

The Myth of the Buddha's Silence



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Essays on The Buddha

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What is often referred to as “the silence of the Buddha” has become almost proverbial and has been widely commented on by both academic and popular writers. Some have claimed that the Buddha remained silent when asked questions about ultimate reality because he wanted to avoid idle speculation, or because he was agnostic, or even because he did not know how to answer. Others have said that he was silent about God, because “the Divine is beyond words”. One writer says: “Buddhists misunderstood Buddha by taking His silence for negation. The silence of Buddha about God was misunderstood and Buddhists felt that Buddha indicated the absence of God through silence. When you have concluded that God does not exist at all, then what is the object of your meditation? If you say that the self is the object, there is no benefit in taking interest about yourself since you are always interested in yourself.”

The respected Catholic thinker Raimon Panikkar wrote: “The ultimate reason for the Buddha's silence seems to me to be rooted neither in the inherent limitation of the human subject, nor in the imperfection of our cognition, nor in the mysterious, recondite nature of reality. Instead, it seems to me that the ultimate reason for the silence of the Buddha resides precisely in the fact that this ultimate reality is not.”

Edmond Holmes in his *The Creed of Buddha* was certain that 2500 years of Buddhists scholarship got it all wrong but that he has finally straightened it out. “...Buddha kept silence, when metaphysical questions were discussed, not because he had nothing to say about great matters, but because he had far too much, because he was overwhelmed by the flood of his own mighty thoughts, and because the channels of expression which the riddle-mongers of his day invited him to use were both too narrow and too shallow to give his soul relief. As it is on the plane of spiritual emotion, so it is on the plane of spiritual thought.”

Father A. Chandrakanthan has a different interpretation. “A philosopher once visited Buddha and asked him ‘Without words, without the wordless, will you tell me the truth?’ Buddha kept silence. After a while the philosopher rose up gently, made a solemn bow and thanked Buddha saying ‘With your loving kindness, I have cleared away all my delusions and entered the true path.’ When the philosopher had left, Ananda, a senior disciple of Buddha, enquired ‘O, Blessed One, what hath this philosopher attained?’ Buddha replied ‘A good horse runs even at the shadow of the whip!’ For Buddha, silence as the inevitable path that leads to the Truth is not distinct from the Truth itself. That is, as the way to the Truth, Silence already contains the reality of the Truth. They are two aspects of the same reality. It is no wonder that even in Christian tradition silence is spoken of as the language of God. In Christian terms, we may say that for Buddha, Silence is the sacrament of the Truth.” The dialogue Father Chandrakanthan quotes is not to be found in any of the Buddhist scriptures, Pali or Sanskrit. It is just one of his inventions. And as we shall see, his conclusions about the Buddha's supposed silence bears no relation to anything the Buddha taught either.

Apart from academics and scholars, popular writers have likewise been anything but silent concerning the Buddha's supposed silence. According to the Hindu guru Sri Chinmoy the Buddha said: “Sometimes silence is the best answer.” Again this quote is a spurious one. The Punjabi poetess Amrita Pritam, an admirer of Mother Meera and the controversial Indian teacher Osho has written: “Where the dance of Meera and the silence of Buddha meet, blossoms the true philosophy of Osho.” Allan Smiths in his *Philosophy of the East* writes: “The Buddha elevated silence to a philosophy. It was the very essence of his teaching.” According to the popular Hindu teacher Sri Ravi Shankar as reported in a recent issue of the *Rishimukh Magazine*, after the Buddha attained enlightenment he sat in silence for such a long time that the gods became frightened and pleaded with him to say something. Then, according to Shankar: “The Buddha said, ‘Those who know, they know, even without my saying, and those who do not know, they will not know by my words. Any description of light to a blind man is of no use. One who has not tasted the ambrosia of existence, of life...there is no point in talking to them about it. So I am silent.’ How can you convey something so intimate, something so personal? Words cannot.” Like a good many writers on what the

Buddha supposedly taught and did, Shankar has simply invented incidents and words that have no basis in the Buddhist texts or even in the Buddhist tradition.

These and numerous other interpretations give the impression that maintaining a “paradoxical” or “enigmatic” silence in response to questions was a major feature of the Buddha’s teaching style and one of the main ways he communicated the truths he had realized. The reality is very different. The Buddha was an advocate of silence, although not in response to questions metaphysical or otherwise, but as an alternative to the idle chatter that often takes place in a social context (M.I,161). He also encouraged silence in the face of anger and provocation (S.I,162). Occasionally he would go into solitude for half a month during which time he did not speak (S.V,12).

One of the few original sources ever mentioned in discussions on the Buddha’s supposed silence is his dialogue with the wandering ascetic Vacchagotta. This man asked the Buddha a series of questions – whether the universe was finite, infinite, both or neither, whether the soul was the same as or different from the body, whether an enlightened person exists after death or does not ... etc. To each of these questions the Buddha replied: “I am not of that view Vaccha” (*Na kho aham Vaccha evamditthi*). Finally, Vacchagotta asked why he had no opinion on these matters and the Buddha replied because such questions and any answers that could be given to them are “just opinions, the grasping of opinions, the jungle of opinions, the wriggling of opinions... They do not lead to giving up, turning away, dispassion, stopping, calming, higher knowledge, to awakening, nor to Nirvana.” Far from responding to Vacchagotta’s questions with silence the Buddha clearly explained his reasons for not answering the questions put to him. He said that they were just opinions that distract attention from the things that really matter (M.I,484-8). This dialogue is hardly an example of the Buddha being silent.

In fact, there are only two places in the Tipitaka, the 45 volumes of Buddhist scriptures, where the Buddha remained silent when asked a question. On another occasion the same Vacchagotta asked the Buddha: “Is there a self?” The Buddha was silent. Vacchagotta continued: “Then is there no self?” and again the Buddha did not respond. Perhaps annoyed or disappointed Vacchagotta rose and left. When Ananda asked the Buddha why he met these questions with silence he replied: ‘If when asked whether there is a self I had answered ‘yes’ I would have been siding with those teachers who are eternalists. And if I had answered ‘no’ I would have been siding with those teachers who are annihilationists. If I had answered ‘yes’ would this have been consistent with the knowledge that everything is without self?’ “No Lord” replied Ananda. “And if I had answered ‘no, there is no self’ an already bewildered Vacchagotta would have been even more bewildered and would have thought ‘Before I had a self and now I don’t have one’.” (S.IV,400).

In this dialogue the Buddha clearly and simply explained why he remained silent; because he did not want to be identified with any particular philosophical standpoints and because he did not want to further bewilder his inquirer. The only other example of the Buddha remaining silent when questioned is his encounter with an individual named Uttiya who asked whether everyone will eventually attain enlightenment. The Buddha remained silent and Ananda answered for him (A.V,194). No reason is given for the Buddha’s silence in this case but it would seem that as previously he considered the question irrelevant.

All the fanciful and speculative explanations about the Buddha’s supposed silence are based on these two incidents. They have their origin in either a failure to examine original sources or more probably, in a desire to co-opt the Buddha into the writer’s particular viewpoint, rather than in anything the Buddha said or chose not to say.