

12

Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta

The Discourse to Prince Abhaya | M 58

Theme: How the Buddha is not caught by trick questions

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 Prince Abhaya

Prince Abhaya was a son of Bimbisāra, king of Magadha, by Paduma,vatī, a courtesan of Ujjenī (capital of Avantī in the southwest, north of the Vindhya mountains). Abhaya was at first a follower of the nirgrantha Nātaputta, but later took refuge in the Buddha.

The Vinaya says that it was Abhaya who discovered the baby Jīvaka Komāra,bhacca lying on a dung-heap left there on the instructions of his mother, the courtesan, Sālāvātī, and he raised him as his own (V 1:269; AA 1:398 f). The Aṅguttara Commentary, however, says that Abhaya was Jīvaka’s own natural father (AA 1:399).¹

In **the Abhaya Sutta** (S 46.56), Abhaya visits the Buddha on Mt Vulture Peak to discuss the views of Pūraṇa Kassapa. The Buddha then teaches him the seven factors of awakening (S 46.56/5:126-128).

When Bimbisāra died, Abhaya was emotionally disturbed and decided to join the Order. On listening to the teaching of **Tāla-c,chigga!’ūpamā Sutta** (S 56.47),² he became a streamwinner, and later became an arhat (Tha 26; ThaA 1:88).

2 The double-horned question

The Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta (M 58) and **the (Asi,bandhaka,putta) Kula Sutta** (S 42.9) both deal with the “double-horned question” (*ubhato,koṭika pañha*)³ here used by the Nirgranthas (early Jains) against the Buddha. By their very nature such questions are as a rule unanswerable—to say “yes” or “no” to any of such questions is to accept that they are valid.⁴

This is like one’s answering “yes” or “no” to a question such as “Where does a fire go when it is extinguished?” The question does “not apply”, it is “wrongly put” (*na upeti*) (M 72.19/1:487). Gethin in *The Foundations of Buddhism* gives a modern example: To answer “‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a question such as ‘Are Martians green?’” one is “drawn into accepting the validity of the question” (1998:68).⁵

In the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta, the Buddha points out to Prince Abhaya that the question he is asking is a “double-horned question,” immediately exposing the problem and Abhaya is impressed [§6]. However, in the (Asi,bandhaka,putta) Kula Sutta, the Buddha goes on to answer the trick question with panache (S 42.9.9-11/4:324).

¹ See §7, where Abhaya is said to have an infant with him.

² S 56.47/5:455 f.

³ See M 58/1:392-396 (SD 7.12) & S 42.9/4:322-324 (SD 7.11) respectively. In Indian logic, this is called *ubhaya-taḥ pāṣa* (see S Bagchi, *Inductive Reasoning: A study of tarka and its role in Indian logic*, Calcutta, 1953: 182, 183). In addition to the dilemma (*du,pada pañha*), MA also mentions the trilemma (*ti.pada pañha*) and the quadrilemma (*catu-p,pada pañha*) (MA 2:197) but there seems to be no examples of these in the Canon. See Jayatilleke 1963:226.

⁴ In **Milinda,pañha**, the double-horned question is skillfully used by way of Buddhist apologetics. See also Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 334 f, 350-352.

⁵ Another modern example is the Christian evangelist’s trick of drawing the unwary into a one-sided indoctrination by asking “What do you think of Christ?” (Matt 22:42). The Buddhist answer is the noble silence. Cf D 25,20/3:53.

3 The 6 kinds of statements

3.1 The heart of **the Abhaya Rāja, kumāra Sutta** is the teaching on right speech. The Buddha gives an almost exhaustive list of “paths of speech” (*vacana, patha*)⁶ or speech-types according to their truth-value, utility (or disutility) and pleasantness (or unpleasantness). A statement could be true (*bhūta, taccha*) or false (*abhūta, ataccha*), useful (connected with the goal, *attha, sarṁhita*) or useless (not connected with the goal, *anatta, sarṁhita*), pleasant (*paesaṁ piyā manāpā*) or unpleasant (*paesaṁ appiyā amanāpā*).

