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## Analysis of the Undeclared Questions (primarily) based on the *Poṭṭhapādasutta*

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### Abstract:

*Sets of "undeclared questions" is frequent topic of discussion that appears in the sutta-s of Theravada Canon. These questions were posed mostly by ascetics and brahmins of various sects to the Buddha, who wanted the Buddha's insight on these matters. Every major religious teacher of that time had different answers to these questions, consequently puzzling the mind of many followers. Usually, it is stated in the sutta-s that the Buddha refrained from engaging in the discussion of these topics. However, closer examination of the Dhamma will reveal that the Buddha in truth had given an analytical answer at different places in the sutta-s and also had given reasons as to why such questions were unanswerable directly. This has a direct correlation to the problem of mainstream linguistic terminology that differed from the "Buddhist concept of reality". Therefore, in this paper, a case has been made as to why such questions are flawed and do not find logical ground in the "Buddhist concept of world and reality". Furthermore, an attempt has been made to give an analytical answer to such questions.*

**Keywords:** language, truth, reality, analysis, duality, middle-way

### 1. Introduction

The set of ten questions seem to have been customarily raised among ascetics and brahmins during the Buddha's time as they are frequently mentioned in the *sutta-s* and mostly asked by followers of other religious sects. As mentioned in the *Kutūhalasālāsutta*,<sup>1</sup> the six famous heretical teachers had their own answers regarding these questions (saying only their position is true and everything else is false), but the Buddha refrained from engaging in such discussions and left them undeclared. At the outset, it appears that only two options were given to answer either as 'yes' or 'no'; answering in either way inevitably leading to the acceptance of one of two extremes. Consequently, either acceptance or rejection of these views meant upholding such extreme view which the Buddha certainly did not hold. What the Buddha found however, was a middle-path doctrine leading to the discovery of a completely new soteriology. In his teaching, such extremism had no place, thus rendering these questions useless mainly because they were a distraction from the main goal, and the questions were asked incorrectly, hence invalid. As such, the Buddha's usual direct reply is:

Because it is unbeneficial and not connected to the goal, not connected to the *Dhamma*; does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life; does not lead to disenchantment; to dispassion, to cessation, to inner peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to *nibbāna*.<sup>2</sup>

At another place, the Buddha calls such speculative views as a thicket of views (*diṭṭhigahanam*), a wilderness of views (*diṭṭhikantāram*), a contortion of views (*diṭṭhivisūkam*), a vacillation of views (*diṭṭhivipphanḍitam*), a fetter of views (*diṭṭhisamyojanam*). It is beset by suffering (*sadukkham*), by vexation (*savighātam*), by despair (*saupāyāsam*), and by fever (*sapariḷāham*), and it does not lead to disenchantment...<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the Buddha had categorized questions into four types to give an appropriate reply. These are i) categorical questions (*pañhoekamsabyākaraṇīyo*), ii) analytical questions (*pañhovibhajjabyākaraṇīyo*), iii) counter-questions (*pañhopaṭipucchābyākaraṇīyo*), iv) questions that should be set aside (*pañhoṭhapanīyo*).<sup>4</sup> Here, as the category suggests, sets of undeclared questions fall under the category of questions that should be set aside. However, as we shall see later, only due to complicated situation, the Buddha set aside these questions for the time being, and answered them analytically later only to those who were familiar with his teaching. To the Buddha, these questions were only speculations having no empirical validity, bearing no purpose to the holy life, and neither fruitful to this nor the next life. Additionally, views set forth by these questions do not have

<sup>1</sup> *Samyuttanikāya* 44.9

<sup>2</sup> *nahetaṃ, poṭṭhapāda, atthasamhitamnadhammasamhitamnadibrahmacariyakam, nanibbidāyanavirāgāyananirodhāyanaupasamāyan aabhiññāyanasambodhāyananibbānāyasaṃvattati, tasmāetaṃmayābyākatan*”ti. – *Dīghanikāya* 9

<sup>3</sup> Bodhi, 2009, p. 591; *Aggivačasutta* [ *Majjhimanikāya* 72 ]

<sup>4</sup> *Pañhabyākaraṇasutta* [ *AN* 4.42 ]

connection to the Buddhist goal, hence his silence on these, matters. However, though this was a usual replay of the Buddha, saying that he had left them undeclared, further examination of the *sutta*-s will reveal that he had, in fact, given answer to these questions in an implicit manner, which will be examined below.

### 1.1. Examination of the Ten Questions

The usual set of ten questions put forth by Poṭṭhapāda in the *Poṭṭhapādasutta* are as follows:

- i. Is the world eternal? Is this alone the truth and all else false? (sassatoloko, idamevasaccammoghamaññan'ti?)
- ii. Is the world not eternal? ... (assassato loko, ... ?)
- iii. Is the world finite? ... (antavā loko, ... ?)
- iv. Is the world infinite? ... (anantavā loko, ... ?)
- v. Is the self the same as the body? ... (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ, ... ?*)
- vi. Is the self one thing and the body another? ... (aññamjīvaṃaññamsarīraṃ, ... ?)
- vii. Does the Tathāgata exist after death? ... (hotitathāgatoparaṃmaraṇā, ... ?)
- viii. Does the Tathāgata not exist after death? ... (nahotitathāgatoparaṃmaraṇā, ... ?)
- ix. Does the Tathāgata both exist and not exist after death? ... (hoticanacahotitathāgatoparaṃmaraṇā, ... ?)
- x. Does the Tathāgata neither exist nor not exist after death? ... (nevahotinahotitathāgatoparaṃmaraṇā, ... ?)

