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SILENCING METAPHYSICS

REFLECTIONS ON THE SILENCE OF THE BUDDHA ON QUESTIONS OF METAPHYSICS¹

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ABSTRACT: Past discussions on the silence of the Buddha have focused on speculations on the “reasons” of the Buddha’s silence. Most scholars offer an analysis of the Buddha’s pragmatic considerations or his argument on human epistemic limits, that is, either that the metaphysical questions are irrelevant to the cessation of suffering or that the metaphysical contents cannot be known. This paper argues that the silence of the Buddha can be seen as a “speech act” whose absence of words actually achieves two purposes, first, the silence expresses the Buddha’s refusal to participate in these debates, and second, the silence creates a “space” which guides the interlocutors to re-direct the focus of their religious understanding. It will be illustrated that this silence of the Buddha is a point of both distinction and connectivity between philosophy as pure speculation on the one hand, and religion as a problem-solving practice on the other.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE relationship between philosophy and religion has been rich and complex. In the West, philosophy has been an interlocutor, a hand-maid, a severe critic and a friendly companion of religion. In Eastern traditions, the relationship has mostly been close and mutually enriching.² In the Buddhist tradition, the historical context at the founding moment was a time of rich philosophical speculations among numerous schools. The two major groups of the Orthodox and the Heterodox schools have been well-explained by leading scholars of Indian and Buddhist traditions.³ Buddhism, as one of the Heterodox Schools, was critical of many aspects of the Hindu tradition, mainly on questions of epistemology, self, origin of the universe and social hierarchic order. Leading Indian and Buddhist scholars have pointed out that

the Buddha imparted teachings of his philosophy of the “Middle Path.” However, there were also several cases of metaphysical questions from different interlocutors whose requests for answers were denied by the Buddha. The repeated incidents of the Buddha’s silence on questions of metaphysics have prompted leading scholars to join a chorus of discussion on the issue. A general survey of the different positions of scholars both from Asia and the West has pointed to two key concerns. They are, first, that the silence of the Buddha indicates a pragmatic consideration when the Buddha explains that these questions are not conducive to the cessation of suffering; second, that the silence of the Buddha indicates a pronouncement of limits of human epistemic potential.⁴

This paper proposes a different approach. It sees the silence of the Buddha as a form of “speech act,” that is a form of communication which accomplishes some purposes without words. It is a “speech” as it communicates, it is an “act” as it aims to accomplish its purposes. Common examples in our daily life could be the silence of acquiescence as an act of acceptance, the silence of negation as an act of denial, or the silence upon incriminating questions about a friend as an expression of loyalty to that friend.⁵ It will be shown that the silence of the Buddha on questions of metaphysics is a “speech act” without words, which declares Buddha’s non-participation in metaphysical speculation on the one hand, and guides the interlocutors to redirect their religious understanding on the other. At the end, this paper will maintain that the silence of the Buddha indicates a point of distinction and connectivity between philosophy as pure speculation, and religion as a problem solving practice.

THE SILENCE OF THE BUDDHA

A leading scholar characterizes the intellectual climate during the time of the Buddha “as rampant with speculation and excessive discussion of theoretical questions.”⁶ Another leading scholar describes the role of the Buddha among these speculations as “one restraining influence.”⁷ This “restraining influence” is best demonstrated by the silence of the Buddha on questions of metaphysics. In Buddhism, there is a group of problems which are known as the “*avyakrtavastuni*”; that is, the undetermined, or un-elucidated or unprofitable questions. The most comprehensive list of these speculations is found in the *Brahma Jala Sutta of the Digha Nikaya*. It serves the purpose of this paper to use the most common list of 10 (plus 4=14) questions posed by Malunkyaputta in the sutta of the same name. I use here the English translation of Henry Clarke Warren:

Thus I have heard. On a certain occasion The Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthi in Jetavana monastery in Anathapindika’s Park. Now it happened to the venerable Malunkyaputta, being in seclusion and plunged in meditation, that a consideration presented itself to his mind as follows: These theories which The Blessed One has left un-elucidated, has set aside and rejected,—that the world is eternal, that the world is not eternal, that the world is finite, that the world is infinite, that the soul and the body are identical, that the soul is one thing and the body another, that the saint exists

after death, that the saint does not exist after death, that the saint both exists and does not exist after death, that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death,—these the Blessed One does not elucidate to me. And the fact that The Blessed One does not elucidate them to me does not please me nor suit me. Therefore, I will draw near to The Blessed One and inquire of him concerning this matter.”