3.2 From these we get a comprehensive set of 8 possible propositions, of which 6 apply to the Sutta, thus:

(1) True	useful	pleasant	[§8.6]	He would assert such a statement at a <u>proper time</u> .
(2) ”	”	unpleasant	[§8.3]	He would assert such a statement at a <u>proper time</u> .
(3) ”	useless	pleasant	[§8.5]	He would <i>not</i> assert such a statement.
(4) ”	”	unpleasant	[§8.2]	He would <i>not</i> assert such a statement.
(5) False	useful	pleasant	[-]	[Unlisted = false speech.]
(6) ”	”	unpleasant	[-]	[Unlisted = harsh speech.]
(7) ”	useless	pleasant	[§8.4]	He would <i>not</i> assert such a statement.
(8) ”	”	unpleasant	[§8.1]	He would <i>not</i> assert such a statement. ⁷

3.3 Statement 2 [§8.3], however, seems to contradict a statement in **the Subhāsita Sutta** (Sn 3.3), where it is stated “One should speak only what is pleasant” (*piya, vācam eva bhāseyya*. Sn 452a). Jayatilleke suggests that “this apparent exception holds good only in the case of the Tathāgata” (1963: 352). However, in the second half of the stanza, *piya* is broadly defined: “What one speaks without bringing evil to others is pleasant” (*yaṁ anādāya pāpāni | paesaṁ bhāsate piyaṁ*, Sn 452cd).

3.4 We should carefully note that alternative (5) “false, useful, pleasant” is actually unlisted in the Sutta. This is the kind of expression that characterizes most of the Mahāyāna “skillful means” and parables, especially those of **the Lotus Sutra** or Saddharma, puṇḍarīka Sūtra, a post-Buddha polemical work that brazenly debunks many of the key teachings of early Buddhism.

The Lotus Sutra cleverly deals with the notion of falsehood (developed in its second chapter), claiming, in effect, that it is permissible to be false as a “skillful means” to liberate someone, thus justifying falsehood and contradiction. Needless to say, if we value truth and do not want to fall for an amoral expedience, this approach is neither wholesome nor legitimate.

The fact that the Lotus Sutra is rooted in a clear historical falsehood—that it had come from the Buddha himself—it would be irrational, not to say unwholesome, to accept it as Buddha Word.⁸ Clearly, it is work that insidiously work against the early historical Buddhist teachings—this is often obvious from the views and activities those sectarians who champion this Sutra.

3.5 The Buddha clearly rejects falsehood as a didactic means, even when it is useful, meaning that this tend to be patronizing or exploitative. The Buddha is no sweet-talker, and we do have numerous

⁶ *Vacana, patha*; cf **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,11.1/1:126). SD 38.1.

⁷ See Jayatilleke 1963:351 f.

⁸ See SD 31.12 (6.1.3).

occasions when he would actually and rightly reprimand foolish monks.⁹ It can be argued that the Subhāsita Sutta (Sn 3.3) records the situation in the early years of the ministry (probably the first 20 years) when only those who have attained the Dharma-eye or become arhats are admitted into the order.¹⁰

4 Connected suttas

4.1 Since the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta deals with the nature of questioning and the truth of a teaching, it should be studied with a number of other related suttas. **The (Asi,bandhaka,putta) Kula Sutta** (S 42.9) relates how the nirgranthas (early Jains) try (again) to discredit the Buddha by instructing Asi,bandhaka,putta to ask a double-horned question to trip the Buddha. Unlike in **the Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M 58) where the Buddha points out to Abhaya that he is asking a double-horned question (so foiling the deceit), here the Buddha replies with a complete discourse, which converts Asi,bandhaka,putta.

