwhile home), **4:74** (group-meal for monks from a naked ascetic), **4:76** (saṅgha-meal with jujube juice from a poor worker); **Miln 15** (Assa,gutta accepts eminent laywoman disciple’s invitation for himself and Nāga,sena).

⁸⁴ Invitations to teach: **D 32**,2/3:195 (the Buddha agrees to teach Āṭānāṭa protection; **S 22.80**/3:92 (to help undisciplined young monks); **A 4.159**/2:145 (Ānanda agrees to teach the nuns in their quarters).

⁸⁵ Accepting to go to a certain place: **M 26**,3.4/1:161 (Ānanda invites Buddha to Rammaka hermitage), **37**,8/1:253 (the devas invite Moggallāna to visit the Vejayanta palace), **88**,5-6/2:113 (Pasenadi invites Buddha to meet him), **88**,5-7/2:113 (to Acira,vatī river bank); **A 5.143**/3:168 (Ānanda invites Buddha to the Sāranda shrine).

⁸⁶ Invitations to visit or meet someone: **M 97**,27/2:191 (Sāriputta agrees to visit Dhanañjāni), **128**,3/3:153 = **V 1:341** (Buddha agrees go to the Kosambī monks to quell a strife), **M 143**,2/3:258 = **S 55.26**/5:381 (Sāriputta agrees to visit sick Anātha,piṇḍika); **S 7.21**/1:183 (Buddha agrees to visit Saṅgāra), **22.85**/3:110 (Sāriputta agrees to visit the monk Yamaka), **22.87**/3:119 (Buddha agrees to visit sick Vakkali), **22.88**/3:124 (to visit sick Assaji), **47.27**/5:176 (Ānanda to visit sick houselord Sirivaḍḍha), **55.3**/5:344 (Buddha to visit layman Dīgh’āvu), **55.27**/5:385 (Ānanda agrees to visit sick Anātha,piṇḍika); **A 2.36**/1:64 (Buddha accepts devas’ invitation to approach Sāriputta), **3.54**/1:185 (monks’ request Buddha to approach wanderer Sarabha on Sappinikā river-bank); **A 6.56**/3:379 (Buddha agrees to visit monk Phaguna).

⁸⁷ Accepting to house-warming: **D 33**,1.2/3:207 (Buddha to first use the Mallas’ new mote-hall at Pāvā); **M 53**,2/-1:354 = **S 35.243**/4:183 f (to first the the new Kapila,vatthu mote-hall).

⁸⁸ Assenting to some request: **D 16**,1.20/2:84 = **V 1:226** (to stay in Pāṭali,gāma lay-disciples’ resthouse, *āvasathā-gāra*); **D 17**,1.24/2:180 (Mahā Sudassana agrees to erect a dwelling, *nivesana*), 2:181 (then, to build a palace, *pāsāda*, called Dharma); **M 83**,13/2:79 (king Nimi accepts gods’ invitation to mount a divine chariot); **V 3:6** (brahmin Verañja invites Buddha to spend rains in Verañjā).

⁸⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silence_procedure.

⁹⁰ For difficulties faced, say, when it is dark, see **Laṭukikôpama S** (M 66,6/1:448 f) & SD 28.11 (3.1.1).

In the **Deva,hita Sutta** (S 7.13), for example, when the Buddha is ill, his attendant then, the monk Upavāṇa, goes to the brahmin Deva,hita's house and stands silently at one side. Deva,hita is impressed with Upavāṇa, makes an offering, visits the Buddha, and goes for refuge.⁹¹

2.6.2 After the Buddha has finished his meal (taken in silence), he would remain seated for a short time in silence, and then at an appropriate time give the thanksgiving. Such details are given in the **Brahm'āyu Sutta** (M 91).⁹² As lay followers offering almsfood (*dāna*), we should be circumspect to ensure that everything is properly prepared so that we can mindfully participate in the actual offering. Once the monks start eating their meals, we should not talk to them so that they can eat their meals mindfully.

Such, too, is the **rule of silence** for monastics living together, especially those practising for spiritual cultivation, such as famously described in the **(Anuruddha) Upakkilesa Sutta** (M 128). Although they do not talk with one another, they gather weekly to discuss Dharma. When they do their chores, they are mindful of one another, too, signalling one another if they need help in any way. [1.2.2.2]

2.6.3 Silence is the general decorum in a monastery. Indeed, for a monastic, silence is the general rule wherever he might be. The **Dhamma-ññū Sutta** (A 7.68), for example, speaks of 7 qualities of one who is accomplished in Dharma (*dharmehi samannāgata*), and the sixth of these is that he “knows society” (*parisaññū*), which includes knowing when to speak and when to remain silent.⁹³ This is the silence of decorum, which keeps us mindful and civil before others so that we inspire faith and joy in them.

Such a silence is not merely to look good and proper before others, but is also a kind of mindful silence so that we are ever ready to communicate with others when necessary, or to be generally circumspect of what is going on around us, especially to ensure that our presence in such a gathering is appropriate for ourselves and beneficial for others.

2.7 ANĀTHA,PIṄDIKA'S LOVING SILENCE

2.7.1 The **Dhammapada Commentary** tells us that although Anātha,piṇḍika regularly visits the Buddha, he does not question the Buddha at all. His reticence, we are told, stems from a deep love (*adhi-matta,sineha*) for the Buddha. He thinks that the Buddha is a delicate (*sukhumāla*) kshatriya. Anātha,piṇḍika thinks that since he is of great benefit (*bahūpakāra*) to the Buddha and the sangha, he might feel obliged to answer his every question, which would tire (*kilameyya*) the Buddha. Hence, he is silent, never asking the Buddha any question during the teaching sessions. We can call this Anātha,piṇḍika's silence or the silence of love (or “loving silence”).

However, as soon as Anātha,piṇḍika takes his seat, the Buddha thinks, “This seth (*seṭṭhī*) is protective of me who needs no protection. For, I've spent 4 incalculables and a further 100,000 aeons fulfilling the perfections.⁹⁴ My own gloriously adorned head have I cut off. My eyes I've plucked out. My heart's flesh I've plucked out. Both my wife and children dear to me as life itself, I've renounced—just for the sake of teaching the Dharma to others! This one is protective of me when I have no need of protection!” And he at once teaches the Dharma.⁹⁵ (DhA 1:5)

⁹¹ S 7.13/1:174 f (SD 44.17).

⁹² M 91,17/2:139 (SD 63.8).

⁹³ A 7.68,8/4:115 (SD 30.10).

⁹⁴ The 10 perfections (*dasa pāramī*) are those of: (1) giving (*dāna*), (2) moral virtue (*sīla*), (3) renunciation (*nek-khamma*), (4) wisdom (*paññā*), (5) effort (*virīya*), (6) patience (*khantī*), (7) truth (*sacca*), (8) determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*), (9) lovingkindness (*mettā*), and (10) equanimity (*upekkhā*) (J 1:73; DhA 1:84). See SD 15.7 (2.4) (1) n.

⁹⁵ *Ayam seṭṭhi maṃ arakkhitabba-ṭṭhāne rakkhati. Ahañ hi kappā,sata,sahass'ādhikāni cattāri asaṅkheyyāni alaṅkata,paṭiyattaṃ attano sīsam chinditvā akkhīni uppāṭetvā hadaya,maṃsaṃ uppāṭetvā pāṇa,samaṃ putta,dāraṃ pariccajītvā pāramiyo pūrento paresaṃ dhamma,desan'attham eva pūresim. Esa maṃ arakkhitabba-ṭṭhāne rakkhātī'ti ekam dhamma,desanaṃ kathetiy'eva.* (DhA 1:5)

2.7.2 However, we have sources, one canonical and one commentarial, that attest to the fact that on two occasions at least Anātha,piṇḍika does question or consult the Buddha. One occasion is recorded in **the Dakkhiṇeyya Dātabba Sutta** (A 2.35), when he asks the Buddha, “How many in the world are worthy of gifts, and where should gifts be made?” (*kati nu kho bhante loke dakkhiṇeyyā, kattha ca dānam dātabbam*). The Buddha answers that there are two who are gift-worthy, that is, the learner and the non-learner, that is, the saints of the path (the streamwinner, the once-returner and the non-returner), and the arhat.⁹⁶

On the other occasion, Anātha,piṇḍika consults the Buddha regarding the marriage of his daughter, Cullā Subhaddā to Uggā, the son of the seth of the city of Uggā. Uggā’s family has invited some naked ascetics, but Cullā Subhaddā, on account of her modesty, refuses even to look at them. This outrages her future father-in-law. The Buddha however later converts him, and all goes well. (DhA 3:466).

2.7.3 The Vinaya records an interesting incident when Anātha,piṇḍika invites the Buddha to spend the rains-retreat (*vass’āvāsa*) in Sāvattihī, and the Buddha replies, “Indeed, houselord, the Tathagatas delight in solitude!” (*suññāgāre kho gahapati tathāgatā abhiramantīti*). Anātha,piṇḍika immediately responds, “It is well understood, lord! It is well understood, well-farer!” (*aññatam bhagavā aññatam sugatā-ti*) (V 2:158). The commentaries, including the Vinaya Commentary (**Samanta,pāsādikā**), are silent here. So we have to hazard a surmise on the meaning of this passage: it is likely that the Buddha means that the conditions in Sāvattihī at that time are not conducive for a rains retreat.

Now we are told that the Buddha does not spend the rains in Sāvattihī in the 14th year of the ministry (BA 3). We could then assume that the Buddha is politely saying *no*, and Anātha,piṇḍika graciously accepts this reply. From what follows of the above Vinaya account, we could assume that Anātha,piṇḍika decides to build a proper residence for the Buddha and the monastic community in Sāvattihī anyway (V 2:158 f). During the last 25 years of the ministry, the Buddha spends the rains mostly either in Jeta’s grove or in the Eastern Park, outside of Sāvattihī. (BA 4)⁹⁷

2.8 STRATEGIC SILENCE

In **the Raṭṭha,pāla Sutta** (M 82), we see silence being used as a strategy. Raṭṭha,pāla, when his parents refuse to let him renounce as a monk, silently refuses to give up his decision. He simply sits down on the bare floor, going on a hunger strike, until his parents relent, so that he renounces to become a monk.⁹⁸ This is an example of a wholesome **strategic silence**, which is, of course, a skillful means, which we will now turn to.

3 Silence as skillful means

3.1 FOUR WAYS OF ANSWERING RIGHTLY

3.1.1 Right silence. We have noted that one of the ways of rightly answering a question is *silence*, that is, not answering it. Such silence can be negative, when it is not helpful for wholesome communication or promoting wisdom [2.1+2], or it can be positive, when it helps in wholesome communication and

⁹⁶ A 2.35/1:62 f. Cf very similar questions asked by the brahmin Deva,hita in **Deva,hita S** (S 7.13,11.2), SD 44.17 and also by Pasenadi, **Issattha S** (S 3.24,2+4), SD 44.18. These 2 suttas in fact give more elaborate replies to such questions. A:B 154 curiously tr *kati*, “how many?” here as “who?”

