

The Ten Unanswered Questions

There are two main texts in the Pali scriptures, Suttas 63 and 72 of the Majjhima Nikaya, each with the same list of ten propositions or 'views' (ditthi):

1. The world is eternal.
2. The world is not eternal.
3. The world is (spatially) infinite.
4. The world is not (spatially) infinite.
5. The soul (jiva) is identical with the body.
6. The soul is not identical with the body.
7. The Tathagata (a perfectly enlightened being) exists after death.
8. The Tathagata does not exist after death.
9. The Tathagata both exists and does not exist after death.
10. The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist after death.

The Buddha refused to give any teaching about these issues, although the monk Malunkya putta challenged him:

If the Lord knows that the world is eternal, let the Lord explain to me that the world is eternal. If the Lord knows that the world is not eternal, let the Lord explain to me that the world is not eternal. If the Lord does not know whether the world is eternal or whether the world is not eternal, then, not knowing, not seeing, this would be honest, namely to say, 'I do not know, I do not see'. And likewise with the other questions (Majjhima Nikaya, 63:427).

The monk Vacchagotta inquired about the state of the Tathagata after death. In response the Buddha rejects as inapplicable the entire range of possible answers in terms of which the question was posed:

'Arise', Vaccha, does not apply.
Well, then, good Gotama, does he not arise?
'Does not arise', Vaccha, does not apply.
Well then, good Gotama, does he both arise and not arise?
'Both arises and does not arise', Vaccha, does not apply.
Well then, good Gotama, does he neither arise nor not arise?
'Neither arises nor does not arise', Vaccha, does not apply.
(Majjhima Nikaya, 72:486)

Vaccha then expresses his bewilderment and disappointment, and the Buddha responds:

You ought to be at a loss, Vaccha, you ought to be bewildered. For Vaccha, this dharma is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond dialectics, subtle, intelligible to the wise. (Majjhima Nikaya, 72:487)

He is referring all the time to the mystery of parinirvana, nirvana beyond this life. It is misleading to say that after death the Tathagata - that is, the fully enlightened individual that we know in this life - exists, or does not exist, or both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor non-exists beyond this life. The Buddha then illustrates the idea of a question that is so put that it has no answer by speaking of a flame that has been quenched. In which direction has the flame gone - east, west, north or south? None of the permitted answers applies. Likewise what happens after the bodily death of a Tathagata cannot be expressed in our available categories of thought.

The Buddha's fundamental point was that to know the answers to these questions is not necessary for liberation. To treat them as though they were will only hinder our advance toward liberation. To make his point he told the parable of the man pierced by a poisoned arrow. If he insists, before receiving medical treatment, on knowing who shot the arrow, and of what clan he is, what kind of bow he was using, what the bow string and the shaft of the arrow were made of, from what kind of bird the feathers on the arrow came, and so on, he will die before his thirst for knowledge is satisfied. Likewise, if we distract ourselves from the path to enlightenment by trying to settle these disputed cosmological and metaphysical issues we may well fail to be healed from birth, ageing, dying, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair. These matters are set aside by the Buddha because such knowledge 'is not connected with the goal, is not fundamental to the Brahma-faring, and does not conduce to turning away from, nor to dispassion, stopping, calming, super-knowledge, awakening nor to nirvana' (Majjhima Nikaya, 63:431).

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