4.2 In **the Kāḷaka (or Kāḷak'ārāma) Sutta** (A 4.24), the Buddha declares that he knows and understands whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, searched into, pondered over by the mind, but he is not subject to any of them. It is said that at the end of the discourse, the earth shook as if in witness of his statement. (A 4.24/2:24 ff)

4.3 THE 4 WAYS OF ANSWERING QUESTIONS

4.3.1 The Saṅgīti Sutta (D 331) lists the 4 ways of answering a question (*pañhā,vyākaraṇa*), that is repeated in the Aṅguttara Nikāya as **the Pañha Vyākaraṇa Sutta** (A 4.42):

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| (1) There is the question which requires a direct answer | <i>ekaṃsa vyākaraṇīya,</i> |
| (2) That which requires an explanation (or analysis) | <i>vibhajja vyākaraṇīya,</i> |
| (3) That which requires a counter-question | <i>paṭipucchā vyākaraṇīya,</i> |
| (4) That which requires to be rejected (as wrongly put) | <i>ṭhapanīya.</i> |
- (D 33,1.11(28)/3:229; A 4.42/2:46; also A 1:197, 2:46; Miln 144; cf Watanabe 1983:1.10 ff)

4.3.2 The Milinda,pañha (Miln 144 f) provides examples for each of the 4 proper ways of answering questions, thus:

- (1) There is the question which requires a direct answer**, that is, a categorical reply, or direct affirmation or negation: *Is form ... feeling ... perception ... mental formation ... consciousness impermanent?* (S 3:21 etc.).
- (2) That which requires an explanation or analysis**, that is, a discriminating reply or analytical reply: *But if form ... feeling ... perception ... mental formation ... consciousness is impermanent ... ?*
- (3) That which requires a counter-question:**

⁹ Monks who show any serious psychosocial weakness (esp wrong view and wrong conduct) are reprimanded as *mogha,purisa*, lit “empty person,” usu tr as “misguided one.” See esp **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22.6/1:132), SD 3.13. See **Pāthika S** (D 24): 3:3 (×3), 4 (×3), 6, 7 (×2), 9 (×2), 10 (×2), 11, 12 (×2), 28 (×2); **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12): 1:68, 69; **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22): 132 (×5), 258 (×5); **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhāya S** (M 38): 258 (×2); **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63): 1:428; **Mahā Kamma,vibhaṅga S** (M 136): 3:208 (×3), 209; **Mīḷhaka S** (S 17.5): 2:229; **Sīha,nāda S** (A 9.11): 4:378; **Vinaya: V** 1:32, 58 (×2), 59 (×4), 154 (×3), 193 (×4), 216, 218 (×3), 250 (×3), 301 (×3), 305 (×3), 306 (×6); 2:7, 18 (×3), 26 (×5), 118, 119 (×2), 165 (×2), 168 (×4), 193. On *mogha,purisa* as a syn of *asappurisa*, see **Sappurisa S** (M 113), SD 23.7 (3.2).

¹⁰ See SD 44.1 (3.5.1.1).

But now, is everything discriminated by the eye? [untraced quote]

See the Ambaṭṭha Sutta (D no. 3) where the Buddha counter-questions Ambaṭṭha who arrogantly questions if the Buddha was a “great man” (*mahā, purisa*).

(4) That which requires to be rejected (as wrongly put), that is, waiving the question as being wrongly put, or keeping silent:

____ The 10 undeclared or indeterminate statements (*avyākata*) or questions set aside (*ṭhapanīya*) by the Buddha. These propositions are listed in several suttas: **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9), **the Pāsādikā Sutta** (D 29), **the Māluṅkya,putta Sutta** (M 63), **the Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72), **the Vacchagotta Saṃyutta** (S 3:257 ff), **the Abyākata Saṃyutta** (S 4:374-403), etc. (Miln 144 f)¹¹

4.4 In **the Suta Sutta** (A 4.183) the Buddha advises Vassakāra, the well known courtier of Magadha that whatever is seen, the heard, the sensed or the cognized, only those that contribute to the decline of unwholesome states and to the growth of wholesome states should be spoken of.

— — —

Abhaya Rāja,kumāra Sutta

The Discourse to Prince Abhaya

M 58

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in the squirrels’ feeding-ground in the Bamboo Forest near Rājagaha.

Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s trick question

2 Then Prince Abhaya¹² went to Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, and after saluting him, sat down at one side. As Prince Abhaya was thus seated at one side, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta said this to him:

3 “Come, my prince, refute the recluse Gotama’s doctrine. Then a good report concerning you will be spread about thus: ‘Prince Abhaya has refuted the doctrine of the ascetic Gotama, so mighty, so powerful!’”

“But how, bhante, shall I refute the doctrine of the ascetic Gotama, so mighty, so powerful?”

“Go, my prince, approach the ascetic Gotama and ask him:

3.2 ‘Bhante, would the Tathagata utter speech that would be unpleasant and disagreeable to others?’

If, when questioned by you thus, he were to answer,

‘The Tathagata, my prince, *would* utter speech that would be unpleasant and disagreeable to others,’

then say to him,

‘Then, bhante, what is the difference between you and an ordinary person? For an ordinary person also would utter speech that would be unpleasant and disagreeable to others.’

¹¹ Further, see **Kathā,vatthu S** (A 3.67), SD 46.11).

¹² Prince Abhaya was a son of Bimbi,sāra, king of Magadha. See Intro (1).

3.3 But if the recluse Gotama, when questioned by you thus, he were to answer,
‘The Tathagata, my prince, would not utter [393] speech that would be unpleasant and disagreeable to others,’

then say to him,

‘Then, bhante, why have you declared regarding Devadatta¹³ thus: ‘Devadatta is destined for the suffering state, that Devadatta is destined for hell, Devadatta will remain there for the aeon, Devadatta is incorrigible’?¹⁴ Devadatta was angry and displeased with that speech of yours.’

3.4 When the recluse Gotama is given this double-horned question¹⁵ by you, he will neither be able to throw it up nor swallow it down. Just as if an iron hook¹⁶ were stuck in a man’s throat, he would not be able to either throw it up or swallow it down, so, too, my prince, when the recluse Gotama is given this double-horned question by you, he will neither be able to throw it up nor swallow it down.”¹⁷

4 “Yes, bhante,” Prince Abhaya replied. Then he rose from his seat and after saluting Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, keeping him [the nirgrantha] to his right side, departed and went to the Blessed One.

Prince Abhaya invites the Buddha

4.2 After saluting the Blessed One, he sat down at one side, looked at the sun, and thought:
“It is too late today to refute the Blessed One’s doctrine. I shall refute the Blessed One’s doctrine in my own house tomorrow.”

Then he said this to the Blessed One,

“Bhante, let the Blessed One and three others¹⁸ consent to accept tomorrow’s meal from me.”

The Blessed One consented by his silence.

5 Then, knowing that the Blessed One had consented, Prince Abhaya rose from this seat, and keeping him [the Blessed One] to his right side, departed.

Then when the night had ended, early in the morning, the Blessed One dressed, and taking robe and bowl, went to Prince Abhaya’s house and sat down at the prepared seat. Then, with his own hands, Prince Abhaya served and satisfied the Blessed One with various excellent food, both hard and soft.

The Buddha answers

When the Blessed One had finished his meal, and washed his bowl and hands, Prince Abhaya, taking a low seat, sat down at one side. Sitting thus at one side, Prince Abhaya said this to the Blessed One:

¹³ On Deva,datta’s attempts to kill the Buddha, see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 ch 7.

¹⁴ “Incorrigible,” *atekiccha*. Comy glosses it as *Buddha,sahassena*, “with a thousand Buddhas,” ie after a thousand Buddhas have arisen (MA 3:108). The Canonical texts however say that Devadatta will stay in Niraya (hell) for only an aeon (*kappa*) (V 2:202; M 1:393; A 3:402, 4:140, 160; It 85).

¹⁵ “Double-horned question,” *ubhato,koṭika pañha*, ie the horns of a dilemma. See S 42.9.6/4:323; Miln 5, 108, 162.