By the looks of it, these contradictory questions<sup>5</sup> were the collection of views propounded by various ascetics and brahmins with regard to the 'self' (soul) and the 'world' to find out if they were eternal or not. Regarding the "concept of self" and the 'world', the *Brahmajālasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* amply discusses on these topic beginning with the origin of such concepts. To recapitulate, the *sutta* mentions that even though some thinkers formed their views hammering out by logic and reason, but many others based their argument on the account of having experienced such states by themselves; but they were only partial truth nonetheless. Moreover, the *sutta* points out, even at highest points of meditative states, one can have wrong understanding about the truth if one were to give in to 'views'.

#### 1.1.1. World and Self

In the *Brahmajālasutta*, wrong view 51 is described as a view of a 'self' as material, composed of four great elements, and at the breaking up of the body is annihilated; it perishes and does not exist after death. This is almost the same view as propounded by Materialist teacher Ajita Kesakambālī (in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta*, *Dīghanikāya*, 2) who supplements further by saying after death the elements will revert back to their original form.<sup>6</sup> The only accepted source of knowledge for Materialists was perception.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, based on the epistemological argument that there was no observable soul, apart from the body, and only the observable exists, no. 5 [the self is same as the body] can easily be attributed to this school.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, they also probably said yes to the question no. 8 [Tathāgata does not exist after death],<sup>9</sup> 3 [the world is finite], and 2 [the world is not eternal] for the reason of them directly implying nihilism of soul, suggests Jayatilleke.

Contrary to this view is the thesis of a soul being different from the body which Jayatilleke, attributes to Pakudha Kaccāyana.<sup>10</sup> As we have seen in the *Brahmajālasutta*, out of four Eternalist theorists, first three of them claim so based on their recollection of their past lives during absorptions. Having remembered their past lives according to their abilities they state:

The self and the world are eternal, barren, steadfast as a mountain peak, standing firm like a pillar. And though these beings roam and wander (through the round of existence), pass away and re-arise, yet the self and the world remain the same just like eternity itself.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, body will die and reappear but the soul and the world remains the same –as eternal. Therefore, the 'Self' is different from the body. This is also a general worldview of a soul. Many people believe that soul gives life to a person and when the soul leaves the body, that person is alive no more.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson (19972, p. 312) identifies such questions as typologies which generally rest on a series of binary selections. Is the system optimistic or pessimistic? Is it nihilistic or not? Is it realistic or idealistic? Is it monistic or pluralistic? Is it rationalist or intuitionist? Is it positive or negative? These dichotomies have value connotations which cannot help prejudicing the inquiry. Equally bad, they contain presuppositions about the structure and problems of philosophy which cause too much trouble to warrant their use in the descriptive of early Indian thought.

<sup>6</sup> Walshe, 2012, p. 96, idea of merging of elements to its original source is also found in the Bṛhad, 3.2.13 but soul here is eternal.

<sup>7</sup> Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 73

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 244

<sup>9</sup> In *DN2*, it is mentioned that he does not believe in ascetics or brahmins who have attained, who have perfectly practiced, who proclaim this world and the next, having realized them by their own super-knowledge. (atthilokesamaṇabrāhmaṇā *sammaggatā sammāpaṭipannā, ye imaṅca lokam paraṅca lokam sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedenti*). Jayatilleke (1963, p. 98) describes it as because extrasensory perception or higher intuition is not perceivable by senses according to Ajita Kesakambālī.

<sup>10</sup> Jayatilleke, 1963, p.246

<sup>11</sup> *sassatoattācalokocavañjhokūṭatthoesikatthāyitthito; tecasattāsandhāvantisamsaranticavantiupapajjanti, atthitvevasassatisamaṃ.*  
[Even though some of these ascetics and brahmins reason it out to produce such view but most of them say that it is the product of their own firsthand experience that they had achieved during meditation.]

