

The Unanswered Questions: Why Were They Unanswered? A Re-examination of the Textual Data

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EVER SINCE THE ACADEMIC study of Buddhism began in the early nineteenth century, one question that has intrigued scholars is why the Buddha deemed it unnecessary to answer certain questions. Although the Buddha gave his own reasons for leaving these questions unanswered, modern scholars wanted to know what other reasons lay behind the Buddha's "silence." So we find attempts being made to understand this situation in the light of such ideological stances as skepticism, agnosticism, pragmatism, logical positivism, and so on. Among the many writings on the subject of undetermined questions, the latest and most exhaustive is the one made by K. N. Jayatilleke in his monumental work, *The Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*.¹ After critically examining all previous interpretations on the subject and basing himself on almost all textual data, Jayatilleke sums up his study in such a manner that it seems to exclude the need for any further contribution to our knowledge of the subject. However, it is my contention that Jayatilleke's own interpretation as well other previous interpretations are basically wrong.

If the earlier interpretations, as I maintain, are basically wrong, this situation is due to the following reasons: first, the failure to notice that the Pāli suttas present not one but two separate lists of unanswered questions, one containing ten and the other containing four; second, the failure to take into consideration the commentarial gloss of the term *tathāgata* as it occurs in the list of unanswered questions; third, the failure to give due consideration to the Buddhist teachings relating to the psychological genesis of ideologies, which has resulted in a number of totally unacceptable interpretations as to why the Buddha left some questions unanswered; and fourth, the attempt to understand

the undetermined questions in the light of such ideological stances as skepticism, agnosticism, pragmatism, and logical positivism, when it is clearly stated in the teachings of the Buddha that all speculative views and ideological stances are due to the insertion of the egocentric perspective into the domain of perceptual experience.

The purpose of this essay is not only to draw attention to where earlier studies went wrong, but also to make a detailed study of the undetermined questions. Therefore, in order to make this study as comprehensive as possible, most of the textual data already dealt with by other scholars is again reviewed in relation to my own interpretations.

The category of undetermined questions, as is well known, is closely connected with the Buddhist teaching relating to four kinds of questions: a question that ought to be explained categorically (*ekamsa-vyākaraṇīya*), a question that ought to be explained analytically (*vibhajja-vyākaraṇīya*), a question that ought to be explained with a counter-question (*paṭipucchā-vyākaraṇīya*), and a question that ought to be set aside (*thapaṇīya*).

In the Pāli suttas themselves we do not find specific examples of these categories of questions and must, therefore, turn to the Pāli commentaries and Sanskrit Buddhist literature to find a variety of examples given for this purpose. Two examples given for the first kind of question are: “Is matter impermanent?” (*rūpaṃ aniccan ti*)² and “Does everyone die?” (*sarve marisyanti*).³ From the Buddhist point of view, these are two questions that ought to be answered categorically in the affirmative. However, a question to which a negative categorical answer may be given can also be subsumed under this heading.

A good example for the second kind of question can in fact be selected from the Pāli suttas themselves. When the Buddha was asked the question, “Is it the monk or the layman who can succeed in attaining what is right, just, and good?” the Buddha says that in this particular context (*ettha*), it is necessary to give not a categorical but an analytical answer. For what determines the answer is not whether the person is a monk or a layman but the practice of good conduct (*sammā paṭipanna*).⁴

An example for the third kind of question that is given by the Mahāsaṃghikas can be traced to the suttas themselves. When the Buddha was asked the question, “Is consciousness a person’s soul or is consciousness one thing and the soul another?” he replies with the question, “What do you take to be the soul?”⁵ The counter-question is

necessary because the notion of soul is interpreted in different ways among various religions.

As to the fourth kind of question, the one that should be set aside (Pāli *ṭhapanīya*; Skt. *sthāpanīya*), both Pāli and Sanskrit sources agree in listing the unanswered (*avyākatā*) questions as examples of this category. In illustrating this kind of question, the Sanskrit Buddhist sources give the following example: is the living being (*sattva*), in the sense of a separate self-entity, identical with or different from the aggregates (*skandha*) into which the empiric individuality is analyzed? This question, it is said, is to be set aside because there is no objective entity corresponding to the word “living being” (*sattva*) and therefore to predicate something of something that really does not exist is meaningless. It is as meaningless as asking the question, “Is the complexion of the barren woman’s son dark or white?” for it is logically impossible for a barren woman to have a son.⁶

Now these four kinds of questions are introduced in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* as “there are these four kinds of explanations of questions” (*cat-tar’ imāni . . . pañhāveyyākāraṇāni*).⁷ The question that arises here is how the questions to which no answers are given could also be considered “explanations.” In point of fact, the *Abhidharmakośa* raises this very same question, and its answer is this: the very explanation that it is not a question to be explained is itself an explanation. An alternative explanation is also given: when it is said that a particular question is not determined, it is not a non-explanation but an explanation. For a question that should be set aside is in fact answered by setting it aside. How can one say that this is not an answer?⁸ This seems to be the reason why in the *Mahāvīyūtpatti* this kind of question is introduced as *sthāpanīya-vyākaraṇa*, that is, a question to be explained by setting it aside.⁹

These four kinds of questions, as Padmanabh Jaini has pointed out, have their counterpart in the three kinds of questions mentioned in the *Yogabhāṣya*: there are questions that are answerable categorically, that is, those that admit to a clear and definitive answer (*ekānta-vacanīya*); there are questions that are answerable by analysis (*vibhajya-vacanīya*); and there are questions that are not answerable (*avacanīya*).¹⁰ Apparently the third kind of question mentioned here seems to correspond to what Buddhism calls *ṭhapanīya*. However, this is not so. *Ṭhapanīya* means that which should be set aside. To say that the

question is to be set aside means to leave the question undetermined. Whether the question is answerable or not, we do not know.

On the other hand, *avacanīya* refers to a question that is not answerable, and Buddhism does not have a category of unanswerable questions. What Buddhism has is the category of unanswered questions. However, the three kinds of questions mentioned in the *Yogabhāṣya* show that its author was influenced by the Buddhist philosophical teachings and their methodology.

For our present purpose what we need to remember here is that it is to the fourth kind of question, a question that should be set aside, that the undetermined questions belong. We would like to begin our study of this subject by first clarifying the number of unanswered questions mentioned in the Pāli suttas. As we have noted above, there are altogether fourteen such questions, made into two lists, the longer list containing ten and the shorter list four. Let us take the longer list first. This list occurs in a number of early Buddhist discourses, the *locus classicus* being the *Cūla-Mālunīyaputta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. The ten questions listed are as follows:

1. Is the world eternal (*sassato loko ti*)?
2. Is the world not eternal (*asassato loko ti*)?
3. Is the world finite (*antavā loko ti*)?
4. Is the world infinite (*anantavā loko ti*)?
5. Is the soul the same as the body (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ ti*)?
6. Is the soul different from the body (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ ti*)?
7. Does the *tathāgata* exist after death (*hoti tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?
8. Does the *tathāgata* not exist after death (*na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?
9. Does the *tathāgata* both exist and non-exist after death (*hoti ca na hoti ca tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?
10. Does the *tathāgata* neither exist nor non-exist after death (*neva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā ti*)?