⁹⁷ The Ency of Buddhism entry on “Anāthapiṇḍika” (1:563 f) says that the Buddha “accepted” Anātha,piṇḍika’s invitation, and seems to imply that by answering in this way (V 2:158) he was hinting to Anātha,piṇḍika that there was no vihara at Sāvattihī or that he should build one there. This is of course uncharacteristic of the Buddha. Further, on Anātha,piṇḍika’s silence, see SD 2.1 (5).

⁹⁸ M 82,8-10/2:58 f (SD 92.5).

promotes wisdom [1.3 f; 2.4-2.7]. Positive silence is actually the fourth way of rightly answering questions, as stated in the suttas and related works.

In other words, it is useful to speak of 2 general kinds of silence, that is, right silence and wrong silence. **Right silence** is related to right speech (*sammā vācā*), that is, speech that is truthful, slander-free, pleasant and beneficial.⁹⁹ Hence, right silence does not entail or suggest falsehood, slander, harshness or frivolity, while wrong silence may suggest any or all of these.

Although right speech is defined in a fourfold way, it is represented in the 5 precepts (*pañca, sīla*),¹⁰⁰ the basic moral code for the laity, only by “refraining from falsehood” (*musā, vādā veramaṇī*). Hence, the fourth precept is a synecdoche for *all the 4 aspects of right speech*. Our speech should be truthful, be unifying and harmonious, be gratifying and inspiring, and be helpful and healing of others.

Similarly, our silence—if it is proper to be silent—should be honest, should promote unity and harmony, be gratifying and inspiring, and be helpful, even healing, too. In short, if our speech or communication should be accurate and sincere,¹⁰¹ our silence should be appropriate and truthful—a point we will discuss later [5.3].

3.1.2 The 4 ways of rightly answering questions

3.1.20 The 4 ways of rightly answering questions (*pañha, vyākaraṇa*) are a teaching model for effectively communicating the Dharma so as to inspire a wholesome change in self and others. According to **the Pañha Vyākaraṇa Sutta** (A 4.42) there are these 4 ways of rightly answering a question, that is, to say:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| (1) to be answered <u>categorically</u> ; | <i>pañha ekamsa, vyākaraṇīya</i> |
| (2) to be answered <u>analytically</u> ; | <i>pañha vibhajja, vyākaraṇīya</i> |
| (3) to be answered by <u>a counter-question</u> ; | <i>pañha paṭipucchā, vyākaraṇīya</i> |
| (4) to be set aside [<u>left unanswered</u>]. | <i>pañha ṭhapanīya</i> |

(A 4.42/2:46), SD 46.12, = **Kathā, vatthu Sutta** (A 3.67/1:197-199), SD 46.11¹⁰²

3.1.2.1 Briefly, a **categorical question** has a *yes* or *no* answer, or a multiple-choice question, or a very short clear answer, even a single-word, answer. In other words, it can be a “closed” question, one that elicits only assent or dissent, agreement or disagreement. Or, there can only be one answer (*ekamsika*) to it. Here’s well known example from **the Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59):

Now, what do you think, bhikshus, is **form** permanent or impermanent?”
 “Impermanent, bhante.” (S 22.59, 12/3:67), SD 1.2¹⁰³

3.1.2.2 An **analytical question** is one that needs a detailed answer discussing issues, or after making a distinction, as appropriate. It is an “open” or “open-ended: question.

Take this opening question from question from **the Sakkāya Pañha Sutta** (S 38.15), “What now, avuso Sāriputta, is self-identity?” The answer takes up the rest of the Sutta.

3.1.2.3 A question to be answered by a **counter-question** is appropriate when the question is unclear or it helps the questioner discover the answer himself. For example, “Does the eye have the same nature as the ear?” An appropriate counter-question would be “With respect to what?”

If they reply, “With respect to impermanence,” then we should answer “Yes.”

3.1.2.4 And a **question to be set aside** or left unanswered is one that is “wrongly put,” that is, it is a trick question or one that has no relevance to the spiritual life or has no spiritual benefit. A well known

⁹⁹ The suttas define **right speech** usu in negative terms, ie, refraining from lying, from slander, from harsh speech, and from frivolous talk: see eg **Sacca Vibhaṅga S** (M 141,26), SD 11.11.

¹⁰⁰ On the 5 precepts, see **Veḷu, dvāreyya S**, SD 1.5 (2).

¹⁰¹ See B Williams. *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 2002:11; also J Ganeri 2007a:53 f.

¹⁰² See also Miln 144 f = Miln:H 201-203. Further see **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

¹⁰³ This is the example given at AA 2:308 (comy to A 3.67),

example is this: “Is the soul the same as the body?” This question should be set aside, saying, “This has not been declared by the Tathagata.”¹⁰⁴

3.1.3 Questions wrongly put

3.1.3.1 There is an anecdote about a layman who was very enthusiastic about a book he had read, entitled *Who dies?*¹⁰⁵ He took the book to a monk and suggested that he should read it. The monk looked at the book cover, then looked at him, and said, “Wrong question!” Apparently, judging a book dismissively by its cover can help us appreciate some nuances of a question wrongly put. However, it is the layman who went away silent and disappointed.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps, then, he knew the guru better.

3.1.3.2 If the question is wrongly put here, perhaps a better answer by the monk would be the silence of openness, perhaps with a compassionate smile, and let the reader judge for himself. Of, if the monk is patient and engaging enough, perhaps he could have asked “Why?” and listen to the reader. Then, the monk could discuss what has been said by the reader, who would surely benefit more from such an exchange.

3.2 SILENCE OF COMPASSION

3.2.1 For those of us familiar with teaching Buddhism to the public, especially the ethnic Buddhists, would be aware that they often hold somewhat simplistic views (“My Buddha pendant is broken, it’s bad luck”), sometimes bizarre opinion (“This mantra can wash away all your bad karma”), sometimes superstitious ramblings (“I’ve been chanting this mantra for thousands of times, but I still get into trouble”), sometimes blind piety (“The venerable ones are holy people and should be fully respected”), sometimes slavish devotion (“He has a big title and dresses well, must know a lot about Buddhism”). It can be quite discomfoting to hear such views being reported back to us like some front-page news.

If we do take the trouble to explain in detail why such views are wrong, even harmful, we are likely to see the devotee’s eyes become glazed and distant, or worse, they simply stop speaking to us thereafter, and then spread the rumour that we are being antagonistic to their beloved teachers or precious beliefs.

Hence, the best response here is to calmly and patiently listen with a gentle smile. On the other hand, we might learn something about how people form their opinions, and be able to be more skillful in counselling such gullible believers or euphoric zealots. This is our practice of the silence of compassion, an openness that accepts others even when they do not deserve it.¹⁰⁷

3.2.2 A famous example of the Buddha’s silence of compassion is found in **the (Vaccha,gotta) Ānanda Sutta** (S 44.10), where the Buddha remains *silent* when the wanderer Vaccha,gotta¹⁰⁸ asks if there is a soul or no soul. For, if the Buddha answers *yes* (there is a soul), he would be going against his own teachings, and if he were to answer *no*, then he would confuse Vaccha,gotta who is holding to the view that there is a soul.¹⁰⁹ [5.2.1]

Since Vaccha,gotta is not ready to give up his soul-view, and we should never compromise the Dharma (as this would be planting the seeds of wrong view in him), the middle way here is that of silence. Of course, we might argue that the Buddha could have told him that there is a “self” in a conventional sense, but the Buddha is probably preparing Vaccha,gotta for bigger things. In fact, Vaccha,gotta meets the Bud-

¹⁰⁴ These examples are from AA 2:308 (comy to A 3.67). More details in **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10.

¹⁰⁵ Stephen & Ondrea Levine, *Who Dies?* NY: Knopf Doubleday, 1982.

¹⁰⁶ On the 4 ways of answering questions, see **Kathā,vatthu S** (A .67), SD 46.11; also **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58), SD 7.12 (4); **Pañha Vyākaraṇa S** (A 4.42/2:46), SD 46.12.

¹⁰⁷ On compassion, see **Brahma,vihāra**, SD 38.5 esp (4).

¹⁰⁸ See **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15 (1).

¹⁰⁹ S 44.10 (SD 2.16(5)).

dha a number of times, as recorded in a number of important suttas, and in due course, he becomes an arhat.¹¹⁰ [1.1.2.3]

3.2.3 The (Dasaka) Uttiya Sutta (A 10.95) gives us another example of the Buddha’s silence of compassion. The wanderer Uttiya meets the Buddha and asks him the 10 undeclared questions [6]. To each question, the Buddha patiently answers that it is “undeclared” (*avyākata*). Uttiya is curious why he does not answer them.

The Buddha replies that he teaches through “direct knowledge” (*abhiññā*), that is, personal realization and awakening (such as formulated for us in the 4 truths) [3.3.1], and that the Dharma which he teaches is for the sake of liberation (that is, not about speculating on such things as the 10 undeclared theses). In the end, Uttiya almost exasperatingly or sarcastically asks, probably rhetorically, how much of the world is saved by such a teaching. The Buddha remains unfazedly silent and does not respond to this question.¹¹¹ [5.2.2]

3.2.4 The Aṅguli,māla Sutta (M 86) presents the Buddha as showing silence when, as he walks on the path towards the notorious serial killer, “cowherds, shepherds, ploughmen and travellers” warn him of the grave danger of meeting such a vicious and powerful killer. The Buddha only silently walks on, knowing what he has to do.

Just as no one, not even Māra and his bad hosts, are able to distract the Buddha as he meditates under the Bodhi tree, no one is able to stop the Buddha from moving compassionately closer to the most dangerous man in the land. Indeed, he is the one who is going to “stop” Aṅguli,māla.¹¹² This is another example of his silence of compassion, or even the silence of purpose.

3.2.5 Here the Buddha’s **silence of purpose** is to clearly put across the message that he does not entertain any speculative view or frivolous talk, but relies on direct knowledge and courageous effort,¹¹³ and trains his followers to do the same. In fact, Uttiya seems to get this message, as he continues to visit the Buddha, becomes a monk and, in due course, an arhat.¹¹⁴ [1.1.6.4]

3.3 THE HEALING SILENCE

3.3.1 Personal healing and transformation

The Buddha’s silence is not merely reflective of the uselessness of the 10 questions [5.1; 5.2.1], or that they cannot really be meaningfully declared in any way. By responding with silence to such questions, the Buddha is gently diverting the questioner and the speculating away from the distractions of discursiveness, and directing him to the true path of inquiry, intuition, healing and liberation.

