

THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

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1. There are four types of questions distinguished by the Buddha:

(a) A question that ought to be answered unilaterally (*ekamsa-vyakaraniya*)

(b) A question that ought to be answered analytically (*vibhajja-vyakaraniya*)

© A question that ought to be answered by raising a counter-question (*patipuccha-vyakaraniya*)

(d) A question that ought to be set aside (*thapaniya*)

(*Anguttaranikaya*, PTS II 46).

2. The four kinds of questions entail four kinds of answers, if we consider the response to the fourth too as an answer. The sequence of their enumeration does not imply a hierarchical evaluation. Each kind of answer, when apposite, is equally valid and commendable. What determines the validity of the answer is whether it belongs to the same class to which the question belongs. Hence the Buddha says a person who does not answer unilaterally a question which ought to be answered unilaterally, who does not answer analytically a question which ought to be answered analytically, who does not answer by raising a counter-question a question which ought to be answered by raising a counter-question, who does not set aside a question which ought to be set aside – such a person is indeed not fit to discuss with, that is, to carry on a meaningful conversation.

3. In the Buddhist discourses these questions are not illustrated with specific examples. Nevertheless, an example that we can give for the first is: “Are all conditioned phenomena impermanent?” From the Buddhist perspective, this needs a categorical answer in the affirmative: “Yes, all conditioned phenomena are impermanent”. An example for the second can be selected from the Buddhist discourses themselves. When a person called Subha asked the Buddha whether it

is the householder or the monk who can realize the religious goal, the Buddha says in reply: “Here (ettha) ... I give an analytical explanation (vibhajjavada); I do not make here (ettha) a unilateral assertion (ekamsavada)”

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What determines the answer is not whether the person is a layman or a monk, but the practice of good conduct. The use of the adverbial form “here” (ettha) means “in relation to the question raised”. If we overlook it, it will give the wrong impression that the Buddha always follows the analytical method in preference to the unilateral method. But this is not so. It is by overlooking this situation that some modern scholars have come to the wrong conclusion that Buddhism is a form of Vibhajjavada, a Doctrine of Analysis (For a discussion of this topic, see the Appendix to “The Theravada Abhidhamma” by Y. Karunadasa).

4. As to the question that needs a counter-question, if a person is asked, “Is consciousness a person’s soul?” he can raise a counter-question, “What do you take to be the soul”? The counter-question is necessary because the idea of soul has widely different connotations and definitions.

5. The unanswered questions:

Before we come to the unanswered questions, it is necessary to refer here to two issues. The first is that these questions are never presented as “unanswerable” questions. To understand so means that they are perfectly legitimate questions and that answers to them transcend the limits of knowledge. The second issue is that if these questions are left unanswered, that does not mean that they are rejected as false. To reject them as false is to answer them, not to leave them as unanswered. In this context the Buddhist commentarial exegesis says that “unanswered” means that which has not been answered “unilaterally, or analytically, or by raising a counter-question”:

(Commentary to the Anguttaranikaya, PTS p. 121)

6. The four kinds of questions are in a Buddhist discourse introduced as: “there are these four kinds of explanations of questions”. The question that arises here is

how the fourth kind to which no answer is given could be considered as an explanation. The Abhidharmakosabhasya raises this very same question and its answer is: The very explanation that it is not a question to be explained is itself an explanation. For a question that should be set aside is, in fact, answered by setting it aside. How can one say that it is not an answer?" (K. N. Jayatileke, Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, p.282: Mahavyutpatti, 83, p.29).

7. Strictly speaking, it is not correct to say that the Buddha was silent on these questions. To say so implies that these questions belong to the realm of esotericism and mysticism and therefore the Buddha adopted the attitude of a mystic in relation to such questions. The Buddha very much responded to them. Although he did not give categorical answers to the questions, he categorically stated the reasons for not determining them as true or false.