¹⁶ “Iron hook,” *aya,singhāṭaka*. In his tr, Thānissaro has “two-horned chestnut” ie “the nut of a tree (*Trapa bicornis*) growing in south and southeast Asia. Its shell looks like the head of a water buffalo, with two nasty, curved ‘horns’ sticking out of either side.” <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/majjhima/mn058.html>. Unfortunately, he does not give his Pali reading.

¹⁷ For a philosophical analysis on Nāta,putta’s argument to trip the Buddha, see Jayatilleke 1963:226 f.

¹⁸ “The Blessed One and three others,” *Bhagavā ... attā,cattuttho*, lit “The Blessed One, with self as the fourth.” This number would be considered a “group” (*gaṇa*), one short of a Saṅgha (which is a minimum of 5 monks). The small number of monks invited probably shows that Abhaya, although royalty with means, does not have the faith of a follower.

6 “Bhante, would the Tathagata utter speech that would be unpleasant and disagreeable to others?”

“My prince, is not this biased [one-sided]?”¹⁹

“Then, bhante, the nirgranthas have lost in this!”

“Why do you say this, my prince: [394] ‘Then, bhante, the nirgranthas have lost in this!’?”

Prince Abhaya then *related to the Blessed One his previous conversation with Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta.*

Simile of the tender infant

7 Now at that time a young tender infant²⁰ was lying on its belly on Prince Abhaya’s lap. Then the Blessed One said this to Prince Abhaya: [395]

“What do you think, my prince? If, while you or your nurse were not mindful of him, the child were to put a stick or a pebble into his mouth, what would you do to him?”

“Bhante, I would remove it. If I could not remove it once, I would take his head in my left hand, and crooking a finger of my right hand, I would remove it even if it meant drawing blood. Why is that? Because I have compassion for the child.”

The 6 kinds of statements²¹

8 (1) “Even so, my prince, such speech as the Tathagata knows to be untrue, false and not connected with the goal, and that is unpleasant and disagreeable to others:²² the Tathagata does not utter such speech.

(2) Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true, real but not connected with the goal, and that is unpleasant and disagreeable to others: the Tathagata does *not* utter such speech.

(3) Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true, real and connected with the goal, but that is unpleasant and disagreeable to others: the Tathagata *knows the time* to use such speech.

(4) Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be untrue, false and not connected with the goal, but that is pleasant and agreeable to others: the Tathagata does *not* utter such speech.

(5) Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true, real but not connected with the goal, but that is pleasant and agreeable to others: the Tathagata does *not* utter such speech.

(6) Such speech as the Tathagata knows to be true, right and connected with the goal, and that is pleasant and agreeable to others:²³ the Tathagata *knows the time* to use such speech.

Why is that? Because the Tathagata is compassionate to beings.”

¹⁹ *Na kho’ttha rāja, kumāra ekamsenā ti.* “Biased,” *ekamsa*, lit “one-sided.” This refers to the double-horned question of the nirgranthas who plan to trip the Buddha with it. See **Subha S** (M99): *ekamsa, vādo*, “one-sided speech” (M 99.4/2:197), that is, a statement that is biased and without basis. There the Buddha declares that “I am one who speaks only after making an analysis (*vibhajja, vāda*)” (M 99.4/2:197).

²⁰ It is possible that this infant is Jīvaka Komāra, bhacca: see Intro (1).

²¹ **Cha vacana, patha*; cf **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,11.1/1:126), SD 38.1. See Intro (3).

²² *Abhūtaṃ ataccaṃ anatta, saṃhitāṃ, sā ca paresaṃ appiyā amanāpā.* “Untrue” (*abhūta*) here and “true” (*bhūta*), I think, refer to the truthfulness of the statement. “Unreal” (*ataccha*) and “real” (*taccha*) concern correct reference, whether the words actually reflect the fact. “The goal” (*attha*) here is arhathood or nirvana, or at least, spiritual development. “Unpleasant” (*appiya*) and “pleasant” (*piya*) concern the civility and propriety; while “disagreeable” (*amanāpa*) and “agreeable” (*manāpa*) refer urbanity and aesthetics.