I have left the term *tathāgata*, as it occurs in the last four questions, untranslated. The reason for this is that it lends itself to two different interpretations. Most modern scholars take the word to mean the

liberated saint, the one who has realized *nibbāna*. This, of course, is the meaning it assumes in a large number of contexts. However, according to the Pāli commentaries the term *tathāgata* in this particular context means the living being in the sense of an independent self-entity (*satto tathāgato ti adhippeto*) or the soul (*tathāgato ti attā*).¹¹ Most of the modern scholars who wrote on this subject do not seem to have noticed this commentarial gloss of the term. On the other hand, Jayatilleke refers to the commentarial interpretation but refuses to accept it. He says that “the contemporary evidence of the Nikayas themselves shows beyond doubt that the word ‘tathāgata’ was used to denote the ‘perfect person’ or the saint as understood in each religion.”¹²

Thus according to Jayatilleke, the term *tathāgata* means “the perfect person” or “the saint” as understood not only in Buddhism but also in other contemporary religions as well. In support of his interpretation Jayatilleke cites a passage from the *Samyutta-nikāya*. According to this passage, during the time of the Buddha other religious teachers such as Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta used to “declare about the state of survival of their best and highest disciples, who had attained to the highest attainment after they were dead and gone” (*yo pissa sāvako uttamapuriso paramapuriso paramappattipatto tam pi sāvakam abbhatītaṃ kālaṅkatam upapattisu vyākaroti*).¹³ The three Pāli words used here to describe such a perfect person are *uttamapuriso* (noblest person), *paramapuriso* (highest person), and *paramappattipatto* (the one who has attained the highest attainment). What is important to remember here is that the word *tathāgata* does not occur among the words quoted above. And in order to show that the three words quoted above are “used as a synonym” of *tathāgata* Jayatilleke refers to another passage in the same *Nikāya*. According to this passage, a number of followers belonging to other religious sects one day approached Anurādha, a disciple of the Buddha, and asked him how the Buddha explained the post-mortem condition of the liberated saint. The exact words used by them to refer to the perfect saint are *tathāgato uttamapuriso paramapuriso paramappattipatto*.¹⁴ As Jayatilleke has said, in this quotation the three terms *uttamapuriso*, *paramapuriso*, and *paramappattipatto* are used as three descriptive adjectives of the term *tathāgata*. And on this basis Jayatilleke concludes that the term *tathāgata* was used to denote the perfect saint as understood by other religions as well.

We cannot agree with this conclusion because of the following reasons: It will be noticed that in the first passage, which refers to the

perfect saint as understood by other religions, the word *tathāgata* is conspicuously missing. However, in the second passage, which refers to the perfect saint as understood in Buddhism, the term *tathāgata* occurs in addition to the other three terms, namely *uttamapuriso*, *paramapuriso*, and *paramappattipatto*. This situation is perfectly understandable, for the term *tathāgata* is often used in Buddhism to denote the perfect saint, the one who has realized *nibbāna*. And it is in conformity to this tradition that, as mentioned in the second passage quoted above, the followers of other religions too used the same term, when they questioned Anurādha about the post-mortem condition of the liberated saint as understood in Buddhism.

The second passage that we have cited above could go against what we seek to establish here, namely that that the term *tathāgata* as it occurs in the list of undetermined questions means not the liberated saint as understood in Buddhism but the living being in the sense of a separate self-entity. However, as we shall see below, this passage deals not with the list of ten, but with the list of four undetermined questions, to which we have already referred.

Thus on the basis of the two passages cited by Jayatilleke it is not possible to conclude that the term *tathāgata* occurring in the list of ten undetermined questions means the perfect saint as understood by all religions during the time of the Buddha. What is more, in none of the Pāli suttas is there any evidence to suggest such a usage of the term on the part of other religions of the day. Then the other possibility that we need to consider here is whether or not the term *tathāgata* in this particular context means the perfect saint, as understood in Buddhism, the one who has realized *nibbāna*. It is in this sense that most modern scholars interpret the term. However, as we have mentioned above, according to the Pāli commentaries it means not the perfect saint as understood in Buddhism either, but the living being (*satta*) as a self-entity or as soul (*attā*).

There is enough evidence to show that the commentarial interpretation is correct. What we need to note here at the very outset is that the list of ten questions to which Buddhism refers was there before the rise of Buddhism. As mentioned in the Pāli suttas, these ten questions had been the subject of much controversy among the many religious and philosophical circles at the time of the rise of Buddhism. According to the *Udāna*, for instance, the ten theses contained in the ten unexplained questions were vigorously debated by many and various

heretical teachers, recluses, brahmins, and *paribbājikas*. Each of these controversial propositions is said to have been held by a school of recluses and brahmins who were at loggerheads with each other in maintaining the truth of their own propositions.¹⁵ The Pāli commentators as well as modern scholars have attempted to identify the various religious and philosophical schools that subscribed to each of these theses. Such an attempt could give the impression that these ten theses were made into a schedule after a survey of the philosophical positions held by different schools of thought. However, the actual situation seems to be otherwise. That is to say, the ten questions were earlier than the answers in the sense that these ten questions constituted a questionnaire on some perennial metaphysical problems to which each and every religious and philosophical system was expected to provide its answers.

It will be noticed that the first four questions in the list concern the nature of the universe that we inhabit. They relate to the problem of whether the universe is finite or infinite in terms of time (*sassato*, *asassato*) and space (*antavā*, *anantavā*). The next two deal with the question of whether the soul and the physical body are identical or different. What they purport to ask is whether we should accept the identity principle, which sees a unity between them, or the duality principle, which sees a difference between them. Then the last four questions, as the Pāli commentaries observe, relate to the post-mortem status of the living being or the soul. What they purport to ask is whether the living being, understood as a self-existent entity, exists after death, does not exist, both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor non-exists. Considering the nature of the six previous questions, the last four, so to say, logically follow from them. For the post-mortem status of the empiric individuality is much more relevant and important than the post-mortem status of the liberated saint. What is more, the idea of the perfect saint was not recognized by the schools of materialism, and, therefore, what happened to the saint after death was not a question that concerned the materialists. In contrast, the question relating to the post-mortem status of the empiric individuality was a question to which all schools, whether they were religious, materialistic, or skeptical, had to respond. This should explain why, as the Pāli suttas tell us, they became the subject of many controversies among the many religious and philosophical systems, and that they generated a bewildering mass of arguments and counter-arguments. This should also explain

why the ten questions were put to the Buddha as well by the followers of other religions and sometimes by the Buddha's own disciples.