Malunkyaputta adds that if the Buddha will solve these problems he will lead the religious life under him; but if the Buddha will not solve them, he will abandon religious training to the lower life of a layman. By adding the pairs, eternal-non-eternal and infinite-finite which are found in other lists, we have 14 questions to which no reply is given.⁸

These 14 questions could be categorized into 3 groups. First, they are questions about the origin and end of the cosmos, second they are questions about the relationship of soul and body, and third, they are questions about human (or rather the Enlightened One’s) immortality. Many of the leading Buddhist and Indian philosophy scholars who join the speculation on these issues offer different discussions. Perhaps the most inclusive framework is the one developed by K. N. Jayatilleke, the eminent Buddhist scholar from Sri Lanka. According to Jayatilleke, the reasons the Buddha refuses to address metaphysical questions can be traced to two basic assumptions, that is, that these questions are answerable, and that these questions are un-answerable. Under the assumption that these questions are answerable, there are two possibilities. First, it implies a position that the Buddha does not know the answers and therefore he does not offer any answer. Second, the Buddha knows the answers but refuses to give an answer as these questions are irrelevant for the cessation of suffering or nirvana. Under the assumption that these questions are un-answerable, there are also two possibilities. First, these questions are beyond human cognition and experience. Second, these questions are meaningless or are wrongly constructed.⁹ The analyses provided by other leading scholars including T. V. R. Murti, David J. Kalupahana, Bhikkhu Nananda, Phra Promkunaporn, though with different emphasis and nuances, can all be put under these four possibilities.¹⁰

THE BUDDHA’S SILENCE AS SPEECH ACT WITHOUT WORDS

It is interesting to note that these discussions and analyses arise mainly from either pragmatic or epistemic concerns, focusing mainly on possible “reasons” of the Buddha. I propose that in such a situation of interlocution, the perspective of the interlocutor needs to be included. In these analyses, it is interesting to note that the “personal” reasons of Malunkyaputta in posing these questions have not been adequately addressed. What is missing from these analytical frameworks are considerations regarding the total situation of the conversation. First, it should be noted that the reasons of Malunkyaputta are also addressed in sutta. He was dissatisfied with the fact that the Buddha had refused probably several times in the past to answer these questions. These questions are so important to him that without some answers he would no longer pursue the path of the Buddha. It seems that there are at least two possible readings of his motivation. First, questions of metaphysics

are so crucial for him that without those answers, he would no longer respect the Buddha. In this sense, his intellectual curiosity is something of an intrinsic value to him. If it is not satisfied, his respect for the Buddha would not be adequate to sustain his practice under him. (In the text, it says that “And the fact that the Blessed One does not elucidate them to me does not please me nor suit me.”) These questions are so fundamental to his intellectual curiosity and personal identity.

Second, it could be that for Malunkyaputta, these metaphysical questions are directly relevant to the purpose of his religious practice with the Buddha. Given the Hindu intellectual climate of the time, the ultimate purpose of religion is the union of the (human) self with the Cosmic Self (union of Atman and Brahman). If that was the case, a religion like that of the Buddha which teaches the doctrine of non-self (*anatta*), and whose spiritual liberation indicates the cessation of suffering, not a union with transcendent Brahman, could sound like a religious practice which leads to *nothing*. Is it not possible that these metaphysical questions are actually indicative of the questions about the fruits of religious practice for Malunkyaputta? According to this reading, it would make good sense for Malunkyaputta to demand an explanation from the Buddha on these questions, otherwise, he could not make sense of the ultimate purpose of his strenuous efforts.¹¹ Unfortunately, the sutta records only that Malunkyaputta “rejoiced” with the responses from the Buddha at the end, but the sutta is silent on the final decision of Malunkyaputta regarding his religious practice.

When we address the total situation of these questions by introducing the possible purpose of the interlocutor into the discussion, we can see that not only is the silence of the Buddha a refusal to answer these metaphysical questions, but the silence indicates a speech act on the part of the Buddha to deny any further participation in these speculations. In his silence, the Buddha was declaring his position *not* to engage in these metaphysics. Given our knowledge that other masters during that time have tried to answer these questions one way or another, the silence of the Buddha was an act of making his position different from all others.¹² In this aspect of the silence of the Buddha, we could say that the Buddha was addressing the intellectual baggage of Malunkyaputta. These questions were constructed out of metaphysical assumptions which the Buddha does not share.