Moreover, we can trace the question about finiteness and infinity of the world to the wrong view 9 [the world is finite], 10 [the world is infinite], and 11 [the world is finite up-and-down and infinite across] from the *Brahmajālasutta*; where they claimed to have attained such knowledge based on their personal higher meditative experience.<sup>12</sup> *Lokāyatikasutta*<sup>13</sup> ascribes the view about an infinite world to Pūraṇa Kassapa<sup>14</sup> and the one about a finite world to Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta.<sup>15</sup> Both of them claim to be all-knowing and all-seeing, and have all-embracing knowledge and vision whether walking, standing, sleeping, or awake, knowledge and vision are constantly and continuously present to them.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, wrong view 11 states that the world is finite (uddhamadhoantasaññī) up and down, and infinite across (*tiriyam anantasaññī*), probably again showing the imperfect knowledge of both teachers. The ninth thesis was held by the Trairāśika Ājīvakas, who posited the state of *sadasat* (being and non-being).<sup>17</sup> This doctrine is stated as:

The Ājīvakas postulate of a third possibility, neither being nor non-being, must have formed a convenient logical basis for the unusual doctrine that some souls were compelled to return even from nirvāṇa. These would be classified in the third category, *sadasat* – emancipated from *samsāra* and yet not emancipated.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the last theory can be ascribed to many schools but Sceptics appear to be closer to it.<sup>19</sup> According to the *Brahmajālasutta*, this fits the description of Eel-wrigglers, and in the *Sāmaññaphalasutta* that of Saṅgha Belaṭṭhiputta. In any case, all of those thinkers resorted to equivocation.<sup>20</sup>

Despite various views propounded by ascetics and brahmins regarding the 'self' and the 'world', the Buddha is of opinion that such views are only distraction to one's spiritual goal; caused by endless search for one's 'self'. In the *Pārāyanavagga*, Mogharāja asks about the Buddha's view on the 'world' where there is no death, including this world, the next, the Brahma, and the deva world. The Buddha's reply is illuminating regarding what he thinks about the relationship between the 'self' and the 'world',

View the world as empty, Mogharāja, always being mindful. Destroying the view of one's self, one may thus cross over death. The king of death does not see one who has such a view of the world.<sup>21</sup>

That is to say, if one were to give up his search for an imaginary 'self' that is permanent and happy, then he will be rewarded with the deathless state upon the perfection of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*).

#### Existence and non-existence

Before going further into the discussion, it is of paramount importance to understand exactly what concepts were represented by the terms in these questions in a contemporary to pre-Buddhist thought. Question of existence and non-existence was a major topic of discussion during the Buddha's time. Each of these questions try to draw a sharp distinction<sup>22</sup> between the dual aspects of existence of a supposed soul – either that of an ordinary person or the Tathāgata (Buddha) with reference to time and the world. It seems, in pre-Buddhist thought, thinkers, who had belief in an existence were either eternalist or transientist; at the same time some were agnostics who denied the possibility of having exclusive knowledge on such metaphysical topics. Similarly, with the "concept of soul", it was imagined as a life-force that persisted through temporality along with the 'world'. Various concepts were thus attached to the notions of 'soul' and the 'world' by ancient sages and thinkers who perceived the world with their own subjective outlook. As such, the ten undeclared questions are posed with the curiosity of finding answers to the relationship between the 'soul' and its existence in the 'world'. The Buddha did not exactly refuse to answer such questions, but only put them aside on the ground that such questions were wrongly put. Let us examine few *sutta*-s to see how the Buddha and other religious teachers viewed 'existence' differently. In the *Kaccānagottasutta*, the Buddha states:

<sup>12</sup> Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 245

<sup>13</sup> AN 9.38

<sup>14</sup> With infinite knowledge, I dwell knowing and seeing the world to be infinite.

<sup>15</sup> With infinite knowledge, I dwell knowing and seeing the world to be finite.

<sup>16</sup> *sabbaññūsabbadassāvīparisesamaññānāḍassanampāṭijānāti*—‘caratocametiṭṭhatocasuttassacajāgarassacasadatam samitam  
*ñāḍadassanam paccupaṭṭhitan*’ti

<sup>17</sup> Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 249

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249

<sup>20</sup> Piya Tan, 2003, p. 55 [*Cūlamālukyasutta*, *Majjhimanikāya*, 63]

<sup>21</sup> “suññatokaṃavekkhassu, mogharājasadāsato.

*attānudiṭṭhiṃūhacca, evaṃmaccutarosiyā.*

*evaṃlokaṃavekkhantam, maccurājānapassatī*’ti.—Norman, 2001, p. 142

<sup>22</sup> Ancient religious expounders must have been fond of drawing a sharp distinction in their answer to show their clear cut stance on religious matters. However, the Buddha was known to answer depending on the nature of questions being asked, and mostly giving his answer with proper analysis. Consequently, followers of orthodox Buddhism, during the Third Buddhist Councils were known as the 'Vibhajjavādins' for they resorted to analytical approach to the Buddha's teachings. There is an episode of such analysis in the *Abhayasutta*. In the *Abhayasutta* [MN 58], prince Abhaya, after constructing his argument with his teacher, seeks to drag the Buddha into the tug of war between admitting the Buddha of being a 'liar' or a user of 'profanity'. Then when the Buddha says that he speaks words that are unending and unpleasant to others depending on the situation without giving categorical answer, Abhaya is left speechless for the Buddha did not answer according to his expectation.