What we have observed so far should support the commentarial gloss on the term *tathāgata* as it occurs in the list of ten unexplained questions. As we shall see, this conclusion gets further confirmed from what we will be observing on the shorter list containing four unexplained questions. The four questions of the shorter list are as follows:

1. Does the *tathāgata* exist after death (*hoti tathāgato param marañā ti*)?
2. Does the *tathāgata* not exist after death (*na hoti tathāgato param marañā ti*)?
3. Does the *tathāgata* both exist and non-exist after death (*hoti ca na hoti ca tathāgato param marañā ti*)?
4. Does the *tathāgata* neither exist nor non-exist after death (*neva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param marañā ti*)?¹⁶

It will be readily noticed that the four questions in this shorter list are identical in wording with the last four questions in the longer list. This is perhaps the main reason that prevented modern scholars from noticing that there are two lists of unanswered questions mentioned in the Pāli suttas. As we shall see in detail the term *tathāgata* as it occurs in the shorter list means not the living being or soul, but the liberated saint as understood in Buddhism. We propose to adduce the following reasons to justify this claim.

In the first place, the Pāli suttas never make a confusion of these two lists. They are always presented as two different lists: in the longer list the term *tathāgata* always means, as the Pāli commentaries say, the living being or the empiric individuality understood as a separate self-entity; in the shorter list the term in question always means the one who has realized the final goal of *nibbāna*. However, as the Pāli commentaries observe, even in the shorter list the term *tathāgata* occurs in the sense of a living being as a separate self-entity. This is because those who raise the four questions regarding the post-mortem status of the *tathāgata* do so with the wrong notion that there is a separate self-entity corresponding to the term *tathāgata*.¹⁷ However, this is no reason why we cannot maintain the distinction between the two lists. For this distinction between the two lists can also be clearly seen in how Buddhism responds to the two sets of questions in the two lists.

The clearest evidence that goes to prove the recognition of two lists of unanswered questions is the *Aggivacchagotta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. For here we find both lists occurring separately. As recorded here, Vacchagotta, the wanderer, visits the Buddha and in the course of the ensuing conversation raises the ten questions of the longer list in order to know the Buddha's response to them. Then the Buddha gives his own reasons as to why he leaves these questions unanswered. The fact that Vacchagotta did not raise further questions shows that he was satisfied with the answers given by the Buddha. Thereafter Vacchagotta raises another four questions. These relate to the post-mortem status of "the monk whose mind is free" (*vimuttacitta bhikkhu*):¹⁸ whether he exists after death, or does not exist, or both exists and non-exists, or neither exists nor non-exists. The words used here, "the monk whose mind is free," obviously mean the *tathāgata* in the sense of the liberated saint. If the term *tathāgata* in the longer list means the liberated saint, then surely Vacchagotta would not raise the latter four questions. For it does certainly amount to a repetition. And what is more, as we shall see later in detail, the Buddha's response to these four questions is quite different from his response to the ten questions raised by Vacchagotta earlier.

Equally important in this connection is the *Avyākata-saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*. Here too we see the two lists separately mentioned. In this *saṃyutta* we find fourteen suttas dealing with the unanswered questions. Among them, ten deal with the questions in the shorter list, and only two with the questions in the longer list. It is clear therefore that the main purpose of the *Avyākata-saṃyutta* is to discuss the Buddhist response to the questions not of the longer list but of the shorter list. This is understandable, for from the Buddhist perspective the questions in the shorter list, which pertain to the post-mortem status of the liberated saint, are more important than those in the longer list. When the shorter list occurs in the *Avyākata-saṃyutta*, the term *tathāgata* is often preceded by the three words: the noblest person (*uttamapuriso*), the highest person (*paramapuriso*), and the one who has attained the highest goal (*paramappattipatto*).¹⁹ The use of these three descriptive terms shows that here the term *tathāgata* means none other than the liberated saint. It may be noted here that these three descriptive terms are never used in respect to the term *tathāgata* when it occurs in the longer list. It may also be noted here that sometimes the shorter list is presented without the above-mentioned three descriptive terms.

However, this does not create any problems for our understanding the intended meaning of the term *tathāgata*, because the meaning of the term is clearly suggested by the Buddhist response to the four questions concerned.

It must be clearly emphasized here that the Buddha's response to the questions in the longer list is completely different from the response to the questions in the shorter list. As we shall see in detail, none of the many reasons given as to why the Buddha left the questions in the longer list unanswered are mentioned in the response to the questions in the shorter list. This is another important factor that enables us to distinguish between the two lists. It may also be noted here that that the Buddhist response to the four questions in the shorter list is, in a way, clearly more positive, although they are left unanswered. On the other hand, the Buddhist response to the questions in the longer list is clearly more negative and often dismissive. The reason for this situation is clear: the questions in the longer list, as we have mentioned, were the contents of a pre-Buddhist questionnaire on some metaphysical problems to which each school of thought was expected to provide answers. They represent a religio-philosophical atmosphere that Buddhism has transcended and, therefore, from the Buddhist perspective they have no legitimacy. However, the four questions in the shorter list are very much legitimate in that they naturally arise from the Buddhist teachings relating to the perfect saint, the one who has realized the final goal.

We may now examine why Buddhism deems it unnecessary to answer the questions contained in the two lists. In this connection there are three things that we should take into consideration. The first is obvious but often ignored: the fourteen questions in the two lists are never presented in the Buddhist texts as unanswerable (*avyākaraṇīya*, *vyākaraṇīya*) questions. On the contrary, they are questions that have been left unanswered (*avyākātā*). To call them unanswerable is, from the Buddhist perspective, to miss the point. It amounts to saying that they are perfectly legitimate questions, but that any answer to them transcends the limits of knowledge. The second is that if these questions have been declared unanswered or undetermined, this does not mean that they have been rejected as false. To reject them as false is certainly to answer them and not to leave them unanswered. The correct position is brought into focus by the use of the words "undetermined" (*avyākātā*), set aside (*ṭhapita*), and rejected (*paṭikkhitta*).²⁰ In this

connection the commentary to the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* says that “unanswered” means that which has not been answered categorically, analytically, or by raising a counter-question.²¹

The third factor that we need to remember here is that if these questions have been declared undetermined, the ten theses involved in them should not be understood as “indeterminate” in the sense of being neither true nor false, in other words, as neutral. This in fact is the meaning of the term *avyākatā* when it is used to denote what is neutral in moral contexts, that is, referring to those acts that are karmically indeterminate—neither *kusala* nor *akusala*.²² The term *avyākatā* is thus used in two different contexts. In a moral sense, it means karmically neutral or indeterminate. When the term is used in respect to the ten (unanswered) questions, it does not mean “indeterminate,” but rather “undetermined,” that is, as to whether they are true, false, or neither true nor false. Another danger to which Buddhist texts draw our attention is the possibility of interpreting the ten theses in question as indeterminate in a moral sense, because of the use of the term *avyākatā*. In this connection, the *Abhidharmadīpa*, a work belonging to the Sarvāstivāda *Abhidharma*, raises the question: “As for the undetermined questions mentioned in the sutras, are we to understand them in an ethical sense?” The question is raised only to answer it in the negative. It is said that the term *avyākṛta*, as used here, should be understood only “in the sense of being set aside” (*sthāpanīyatvāt*), and not in an ethical sense to mean morally indeterminate.²³