In a word or a phrase, all this—the Buddha’s teaching—is about **personal transformation**. If it takes silence to help spiritually transform a person, the Buddha would use it [6]. Of course, the silence itself does not usually help us gain immediate insight, but it does remove the distractions, and it stops us from wild goose chasing, running after wish-fulfilling mirages. It prepares us for the true path of spiritual training.

For this reason, the Buddha tells Uttiya in **the (Dasaka) Uttiya Sutta** (A 10.95), for example, that he does not delve into metaphysical speculations, such as whether or not there is an abiding soul or any such undeclared questions, but he looks directly into true reality. For that reason, he teaches only the 4 noble

¹¹⁰ See **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15 (1).

¹¹¹ A 10.95,2.5 (SD 44.16).

¹¹² M 85 (SD 5.11).

¹¹³ On moral courage (*vesārajja*), see SD 28.9a (3).

¹¹⁴ A 10.95 @ SD 44.16 (2).

truths, that is, the true nature of suffering, the root conditions for its arising, the cure or full liberation, and the path or way to that liberation.¹¹⁵ [3.2.3]

3.3.2 Parable of a doctor

3.3.2.1 In short, the Buddha is like a doctor who heals others and points out the nature of the greatest health and highest happiness. In at least two important texts, the Buddha uses the imagery of a doctor or surgeon to show the hazards of speculative diversions, when we should see the urgency of practising the Dharma for self-healing, if not for self-liberation.

We see such a parable of the doctor (better known as the parable of the poisoned dart) in **the Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (M 63), and in **the Sunakkhatta Sutta** (M 105), where it is more elaborately presented.¹¹⁶ The M 63 parable serves our purposes here better than the parable in M 105, which actually illustrates the arhat's aloofness from objects of attachment, which can be said to be **nirvanic silence**, one that is absent of all defilements and suffering. [5.2.3]

3.3.2.2 In the M 63 **parable of the doctor** (an arrow-removing physician), he treats a person wounded by a poisoned dart. The patient, however, refuses to have the arrow removed until he is told the details about the bowman, the bow and of the arrow. The doctor warns the patient that the answers to all these questions would never be known, and meantime he will surely die.¹¹⁷

Leaving the poisoned arrow in the body is like our clinging to all kinds of views, especially speculations about what can never really be known or what are unnecessary for spiritual awakening. The deadly arrow should be immediately extracted and the patient's wound treated, so that he will fully recover.¹¹⁸

3.3.2.3 Hence, the Buddha is silent on the undeclared questions and those that are wrongly put. This is to prevent them from becoming poison arrows that will harm us painfully. However, since it can be difficult for many of us to let go of views (they are, after all, a powerful form of craving that is only fully uprooted by an arhat), the Buddha would rather that we entertain some kind of provisional views.

Such views are based on worldly concepts and conventions—such as religious ideas, stories, images and even object lessons—so that we do not get caught up in speculating about questions that have no answers or are not helpful to personal development and spiritual awakening.

3.3.2.4 We see a hint of “concession” in such texts as **the Assutava Sutta 1** (S 12.61), which says that as far as self-views go, it is “better” for us (if we tend to have such a view) to identify the self with the body than with the mind. For, while the body appears to remain stable longer, the mind moves so fast that it is difficult to find an analogy for its speed.¹¹⁹

Indeed, most of us, even with some understanding of Dharma and the suttas, do have the view that our body seems to be stable (most of the time anyway), compared to the mind. Yet, we are also capable of reflecting that, despite the body's appearance of being stable and durable, it is still impermanent. To that extent, we do have some right view.

3.3.2.5 In other words, it is better for us to have a wrong view about the body (that it appears stable and durable) than to view that it is or has an abiding entity or permanent soul. If we hold any such soul-view, it is impossible that we will ever appreciate the full value and benefit of the Dharma. On the other

¹¹⁵ A 10.95 (SD 44.16). We are reminded of the Roman lawyer and philosopher, Cicero (106-43 BCE), who writes, in his last work, that deliberately leading a person into error, even by telling him the truth, is worse than failing to show them the right path. It is better here to remain silent (*De Officiis* [On duties] 3.50-55).

¹¹⁶ M 63,5/1:428 f (SD 5.8), & M 105,19-30/2:256-261 (SD 94.3).

¹¹⁷ M 63,5/1:428 f (SD 5.8).

¹¹⁸ On the Buddha as a “doctor,” see Sn 560; also SD 43.7 (2.2); also **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63,5.2), SD 5.8. On early Buddhism and Indian medicine, see SD 1.1 (5.3).

¹¹⁹ S 12.61/2:95 (SD 20.2).

hand, the view that our body is stable and durable is only a provisional view, one which we will be ever more willing and able to abandon as our understanding of the Dharma grows.¹²⁰

3.4 TRUTH AND VALUE

3.4.1 We have noted again and again that the Buddha is silent on speculative views and notions that are not helpful to personal development and spiritual progress. In other words, he regards it as a waste of time and effort to deal with such ideas, as they are not useful to our training. In other words, such speculations have *no value* to the spiritual life. What is of value to us should be useful to us in some wholesome way. For example, money is valuable to us because we can buy food, clothing, housing and medical care for ourselves.

However, these are things of worldly value to us because they are physical or benefit only our body (only indirectly, they benefit our mind). Moreover, they are things that are *external* to us, things which we can only “have.” Hence, they are also said to be of **extrinsic value**.

3.4.2 The Buddha is *not* silent on those things that are of value to us *internally*, which we can cultivate or nurture, such as life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom. These are qualities that we *become*: each of these qualities “is” us: we *are* alive, we *are* happy, we *are* free, we *are* true or truthful, and we *are* wise. Or, they are qualities we can cultivate. We want to “internalize” such qualities: hence, they are of **intrinsic value**, that is, they are good in themselves.¹²¹

As these are qualities that are wholesomely useful (thus *valuable*) to us, the Buddha is not silent on them, but speak volumes on them throughout his 45-year ministry. On a simple level, these are qualities that help us in utilizing our body as a tool for mental development. What we *do* with our body in this way, that is, cultivating it as a foundation for mental development, is called moral virtue (*sīla*).¹²²

3.4.3 Now, we come to a very important question: How does intrinsic value pervade these qualities (life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom)? The answer is that these values, or what they value, are true, that is to say, they reflect true reality, and allow us, in due course, to directly see true reality. These five qualities reflect the truth: we are *alive*, we want to live *happily*, we must be *free*, all this is *true*, and what makes us aware of all this is *wisdom*.

The undeclared questions are those that have no intrinsic value to us: they are neither useful to helping us gain any of the 5 value-related qualities, nor do they reflect true reality. They have nothing to do with life; they do not bring true happiness; they do not set us free; they are not the truth in anyway; they neither define nor increase our wisdom. Hence, the Buddha is silent on these undeclared questions.

3.5 TRUTH AND TIME

3.5.1 Timely truth

3.5.1.1 We will here examine what kind of statements the Buddha would make in his efforts to communicate or transform others. **The Abhaya Rājā, kumāra Sutta** (M 58) lists these 8 possible propositions¹²³ to give us a very good idea of how this is done:

¹²⁰ For a differently nuanced treatment of the doctor parable, see Ganeri 2007b:98-103 (§4.1).

¹²¹ On how these 5 values make the 5 precepts useful for personal development, see **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7) & SD 1.5 (2).

¹²² See SD 1.5 (2.7); see also “Intrinsic vs extrinsic value,” in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/>.

¹²³ The Sutta lists only 6 possible statements, omitting (5) and (6), apparently they are below the Buddha’s dignity and he does not need to resort to even “white lying” on account of his wisdom. The Mahāyāna concept of “skillful means,” as such, where direct or indirect lying is used, is a later innovation, *not* attested in early Buddhism.

(1)	True	useful	pleasant	He would assert this <u>at a proper time</u> .	
(2)	”	useful	unpleasant	He would assert this <u>at a proper time</u> .	
(3)	”	useless	pleasant	He would <i>not</i> assert this.	= frivolous talk
(4)	”	”	unpleasant	He would <i>not</i> assert this	= slander (divisive speech)
(5)	False	useful	pleasant	[Unlisted = false speech.]	= Mahāyāna “skillful means”
(6)	”	”	unpleasant	[Unlisted = harsh speech.]	= harsh speech
(7)	”	useless	pleasant	He would <i>not</i> assert this.	= frivolous talk
(8)	”	”	unpleasant	He would <i>not</i> assert this.	= slander

(M 58,8/1:395), SD 7.12

3.5.1.2 From this list, we can deduce that the Buddha would make **only the first 2 kinds of statements**, that is, what are both true and useful, whether they are (1) pleasant or (2) not. In most cases, as recorded in numerous suttas, the Buddha is recorded as making only *true, useful and pleasant statements*.

However, at the right time (*kālena*), he would make statements that are true, useful and unpleasant. The most common example of such a statement is where he uses the term “empty person” (*mogha, purisa*), which seems to be the strongest term of disapproval he ever uses, especially to serious cases of those holding on wrong views, such as those of Sāti (M 38), who has the view that it is the “same” consciousness that is reborn, and of Ariṭṭha (M 22), who is told that even an arhat has feelings.¹²⁴

3.5.1.3 It is also clear that the Buddha would not make any kind of statement that is **false**, whether *pleasant* or *unpleasant*, even if they are useful, what more if they are also useless (which amounts to blatant lying). This is very significant as it clearly entails that whatever “skillful means” the Buddha uses, he would never resort to lying, such as notoriously suggested by such Mahāyāna “skillful means” as in the parable of the burning house in the Lotus Sutra. The point is that the Buddha is above lying of any kind and does not need to on account of his wisdom.

What is useless does not help us grow spiritually. Such views stunt our growth, so that we are caught in a rut of limiting self-view.¹²⁵ Useful speech or view, on the other hand, even if it is only provisionally right, helps us to go beyond it, like stepping up on the rungs of a ladder¹²⁶ until we reach the safe heights from what is troubling us below.

3.5.1.4 The Catu Kāla Sutta (A 4.146) speaks of the 4 timely practices, that is, listening to the Dharma, discussing the Dharma, meditating for stillness, and meditating for insight.¹²⁷ Simple or routine as these instructions may appear, we must not be deceived by their simplicity. For the suttas have a habit of presenting vital truths, even profound ones, in the simplest of words, put together to mirror teachings that, when well understood, help us progress on the path to awakening.

First of all, it is clear that we take time to learn anything. The truth, once we welcome it into our lives, often takes some time to form and organize itself in our hearts and minds. These are nuanced truths about ourselves—how we think, feel and direct our lives—and they should not come too early or too late, but at the right time. If the truth comes too early to us, that is, we are unprepared for it, then we might not recognize it, or we might even misconstrue it, and so mislead ourselves on account of it.