This world, Kaccāna, for the most part depends upon a duality – upon the notion of existence (*atthitañca*) and the notion of nonexistence (*natthitañca*). But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of nonexistence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.<sup>23</sup>

Here, instead of arriving at a hurried conclusion with categorical answers, the Buddha's advice is to patiently analyze the facts with discriminative knowledge to arrive at a definitive conclusion. In this passage, the pāli terms used for existence and nonexistence are *atthitā* and *natthitā* respectively instead of the regular term *bhava*. These terms are abstract nouns formed from the verbs *atthi* and *natthi*.<sup>24</sup> While these are the notions of existence and non-existence in the abstract (thus, also metaphysical assumptions are implicit in such abstractions of eternalism and annihilationism), whereas *bhava* is concrete individual existence. The important point to notice here is the use of the term 'notion'. It implies, these two extreme views about the world are only 'notion', just like the "concept of self", and nothing concrete can be derived from them. Similarly, in the *Acelakassapasutta*,<sup>25</sup> the Buddha strangely answers negatively to questions put forth by Kassapa that if suffering is created by oneself (*kiṃpana, bhogotama, sayamkamaṃ dukkhan'ti?*); created by others (*paramkamaṃ dukkhan'ti?*), by both oneself and other (*sayamkatañcaparamkatañcadukkhan'ti?*); or if it is fortuitously arisen (*adhiccasamuppannaṃ dukkhan'ti?*). Hearing that the Buddha says suffering is created by nobody, not even by chance, then he asks "is there suffering at all?" (*natthidukkhan'ti?*), but here the Buddha says there is suffering. This is a strange conversation, but we need to look at the next part of the *sutta* to understand what these questions meant to non-Buddhist followers of the Buddha's time. Then having confused Kassapa, the Buddha goes on to explain, "suffering is created by oneself" when one asserts thus, this amounts to eternalism... 'Suffering is created by another', when one asserts thus, this amounts to annihilationism."<sup>26</sup> Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma in the middle. This section should serve as a premise to understand about the pre-Buddhist "concept of existence", 'soul', 'world', and 'liberation' of a person in comparison with the Buddha's own new wave of thought which differed completely from the ideas presented in the ten undeclared questions. In the pre-Buddhist thought, the term '*atta*' came with the belief in a 'Soul/Self'; consequently, the Buddha had to make a declaration that even though he uses the term '*atta*' constantly, it was only for the sake of conversation, and he does not believe that there is any "concept of metaphysical being" attached to that term. Due to such reasons, the Buddha had to tell Poṭṭhapāda that an outsider will find it difficult to understand these metaphysical queries from the Buddhist perspective (*dujjānaṃ kho etaṃ, poṭṭhapāda, tayā aññadiṭṭhikena aññakhanṭikena aññarucikena aññatrāyogena aññatrācariyakena...*).

## 1.2. Examination of *sutta*-s

Few of many *sutta*-s that deal with the content of unanswered questions are discussed here to shed more lights on its contextual background.

### 1.2.1. *Abyākatasaṃyutta*.

This entire section of the *Samyuttanikāya* is devoted to the discussion of undeclared questions. However, it is not much informative in explaining exactly why the Buddha had left them undeclared except some answers that we are already familiar with. If people did not get their answers from the Buddha then they would turn to his disciples and vice versa, but the answer they get would be the same consensual opinion – that the Buddha had left them undeclared. The first six chapters deal only with the last four questions related to the Tathāgata, whereas the other five chapters deal with all sorts of questions posed by the wanderer Vacchagotta, who is the foremost proponent of these matters in the Canon. The idea presented in this section is that questions such as these will only arise when one has attachment to the 'Self',<sup>27</sup> but in the absence of any attachment it is simply impossible even to think about them by people who have seen the ending of their round of existence. Thus, only those who are not devoid of lust, desire, affection, thirst, passion, and craving for existence ponder on such questions.

<sup>23</sup> *Samyuttanikāya*, 12.15

<sup>24</sup> Bodhi, 2000, p. 734

<sup>25</sup> *Samyuttanikāya*, 12.17

<sup>26</sup> "sokarotisopaṭisaṃvedayaṭī' tikhō,

kassapa, āditosato 'sayamkamaṃ dukkhan' tiitivadaṃ sassaṃ etaṃ pareti. 'aññokaroti aññopaṭisaṃvedayaṭī' tikhō, kassapa, vedanābh itunnassasato 'paramkamaṃ dukkhan' tiitivadaṃ ucchedaṃ etaṃ pareti."

<sup>27</sup> Some regard six senses as "this is mine, this I am, this is my self (*etaṃ mama, esohamasmi, esomeattā*)" – *Samyuttanikāya*, 44.7. Some regard form as self, or self as possessing form, or form as in self, or self as in form

(*rūpaṃ attato samanupassanti, rūpavantaṃ vā attānaṃ, attanivārūpaṃ, rūpasmiṃ vā attānaṃ*). They seek this self in the personality factor as it has been shown in the previous chapter. However, the Buddha does not hold such views, and same with other aggregates. – *Samyuttanikāya*, 44.8. Moreover, the Buddha knows about the origin and cessation of each aggregate. Thus, he says in the *Aggivaṃṇasutta* [*Majjhimanikāya*, 72], "I say, with the destruction, fading away, cessation, giving up, and relinquishing of all conceivings, all excogitations, all I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency to conceit, the Tathāgata is liberated through not clinging."