Some may think that this is too obvious a thing to be mentioned. That this is not so is shown by a controversy recorded in the *Kathāvatthu* of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*.²⁴ It concerns the position taken up by a non-Theravāda school, that speculative views (*diṭṭhigata*) are ethically neutral. The argument is based on the observation that since the ten questions are undetermined, the theses involved in them should not be described either as right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) or as wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*), and therefore they are neutral from an ethical point of view. The counter-argument of the Theravādins is that the ten theses in question are a species of speculative views (*diṭṭhigata*), that their acceptance leads to unwholesome consequences, and that therefore they cannot be qualified as ethically neutral. The view rejected by the Theravādins is based on the wrong assumption that what is left undetermined as true or false is necessarily indeterminate, that is, neither true nor false. What we need to remember here is this: when a question

is left “undetermined,” this means not only that it is not determined as true or false, but also that it is not determined as either true nor false—because we cannot predicate anything on what is undetermined.

Another thing that we must remember here is that it is incorrect to say that the Buddha was silent on these questions. To say so implies that these questions belong to the realm of mysticism and that therefore the Buddha adopted the attitude of a mystic in relation to them. The fact of the matter is that the Buddha very much responded to them. Although he did not give a categorical answer to any of the ten questions, he categorically stated the reasons for his not determining them as true or false. In passing, it may be noted here that the Buddha never resorted to silence as a way of communicating his teachings. Silence is just the opposite of communicating the doctrine, as clearly indicated by the words, “Either engage in dhamma-talk or observe the noble silence” (*dhammī vā kathā ariyo vā tuṅhībhāvo*).²⁵

If we are to understand the full significance of the reasons given by the Buddha as to why the ten questions are left unanswered, we must constantly remember the Buddha’s own statement as to what his doctrine is and what it is not. The reference is to the well-known statement where the Buddha says that as a religious teacher he teaches only two things, namely suffering and its cessation.²⁶ The same idea is conveyed in another equally well-known statement, namely, just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, even so this doctrine and discipline has but one taste, the taste of deliverance.²⁷ The doctrine of dependent origination, which the Buddha wants us to understand as his central doctrine, is in fact an explanation, in terms of causality, of the origination and cessation of suffering. Again it is precisely these two themes that we find presented in the four noble truths as four interconnected propositions. Hence all Buddhist teachings, whether related to the nature of actuality or to the nature of knowledge, theory, and practice of the moral life, are all related to the problem of suffering and its cessation. It is in relation to them that all Buddhist doctrines assume their significance.

If the Buddha says that he is concerned only with suffering and its cessation, this could also be understood in terms of the causes of suffering. Since suffering (first noble truth) is due to man’s self-centered desire (second noble truth), it can also be said that Buddhism is concerned only with the problem of our being conditioned by our self-centered desires and the need to eliminate it. Thus, in the final analysis

concern with suffering means concern with human imperfection and the need to become perfect. These, then, are the two parameters within which all Buddhist teachings assume their significance. To go beyond them is to go beyond the legitimate bounds of the dhamma.

It is against this background that we need to understand why Buddhism has set aside certain questions as undetermined. Nothing illustrates this situation better than the parable of the poisoned arrow (*sallūpama*). When the monk Mālun̄kyaputta wanted to know from the Buddha the answers to these ten questions, the Buddha tells him that these questions are “undetermined, set aside, and rejected” by the Blessed One. The answers to these questions are not relevant to understanding the fact of suffering and its elimination. It is as irrelevant as the need to know the name of the person who shot the arrow in order to remove it.²⁸

Thus if the Buddha set aside answers to these ten questions, this position is in full consonance with his well-known pronouncement that his teaching has only the objective of explaining suffering and its elimination. What matters here is not if the questions are solvable, but whether or not they have any relevance to our understanding of our existentialist problem and the way out of it.

Then in the *Aggivaḥagotta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, we find the Buddha telling Vaccha that he does not uphold any of these views, and declares that the opposite view is false. When Vaccha asks for the reasons for this attitude, the Buddha says that they are “a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, a fetter of views. It is beset by suffering, by vexation, by despair, and by fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. Seeing this danger, I do not take up any of these speculative views.”²⁹

Why the Buddha did not resolve the undetermined questions is a subject that has been discussed in the *Milindapañha* too.³⁰ Here King Milinda tells Venerable Nāgasena Thera that the Buddha’s refusal to reply to the questions put forth by Mālun̄kyaputta is not consonant with the statement made by the Buddha that in respect of the truths the Tathāgata has no such thing as the closed fist of a teacher who keeps something back: “This problem, Nāgasena, will be one of two ends, on one of which it must rest, for he must have refrained from answering either out of ignorance, or out of wish to conceal something. If the first statement be true, it must have been out of ignorance.

But if he knew, and still did not reply, then the first statement must be false.”³¹ Venerable Nāgasena reminds the king that there are four ways of responding to a problem and that the fourth way is to leave the problem undetermined. “And why ought such a question to be put aside? Because there is no reason or object for answering it. . . . For the Blessed Buddhas lift not up their voice without a reason and without an object.”³² This reply conforms to the view expressed in the Pāli suttas that a solution to these questions is not conducive to the realization of any of the objectives set forth in Buddhism.

We have referred above to the main reasons given in the Pāli suttas as to why the ten questions are left unanswered. As mentioned above they are in perfect harmony with the parameters within which Buddhism operates as a religion, namely, suffering and the need to eliminate it. To understand suffering and its causes, its cessation and the path leading to it, it is absolutely not necessary to know the answers to these questions, just as much as it is not necessary to know the name of the person who shot the arrow in order to remove it. Therefore any attempt on our part to inquire into any other reasons why the questions were left unanswered is, strictly speaking, not legitimate—doing so we are going beyond the parameters within which Buddhist teachings assume their significance.

However, it is well known that many Buddhist scholars have speculated as to the other reasons why the questions were left unanswered. One of the earliest among them is Jacobi. He says that the Buddhist attitude to these questions was influenced by the attitude of the skeptic.³³ This view is not different from what Keith has to say on this matter: “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 today do from the study of modern systems, and that he had no reasoned or other conviction on this matter.”³⁴ He notes, “This leads clearly to the conclusion that agnosticism in these matters is not based on any reasoned conviction of the limits of knowledge; it rests on the two-fold ground that the Buddha has not himself a clear conclusion on the truth of these issues, but is convinced that disputation on them will not lead to the frame of mind which is essential for the attainment of Nirvāṇa.”³⁵ Thus according to both Jacobi and Keith if the Buddha did not answer the (unanswered) questions it was because he did not know the answers to them.