8. The Ten Unanswered Questions:

Is the world eternal (sassato loko)

Is the world not eternal (asassato loko)

Is the world finite (antava loko)

Is the world infinite (anantava loko)

Is the soul, the same as the body (tam jivam tam sariram)

Is the soul, one thing and the body another (annam jivam annam sariram)

Does the Tathagata exist after death (hoti Tathagato parammarana)

Does the Tathagata not exist after death (na hoti Tathagato parammarana)

Does the Tathagata both exist and does not exist after death (hoti ca na hoti ca Tathagato parammarana)

Does the Tathagata neither exist nor non-exist after death (neva hoti na na hoti Tathagato parammarana)

9. The first four questions raise the issue whether the world is eternal or non-eternal in terms of time, finite or infinite in terms of space. The next two deal with the issue whether the soul and the physical body are identical or different, that is, whether we should accept the identity principle which sees a unity between the psycho and the somatic, or the duality principle which sees a difference between them. The last four relate to the post-mortem survival of the Tathagata.

Commentarial exegesis says here “Tathagata” means soul or the living being in the sense of a separate self-entity (Commentary to the Anguttaranikaya PTS II, 308-309). This seems to mean that unenlightened persons mistakenly consider that there is an independent self-entity called Tathagata.

10. It is very likely that these ten questions were a metaphysical questionnaire on some perennial problems that was there before the rise of Buddhism. This explains why these enquiries became the subject of many controversies among the religious systems during the time of the Buddha.

11. The four-fold predication, referred to above, has given rise to many comments on the part of modern scholars. Louis de La Vallee Poussin calls it “a four-branched dilemma of Buddhist dialectic and believes that it violates the principle of contradiction”. K. N. Jayatilleke seeks to validate the four-fold predication by showing that they are “the four possible positions or logical alternatives that a proposition can take” (K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, p. 475.)

12. As noted above, these questions are part of a pre-Buddhist questionnaire on certain obtuse metaphysical problems. If that were so, then the authorship of the four-fold predication cannot be attributed to Buddhism. What actually matters to Buddhism is not the manner of the predication, but the object of the predication, which is the self, whose existence Buddhism denies. Therefore, as far as Buddhism is concerned, it does not matter whether the four-fold predication is logically valid or not.

13. Another reason why the four questions are meaningless, stems from the use of the verbal forms, namely, “exists, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, neither exists nor non-exists”. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising

transcends the binary-ism of existence (atthita) and non-existence (natthita). As such, in the Buddhist context the notion of “exists” and “does not exist” does not arise.

14. From the Buddhist perspective, the main reason for raising the unanswered questions is the personality view, or self-view (sakkaya-ditthi). Hence the Buddhist monk Isidatta tells Citta the householder:

“Now, householder, as to those diverse views that arise in the world ... and as to these 62 views set forth in the Brahmajala sutta, it is owing to the personality view, or the self view that they arise, and if the personality view/self view exists not, they do not exist. (Samyuttanikaya PTS IV 526 ff.)

Thus, from the Buddhist perspective all theoretical views, including those involved in the ten unanswered questions are ultimately due to the self view. They all have the self as their point of view. As long as the self-view persists as our ideational framework, there is the ingression of the egocentric perspective into our sphere of perceptual experience. This results in what Buddhism calls ‘distortional thinking’ (mannana), the thinking that distorts the nature of actuality. When we are overcome with ‘distortional’ thinking, we see what we ‘want to see’, not ‘what is actually there’.(Majjhimanikaya PTS I, 1 ff.)

15. As to why the Buddha does not answer the questions, one reason is that they are based on the self view, which Buddhism denies. A second reason is that answers to these questions “do not conduce to dispassion, to cessation of suffering, to calming, to higher knowledge, to awakening, or to Nibbana”. A third reason is that the Buddha does not endorse either attachment or repugnance to any theoretical view. Both attitudes are due to greed and aversion.

16. We find a wider scope of the “unanswered” clearly articulated in a passage from the Sanskrit Sutra Pitaka cited in the Abhidharmakosa-vyakhya of Acarya Yasomitra. It is a dialogue between a Brahmin and the Buddha:

The Brahmin: “Master Gautama, is the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences (the result)?”

The Buddha: "Brahmana, this is undetermined (avyakrtam etad brahmana)."

The Brahmin: "(Then) is the one who acts different from the one who experiences (the result)?"

The Buddha: "Brahmana, this is undetermined (avyakrtam etad brahmana)."

The Brahmin: "When asked whether the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences, you say that it is undetermined. When asked whether the one who acts is different from the one who experiences, you say that it is undetermined. What indeed is the meaning of what the Master Gautama has said?"