Yet, we must not tarry for the Dharma to come to us. Here, to wait is to do nothing. We should begin by removing distractions from our lives. Whatever distracts us takes away our time from the real task.¹²⁸ First, we should examine and build our true priorities: we must be true to ourselves, to the world, and to the Dharma.¹²⁹ Then, we strengthen our minds and lighten our hearts, cultivating joy and light to welcome the Dharma into our lives.

¹²⁴ M 38,5.3/1:257 (SD 7.10), & M 22,6/1:132 (SD 3.13).

¹²⁵ On how our view of sexuality limits us, see **Saññoga S** (A 7.48), SD 8.7.

¹²⁶ The imagery of the ladder, echoing the parable of the raft (M 22,12-14/1:134 f), SD 3.13, is used by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (tr C K Ogden), 1922:6.54. See Ganeri 2007a:50.

¹²⁷ **Catu Kāla Sutta 1** (A 4.146/2:140), SD 41.1(6.1.3).

¹²⁸ On how distractions “takes time,” see **Sambahula S** (S 4.21/1:117 f) = (S 1.20.5/1:9), SD 21.4.

¹²⁹ See **Ādhipateyya S** (A 3.40), SD 27.3.

Secondly, when the truth comes at the right time, what we learn will transform us to be a more whole and free being. The timely truth transforms us, sometimes gently, sometimes suddenly, as it were, into a more wholesome and independent being. We think better, feel better, and direct our lives better. We become more detached from others and the world—we are emotionally independent—in the sense that we are happy with ourselves just as we are, so empowering ourselves beyond the lack of others and longing for the world. The world remains as what it is,¹³⁰ so to speak—it need not change as *we* need to—we must change for the better (in moral, psychological and spiritual senses). Then, we will see the world in better light. We are now more prepared to help others more effectively.

3.5.2 The truths: 4 or 2?

3.5.2.1 Although the Buddha is, as a rule, silent on the undeclared theses or questions, he does teach the 4 noble truths¹³¹ [1.1.4], because they are relevant to our personal development and spiritual awakening. We might even say that this is all that the Buddha teaches, as he himself declares in **the Anurādhā Sutta** (S 22.86), “Formerly, Anurādhā, and also now, I only declare suffering and the ending of suffering.”¹³² This is the famous “two noble truths.”

The 2 noble truths are the essence of the 4 noble truths, which are the definition of suffering, its arising, its ending, and the way to its ending.¹³³ The first of the 2 truths, “suffering” (*dukkha*), contains truths (1) and (2) of the 4-truth model, and the second of the 2 truths, “ending” (*nirodha*), contains truths (3) and (4) of the 4-truth model.

Both the truth models have the same soteriological purpose. They help us understand the true nature of the world and how we free ourselves from it. While both models refer to the same thing, the 2-truth model is a summary, while **the 4 truths** as a set gives the full formula for a more detailed discussion. This is the teaching—whether the 2 truths or the 4 truths—that we should know and make known, since they are what the Buddha himself teaches [1.1.2.8].

3.5.2.2 What then is **the purpose of the 2-truth model**? If we see the 4-truth model as a theoretical structure with which to mentally grasp how to identify the *meaning* of life, embodied in suffering and its arising (the first two truths), and the *purpose* of life, embodied in the ending of suffering and the way to do this (the last two truths), then we can see the 2-truth model as simply pointing to the meaning and the purpose of life, that is, respectively, suffering and its ending. The meaning of life is to understand what is suffering and learn from it, while the purpose of life is to free ourselves from suffering and awaken into bliss and wisdom.

3.5.2.3 We can also use the 2-truth model to encompass the practice of mental cultivation by way of **the 4 focuses of mindfulness** (*sati paṭṭhāna*).¹³⁴ They are also known as the 4 contemplations (*anupassanā*), that is, the contemplations of the body, of feelings, of the mind, and of realities.¹³⁵ Since the first truth encompasses *suffering*, we begin with the basic ground for pain: the body and feelings. The second truth deals with the *ending* of suffering: with the momentary cessation of bodily suffering, we now see a more subtle level of ground for suffering, the mind, and when the mind is still, visions of reality arise.

Beginners generally begin with **the contemplation of the body** (*kāyānupassanā*) or body-based meditation, such as the breath meditation. Actually, the first stage in this meditation is to find an ideal environment (peaceful and undistracting) and sit in the most comfortable posture so that we can remain physically still and mentally alert. In other words, we begin by stilling the body, calming down all the 5

¹³⁰ See **Nibbedhika Pariyāya S** (A 6.63,3/3:411), SD 6.11.

¹³¹ On the 4 noble truths, see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (SD 56.11), SD 1.1.

¹³² *Ettha ca te anuruddhā diṭṭh’ev’ dhamme saccato thetato tathāgato anupalabbhiyamāno, kallaṃ nu te taṃ veyyākaranam* (S 22.86,21.2/3:119), SD 21.13.

¹³³ On the 4 noble truths, see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (SD 56.11), SD 1.1.

¹³⁴ See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.3.

¹³⁵ See SD 13.1 (4).

physical senses and putting them to rest, as it were. Simply, this may be said to be “the silence of the body.”

As we work on the contemplation of the body, we might, in due course, notice various kinds of feeling arising in our body and mind. Now we go on to **the contemplation of feelings** (*vedanā'nupassanā*) or feeling-based meditation. We notice painful feelings, pleasant feelings, and times where neither seems to occur. We simply note their rising, or their falling away, or both their rising and falling. In this way, we are not distracted by them, but learn to disregard them as we tame them, as it were. This is called “the silence of feelings.”

Then we go on to **the contemplation of the mind** (*cittānupassanā*) or mind-based meditation. We notice whatever thoughts that arise, or fall away, or arising and falling. Whatever kind of thoughts they may be, we simply note them without any comment, and, above all, never following them, or we would fall into a maelstrom of thoughts, so be distracted. When we are able to calm all such thoughts, we experience “the silence of the mind.”

A calm body easily supports and enhances a calm mind. A mind that is calm and happy easily sees itself. And what does it see within itself? It is able to see various visions of true reality. This is where some Dharma vocabulary is helpful in identifying them once **the contemplation of reality** (*dhammānupassanā*), or reality-based meditation, is accomplished, and with that there is “the silence of reality.”

3.5.2.4 Philosophically, we can say that the 2-truth *sutta* model is based on the commentarial model of the 2 truths,¹³⁶ that is, conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*) and ultimate truth (*param'attha sacca*).¹³⁷ **Conventional truth** (*sammuti sacca*) is the language and mind of world, dealing with words, language, ideas and concepts in a mutually agreed way so that we are able to communicate with one another. This is the most common way we speak, mostly referring to people, things and names, such as “a king,” “a chariot,” or “Vessantara.”¹³⁸

The conventional truth is expressed through images, parables and stories. All these are intermediaries with which the Buddha, awakened teachers and the wise try to convey ideas of spiritual awakening so that we are better informed of its nature and are inspired to strive on diligently in the direction of nirvana.

If conventional truth is expressed in “people-based” (*puggalādhiṭṭhāna*) ways, then **ultimate truth** (*param'attha sacca*) is mostly expressed in “idea-based” (*dhammādhiṭṭhāna*) terms.¹³⁹ Here, the truth is expressed and exposed by way of ideas or concepts, such as impermanence, conditionality and nirvana.

3.5.2.5 However, we can also translate *dhamma* in the term as “reality.” *Dhammādhiṭṭhāna* then translates as “**reality-based,**” which refers to an experiential way of teaching the Dharma or answering questions. In this case, there is no limitation in the way an answer is given (as long as it is true, useful, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant) [3.5.1.1], but the effect is that of transforming or uplifting the listener to a higher level of being, even sainthood itself.

Hence, the ultimate truth is an experiential one, and can also be expressed through *silence*, that is, the silence of experience. Notice how when we fully experience something really important, we feel as if we have no more need of words for it: we just know it is right! This is the transcendence above all speech, languages, concepts and any kind of intermediary that are merely trying to put a finger on nirvana. In short, this is nirvana itself, the ultimate and absolute silence.

¹³⁶ AA 1:95; KvuA 84. Cf Vbh's lists of 2 truths (Vbh 116-121, 408).

¹³⁷ Dhs 193, 245. On the 2 truths, see SD 5.17 (5.3.7); also SD 10.6 (3.3). On the 2 levels of language, see **Poṭṭha-pāda S** (D 9), SD 7.14 (4).

¹³⁸ See SD 2.6b (1).

¹³⁹ This duad is usu used in terms of teaching (*desanā*): Nett 164 f; MA 1:24; PmA 449; Nett 164 f; also SD 36.1 (1.10).

4 The noble silence and sagehood

4.1 THE STILL MIND IN MEDITATION

4.1.1 Even better known than the Buddha's silence on the 10 theses and questions is the silence of meditation, famously known as “the noble silence,” as found in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), where the Buddha exhorts the monks, when assembled, to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (that is, either talk Dharma or meditate).¹⁴⁰ Technically, this is a term for a still mind deeply absorbed in the bliss of meditation or dhyana (*jhāna*).

4.1.2 **Dhyana** is a progressive four-stage suprasensory experience of altered consciousness, and has become predominantly and usefully Buddhist, in the the suttas have clear and practical descriptions, that can even be right said to be non-religious in nature. The early Buddhist purpose of attaining dhyana is to clear our minds of thoughts, then let go of our views, and so free the mind to fully be itself, seeing itself in joy, clarity and peace.¹⁴¹

4.1.3 There are at least two ways of interpreting the term “**noble silence**.” The first is as a tatpurusha (determinative compound), that is, as “the silence of the noble ones [the saints].” The other is as a karmadharaya (descriptive compound), that is, “the silence that is noble,” or simply “noble silence,” or “the silence of the silent sage (*muni*),” which is a tatpurusha [5].

Taken as a tatpurusha compound,¹⁴² “noble silence” (the silence of the noble ones) refers to *the mental state* of an awakened mind, or more broadly, that of any saint, especially the “silent sage,” whose mind is still. As a karmadharaya compound,¹⁴³ “noble silence” (the silence that is noble) refers to *the stillness of the second dhyana* or deep meditation [4.2], or even meditation in general that is seriously undertaken [4.3]. Neither of these senses applies to the *rule* of silence, that is, “conventional silence” or “regulatory silence.” Above all, it is a spiritual silence.

4.2 NOBLE SILENCE AS THE 2ND DHYANA

4.2.1 **The Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9), in its description of the second dhyana, describes the context of noble silence, thus:

With the stilling of initial application and sustained application, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, the monk enters and dwells in the second dhyana, free from initial application and sustained application, *accompanied by zest and joy, born of concentration*.