Another possibility to which some scholars have hinted is based on pragmatism. According to this view the Buddha “knew the answers [to these questions] but they were irrelevant for gaining spiritual knowledge or salvation.”³⁶ As Jayatilleke observes, the parable of the poisoned arrow and the parable of the *Siṃsapā* leaves appear to support this conclusion. “The parable of the arrow seems to imply indirectly that questions regarding who shot the arrow, etc. can in principle be answered though they are irrelevant for the purpose of a cure. The parable of the *Simsapa* leaves states that what the Buddha knew but did not preach was comparable to the leaves on the trees of the *Simsapa* forest, while what he taught was as little as the leaves on his hand.”³⁷ However, as Jayatilleke rightly observes, “one cannot read too much into the parable of the arrow; and the parable of the *Simsapa* leaves does not necessarily imply that the ten questions were meaningful.”³⁸

Another explanation offered by scholars is based on rational agnosticism: if the questions are not answered they are beyond the grasp of the intellect; they transcend the limits of knowledge. This solution was first suggested by Beckh, but it came to be articulated further by Murti. In this connection Murti says,

The similarity of the *avyākṛta* to the celebrated antinomies of Kant . . . cannot fail to strike us. . . . The formulation of the problems in the thesis-antithesis form is itself evidence of the awareness of the conflict in Reason. That the conflict is not on the empirical level and so not capable of being settled by appeal to facts is realized by [the] Buddha when he declares them insoluble. Reason involves itself in deep and interminable conflict when it tries to go beyond phenomena to seek their ultimate ground.³⁹

The solution offered by Jayatilleke partly coincides with that offered by Murti. He says that “Murti’s rational agnostic solution remains a possibility with regard to the problem of the origin, duration, and extent of the universe,” and that the other six questions appear to have been discarded on the grounds that they were (logically) meaningless.⁴⁰ Thus, according to this explanation, while the first four questions—whether the world is eternal or non-eternal, finite or infinite—are not answered because they go beyond the limits of knowledge, the last six are left undetermined because they are logically meaningless.

Thus we have here four different answers by modern scholars as to why the Buddha left certain questions unanswered. According to the first, the Buddha did not know the answers to them (skepticism, naïve

agnosticism). According to the second, the Buddha knew the answers to them but left them unanswered because they were not relevant to Buddhism as a religion (pragmatism). According to the third, the questions go beyond the limits of knowledge (rational agnosticism). According to the fourth answer, only the first four questions go beyond limits of knowledge (rational agnosticism) whereas the other six are logically meaningless (logical positivism).

According to my own interpretation, which I present in the following pages, the first three explanations are totally unacceptable. As to the fourth, the one proposed by Jayatilleke, where I cannot agree with him is when he says that only the last six questions are logically meaningless. For we have reasons to believe that not only the last six but all the ten are meaningless, because they are all based on a wrong approach to the nature of reality. In the context of Buddhist teachings none of the ten questions arise as valid questions. When we say “meaningless” this must be understood entirely from the Buddhist perspective, not from the perspective of any other religion or philosophy, modern or ancient, Eastern or Western.

In maintaining my thesis that the questions do not arise in the context of Buddhist teachings, I intend to base it on another kind of textual evidence relating to the unanswered questions. This refers to the Buddhist teachings on what may be called the psychology of ideologies, that is, the Buddhist analysis of the psychological mainsprings of all views and ideological stances. In unfolding their implications we can discover another set of reasons as to why the ten questions were left unanswered.

Thus in the *Avyākata-saṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta-nikāya* we find another set of reasons for not answering the unanswered questions. As recorded here, Vacchagotta the wanderer asks Venerable Moggallāna why, when the other religious teachers provide specific answers to these questions, the Buddha has left them unanswered. The reply given is that unlike other religious teachers, the Buddha does not consider the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind as “this is mine,” “this am I,” and “this is my self.”⁴¹ This, in other words, means that the Buddha is free from what is called *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality view. We find this same idea repeated in a different way in yet another answer given by Venerable Moggallāna to Vacchagotta the wanderer. The reply is that unlike other religious teachers the Buddha does not consider material form as self, or self as having material form,

or material form in self, or self in material form. This statement, with appropriate changes, is repeated in respect of the other four aggregates as well. What we find here is another way of referring to what may be rendered into English as the “personality view.”⁴²

What is the “personality view,” and why is it cited here as the reason for raising and answering the unanswered questions? Another expression for this view is *attavāda*, the belief in a self, and according to the twelve-factored formula of dependent origination it is one of the four attachments (*attavāda-upādāna*) conditioned by craving (*taṇhā-paccayā upādānam*). The emergence of the personality-view and its impact on our perceptual experience is a subject closely associated with the Buddhist teaching relating to sense-perception. This is a subject on which we have two illuminating disquisitions: one by Venerable Ñāṇananda in his *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought*,⁴³ and the other by Venerable Bodhi in his introduction to the translation of the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*.⁴⁴

An instance of cognition, according to early Buddhism, consists of a series of mental phenomena, beginning from sensory contact and culminating in a complex stage called *papañca*, a stage representing conceptual proliferation. Among the many stages of the process it is at the stage of feeling that arises immediately after sensory contact that “the latent illusion of the ego awakens and thereafter the duality between the ego and non-ego is maintained until it is fully crystallized and justified” at the conceptual level of *papañca*. Thus the dependently arising components of the perceptual experience present themselves to the ordinary worldling in a different form: as a duality between a separate subject on the one hand and the perceptual experience on the other. This gives rise to the false notion that “a subject distinct from the cognitive act itself is the persisting experiencer of each fleeting occasion of cognition.”⁴⁵ Once the ego-consciousness has emerged, it cannot exist in a vacuum. It must have some content for itself, some kind of “form and shape in the domain of concrete fact.” This the worldling achieves by identifying what Venerable Bodhi calls “the spectral ego with some component of the worldling’s psychophysical existence,” that is, the five components into which the empiric individuality is analyzed.⁴⁶ This identification manifests itself in three different ways: “this is mine” (*etaṃ mama*), “this I am” (*eso’ ham asmi*), and “this is my self” (*eso me attā*). The first is due to craving (*taṇhā*), manifesting in the notions of my and mine; for it is the function of craving to appropriate

things as one's own property. The second is due to conceit (*māna*), which is a self-measurement in relation to what is not-I, a basis for all judgments of comparison. And the third is due to wrong view (*diṭṭhi*), "a dogmatic adherence to the concept of an ego as a theoretical formulation." It is through this threefold identification that "the uninstructed worldling" (*assutavā puthujjano*) establishes his or her identity as a separate selfhood or individualized existence.⁴⁷