²³ *Bhūtaṃ tacchaṃ attha, saṃhitāṃ, sā ca paresaṃ piyā manāpā.*

Parable of the chariot

9 “Bhante, when learned kshatriyas, learned brahmins, learned householders and learned recluses, after preparing a question, then go to the Blessed One and ask it, is there already in the Blessed One’s mind the thought:

‘If they come to me and ask me thus, I shall answer thus’? Or does that answer occur to the Tathagata spontaneously?”²⁴

10 “In this connection, my prince, I will ask you a question in return.²⁵ Answer it as you please. What do you think, my prince? Are you skilled in the parts of a chariot?”²⁶

“Yes, bhante, I am.”

“What do you think, my prince? When people come to you and ask: ‘What is the name of this part of the chariot?’ is there already in your mind the thought: [396] ‘If they come to me and ask me thus, I shall answer thus’? Or does the answer occur to you spontaneously?”

“Bhante, I am well known as a charioteer, skilled in the parts of a chariot. All the parts of a chariot are well known to me. That answer would occur to me spontaneously.”

11 “Even so, my prince, when learned kshatriyas, learned brahmins, learned householders and learned recluses, after preparing a question, then approach the Tathagata and ask it, the answer occurs to the Tathagata spontaneously.

Why is that? **The Dharma-element**²⁷ has been fully penetrated by the Tathagata, through such a full penetration, the answer occurs to the Tathagata spontaneously.”

12 When this was said, Prince Abhaya said this:

“Excellent, master Gotama! Excellent, master Gotama! Just as if one were to place upright what had been overturned, or were to reveal what was hidden, or were to show the way to one who was lost, or were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way, in numerous ways, has the Dharma been made clear by the Blessed Gotama.

I go to the Blessed Gotama for refuge, to the Dharma, and to the community of monks. May the Blessed Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge from this day forth for life.”

— evaṃ —

²⁴ “Spontaneously,” *ṭhānaso*, here means both “on the spot” (*ṭhān’uppattika*) and “at that moment” (*taṃ khaṇam*) (MA 3:113). PED: “without an interval or a cause (of change), at once, immediately, spontaneously, impromptu.”

²⁵ “I will ask a question in return,” *paṭipucchissāmi*, ie ask a counter-question. See Intro (4) under **Pañha Vyākaraṇa S** (A 4.42) for the 4 ways of answering a question.

²⁶ *Kusalo tvaṃ rathassa aṅga, paccaṅgānan’ti*. This episode on the parable of the chariot is a good example of the Buddha as one with knowledge of the individual (*puggal’aññū*): see **Dhamm’aññū S** (A 7.64,9/4:116 f), SD 30.10.

²⁷ “The Dharma-element,” *dhamma, dhātu*, also tr as “element of things” (M:B), “causal cosmic order” (Jaya-tilleke 1963:448 f); as at D 14,1.15/2:8. Comy gives 2 glosses: (1) the nature of Dharma (*dhamma, sabhāva*); (2) the Buddha’s knowledge of omniscience (*sabb’aññutā, ñāṇa*). However, *dhamma, dhātu* here should not be confused with the same term used to signify the element of mind-objects among the 18 elements, nor does it bear the meaning of an all-embracing cosmic principle that the term acquires in Mahāyāna Buddhism.” (M:ÑB 1261 n614). See D 2:18; S 2:143, Nett 64 f, Vism 486 f, where *dhamma, dhātu* seems to be used in the sense of a mental state as an irreducible element (M:H 2:64 n1). Cf Dhs 67, 69; Vbh 72, 87, 89.

Bibliography

Gethin, Rupert

1998 *Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 350 pages, 3 maps.

Jayatilke, K N

1963 *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. London: Allen & Unwin 1963; repr Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

Watanabe, F

1983 *Philosophy and its development in the Nikāyas and Abhidhamma*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983.

050222 rev060309 081119 091102 121014 130314 130725 140606 150421 160724 171104 181231
211125