(D 9,11), SD 7.14

4.2.2 According to **the Kolita Sutta** (S 21.1), the second dhyana is known as “the noble silence” (*ariya, tuṅhī, bhāva*) because within it initial application and sustained application (thinking and pondering, *vitakka, vicāra*) cease, and with their cessation, speech cannot occur (S 21.1).¹⁴⁴ This is a hallmark of

¹⁴⁰ M 26,4/1:161 @ SD 1.11; see also **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (4).

¹⁴¹ See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (7). On “the noble silence and right speech,” see SD 26.11 (2).

¹⁴² A tatpurusha compound (P *tappurisa*; Skt *tatpurusha*) or dependent determinative cpd, as in “madhouse,” “grasshopper.” See Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, London, 1974:77 f & index; Tubb & Boose, *Scholastic Sanskrit*, NY, 2007:87, 96-125.

¹⁴³ A karmadharaya compound (P *kamma, dhāraya*; Skt *karma, dhāraya*) or descriptive cpd, as in “superman,” “spiderman.” See Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, London, 1974:108 f & index; Tubb & Boose, *Scholastic Sanskrit*, NY, 2007:87, 102-106.

¹⁴⁴ **Kolita S** (S 21.1/2:273 f), SD 24.12b & **Dutiya Jhāna S** (S 40.2/4:263 f), SD 24.12a. In **Kāmabhū S 2** (S 41.-6) *vitakka* and *vicāra* are called verbal formation (*vacī, saṅkhāra*), the mental factors responsible for speech (S 41.6/-4:293), SD 48.7.

Buddhist meditation, namely, the silence of the mind in profound bliss. Dhamma,pāla, in his commentary on the Thera,gāthā describes the fourth dhyana as the “noble silence” (ThaA 3:102).¹⁴⁵

4.2.3 This is clearly evident to those who have attained dhyana or even some early levels of meditative concentration. Meditative stillness or samadhi (*samādhi*) arises when all the 5 physical senses have shut down, as it were. In other words, we do not have to process any more sense-data of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. As such, the sense-consciousnesses (other than the mind itself) have subsided. The result is the mind looking at itself, like two mirrors facing one another—this is pure bliss, to say the least.¹⁴⁶

4.3 NOBLE SILENCE AS THE MEDITATING MIND

In the **Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), the Buddha exhorts the monks when they are assembled to “either speak on the Dharma or observe the noble silence” (that is, either talk Dharma or meditate).¹⁴⁷ The Commentary on the Sutta says that those who cannot attain dhyana are advised to maintain “noble silence” by attending to their basic meditation subject (MA 2:169).

In other words, the Commentary takes “noble silence” to refer more broadly to meditation itself. In our own times, the notion of “noble silence” is further extended, even ritualized and watered down, to mean the rule of silence. Strictly speaking, here the sign in the retreat, temple or centre kitchen should simply read “Silence please” or “Quiet please.” The next thing is to gently help people to observe the rule, and not take it merely as a sign of ritual piety.

4.4 THE SILENT SAGE

In the earliest decades of the Buddha’s ministry—or the “first period”¹⁴⁸—most of the monks were eremites or wanderers who were meditators delighting in the inner silence of the awakened mind, as reflected in the terms *muni* (“the silent sage”)¹⁴⁹ and *moneyya* (“the silence of the true sage”), a very common term in the Sutta Nipāta.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Cf **Nandaka S** (A 9.4/4:359), SD 73.4; Tha 650, 999; ThaA 2:274 (qu M 1:161). See also **Dutiya Jhāna Pañha S** (S 40.2/4:263 f), SD 24.12a.

¹⁴⁶ For details, see **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, SD 33.1b (6).

¹⁴⁷ M 26.4/1:161 (SD 1.11); see also **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (4).

¹⁴⁸ The first of the 2 periods of the Buddha’s ministry: see SD 40a.1 (1.3).

¹⁴⁹ See SD 26.11 (2.1). Refs incl the foll: **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16/2:106*, 157*), **Sakka,pañha S** (D 21/2:-267*×2); **Brahmāyu S** (M 91/2:144*×2, 146*), **Isi,gili S** (M 116/3:70*), **Deva,dūta S** (M 130/3:187*), **Bhadd’e-ka,ratta S** (Buddha: M 131/187*, 189), (Ānanda: M 132/3:191*, 192*) (Mahā Kaccāna: M 133/3:193*, 195*, 198*) (Lomasakaṅgiya: M 134/3:200*, 201*), **Dhātu,vibhaṅga S** (M 140/3:239, 346×4); **Sappa S** (S 4.6/1:106*), **Aggika S** (S 7.8/1:167*, 168*), **Deva,hita S** (S 7.13/1:175*×2), **Kaṭṭha,hāra S** (S 7.18/1:181*), **Arati S** (S 8.2/-1:187*), **Gaggarā S** (S 8.11/1:196*), **Hxaliddikani S 1** (S 22.3/3:9*), **Cetiya S** (S 51.10/5:263*), **Ādhipateyya S** (A 3.40/1:150*), **Ti,kaṇṇa S** (A 3.58/1:165*), **Jāṇussoṇi S** (A 3.59/1:167*), **Anusota S** (A 4.5/2:6* *sa ve muni*, vl *sa vedagū*), **Bhūmi,cāla S** (A 8.70/4:312*); **Dh** 225a, 269bd; **Bāhiya S** (U 1.10/9*), **Āyu,saṅkhār’osajjana S** (U 6.1/64*); **Dhamma Te,vijja S** (It 99/3.5.10/100*); **Muni S** (Sn 1.12/211-221*×10), **Pabbajjā S** (Sn 3.1/414b*), **Māgha S** (Sn 3.5/508c*), **Sabhiya S** (Sn 3.6/523c*, 540c*, 545b*), **Sela S** (Sn 3.7/571b*), **Nālaka S** (Sn 3.11/700-cd*, 708d*), **Guhatṭhaka S** (Sn 4.2/779b*), **Duṭṭhatṭhaka S** (Sn 4.3/780c*), **Jarā S** (Sn 809c, 4.7/812c*), **Tissa Metteyya S** (Sn 4.7/821b*), **Māgandiya S** (Sn 4.9/844b*), **Purābheda S** (Sn 4.10/850d*, 860b*), **Mahā Viyūha S** (Sn 4.13/914c*), **Atta,daṇḍa S** (Sn 4.15/941d, 946a, 954b), **Mettagū Maṇava S** (Sn 5.5/1052e, 1058b), **Nanda Maṇava S** (Sn 5.8/1077a), **Hemaka Maṇava S** (Sn 5.9/1085c), **Pārāyana S** (Sn 5.18/1127d); **Tha** 137a; **Thī** 205a. (More refs at Vv, Pv, Tha, Thī, Ap, B, J, Nm, Nc.) Six kinds of muni: **Nm 1:58** (Comy on Guhatṭhaka S, Sn 4.2/772-779), **2:355** (Comy on Mahā Viyūha S, Sn 4.13/895-914). Note that most of the refs are marked with an asterisk (*), ie they are verses, which in such cases, are ancient.

¹⁵⁰ Refs incl the foll: **Nālaka S** (Sn 3.11/700d, 701a, 716a). Three kinds of moneyya: **(Vitthāra) Moneyya S** (A 3.120/1:273); **(Saṅkhitta) Moneyya S** (It 67/3.2.8/56); **Saṅgīti S** (D 33.1.10(53)/3:220); **Nm 1:57, 129, 2:335**.

Meditation is a training in the taming and silencing of the mind, to clear it of words and noise, so that we can directly *feel* our present-moment experiences, understand their true nature, and go on to realize the liberating wisdom. Only in such inner stillness can we truly see our minds and cultivate the wisdom with which to express the Dharma clearly and effectively to others.¹⁵¹

5 The silence of the 10 points

5.1 IS SILENCE A FORM OF SECRECY?

5.1.0 Before we close, let us once again briefly look at the significance of 10 undeclared theses and questions.¹⁵² Here we shall discuss some more practical aspects of silence, as reflected in these categories: a sutta dilemma [5.1], spiritual silence [5.2], social ethics [5.3], and ineffability [5.4].

5.1.1 Silence and secrets

5.1.1.1 SOCRATE’S SILENCE. In the *Clitophon*, the questioner Clitophon accuses Socrates,¹⁵³ thus: “[O]ne of two things must be true: either you know nothing about it, or you don’t wish to share it with me!”¹⁵⁴ Socrates’ silence may be due to his inability to instruct the opinionated but ignorant Clitophon. He is not only ignorant of his own faults, but he is also unaware of Socrates’ methods at work.

More importantly, the gap between Socrates and Clitophon suggests the limitations of speech, which is not helping Clitophon understand Socrates’ teachings.¹⁵⁵ This silence leaves the dialogue open-ended, so that we can think for ourselves what may have happened, and reflect on what has been said.¹⁵⁶

5.1.1.2 THE MILINDA, PAÑHA discusses this dilemma: The Buddha declares that he has “**no guru’s fist,**” nothing to hide,” and yet he does not answer the undeclared questions. Now, if he knows and does not answer, then it is a “teacher’s fist,” but if he has no teacher’s fist and still does not answer, it means that he does not know! Nāgasena replies by explaining the way of answering a question, but goes no further [3.1] (Miln 4.2.2).¹⁵⁷

It should further be said that, when the questioner does not know the answer, it is still a “secret” to him, but not to the Buddha, who knows why he does not answer (such as not to confuse him further). It is not as bad as being ignorant, than if the questioner is further confused by an answer that he does not understand, or worse, if induced or misled into a negative state of affairs. [5.1.2]

¹⁵¹ **Visākha S** (A 4.48) speaks of 6 kinds of oratorical excellences: (1) refined speech (*poriyā vācāya*), (2) clear voice (*vissatthāya*), (3) distinct enunciation (*anelagalāya*), (4) clarity in meaning (*atthassa viññāpaniyā*), (5) well-rounded knowledge (*pariyāpanñāya*), (6) independence of thought (*anissitāya*) (A 4.4,8/2:51).

¹⁵² Technically known as “extreme views” (*anta-g.gāhikā, diṭṭhi*): V 1:172; M 1:426; S 4:392; A 5:193; Pm 1:139, 151-155; Vbh 392; SA 3:137; NmA 1:243 f; PmA 2:453; VbhA 496); *dasa, vatthukā* ~ (Nm 1:113; Nc:Be 235); also spelt *anta-g.gāhika, diṭṭhi* (esp in Subcomys). If you have not read **The unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10 (where these 10 theses and questions are discussed in detail), it helps to break off here to read it as a background to this section.

¹⁵³ The Greek philosopher Socrates (470/469-399 BCE), his student, Plato (428/427 or 424/423-348/347 BCE), who recorded Socrates’ dialogues), along with his own student, Aristotle (384-322 BCE), are the founding fathers of western philosophy.