(*tathāgato sabbamaññitānaṃ sabbamathitānaṃ sabbāhaṃkāramamaṃkāramānānusayānaṃ khayāviraṅgānirodhācāgāpaṇinissaggāna upādāvimuttotivadāmi'ti.*)

To the Buddha, who himself does not believe in the "concept of self", speculation on metaphysical questions are simply a waste of time that leads nowhere to the actual realization of the truth. Furthermore, in the *Anandasutta*,<sup>28</sup> though the Buddha stands by his 'no-self' doctrine he keeps silence regarding a question posed by Vacchagotta. This approach of the Buddha is criticized by scholars who are of the opinion that the Buddha should have directly replied 'no' when asked about the existence of a 'Self'. This silence of the Buddha is also mistakenly taken by some scholars to interpret that the Buddha only denied the 'empirical self' which goes through changes but not the actual 'metaphysical or psychological Self' that is permanent and happy. Even going as far as to claim that the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to attain this 'Self'.<sup>29</sup>

Going back to the question posed by Vacchagotta, when he asks whether there is a 'self' or there is not, the Buddha refuses to say anything. The reason being not to fall either into the eternalist or nihilist view of 'self' proclaimed by other ascetics and brahmins. Similar to *Kālāmasutta*,<sup>30</sup> in the *Kutūhalasālāsutta*<sup>31</sup> too Vacchagotta is perplexed by categorical answers given by the six famous heretical teachers (Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, Saṅghaya Belaṭṭhiputta, Pakudha Kaccāyana, and Ajita Kesakambalī) on the sets of "undeclared questions", but no uniform answers were given. This and the *sutta*-s that follow are illuminating in explaining the unexplainable nature of *nibbāna*<sup>32</sup> and the 'self'. The Buddha mentions that he declares a rebirth for one with fuel (cankers), but not for one without fuel (liberated one). The fire burns dependent upon the fuel, but when an arhant has shattered the chain of dependent arising, he is no longer supported by any fuel. Thus, asking a question like "does the self exist?" to the Buddha is like asking "does non-existence also has an existence?" As a matter of fact, in the *Aggivačchagottasutta*, the Buddha says such terms as existence or non-existence do not apply (e.g. *upapajjatiṭṭhiko, vaccha, na upeti*) to a liberated person further explained by a simile of a fire (same as above) and unfathomable ocean.<sup>33</sup> Rightly so, a person so used to the way of thinking in terms of 'self' admits his bewilderment and confusion by the Buddha's answer, and whatever previously gained clarity on this matter by him, through conversation with the Buddha has also now disappeared.<sup>34</sup>

### 1.2.2. Cūlamālunkyasutta.<sup>35</sup>

This *sutta* is important to understand the doctrinal pragmatism of early Buddhism. In the *Sīsapāvanasutta*,<sup>36</sup> the Buddha says that he is in a possession of a vast amount of knowledge and wisdom, but he teaches the Dhamma which has a sole purpose of putting an stop to the rounds of existence.<sup>37</sup> Engaging in futile discussion is not worth anything to our intellectual development or to our practical life. Giving an example of a person struck by a poisoned arrow, the Buddha tries to show the immediacy of human life. In this *sutta*, Mālunkyāputta even threatens to leave the order if the Buddha were unable to answer these undeclared questions; but the Buddha says that since he did not promise to answer these questions when a person enters the Order, so even if a person were to die, he says he still would not answer those questions. The Buddha is of opinion that human birth is difficult to achieve.<sup>38</sup> Only a human can attain the Buddhahood, and human life is the most suitable to attain arhatship too; because animals have no intellectual capacity and deities are busy indulging in sensually pleasurable activities. To make the most out of a precious life that we have got the Buddha gives a simile of a person struck by an arrow to motivate us to strive for liberation in this very lifetime.

Suppose a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say: 'I will not let the surgeon pull out this sorrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a brahmin or a merchant or a worker.' And he would say: 'I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me was tall or short or of middle height; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me was dark or brown or golden-skinned; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such a village or town or city; ... until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a cross-bow; ... until I know whether the bowstring that wounded me was fiber or reed or sinew or hemp or bark; ... until

<sup>28</sup> *Samyuttanikāya*, 44.10

<sup>29</sup> Remón, 1980, p. 20ff

<sup>30</sup> *Aṅguttaranikāya*, 3.65

<sup>31</sup> *Samyuttanikāya*, 44.9

<sup>32</sup> *Nibbāna* is 'unconditioned' and thus beyond our conceptualization and usage of language because we cannot understand a word if we have not experienced such situation for ourselves. That is why the Buddha says to Poṭṭhapāda, an outsider will find his teaching on 'self' difficult to understand for they are not used to the Buddhist way of thinking. They are held back by deeply rooted "notion of self"; and scholars who declare that the Buddha admits of transcendental Ātman should know that "all phenomena are non-self (*sabbe dhamma anattā*)" which includes both the conditioned and the unconditioned.