Thus what is called the personality view is one of the three ways in which the ego-consciousness manifests itself. It is the affirmation of the presence of an abiding self in the five aggregates of the empiric individuality. The personality view, it hardly needs mentioning, is not the result of any deliberate reflection. It arises at the pre-reflective level due to the latent tendencies (*anusaya*) leading to "I-making," "mine-making," and conceit (*ahaṃkāra-mamaṃkāra-mānānusaya*), and is due "to the fundamental need to establish and maintain, within the empirical personality, some permanent basis of selfhood or individualized existence."⁴⁸ Although it arises at a pre-reflective level, it could lead later to many speculative views concerning the nature of the self and the world. Hence the Buddha says: "Now, householder, as to those diverse views that arise in the world . . . and as to these sixty-two views set forth in the Brahmajala[-sutta], it is owing to the personality view that they arise and if the personality view exists not, they do not exist."⁴⁹

Thus, from the Buddhist perspective, all views, including those involved in the ten unanswered questions, are due to the personality view. The personality view, as noted above, is one of the three ways in which the ego-consciousness manifests itself; therefore, as long as this view persists as our ideational framework there is the ingression of the egocentric perspective into our perceptual experience. And it is the ingression of the egocentric perspective into the sphere of the perceptual experience that results in what Buddhism calls *maññanā*, or "distortional thinking," the thinking that distorts the nature of actuality. This consists of our attributing properties to the objects of cognition that do not belong to them, and also "in the constructive activity of the subjective imagination." It is to this situation that the first discourse of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the *Mūlapariyāya-sutta*, draws our attention. The first part of this discourse shows how the uninstructed worldling (*assutavā puthujjano*) responds to some twenty-four kinds of objects. The objects are listed in such a way as to represent all that comes within the range

of experience. They range from the four primary elements of matter to such abstract categories as diversity and unity, the idea of totality and *nibbāna* as the supreme goal. And in explaining the cognitive pattern of the uninstructed worldling in relation to these objects, the sutta uses two verbs, *saṃjānāti* (perceives) and *maññati* (conceives). The first, as the commentary explains, refers to some kind of perverted perception (*saññā-vipallāsa*). The reason for this kind of response to the object is unwise attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*) to it, which, in turn, is due to the impact of the latent defilements, namely lust, aversion, and delusion, which come to the surface of higher levels of awareness. The second refers to distortional thinking (*maññanā*) due to the insertion of the egocentric perspective into the objects of cognition.⁵⁰

Thus as long as what is referred to as the personality view persists, so long will our pronouncements on the nature of reality be conditioned by the egocentric perspective. It is to this situation that the Venerable Moggallāna draws Saccaka's attention when he says that if the Buddha does not answer the ten undetermined questions, it is because the Buddha is free from the personality view. What this clearly implies is that once the ego-notion is eliminated, the very validity of raising such questions gets eliminated. In other words, in the context of the Buddhist teaching relating to the nature of reality, they become meaningless questions.

Another aspect relating to the undetermined questions that we need to examine here is why they are described as *pacceka-saccas*, literally, "individual truths." This description seems to make the undetermined questions, so to say, somewhat determined. The notion of *pacceka-sacca* appears in Buddhist texts in reference to the various theories and speculative views put forward by controversialist debaters. They are said to dogmatically cling to their own theories (*pacceka-saccesu puthū nivittṭhā*), asserting them to be absolutely true. The term *pacceka-sacca* is also used to denote the undetermined theses, because, as we have seen, those who advocated them rejected all other views as totally wrong, thus generating a host of arguments and counterarguments among the various religious and philosophical circles.⁵¹

Jayatilleke, who has produced a critical study of the subject, says that the term *pacceka-sacca* could be translated as "partial truths" because the theories in question seem to contain an element of truth. As he says, this is strongly suggested by the parable of the blind men and the elephant. "A number of men born blind are assembled by the king

who instructs that they be made to touch an elephant. They touch various parts of the elephant such as the forehead, ears, tusks, etc. They are then asked to describe the elephant and each reports mistaking the part for the whole that the elephant was like that portion of the elephant which was felt by them.” The blind men make ten conflicting accounts corresponding to the ten parts of the elephant they touched, and these are compared to the ten undetermined theses put forward by the various recluses and brahmins. Thus, as Jayatilleke says, “these theses mistakenly describe the part for the whole and in so far as they constitute descriptions of their partial experience they have an element of truth but are deluded in ascribing to the whole of reality what is true only of the part or in other words what is partially true.”⁵²

However, according to Jayatilleke the more probable explanation is that the term *pacceka-sacca* was used in a sarcastic sense to refer to the individual (alleged) truths of the heretical sects.⁵³ This observation is based on the fact that in that section of the *Sutta-nipāta* where the term *pacceka-sacca* occurs, it is claimed “truth indeed is one” (*ekam hi saccam*) and not two (*dutiya*) or many (*nānā*). In point of fact, in this connection the *Mahāniddeśa* says that when others proclaim many truths although truth is one, these many truths are the ten undetermined theses. Thus neither the *Sutta-nipāta* nor its canonical commentary allow us to interpret what are called *pacceka-saccas* as partial truths or truths in a relative sense. They are private truths, what each person regards as true although they are not true. What we maintain here gets confirmed by the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* where the ideal monk is described as one who has abandoned *pacceka-saccas* (*panunna-pacceka-sacca*).⁵⁴

The commentarial explanation of *pacceka-sacca*, too, does not justify them either as partial truths or as individual truths. The analogy of the elephant and the blind men, as the commentary says, illustrates how what is called *sakkāya*, i.e., the group of the five aggregates of grasping (*pañca upādānakkhandhā*), becomes a basis for many kinds of misinterpretations. Just as each blind man touches one part of the elephant and mistakenly believes that to be the shape of the elephant, even so each party mistakenly takes one of the five aggregates, such as material form or feelings, as the self and attributes to it such characteristics as eternity or non-eternity.⁵⁵

In this connection what we need to remember here is that according to Buddhism all assertions as to the absolute reality of the self as well as all denials as to the absolute non-reality of the self are traceable

to the five aggregates of grasping; they are all based on a misinterpretation of their true nature. Thus the commentarial explanation, it may be noted, conforms to the canonical statement that all theories relating to the self, in whichever way the notion of the self is conceived, have to be based on one or more of the five aggregates of grasping, and that all speculative views pertaining to the nature of the self and the world are traceable to the “descent” of the egocentric perspective into the field of perceptual experience. It is to this situation that Buddhism traces the origin of the ten undetermined theses.