¹⁵⁴ *Clitophon* 410c6-7. The *Clitophon* (Greek, Κλειτοφῶν, also transliterated as *Cleitophon*), the shortest of Plato’s work, is a 4th cent BCE dialogue traditionally ascribed to Plato, but whose authenticity has been debated. It is a dialogue btw the opinionated politician Clitophon and Socrates, with Socrates remaining mostly silent. For refs, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clitophon_\(dialogue\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clitophon_(dialogue)), esp “Socrates; silence.”

¹⁵⁵ Mark Kremer, *Plato’s Cleitophon: On Socrates and the Modern Mind*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004:28.

¹⁵⁶ Hayden Ausland, “On a Curious Platonic Dialogue,” *Ancient Philosophy* 25, 2005:412.

¹⁵⁷ Miln 4.2.2/144 f.

Hence, the Buddha, who has no guru's fist, still remains silent towards a question wrongly put or when the questioner is not ready. The questioner may wrongly opine that the Buddha does not know. It is, however, only his view, and a wrong one, too.

5.1.2 The silence of knowing

5.1.2.1 Unless it's a trick question,¹⁵⁸ we are generally right in saying that a questioner generally does not know the answer to his question. After all, this is a very good reason to ask such a question, especially when the respondent is someone wise like the Buddha. It is also understandable that such a questioner would demand some kind of answer to his questions.

Do any of the Buddha's questions asked during his dialogues with others fall into the category of "trick questions"? If any questions of the Buddha is seen as a trick questions, it is clear that they are not ill-intentioned (not rooted in greed, hate or delusion), and never to mislead the questioner. Like a skillful irrigator, the Buddha is merely opening a new channel or a thought-path familiar to the questioner, so that he moves away from his false view and prepares himself for the right view of things. The early Buddhist notion of "skillful means" eschews falsehood and unwholesome speech.¹⁵⁹

5.1.2.2 However, notwithstanding Clitophon's narrow view that Socrates' silence meant that either he was ignorant or he did not wish to share his knowledge, the ancient Indians (contemporaries of these Greek philosophers) allowed 4 ways of answering a question, that is, a direct categorical answer, a more detailed analytical answer, a counter-question (seeking clarification), and silence (setting aside the question as wrongly put) [3.1.2]. Silence is an acceptable answer, especially if the question is of a philosophical or speculative nature.

5.1.2.3 The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) presents us with an interesting situation where the 500 assembled monks remain silent despite the Buddha's asking thrice:

"Now, bhikshus, there may be doubts or misgivings amongst some monks as regards the Buddha or the Dharma or the Sangha or the path or the way. Ask, bhikshus. Regret not later,¹⁶⁰ saying, 'We were before the Blessed One, and we were not able to ask the Blessed One face to face!'"

(D 16,6.5/2:155 f), SD 9

When Ānanda reassures the Buddha that the monks are silent because they have *neither doubt nor misgiving*, the Buddha replies that he already knows this, "For, Ānanda, amongst these 500 monks, even the most backward [the least developed] monk is a streamwinner, not bound for the lower world, destined for awakening."

On attaining streamwinning, our doubts regarding the Dharma are uprooted (Sn 231). Since those present before the Buddha in his last moments are at least of this level, none of them asks any question. The Sanskrit **Mahā,parinirvāṇa Sūtra** (§42.8) tells us that the Buddha always acts out of compassion for future generations (for us today): *api tu karaṇīyaṃ etat tathāgatena yathāpi tat paścimaṃ janatām anukāmpamānaḥ*.¹⁶¹ Out of the Buddha's compassion, the Dharma is accessible to us so that we can ourselves work towards **the silence of liberation**.

¹⁵⁸ This is usually the "two-horned or double-pointed question," a false dilemma: see SD 7.11 (2). However, it is also not the case that the questioner always knows the right answer to the trick question he is asking.

¹⁵⁹ On ethical skillful means, see **Skillful means**, SD 30.8 (8.3).

¹⁶⁰ *Mā pacchā vipaṭṭisārino ahuvattha*): as at §§5.19+20. Elsewhere, it forms the well known call to meditate: see **Araka S** (A 22.70.4/3:139), SD 16.17 & n. For comy, see MA 1:195 f, SA 3:111 f, 266 f. From here to §6.6 = **Kusinārā S** (A 4.76/2:79 f); **Devatā S** (A 9.19/4:392).

¹⁶¹ Waldschmidt, *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, vol 2, Berlin 1951:392. See **D 16,6.5** n, SD 9.

5.2 SPIRITUAL SILENCE: THE BUDDHA’S SILENCE ON THE 10 THESES

5.2.1 Silence of the 10 theses

5.2.1.1 The most famous silence in all religion must surely be the Buddha’s silence regarding the 10 theses or points. We have a number of ancient texts that record the Buddha’s own explanation for why he does not answer any of the 10 questions. The first explanation can be found in **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9), thus:

28 “Why, bhante, has the Blessed One left them [the 10 undeclared points]¹⁶² undeclared?”

28.2 “Because it [their declaration] is unbeneficial [*not* connected to the goal];

it is *not* connected to the Dharma;

it does *not* belong to the fundamentals of the holy life,

it does *not* lead to revulsion [disillusionment], to dispassion [fading away of defilement], to cessation (of suffering), to inner peace [the stilling of defilements], to direct knowledge (of the 4 noble truths), to awakening, to nirvana.

That is why I have left them undeclared [undetermined].” [189]

29 “But what has the venerable Blessed One declared [determined] (*vyākata*)?”

29.2 “‘This is suffering,’¹⁶³ Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared [determined];

‘This is the arising of suffering,’ Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared;

‘This is the ending of suffering,’ Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared;

‘This is the path leading to the ending of suffering,’ Poṭṭhapāda, I have declared.”

30 “And why has the venerable Blessed One declared them?”

30.2 “Because it [their declaration] is beneficial [connected to the goal];

it is connected to the Dharma;

it has to do with the fundamentals of the holy life,

it leads to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation (of suffering), to inner peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.¹⁶⁴

That is why I have declared them.”

(D 9,25), SD 7.14

5.2.1.2 In §29, the Buddha states what he *has* declared, that is, the 4 noble truths. he goes on to explain that he teaches these truths because “they are connected to the goal, ... to the Dharma, ... to the fundamentals of the holy life ... to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation (of suffering), to inner peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.” In short, the Buddha only explains those teachings that are connected with or lead to spiritual awakening.

5.2.2 Awakening here and now

5.2.2.1 The Buddha, after stating that he only teaches what conduces to the path and goal of awakening, goes on to say that such an awakening can, indeed, should, occur in this life itself. In **the Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (M 63), we see a statement on silence almost identical to the one in the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta above [5.2.1.2]. In the Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta Sutta, however, the Buddha also gives us the parable of the man shot with a poisoned dart, thus:

¹⁶² The Pali text uses *taṃ*, “that” or idiomatically “it,” ie the 10 indeterminable points. For a detailed analysis of these 10 points, see **Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63), SD 5.8 (2).

¹⁶³ “Suffering,” *dukkha*. Here Rhys Davids proposes an interesting tr: “dis-ease,” ie as the opp of “ease” (*sukha*) (D:RD 1:249 n1).

¹⁶⁴ The line is the nibbidā formula, see **Nibbida**, SD 20.1 esp (3.3).

5.2 Suppose, Māluṅkya,putta, a man were wounded by an arrow [dart],¹⁶⁵ thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and blood relatives, brings a **physician** who is a dart-remover to treat him.

If he were to say, ‘I will not let the arrow-removing physician pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me is a kshatriya [noble] or a brahmin [priest] or a vaishya [merchant] or a shudra [worker].’

Or, if he were to say, ‘I will not let the arrow-removing physician pull out this arrow until I know the name and the clan of the man who wounded me.

... until I know whether the man who wounded me is tall or short or of medium height.

... until I know whether the man who wounded me is dark or brown or yellow-skinned.

... until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such and such a village or town or city.

...until I know whether the bow with which I am wounded is a longbow or a kodanda [a Munda bow].

... until I know whether the bowstring with which I am wounded is fibre or reed or sinew or hemp or bark.

... until I know whether the shaft with which I am wounded is wild or cultivated.

... until I know whether the feathers fitted to the shaft with which I am wounded is from a vulture or a heron or a hawk or a peacock or a stork.

... until I know whether the sinew that binds the shaft with which I am wounded is that of an ox or a buffalo or a deer or a monkey.

... until I know whether the arrow that wounded me is hoof-tipped or curved or barbed or calf-footed or oleander.

All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die.

So, too, Māluṅkya,putta, if anyone were to say thus: “I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until he declares to me, ‘*The world is eternal,*’ ... or ‘*A tathāgata both exists and not exists after death,*’ that would still remain undetermined by a tathāgata and meanwhile the person would die. (M 63,5.2), SD 5.8

5.2.2.2 The Buddha adds that whether or not there is the view, ‘*A tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death ...*’ or any other of the 10 theses is true or not, the truth and reality remains that “there is birth, there is ageing, there is death, there are sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now.”¹⁶⁶

The point is clear. The Buddha Dharma is not about answers various speculations about the world, or existence, or even religion itself. It is about what is really before us, and the immediate and urgent realities that we should address, for our personal development and spiritual liberation. None of the types of speculations listed in the 10 theses will help us in this. On the contrary, they actually hinder us from the spiritual path. This is because we are looking outwards into the world. Instead, we should be looking within to understand the source of why we speculate over such matters, and so free ourselves from the world of the senses and delusion.

5.2.3 Renouncing the world

5.2.3.1 The (Vaccha,gotta) Moggallāna Sutta (S 44.7) records an important and interesting dialogue between the brahmin Vaccha,gotta and the elder Moggallāna.Vaccha,gotta—clearly having some understanding of the problems related to the 10 theses—asks Moggallāna why the wanderers of other sects resort to the 10 theses in their teachings.

¹⁶⁵ *Salla*, sometimes rendered as “arrow” (*sara*). See M 63,5.2 (SD 5.8) for details.

¹⁶⁶ M 63,6 (SD 5.8).

Moggallāna’s answer is very instructive. He explains that the wanderers of other sects think in terms of “owning” or identifying with the 6 sense-bases, that is, they regard each of these sense-bases, thus: “This is mine; this I am; this is my self.” In other words, they have externalized the inner reality of their own minds, projecting it to what they perceive externally—something like, thinking, “These things are my Soul ...”—without any understanding of how that inner reality works.