<sup>33</sup> To clarify further that the Buddha does not take either eternalism nor nihilism stance on the concept of self-Bhikkhu Bodhi (2009, p.1278) mentions: "The image of the extinguished fire, taken alone, veers in the direction of total extinction, and thus must be balanced by the image of the ocean; the image of the ocean, taken alone, suggests some eternal mode of being, and thus must be balanced by the image of the extinguished fire. Again, the truth lies in the middle that transcends untenable extremes.

<sup>34</sup> *etthāhaṃ, bhogotama, aññāṇamāpādiṃ, etthasammohamāpādiṃ.*

*yāpimeesābhotogotamassapurimenakathāsallāpenaahupasādamattāsāpimeetarahiantarahitā.*

<sup>35</sup> *Majjhimanikāya*, 63

<sup>36</sup> *Samyuttanikāya*, 56.31

<sup>37</sup> What the Buddha knows is compared to all leaves in a forest and what he has preached is compared to only a handful of leaves from that forest.

<sup>38</sup> *kičchomanussapaṭilābho – Dhammapada.*, verse 182

I know whether the shaft that wounded me was wild or cultivated; ... until I know with what kind of feathers the shaft that wounded me was fitted – whether those of a vulture or a hawk or a peacock or a stork; .. until I know with what kind of sinew the shaft that wounded me was bound – whether that of an ox or a buffalo or a deer or a monkey; ... until I know what kind of arrowhead it was that wounded me – whether spiked or razor-tipped or carved or barbed or calf-toothed or lancet-shaped. All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.3. Invalidity and defects of the Ten Questions

As we have noticed in the *Aggivacchagottasutta*, the Buddha gives a simile of a fire to prove his point that the Buddhahood is beyond any linguistic measure (at least to those who have not attained the fruit). In this *sutta*, the question of interest to us is this: "When the fire was extinguished in which direction did it go?" To this question, Vaccha answers by saying "that does not apply, because grass and sticks are used to kindle a fire but if there is no fuel then it is reckoned as extinguished."<sup>40</sup> In the same way, says the Buddha that the Tathāgata is liberated from reckoning in terms of material form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Therefore, questions such as, "he appears"; "does not appear"; "both reappears and does not reappear"; "neither reappears nor does not reappear" do not apply. This also finds supports in the *Suttanipāta*, where the Buddha states:

There is no measuring of one who has gone out, Upasīva, said the Blessed One. That no longer exists for him by which they might speak of him. When all phenomena have been removed, then all ways of speaking are also removed.<sup>41</sup>

On account of this, many scholars also believe in the possibility of these questions being unanswerable, whereas some believe the Buddha to be skeptical.<sup>42</sup> However, Jayatilleke observes that these questions were regarded to be in principle answerable categorically though dismissed for pragmatic reasons.<sup>43</sup> In the same manner, Gethin also points out that:

The questions are unanswerable because they assume, as absolute, categories and concepts – the world, the soul, the self, the Tathāgata... To answer 'yes' or 'no' to any one of them is to be drawn into accepting the validity of the question and the terms in which it is couched – rather like answering 'yes' or 'no' to a question such as, 'Are Martians green?' One's answer may be constructed in ways one had not intended.<sup>44</sup>

A similar point is made by Jayatilleke,<sup>45</sup> who argues that a question which asks for the relationship between an existent thing and non-entity is literally meaningless and has to be set aside. He mentions that it is like asking "Is the son of a barren woman white or black?" Since it is logically impossible for a barren woman to have a child, it makes questions such as these useless at the end. Furthermore, pointing out the defects of typological questions, Robinson states:

One outstanding defect of the typological approach is that its objective is to classify rather than to explain. It aims at attaching descriptive labels to a system on the basis of theses, which it maintains on a limited number of diagnostic topics. It ignores structural differences, the relative importance of different aspects of the system, the problematic that the system attempts to deal with, and the routes by which conclusions are derived or proven. In classifying a system, it eliminates almost everything that is of interest in it. Another defect is that typology assumes the commensurability of philosophical systems. This is as suspect as the now generally repudiated assumption that there is such a thing as universal grammar. Just as each term –noun, sentence, vowel, for instance –has to be defined anew for every language –so each philosophical term –being, cognition, virtue, for example –has to be defined in terms of the system under description.<sup>46</sup>

### 1.4. Loaded Questions

Much of what has been argued as the Buddha's refusal to leave aside ten questions as undeclared comes down to this point. Invalidity of questions from this perspective is known as the "loaded question" or "complex question fallacy". Bassham et al. define a loaded question thus: "A loaded question is a question that contains an unfair or questionable assumption... The loaded question fallacy occurs when an arguer asks a question that contains an unfair or unwarranted presupposition."<sup>47</sup> One of few examples mentioned is:

Joe: Have you stopped cheating on exams?

<sup>39</sup> Bodhi, 2009, pp. 534-535

<sup>40</sup> *Mahātanhāsankhayasutta [Majjhimanikāya, 48]* also talks about a simile of a fire: Depending on various conditions, fire is lit and when it goes out we cannot find in which direction did the fire go because it is not hidden inside (for instance) a log but is present only when suitable conditions are met.