THE LIST OF FOUR UNDETERMINED QUESTIONS

Now we are in a better position to examine the shorter list containing the four unexamined questions. These four questions, as noted earlier, refer to the post-mortem status of a *tathāgata* where the term means the liberated saint and not the soul or the self-entity as when it occurs in the longer list. What happens to the liberated saint after death is a question to which other religious teachers, too, had to provide answers, because each religious system had its own notion of the perfect saint, described as *uttamapuriso*, *paramapuriso*, and *paramappattipatto*. Thus we find it recorded in the *Kutūhalasālā-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya* such religious teachers as Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, and Pakudha Kaccāyana predicting that such and such person who had attained the highest goal was born in such and such a place.⁵⁶

One of the most important sources for our understanding the Buddhist response to this question is the *Aggivacchagotta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. As recorded here, Vaccha, the wandering ascetic, visits the Buddha and raises one by one the ten questions in the longer list. On being told why the Buddha does not explain them, he then raises the four questions relating to the post-mortem status of the liberated saint. The term used here is not *tathāgata* but “the monk whose mind is liberated” (*vimuttacitta-bhikkhu*), but it means the same as *tathāgata* in the sense of the liberated saint. The four questions relate to whether he is born after death, or is not born, or is both born and non-born, or is neither born nor non-born. Here “is born” is the same in intent as “exists.”

The Buddha’s response to the four alternative possibilities proposed by Vacchagotta is neither one of acceptance nor one of rejection,

but that none of the alternative possibilities “fits the case” (*na upeti*). The commentarial gloss of the term is “not proper,” or “does not apply” (*na yujjati*).⁵⁷ On hearing the Buddha’s reply Vaccha confesses that he has fallen into bewilderment and confusion, and that the measure of confidence he had gained through previous conversation with Master Gotama has now disappeared. Then the Buddha tells Vaccha:

It is enough to cause you bewilderment, Vaccha, enough to cause you confusion. For this Dhamma, Vaccha, is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. It is hard for you to understand it when you hold another view, accept another teaching, approve of another teaching, pursue a different training, and follow a different teacher.⁵⁸

Thus, as the latter part of this statement shows, one reason why Vaccha could not grasp the full significance of the Buddha’s reply was his being conditioned by a set of views and viewpoints totally at variance with the Buddha’s dhamma. Hence the Buddha wanted to clarify the whole situation with the analogy of a fire getting extinguished with the exhaustion of its fuel:

“What do you think, Vaccha? Suppose a fire was burning before you. Would you know: ‘This fire is burning before me?’”

“I would, Master Gotama.”

“If someone were to ask you, Vaccha, ‘What does this fire burning before you burn in dependence on?’—being asked thus what would you answer?”

“Being asked thus, Master Gotama, I would answer: ‘This fire burning before me burns on dependence on grass and sticks.’”

“If that fire before you were to be extinguished, would you know: ‘this fire before me has been extinguished?’”

“I would, Master Gotama.”

“If someone were to ask you, Vaccha: ‘When that fire before you was extinguished to which direction did it go: the east, the west, the north, or the south’—being asked thus what would you answer?”

“That does not apply, Master Gotama. The fire burned in dependence on its fuel of grass and sticks. When that is used up, if it does not get any more fuel, being without fuel it is reckoned as extinguished.”

“So too, Vaccha, the Tathāgata has abandoned that material form by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm-stump, done away with so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from

reckoning in terms of material form, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom like the ocean. The term 'reappears' does not apply, the term 'does not reappear' does not apply, the term 'both reappears and does not reappear' does not apply, the term nether 'reappears nor non-reappears' does not apply."⁵⁹

The above statement that none of the four alternatives fits the case has given rise to a widespread belief that the post-mortem status of a *tathāgata* is some kind of mystical absorption with an absolute that transcends the four alternative possibilities proposed by Vaccha. In other words, the liberated saint enters, after death, into a transcendental realm that transcends all descriptions in terms of existence, non-existence, both existence and non-existence, and neither existence nor non-existence. It has also been suggested that if the four questions were considered meaningless, this meaninglessness is partly due to the inadequacy of the concepts contained in them to refer to this state.

If the four questions are set aside it is not because the concepts contained in them are inadequate to refer to this state. The correct position is that the questions do not arise. What is focused on here is not the inadequacy of the concepts contained in the four questions, but their illegitimacy. It is just as the four questions as to where the fire went. Here too what is focused on is not their inadequacy but their illegitimacy in explaining a fire that gets extinguished with the exhaustion of its fuel. A fire can burn only so long as there is fuel. Once the fuel is gone the fire gets extinguished. Being extinguished does not mean that the fire gets released from its fuel and goes out to one of the four quarters. In the same manner it is not the case that an entity called *tathāgata* gets released from the five aggregates and finds its way to some other kind of existence. To try to locate a *tathāgata* in a post-mortem position is like trying to locate an extinguished fire. In both cases the questions are equally meaningless and equally unwarranted.

In point of fact, when it is said that the four questions on the post-mortem status of a *tathāgata* do not arise (*na upeti*), it explains more the present position of a *tathāgata* than his or her post-mortem status. The present position of a *tathāgata* is such that it does not admit any of the four questions relating to his or her after-death condition. For, although a *tathāgata* is not without the five aggregates, he or she does not identify him- or herself with any of them. Therefore he or she cannot be identified in terms of material form, feelings, perceptions, men-

tal formations, and consciousness. This is what makes a *tathāgata*, the liberated saint, incomprehensible in this very life itself.

The view held by some—namely, that if the Buddha did not confirm any of the four alternatives proposed by Vacchagotta, this should mean that the post-mortem status of a *tathāgata* is such that it cannot be described in terms of any of them—is, in fact, contradicted by direct textual evidence. Of particular importance in this connection is the *Anurādha-sutta* of the *Samyutta-nikāya*.⁶⁰ It begins with an encounter between Anurādha, a Buddhist monk, and a group of followers belonging to other religious sects. They tell Anurādha that the post-mortem existence of a *tathāgata*, “a superman, one of the best of men, a winner of the highest winning,” is proclaimed with reference to one of the four alternative positions described above.⁶¹ Then Anurādha tells them that the post-mortem position of a *tathāgata* is such that it can be described, not with reference to any of the four alternatives, nor with reference to a position besides them, but with a position that transcends them. Anurādha reported to the Buddha what transpired between him and the heretics and wanted to know whether what he said represented the correct position. The Buddha first reminded him of the nature of the five aggregates as impermanent, suffering, and non-self, and then asked Anurādha:

“Now what say you, Anuradha? Do you regard a Tathāgata’s material form as the Tathāgata?”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Do you regard him as (his) feeling, (his) perception, (his) activities or apart from them? As (his) consciousness or as apart from it?”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Now how say you, Anuradha? Do you regard him as having no material form, no feeling, no perception, no activities, no consciousness?”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Then, Anuradha, since in just this life a Tathāgata is not met with in truth, in reality, is it proper for you to pronounce this of him: ‘Friends, he who is a Tathāgata, a superman one of the best of beings, a winner of the highest gain, is proclaimed in other than these four ways: The Tathāgata exists after death, he does not exist, he both exists and does not exist, he neither exists nor non-exists.’”