From another aspect, the silence of the Buddha can be seen as a speech act which creates a “space” for Malunkyaputta to “break away” from his obsession with these metaphysical questions. Any answers would only further proliferate speculations on these never-ending problems. Silence as a “break” or a rapture which puts a stop to rampant speculations is needed for Malunkyaputta. We should also note that after the silence, the Buddha reminds Malunkyaputta that he had never promised to give such teachings to his followers, nor had Malunkyaputta set this as a condition of his becoming a disciple. Furthermore, the Buddha adds, to set up such a condition for joining or remaining in the order would be acting as foolishly as a wounded man who refused to have a poisoned arrow removed from his body until he learned the caste of the man who shot the arrow. Towards the end, the Buddha reiterates the scope and purpose of his religion. He argues that the religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life depend

on the dogma that the world is not eternal. “there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing.”¹³ Malunkyaputta thought he needed metaphysics on the future to explain the purpose of his practice. The Buddha’s silence forced him to redirect his quest to his present life and existential condition. In asking those questions Malunkyaputta has not realized that he was acting like the wounded man who refused to have the poisoned arrow removed from his wound. His insistence on the Buddha’s answer to his metaphysical questions would be like the demand of the wounded man to know about the caste of the archer before having the poisoned arrow removed. The silence of the Buddha was a “non-verbal speech” which “acts” to remove the poisoned arrow from wounded Malunkyaputta. Malunkyaputta needed a “silent treatment” from the Buddha to realize he was in pain and suffering. Answers to metaphysical questions would not help him heal. In this sense, silence is an act of “speech” for it aims to communicate a religious point. This metaphor of the poisoned arrow helps complete the sense of the silence.

On another occasion, in the Mahavagga, when Siha, a disciple of the Nigantha sect, asks the Buddha if he teaches the doctrine of annihilation after death, the Buddha answered, “I proclaim, Siha, the annihilation of lust.”¹⁴ This metaphysical question is directed to a speculation on future existence, the Buddha’s response is re-directed to the “now,” the very moment of the present existential condition of human beings. The lust for existence of the “now” gives rise to the question of existence or annihilation after death. The religious point is to address the “lust of the now,” and not to address the existence of a question on future life arising from attachment, or lust for life. In this conversation with Siha, the silence of the Buddha on the question of annihilation after death is implied, hidden and embedded in his answer.

SILENCE AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIONS

From our re-reading of the silence of the Buddha, we could see that the discussions of scholars on this issue have overlooked the significance of silence as an act. Most of the works have addressed the question *why* the Buddha refused to answer these questions. They have not focused on the communicative power of silence as such. In this paper, silence itself is seen as a speech act which communicates the philosophical position of the Buddha. Moreover, as an act it offers a possible “cure” for the obsession of Malunkyaputta who cannot put these questions out of his mind. A leading scholar of silence has offered an analytical framework which characterizes the silent moments of the Buddha into 3 types. They are: ascetic or purifying silence, silence of reluctance to teach right after his enlightenment, and selective silence concerning questions about the ultimate.¹⁵ Our discussion has focused on the last type of silence in the teaching career of the Buddha. The analysis of this paper reinforces some insights into the significance of silence in Eastern traditions by Bernard P. Dauenhauer whose *Silence: The Phenomenon and*

Its Ontological Significance offers a comprehensive study of silence in Western traditions. He writes:

Action springs from desire, and the highest action from the highest desire, whether this be conceived as the noblest desire or as the transcendence of desire. In any case, some form of correlation between speech on the one hand and action and desire on the other hand is widely recognized. What the Eastern traditions add is the connection between silence and action or desire. Silence in these traditions, is not merely intelligible. It is also efficacious.¹⁶

What is articulated by Dauenhauer is elaborated in this paper. Silence is not only understandable, it also works to provide a door out of speculative entrapment. As a scholar of Buddhist philosophy it would not be adequate to address this issue of the silence of the Buddha, merely from the question whether these questions are answerable or unanswerable. We need to put these questions back into the context of the conversation. That is, these questions were posed as a demand for *self-understanding* of Malunkyaputta. In order to address these questions, the Buddha was not merely addressing the “content” of the questions, that is whether they are answerable or unanswerable, but he was addressing the problem of the self or the existential condition of Malunkyaputta. Silence was a “gate” which opens the door for Malunkyaputta to get out of the entrapment of metaphysical speculation. In order to be a “gate,” silence must not be part of verbal speech which records, articulates and directs speculation. Silence can be efficacious only in its absence of words. The purpose of Buddhism is to offer spiritual liberation, not to offer a definite answer to questions about the origin and end of the cosmos, or to the question concerning the immortality of the soul.