The Buddha: "Brahmana, when one asserts that the one who acts is the same as the one who experiences, this amounts to eternalism. When one asserts that the one who acts is different from the one who experiences, this amounts to annihilationism. Without entering either of the two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the doctrine through the middle way" (etavamtav anugamya Tathagato madhyaya pratipada dharmam desayati ti: Abhidharmakosavyakhya, ed. U. Wogihara, 1932-36).

17. The above quotation shows that in the Sanskrit Sutras "unanswered, undetermined" has been used by the Buddha not only in responding to the well-known ten questions.

18. The method adopted here for this purpose is to examine the logical and practical consequences of a given theoretical view, in the event of its being accepted. In other words, to examine whether the acceptance of a view leads to situations that obstruct the path to freedom. The best example for this comes from how the Buddha keeps himself aloof from the two views: the self and the body are the same, and the self is one thing and the body another:

"Verily, if one holds the view that the self is identical with the body, in that case, there can be no holy life. If one holds the view that the self is one thing and the body another, in that case, too there can be no holy life. Avoiding both extremes the Tathagata teaches the doctrine that lies in the middle." (Samyuttanikaya, PTS II 156).

19. Neither of the two mutually exclusive views is judged as wrong. What the Buddha says instead is that he keeps himself aloof from both. It is in this sense that one can maintain that the scope of the unanswered has a wider applicability.

20. Another instance of “undetermined” is recorded in the Avyakata Samyutta of the Samyuttanikaya: When an itinerant philosopher called Vacchagotta asked the Buddha whether the “self” exists or not, the Buddha observed silence. Then the Buddha told Ananda why he decided to remain silent:

“If, Ananda, when Vacchagotta asked, ‘is there a self?’ I had said, ‘there is a self’, then I should have been one of those who hold the doctrine of eternalism. But if I had replied ‘there is no self’, then I would have been one of those who hold the doctrine of annihilation. And if, when Vacchagotta asked ‘is there a self’, I had replied, ‘there is a self’, would it have been in accordance with the knowledge that all things are without self?

‘No, Lord.’

If I had said, ‘there is no self’, the bewildered Vacchagotta would have become still more bewildered, thinking, ‘then did my ‘self’ exist before, and now it does not exist anymore’ (Samyuttanikaya 1V, Atthasutta Sutta, Avyakata-Samyutta).

20. The wider range of the un-answered:

As shown by his dialogues with contemporary religious teachers, the Buddha’s attitude to theoretical views is not one based on arguments to refute them as wrong. Rather, the Buddha’s attitude is to keep himself aloof from such spurious arguments. This is clearly shown by the Brahmajala-Sutta of the Dighanikaya. Here we find some 62 theoretical views enumerated, on the nature of the self and the world. All that we find here is a psychological diagnosis of how these views arise and why they persist in the world at large, and more importantly, how they can be transcended by identifying and eliminating their psychological well-springs.

21. Some Modern Interpretations on the Buddha’s Silence:

There are four main interpretations. The first proposes that the Buddha did not know the answers to them. This is to understand the Buddha’s silence in the light

of skepticism or naïve agnosticism. The second is that the Buddha knew the answers but refrained from answering them for practical reasons. This is to understand the Buddha's silence in the light of pragmatism. The third is that solutions to these questions go beyond the grasp of the intellect; in other words, they transcend the limits of knowledge. This is an attempt to understand the Buddha's silence in the light of rational agnosticism. The fourth is that while the first four questions transcend the limits of knowledge, the next six questions are logically meaningless.

22. These different interpretations bring into focus three different positions: (1) The Buddha did not know the answers, (2) the Buddha knew the answers, and (3) the questions transcend the limits of knowledge and are, therefore, unanswerable.

23. In the light of what we have observed so far, these three interpretations are totally unacceptable, because, in the context of Buddhist teachings, all the ten questions are inappropriate, as they are based on the self-view. In this connection one could argue that the interpretation based on pragmatic reasons is acceptable, since the Buddha himself says that he does not answer these questions as they are not relevant to realizing the final goal. Yet there is a big difference between what the Buddha says and what the modern interpretation claims. According to the modern interpretation, the Buddha knew the answers to the questions but for pragmatic reasons withheld the answers. However, what the Buddha knew was not the answers to the questions, but how and why they arise as meaningless questions.