“Surely not, lord.”

“Well said! Well said, Anuradha! Both formerly and now also, Anuradha, it is just suffering and the ceasing of suffering that I proclaim.”⁶²

Thus what the Buddha told Anurādha should show that it is equally inadmissible to describe the after-death status of a *tathāgata* in terms of a position besides the four propositions. Whether the fourfold predication “exhausts the universe of discourse,” and therefore whether a fifth position is not logically possible, is not a question that has any relevance here. What is relevant here is not the manner of the predication, but the object of the predication, that is, a *tathāgata* in the sense of a liberated saint. The Buddhist argument rests not on the inadequacy of the alternative predications, but on their illegitimacy, so the addition of any other method of predication, whether it is logically possible or not, makes no difference. In point of fact, when the Buddha rejects the alternative position proposed by Anurādha it is not on the grounds that a fifth position is logically impossible. Rather it is on the grounds that the appellation *tathāgata* can neither be identified with any of the five aggregates, nor can it be distinguished from them, and that in this very life itself a *tathāgata* is not comprehensible with or without reference to the five aggregates.

It will be noted that in summing up the correct position to Anurādha, the Buddha says that both formerly and now “it is just suffering and the cessation of suffering” that he proclaims. This statement could be considered as the final answer to the question why any predication on the post-mortem status of the liberated saint is not legitimate. From the Buddhist perspective, if anything arises it is suffering, and if anything ceases it is also suffering.⁶³ And it is just suffering and its cessation that the Buddha proclaims. Therefore what is extinguished when *nibbāna* is won is only suffering. It is not the annihilation of an independently existing self-entity. For Buddhism, individual existence is only a mass of suffering (*dukkhakhandha*). There is no individual self-entity. It is *sassatavādā* and *ucchedavādā* that recognize such a self-entity. While *sassatavādā* proclaims the eternal existence of the self-entity, *ucchedavādā* proclaims its complete annihilation at death. Buddhism does not recognize such an independently existing self-entity either to be annihilated or to be perpetuated into eternity. Therefore what is brought to an end when *nibbāna* is won is not a self-entity but the false notion of such an entity, i.e., the ego-illusion and all that it entails and implies. It is in this context that we should understand the following statement of the Buddha: “Some ascetics and brahmins accuse me wrongly, baselessly, falsely and groundlessly, saying that the recluse Gotama is a nihilist and preaches the annihilation, destruction, and

non-existence of an existent being. That is what I am not and do not affirm. Both previously and now I preach suffering and cessation of suffering.”⁶⁴

NOTES

1. K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963).
2. V. Trenckner, ed., *The Milindapañho: Being Dialogues between King Milinda and the Buddhist Sage Nagasena* (London: Pali Text Society, 1962), 145.
3. De La Vallee Poussin, trans., *L'Abhidharmakosha de Vasubandhu*, 6 vols. (repr., Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1971), 5:44.
4. V. Trenckner, ed., *Majjhima Nikāya*, 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1888–1925), 2:197.
5. T. W. Rhys Davids and others, eds., *Dīgha Nikāya*, 3 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1890–1911), 1:185.
6. Prahlad Pradhan, ed., *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu* (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1967), 202.
7. R. Morris and E. Hardy, eds., *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1885–1900), 2:121.
8. Pradhan, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, 281.
9. I. P. Minaev, *Mahavyutpatti*, vol. 30 (Sankpeterburg: Viblothica Buddhica, 1911).
10. Padmanabha Jaini, ed., *Abhidharmadīpa with Vibhashaprabhavr̥tti* (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1959), 121.
11. Buddhaghōṣa, *Manorathī-pūraṇī (Aṅguttara-nikāya Aṭṭhakathā)*, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1924–1956), 2:308, 2:309.
12. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 244.
13. L. Feer, ed., *Samyutta Nikāya*, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1884–1898), 4:398.
14. *Ibid.*, 4:380.
15. P. Steinthal, ed., *Udāna* (London: Pali Text Society, 1885), 69.
16. See, for example, the *Avyākata-samyutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, 5:374–403.
17. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 3:206.
18. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:487.
19. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 3:89.
20. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:426.
21. Buddhaghōṣa, *Manorathī-pūraṇī*, 2:121.
22. See for example, Edward Müller, ed., *The Dhammasaṅgaṇi* (London: Pali

- Text Society, 1885), 45ff.
23. Jaini, *Abhidharmadīpa*, 248.
24. A. C. Taylor, ed., *Kathāvatthu* (London: Pali Text Society), 251ff.
25. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 4:359.
26. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 4:398.
27. H. Oldenberg, *Vinaya Piṭaka*, 5 vols. (London: Pali Text Society, 1879–1883), 2:239.
28. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1:429.
29. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 591.
30. *Milindapañho*, 124.
31. T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *The Questions King Milinda*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1890–1894), 1:204–206.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 472–473.
34. Arthur Berriedale Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon* (repr., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1996), 63.
35. *Ibid.*, 45.
36. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 472–473.
37. *Ibid.*, 474.
38. *Ibid.*
39. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), 36ff.
40. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*.
41. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 4:398.
42. *Ibid.*, 4:402.
43. Ven. Bhikkhu Ñāṇānanda, *Concept and Reality* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971).
44. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Discourse on the Root of Existence: The Mūlapariyāyasutta and Its Commentaries* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993).
45. *Ibid.*, 7.
46. *Ibid.*, 8.

47. This account is based on the two works by Ven. Ñāṇānanda and Ven. Bodhi.
48. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and Its Commentaries* (repr., Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1992), 6–7.
49. Based on the two works referred to in notes 43 and 44.
50. Ibid.
51. [Ed.: K. R. Norman, trans. *The Group of Discourses*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001), 161.]
52. See Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 355.
53. Ibid., 289, 354–356.
54. Rhys Davids and Carpenter, *Dīgha Nikāya*, 2:269–270.
55. [Ed.: Buddhaghosa, *Manorathī-pūraṇī (Aṅguttara-nikāya Aṭṭhakathā)*.]
56. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 4:398.
57. *Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*.
58. Bodhi and Ñāṇamoli, *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 593.
59. This argument is similarly applied to the other four aggregates as well. See *ibid.*
60. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 4:398.
61. F. L. Woodward, Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids, and E. M. Hare, trans., *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Samyutta Nikāya)* (London: Pali Text Society, 1927), 269.
62. [Ed.: I. B. Horner, trans., *The Book of Middle Length Sayings*, 3 vols. (Bristol: Pali Text Society, 1954–1959).]
63. *Samyutta Nikāya*, 1:135.
64. I. B. Horner, *Book of Middle Length Sayings*, 1:140.