In a way, it was ironic for Malunkyaputta to demand answers to these metaphysical questions as a pre-requisite for continuing the practice. Actually, the purpose of Buddhist practice is to “lose” or “see no need” of such metaphysics. In other words, the very posing of these questions reflects the existential problem of Malunkyaputta, who was still searching for a “self” which will last after death, who will reap the rewards or the fruits of his practice. (That was why the questions about the existence of saints after death were so important for him.) The ontological frame of self and life, life after death and the end of the universe is the very frame of basic attachments which need to be transcended. That is why the silence of the Buddha could be a “liberating moment” for Malunkyaputta. He needs to put aside his metaphysical garment embedded in language, and meditate on the naked silence of non-self.

To address the question of the silence of the Buddha, we could go beyond the question why the Buddha remained silent and speculate on his possible motivation. A more holistic approach is attempted here by analyzing the reasons of Malunkyaputta, the interlocutor. This paper argues that the silence of the Buddha was not merely addressed to the content of these metaphysical questions, it was a speech act of the Buddha to offer a “cure” for Malunkyaputta who was obsessed with and entrapped in these metaphysical riddles. The silence of the Buddha was also a declaration of non-participation of the Buddha in these speculative metaphysics which were rampant at the time.

This paper demonstrates that silence carries communicative power which acts as a bridge between philosophy as pure speculation and religion as a problem solving practice. As a founder of religion, the Buddha's act of silence "restrains" philosophical speculation, so that the act could help "cure" Malunkyaputta's obsession with metaphysics. This silence offers an "empty mirror" or a space from which Malunkyaputta could "see" his efforts from a new light. The repeated questions entrapped him. The silence could liberate him and redirect him to the right path. Let's hope that we can all hear the "thunderous silence" of the Buddha and re-think the complex relationship between philosophy and religions for this young twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. This paper has not dealt with the broader question of silence and language in Buddhism which would have to include the silence of Temija in one of the ten Great Jataka tales, the question of knowledge and language in Buddhism, and the question of nirvana and the limit of language, for examples. These broader topics could be attempted on another occasion. It would also be interesting to discuss the holding up of a flower by the Buddha to Maha Kassapa as a gesture without words which sets the idea of "transmission outside the scripture" into motion, culminating in the Zen tradition. A comparative study of the "smile" of Confucius which creates humbling ripple effects on the wildly ambitious answers from his students as recorded in *The Analects 11:25* would also be extremely fruitful in understanding the philosophic significance of non-verbal communication in Eastern traditions.
2. Please see a good general survey of this rich and complex relationship in John E. Smith, "Philosophy and Religion: One Central Reflection," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 38 (December 1995): 103–108.
3. Please see Suwanna Satha-Anand, *Faith and Reason: A Philosophical Dialogue on Religion* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, B.E. 2550), Introduction.
4. Please see a good general survey in Thanisara Prathanrajnikorn, *Problems the Buddha Refuses to Address* (Bangkok: Song-Siam, B.E. 2552).
5. This is a different view on the speech act theory which discusses the performative nature of certain speech, such that, for example, the saying of "I do" of bride and groom in a wedding ceremony is itself the act of getting married. Please see John Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). Instead of analyzing speech which "acts," this paper analyzes silence which acts like a speech. This paper sees silence as a "speech act" without words, as silence is a form of communication which aims to accomplish certain purposes. It is a "speech" although without words, as it communicates, and it is an "act" as it aims to achieve its purposes.
6. M.Hiriyana, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1932), p. 136.
7. Troy Wilson Organ, "The Silence of the Buddha," *Philosophy East and West* 4, no.2 (July, 1954): 125.
8. I use the translation as quoted in the article by Troy Wilson Organ, *ibid.*, p. 126.

9. Please See K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963), p. 472.
10. Please see a general survey in Thanisara Pratanrajnikorn, *Problems the Buddha Refuses to Address*, pp. 181–194.
11. See an interesting article on religious appeals and strenuous efforts in Steven G. Smith, “The Religious Appeals of Transworth and Transtrying,” *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 55 (2004): 109–125.
12. Please see a good survey of the other teachers’ positions and answers to these metaphysical questions in Thanisara Pratanrjnikom, *Problems the Buddha Refuses to Address*, pp. 30–49.
13. I use here the quotations from Organ’s paper, “The Silence of the Buddha,” 138.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 136–137.
15. See an interesting characterization of 3 silent moments in the teaching career of the Buddha in Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 110.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 111.