<sup>41</sup> *atthaṅgatassanapamāṇamatthi, (upasīvātibhagavā)*

*yenanamvajjūmtamṭassanattṭhi.*

*sabbesudhammesusamohatesu, samūhatāvādapathāpisabbe*”ti. –Norman, 2001, p. 137 [Suttanipāta, 1082]

<sup>42</sup> A.B. Keith, p.63: It is quite legitimate to hold that the Buddha was a genuine agnostic, that he had studied the various systems of ideas prevalent in his day without deriving any greater satisfaction from them than any of us to-day do from the study of modern systems, and that he had no reasoned or other conviction on the matter. From the general poverty of philosophical constructive power exhibited by such parts of the system as appear essentially Buddha's, one is inclined to prefer this explanation.

<sup>43</sup> Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 288

<sup>44</sup> Gethin, 1998, p. 62

<sup>45</sup> Jayatilleke, 1963, p. 291

<sup>46</sup> Robinson, 1972, p. 311

<sup>47</sup> Bassham et al., 2011, pp. 146-147

Pete: No!

Joe: Oh, so you admit that you still cheat on exams?

Pete: No, I meant to say yes!

Pete: No.

"Have you stopped cheating on exams?" is a loaded question because any direct 'yes' or 'no' answer will force Pete to admit something that he does not want to admit. This question already assumes that Pete has previously cheated on exam, even though that might not be the case. By applying Pete's single 'yes' or 'no' answers to both question, Joe commits the fallacy of loaded question. A common way out of this argument is not to answer the question but to challenge the assumption behind the question.<sup>48</sup> Another popular example is "have you stopped beating your wife?" which presupposes that you have been beating your wife. Answering either positively or negatively will make you look guilty.

Thus, if a person says 'yes' to a question like "Is the world eternal?" then one admits of eternalism, and by saying 'no' he admits nihilism, because of the presupposition that came with such terms such questions were discarded by the Buddha as two extremes. "Is the soul different from the body?" again already presupposes that the 'Self' exists and the Buddha only has to answer 'yes' or 'no' to it. Similarly, it has already been discussed about the fallacy in questions regarding the Tathāgata in the section of the *Abyākatāsaṃyutta*. Moreover, notice the words like 'soul', 'eternal', 'non-eternal' all of which are wrong view in Buddhism. Therefore, as suggested by logicians it is best to reject or avoid answering such kinds of question, and if possible counter it with challenge or explain it to them. It is at this point that the Buddha refused to declare anything regarding such questions. Although he could have explained it to them, but as he says he does not see the understanding of such questions leading anywhere near to *nibbāna*.

Furthermore, invalidity of questions according to Buddhist epistemology is evident in many *sutta*-s where the Buddha remarks such questions as "Not a valid question" (*nokallopaṇho*). For instance, in the *Moliyaphaggunasutta*,<sup>49</sup> when the Buddha talks about four kinds of nutriment –as edible food, gross or subtle (*kabaḷīkārōāhāro, oḷārikovāsukhumovā*); contact (*phassa*), volition (*manosañcetanā*), consciousness (*viññāṇa*); venerable Phagguna asks, "Venerable sir, who consumes the nutriment of consciousness?" (*konukho viññāṇāhāramāhāretī?*). To this question, the Buddha replies by saying it is not a valid question and goes on to explain why. He emphasizes on the part of "one consumes" (*āhāretī*) and "who consumes?" (*konukho āhāretī?*), and says he does not say so (*evamaṇṇavādāmi*). Why? Because it is not a valid question. Here, the term 'who?' is 'pregnant' with an implicit view of 'self'; and Phagguna sees someone [self] standing behind consciousness in the role of a substantial subject based on an illegitimate assumption.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, according to the language of conditionality, as mentioned in Chapter Three, Phagguna should revise his question as "For what is the nutriment consciousness [a condition] (*kissanukhoviññāṇāhāro?*). Similarly, the Buddha refuses to answer questions like "who feels?" "who makes contact?" "who craves?" because they are wrongly formulated and not valid according to the "Buddhist concept of reality"; as such, the Buddha had to refuse to give categorical answer to such questions and resort to analysis.

### 1.5. The Buddha's Answer

At the outset, it seems that the Buddha simply did not want to have a discussion on this matter. Some scholars also suggest that the Buddha did not have a solution to these problems. However, by now it should be clear that the Buddha was neither agnostic nor ignorant of these facts. As Robinson has pointed outpoints out, "A preferable method for handling early Buddhism is to investigate the texts inductively, allowing their own problems and concepts and relational structures to appear, and shaping the description to the systems themselves."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, instead of trying to drag the Buddha into admitting one of the two possibilities, one should give him a chance to explain why he has refused to partake in such discussion, and let him form his own solution to these problems. To this end, Anāthapindika clarifies that these views are the product of one's own careless attention or conditioned by someone else's utterance.<sup>52</sup> In other words, these questions were wrongly put, thus requiring explanation; and this explanation is what probably was overlooked by scholars to make such audacious accusations. Vast intellectual capacity of the Buddha is mentioned in the *Simsapasutta*<sup>53</sup> but he preaches only which are related to the end of suffering. Moreover, one should estimate the knowledge and wisdom of the Buddha by what he says after thoroughly examining sixty-two views in the *Brahmajālasutta*:

This, monks, the Tathāgata understands: These view-points thus grasped and adhered to will lead to such-and-such destinations in another world. This the Tathāgata knows, and more, but he is not attached to that knowledge. And being thus unattached he has experienced for himself perfect peace, and having truly understood the arising and passing away of feelings, their attraction and peril and the deliverance from them, the Tathāgata is liberated without remainder.