5.2.3.2 Moggallāna then explains to Vaccha, gotta that the Buddha teaches the “disowning” or letting go of such perceptions of the external world, so that we can work with the real problem about how the mind works, and so freeing it. Moggallāna continues:

But, Vaccha, the Tathāgata, the arhat, the full self-awakened one,
 regards the eye, thus: “This is *not* mine; this I am *not*; this is *not_my* self.”¹⁶⁷
 He regards the ear, thus: “This is *not* mine; this I am *not*; this is *not_my* self.”
 He regards the nose, thus: “This is *not* mine; this I am *not*; this is *not_my* self.”
 He regards the tongue, thus: “This is *not* mine; this I am *not*; this is *not_my* self.”
 He regards the body, thus: “This is *not* mine; this I am *not*; this is *not_my* self.”
 He regards the mind, thus: “This is *not* mine; this I am *not*; this is *not_my* self.”

(S 44.7,15-16), SD 53.14

This passage beautifully presents to us the essence of the true purpose and goal of **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*). The highest or true renunciation is the letting go of all the senses—the world (as stated in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23)).¹⁶⁸ Even in this world itself, we can feel the profound joy of such a renunciation in our meditation, when we have overcome the mental hindrances—that is, free ourselves from the delusive powers of the 6 sense-bases—and enjoying dhyana, or even some simple level of samadhi.¹⁶⁹

5.2.3.3 The import of this passage [5.2.3.2] is highly significant for a helpful understanding of how our mind works. When we think that either our living body or the mind as the soul or self (*attā*), or as belonging to the self or soul, or feel some kind of bond with this self or soul, we must still recognize that both the body and mind are impermanent. The world out there, too, is impermanent.

When we accept the fact that everything is impermanent, but we still identify ourselves with such impermanent things, surely, we would fear that they will cease to exist. This fear arises from the desire and attachment to what is really impermanent: this is a cognitive dissonance. As long as we are unwilling or unable to see this, we will continue to fear losing them. (Dh 212-216)

5.2.3.4 Because we are filled with **a desire to live** (*jīvitū, kāma*) and **a desire not to die** (*amaritū, kāma*),¹⁷⁰ we believe or want to believe that there is life after death, especially an eternal after-life state, in some kind of heaven or heavenly state. This view is one rooted in eternalism (*sassata, diṭṭhi*).

Some of us, on the other hand, are attached to sensual pleasures, and wish to enjoy them without any regard to their consequences or implications of our actions. In other words, we choose not to be responsible for our actions, with the belief—or desire to believe—that there is no life after death. This view is one based on annihilationism (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*).¹⁷¹

5.2.3.5 The Buddha, on the other hand, has realized that all suffering or unsatisfactoriness arises from ignorance (*avijjā*), which is like when we are lost in blinding darkness and the slightest glimmer of light attracts us. That glimmer arouses in us craving (*taṇhā*), a thirst, rooted in ignorance (not know where we

¹⁶⁷ *N’etaṃ mama, n’eso ’ham asmi, na m’eso attā ’ti.*

¹⁶⁸ S 35.23 (SD 7.1).

¹⁶⁹ On meditation as renunciation, see **Hālidakāni S 1** (S 22.3/3:9-12) SD 10.12; **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (14.7); **Sexuality**, SD 31.7 (1.6.2). On the purpose of renunciation, see **Danta, bhūmi S** (M 125) SD 46.3; SD 46.15 (2.7.1.4); SD 66.13 (1). On the renunciation pericope, see (**Ānanda**) **Subha S** (D 10,1.7) n, SD 40a.13; explanation, SD 40a.1 (8.1.2).

¹⁷⁰ On these two terms, see **Sunakkhatta S** (M 105,30/2:261,6), SD 94.3 = **Janapda Kalyāṇi S** (S 47.20/5:170,7) = J 1:393,24 ≈ Vism 297,11; (pl) **Pāyāsi S** (D 23,12/2:330,8), SD 39.4.

¹⁷¹ On these 2 extreme views—eternalism and annihilationism—see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,2-3) + SD 1.1 (3).

are or what is before us). Ignorance makes us blindly imagine what we seem to lack; craving identifies with what we see as being able to fill that lack. We fervidly run after it and tenaciously grasp it. Not able to use what we grasp, we go on chasing and grasping. The chase seems to be more fun—so we keep on chasing.

Rooted in ignorance and driven by craving, we identify the body or the mind, or both, as our abiding self or eternal soul. But once we understand how our mind is rooted in ignorance and driven by craving, we begin to be able to let go of this false identification. When we do let go of all such notions of self-identity (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), then our existential angst and spiritual suffering stop. Then we clearly understand why we do not need to seek answers to questions and speculations about the self, the world, or the afterlife—because the answer is *not* out there, but *in here* (in our own minds).

5.2.4 Not a true silence, but a teaching strategy

5.2.4.1 Is the Buddha's not answering questions on the 10 theses [5.1.0; 3.3.1] a true silence? It would have been so if he does not say anything at all about them through the suttas and other ancient texts. Of course, there are instances of his being truly silent, such as when he does not answer any of Vaccha,gotta's questions on the 10 theses, as recorded in **the (Vaccha,gotta) Ānanda Sutta** (S 44.10). Having finished asking all the questions, Vaccha,gotta then leaves. Ānanda then asks the Buddha to explain himself.¹⁷² [3.2.2]

5.2.4.2 In such a situation, the Buddha's silence is a teaching strategy, a skillful means. In fact, after Vaccha,gotta has left, the Buddha explains to Ānanda to the effect that any reply he gives would confuse Vaccha,gotta [1.1.2.3]. The effect of the Buddha's silence here actually has a positive effect on Vaccha,gotta, since we have suttas on his further visits, questioning the Buddha on the Dharma, and in due course he joins the order and becomes an arhat.¹⁷³ [3.2.1]

5.2.4.3 The Buddha's not answering any of the undeclared questions is not true silence, in the sense that he *does* answer by stating that he refuses to take any stand on any of them. Such is the case in **the (Dasaka) Uttiya Sutta** (A 10.95), where he answers every one of the 10 questions asked by Uttiya by stating unequivocally, "Uttiya, it has not been declared so ... by me."¹⁷⁴ [3.2.3]. This is simply a case of the Buddha not taking any stand on the matter, and it is *not* a real silence, except perhaps only in an idiomatic sense.

5.3 TRUTH AND VALUE

5.3.1 Buddhism as a profession

5.3.1.1 Information on any religion and any scripture is easily available today to anyone who has access to bookstores, libraries, well-organized courses, the universities, and, of course, the Internet. The Buddhist civilization is sufficiently old and rich to attract scholars of various disciplines to examine Buddhism through their own lenses. The interesting effect of such careful (although sometimes cavalier) investigation of Buddhism is to inevitably create various forms of "scholars' Buddhism."

The academic scholars' critical analyses of Buddhism sometimes try to challenge some popular forms of Buddhism or some established Buddhist ideas. Where the scholars are honest and discerning—especially when they are driven by the love for truth and humanity—their research and ideas are valuable in helping us reexamine how we look at Buddhism.

Where such scholars are themselves practising Buddhists, or at least sympathetic to Buddhism as a living religion—and not merely seeing it as an easy and lucrative profession, even to the extent of declar-

¹⁷² S 44.10/4:400 f (SD 2.16).

¹⁷³ See **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SD 6.15 (1).

¹⁷⁴ S 44.10/4:400 (SD 2.16).

ing that they are “not Buddhists” themselves—they are also effectively Buddhist teachers. There is much that Buddhists today can learn from such practising scholars.¹⁷⁵

The sciences and most other non-religious disciplines can be studied in an impersonal way. However, when it comes to Buddhist beliefs and practices, it is like the fine arts. We cannot really learn, say, music from a lecturer who has no practical experience of music, who plays no musical instrument at all, or who does not love music.

5.3.1.2 Furthermore, even amongst Buddhist monastics, there is today a strong undercurrent of professing Buddhism as a career. A growing number of monastics (especially from the ethnic Buddhist fold) have devoted themselves to the attainment of some academic degree, so that they are effectively “career monastics.”

After attaining such academic degrees, many (if not most) of them seem neither capable of teaching a high standard of Buddhist studies, or doctrine, or meditation, nor are inclined to do so. Many of them simply gravitate to living busy social lives running a temple or centre, lives that are, as a rule, more affluent and comfortable than that of lay devotees who frequent their organization, of which they are the CEOs and so on. Such a lifestyle is far from being one of spiritual silence. This is the secularization and domestication of these monastics. They have become overwhelmed in worldly noise.

5.3.1.3 The comment reflects the reality that is more common amongst Asian monastics than western monastics. It is, of course, possible for well-meaning monastic academic scholars to be able to keep to their monastic rules and practice while working as an academic specialist of Buddhist studies. In practical terms, they would be the ideal Buddhist scholars.

5.3.2 Silence as a virtue

5.3.2.1 Not knowing is *ignorance*; thinking that we know when we know not is *self-delusion*. If we know that we know not, to that extent we are wise, and should be moved to seek the truth. If we think that we know and stop there, then we are stuck in ignorance and falsehood.

Conversely, if we know that what we are going to say—even if it is true, useful or pleasant—would confuse another, it is best not to say it. If we know that remaining silent would actually save others from unnecessary or unjust embarrassment, unease, or unwholesome response, then silence is a better option. In either case, ours would be a virtuous silence, one that maintains, if not promotes, moral virtue in another. Or, it is a timely silence, because the other party is not ready for the truth.

5.3.2.2 In this connection, there is the curiously germane story of **Mallikā**, Pasenadi’s queen, who dies recalling her misdeed of bestiality in the royal bath-house, and is reborn in hell. The devastated king asks the Buddha of her destiny. For seven days, the Buddha “distracts” him with inspiring teachings so that he forgets about his question. On the eighth day, when Mallikā is reborn in Tusita heaven on account of her great virtue and generosity, the Buddha then answers the king’s question with the happy truth.

The rationale behind the Buddha’s “silence” here is to ensure that Pasenadi does not despair at the fact that such a virtuous woman could be reborn in hell—a perception that might arouse incapacitating wrong views in him, hindering him from spiritual progress. The Buddha’s silence here truly gives the king the benefit of the doubt.¹⁷⁶

5.4 SILENCE AND INEFFABILITY.

5.4.1 The terms silence and **ineffability** are sometimes erroneously applied, even as synonyms, to the undeclared theses and questions. However, these terms are quite distinct, not synonyms. In fact, as we shall soon see, only “silence” (*tunhī, bhāva*) rightly applies to the undeclared theses and questions, while

¹⁷⁵ On the notion of scholars of Buddhism who are practitioners, see eg Jackson & Makransky 2000.

¹⁷⁶ See **Mallikā Devī Vatthu** (DhA 11.6/3:119-123); see SD 42.14 (2.3),

“**ineffability**” (*atakkâvacara*) is often used to describe the intuitive or supralinguistic aspects of Buddhist experience, such as dhyana, awakening, and nirvana, which are beyond words and concepts.¹⁷⁷

Language does not help in explicating any of the 10 undeclared points, much less help us an iota in the attaining of dhyana. This is because language is a product of our thinking and pondering [4.2], and an intermediary or medium between our mind and the referent (the mind’s object). In other words, we are simply projecting our own image of such an object.