These, monks, are those other matters, profound, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond mere thought, subtle, to be experienced by the wise, which the Tathāgata, having realized them by his own super-knowledge, proclaims, and about which those who would truthfully praise the Tathāgata would rightly speak.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loaded\\_question](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loaded_question)

<sup>49</sup>*Saṃyuttanikāya, 12.12*

<sup>50</sup>Bodhi, 2000, p. 732

<sup>51</sup>Robinson, 1972, p.312

<sup>52</sup>*kimdiṭṭhikasutta[Aṅguttaranikāya, 10.93]:imassaayamāyasmatoditṭhiattano*

*vāayonisomanasikārahetuuppanāparatoghosaṃpaccayāvā*. Also pointed out by Jayatilleke, 1968, p. 289. This same reason is also mentioned in the *Sabbāsavasutta* [Majjhimanikāya, 2].

<sup>53</sup>*Saṃyuttanikāya, 56.31*

<sup>54</sup>Walshe, 2012, p. 87

It should be clear by now that the Buddha did not back away from answering these questions as the questions themselves had faults in them. What usually follows immediately after each of these question is the Buddha's answer and a solution to such problems. As mentioned previously, these questions are, according to the "Buddhist concept of reality" illogical and tricky to answer which require more explanation; but anyhow answers can be found in the doctrine of the "Middle-path" and the "Dependent-Origination".

In the *Poṭṭhapādasutta*, after mentioning about what he has left undeclared (*anekamsikādhamma*) the Buddha goes on to discuss about what he has really declared (*ekamsikā dhammā*). What he has really declared are the Four Noble Truths. As mentioned also in the *Upaniṣad*, conflict of existence and non-existence was a tough subject to grasp.<sup>55</sup> By existence and non-existence, the concept of 'eternity' or 'nihilism' was to be known. Therefore, when the Buddha came to the scene, any question like the ten undeclared questions were asked with this view in mind. Ignoring both of these extremes the Buddha gave something new to the society to think about through his midway position. As the Buddha himself declares, "without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma in the middle."<sup>56</sup> This is the argument upon which all other thesis are built.

The next principle that supports the Buddha's position is the doctrine of "Dependent Origination", which is more useful to shed some light on loaded questions. This method to explain undeclared questions can be seen in the simile of the fire as mentioned in *sutta*-s like *Aggivaṇṇasutta*<sup>57</sup> and the *Mahātanhāsankhayasutta*<sup>58</sup> where the Buddha mentions that only with causes and conditions fire will appear, thus also debunking a theory that God created everything. It is also mentioned in the beginning of the *Poṭṭhapādasutta* everyone who says consciousness arises without causes and conditions is wrong from the beginning. The formula of "Dependent Arising" runs thus, "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases"<sup>59</sup> This formula can be used to describe any process or anything that is not *nibbāna*. Therefore, in connection with the world that constantly goes through arising (*uppāda*), persistence (*thiti*), and passing away (*bhaṅga*), it is difficult to say in its entirety whether the world is eternal or not. One needs to calmly observe natural order of things as they really come to be, because having any kind of view is a stumbling block to one's liberation. As such, in Buddhist meditation, one is instructed to suspend one's thought to focus one's entire attention to see things as they really are without any discrimination or distraction. Even the main interlocutor of the "undeclared questions", wanderer Vacchagotta, finally attained release when he focused on actual practice instead of speculation.<sup>60</sup> Thus, a person who has attained knowledge of the Dhamma would not even think about these questions as he has rightly seen and done what is there to be done.

## 2. Conclusion

These questions were entertained by all religious teachers during the Buddha's time and troubled the minds of many followers. Even as of today, some of these philosophical problems have been more or less solved through scientific discovery but many other problems remain at large due to various contradictory religious beliefs. According to Buddhism, the Buddha refused to take any side categorically at once due to the nature of such questions where such terms carried different meanings than what the Buddha had in mind. Hence, he resorted to analysis to properly explain the meaning behind such terms and clarified his position on these matters.

<sup>55</sup> *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.25

<sup>56</sup> Bodhi, 2000, p. 547 [*Samyuttanikāya*, 12.17]

<sup>57</sup> *Majjhimanikāya*, 72

<sup>58</sup> *Majjhimanikāya*, 48

<sup>59</sup> *imasmiṃsatiidaṃhoti, imassuppādāidaṃuppajjati. imasmimāsatiidaṃnahoti, imassanirodhāidaṃnirujjhati. Dasabalasutta* [*Samyuttanikāya*, 12.21]

<sup>60</sup> *Mahāvaccagottasutta* [*Majjhimanikāya*, 73]



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