And if we obtain such information from the Internet, the media, from books, or even from others who are experts, or even awakened, we get only a second-hand, more often a third-hand or handed down information. At best, we have only received wisdom without any direct experience of true reality.

5.4.2 Silence here refers to a *deliberate* act of the Buddha or the silent person. Philosophically, it is used almost exclusively to describe the Buddha’s attitude towards the 10 undeclared theses or questions: he is *silent* on them. This does not mean that he is incapable of discussing, but he is not inclined to do so as it would not be conducive for the listener’s progress on the path of mental cultivation and spiritual liberation. In fact, as already noted, the Buddha may be silent on the undeclared points on one occasion [5.2.1], but he may have something to say about them on another [5.2.2].

The silence of non-speculating is only a prevention from our being drowned or dragged away by words, ideas and concepts, so that we lose our way or fall away from the path of personal development and self-awakening. Hence, the silence is also a preparation for deeper mental cultivation, such as the attaining of dhyana, or some level of sainthood, even nirvana itself. But it is still too early in our spiritual journey. The body and mind may be still and silent, but we have yet to free ourselves from our defilements and from suffering.

5.4.3 Ineffability is of a more passive nature, describing a dhyana state or nirvana itself, which is beyond intellectual knowledge, accessible only through direct experience. Both dhyana and nirvana are a sort of supralinguistic, direct and personal experience. It’s like watching a clear moonless night sky full of stars: we can try to describe it in the finest of language, and even record the event on the best of cameras, it is still neither the moonless night sky of stars nor the personal experience itself.

Philosophers and religionists try to use **negative language** or apophasis to refer or point to such ineffable “states.”¹⁷⁸ But this is merely a way of saying what “it” is not. It is still not the real “thing.” Even when you are inspired to put it into beautiful poetic words, even music, it is still *not* the thing. This is simply because both dhyana and nirvana are beyond the senses. They are not only *supralinguistic*, but also suprasensory. So we are each left to taste it for ourselves. The word is not the thing; the name is not the thing named.¹⁷⁹

6 Conclusion

6.1 SILENCE OF THE BODY

6.1.1 The Buddha’s silence is not that he does not know the answers to all the religious questions, or is unable to express them in intelligible language. His silence is both practical and spiritual, and above all natural. It is **practical** in that he is only interested in pointing out to us the true nature of the world and how we can be truly at peace with it. However, if we really understand the Buddha’s teachings on the sense-faculties and how they constitute **the “all”** (*sabba*) of what can be known, then we are in a better position to understand why he is silent on speculative and frivolous issues. Such questions distract us

¹⁷⁷ See **Unanswered questions**, SD 40a.10 (4.1).

¹⁷⁸ On apophasis, see SD 40a.3 (6.3).

¹⁷⁹ See SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5); SD 17.4 (4).

from the real “problem,” that of the “all” (*sabba*),¹⁸⁰ how our sense-faculties work and how we create our own worlds with them.

6.1.2 The real problem—our **spiritual** task—then lies in our own mental processes which give rise to such questions. What is vital here, as such, is not an answer or the lack of an answer to these questions, but rather that we need to be able to fully remove ourselves from such a sphere of mentation and ratiocination so that our thoughts are still and clear. We need to see true reality for ourselves.

6.1.3 The Buddha’s silence on the undeclared theses or questions is a **natural** one, in the sense that he is neither contriving to hold back “secret” teachings until the very last moment so as to preserve his position of power, nor to selectively teach the favoured or those favouring him. It is natural in the sense that it fits or promotes the true purpose of life, that is, to grow, and above all, to grow *spiritually*.

This spiritual growth begins with an understanding of our body, that is, the 5 physical senses. They are always feeding us with information from the “outside” world, which we have to incessantly process. Yet such information, useful as it may be in the world, becomes cyclic and tiresome after a while. So we need to “rest” our senses, as it were, that is, to see beyond them. We can best do this by calming them, and then, with a calm body, work to still the mind. **The silence of the body** is the first step in spiritual development.

6.2 SILENCE OF SPEECH

6.2.1 Before we can really cultivate mental peace, we must close another “door,” that is, the speech door. **Speech** is an expression of an active mind, and is directed outwardly. Speech is, of course, useful when it brings wisdom. But when it does not, it can, and often does, become a distraction. It saps our physical and mental energies, and distracts us, and creates false realities in us.¹⁸¹

6.2.2 An instructive Jātaka story illustrates this point. **A tortoise**, being a slow land animal, desires to fly up in the sky and see how everything looks like from up there. He has two kind geese for friends, and they volunteer to help him realize his dream. So they bring a strong stick and tell the tortoise to bite it hard in the middle. The geese warn the tortoise *never* to say a word, no matter how beautiful and breath-taking the view may be. The tortoise at once agrees.

Then, each of the geese, taking one end of the stick, together fly high in the sky. So, the tortoise, clinging on to the stick, held up by the two geese, is lifted into the clear blue sky, over tree-tops, hills, lakes, rivers, all kinds of animals and everything else. It is such a great sight that the tortoise self-forgetfully exclaims: “Wow, what a beautiful sight!” That is the last we hear of the tortoise!¹⁸²

6.2.3 **Speech**, like the body, is a wonderful servant, but a bad master. The true master here is our calm and clear mind. As we understand our mind better, we also better master our body (our physical actions) and speech. They become more helpful in our further personal development and mental cultivation.

No matter how useful speech may be, the real joy comes when it has done its task: it helps us to learn and to share that learning. When speech is done, we feel the reward of a satisfying inner silence.

6.2.4 **Body, speech and mind** are like the three corners of a tripod. When connected together with calm and clarity, they give us a good and stable base for our lives. They are, in fact, the doors of all our actions for which we must be accountable. This means that our body, speech and mind, are the real source-

¹⁸⁰ See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

¹⁸¹ This is an allusion to the 5 mental hindrances: see *Nīvaraṇa*, SD 32.1.

¹⁸² This is an adaptation of **Kacchapa J** (J 215/2:175-177).

es of pain or joy. When we understand this, we can learn from how all this happens. Then, we can lessen the suffering, promote the joy, and go on to free ourselves from them altogether.

6.3 SILENCE OF THE MIND

Our body and speech are, effectively or ineffectively, the expression or activity of our mind. Our deeds and words are ineffective (have no beneficial effect) when the mind is not still; but is disturbed and troubled. This disturbance is further fed by unwholesome bodily deeds and speech. So the snake bites its own tail.

As we begin to notice mental calm, the mind itself becomes clearer. Then, our deeds and speech, too, become calmer and clearer. The snake begins to loosen its bite, and it feels less pain. We need to cultivate the mind to become so very calm and very clear until the snake disappears altogether: no snake, no tail-biting. This is the bliss of the silence of the mind.

6.4 SILENCE OF AWAKENING

6.4.1 We are all living beings, but most of us are still deep in slumber, and would not wake up despite the calls to wake up. Many others are sleepwalking and do not even know it. We go through our daily routine, wait for each routine to end so that we might feed ourselves, or pursue some frivolous pleasure. Then we hope to find some rest, all of which we seem never to have enough of.

6.4.2 It is like some “**nanites**” (intelligent microscopic robots that self-replicate)¹⁸³ are flooding our system and taking over our three doors of action. These nanites are, for our purpose here, an image for the cycles within cycles of thinking that we get caught up in. In the suttas, this is known as “thought proliferation” (*papañca*).¹⁸⁴ This is a key characteristic of the unawakened mind, it is a series of thought explosions, and we run about excitedly to find out what is going on or to gawk at the on-going destruction.

The *papañca* nanites are self-replicating inner voices. The more we listen to them, the more they replicate themselves. So we see ourselves become bigger and more “real.” Very soon, these nanites take over our whole body, speech and mind. We then become *asuras*,¹⁸⁵ the “fallen gods” of Buddhist mythology. We become viciously vindictive beings who will do anything to get what we want, use anyone for what they can give us (power, money, pleasure), and even destroy them in the process.

6.4.3 To awaken as **truly free beings**, we need to stop *papañca*; we need to end this profusion of thoughts. How do we stop thought or thinking? Actually, we cannot, not while we are unawakened: so this becomes a double bind. However, we may not be able to stop thinking, but we do not have to follow the thoughts. We should see them for what they really are: moments of memories and ideas that rise and fall.

It’s like watching the traffic and we want to cross the road. We watch the flow of passing vehicles without paying attention to the individual vehicles. When we notice a safe window in the flow, we at once mindfully and safely cross over to the other side.

So we simply observe our thoughts without commenting on them or following them. Soon, we will notice there are gaps in between the thoughts. These are very peaceful spaces which we should enjoy, as they empower us to lessen the thoughts and increase the joy.

¹⁸³ In the Stargate series (1997-2007), the “*nanites*” are tiny self-replicating robots built by the Ancients to destroy the vampire-like Wraiths. To protect themselves the Ancients programmed the nanites to prevent them from harming anyone with Ancient Technology Activation (ATA) gene. In time, however, the nanites evolved to take human form, becoming Asurans (cf *P asura*), superior humans in every way, except that they are heartless thinking machines.

¹⁸⁴ On *papañca*, see **Madhu,piṇḍika S** (M 18), SD 6.14 (2).

¹⁸⁵ Cf the “Asurans” or “Replicators” in the Stargate series (see above here).

6.4.4 In simple terms, the more peaceful joy we cultivate within, the closer we are to inner peace, the clearer our mind becomes. We can now see the path more clearly and the goal appears to us in the distance. The vision is simply inspiring and compelling. We only want to move on. As we move, we notice how impermanent our path and journey are, everything passing by us and we are ourselves moving.

Then, we realize that we are but conscious moving parts seeking the wholesome. None of these parts exist in themselves, which means that we have *no abiding self*: we can change and need to change. As we realize this, our self-doubt lessens and our conviction to spiritual growth is strengthened. As we grow stronger, the more we look within ourselves for strength and succour. We become less superstitious and more self-reliant. Finally, when the 3 fetters of self-identity, doubt and attachment to rituals and vows are broken, we are well on the way to hearing **the sweet silence of awakening**.¹⁸⁶

— end —

Suggested 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 (*avyākātā* questions), 239-245 (on propositions 7-10 on the tathāgata);
- (4) Gethin 1998:66-68 (on **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S**, M 63).
- (5) Intro to **Mahāli S** (D 6) in D:RD 1:186-190;
- (6) Intro to **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58) tr in SD 7.12.

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[See also Bibliographies of SD 6.15 & of SD 40a.10]

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¹⁸⁶ See **Emotional independence**, SD 40a.8.

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