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SILENCE IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY: CASES OF THE BUDDHA AND EVAGRIUS OF PONTUS (PART I)

Summary

The Buddha's refusal to answer some of the questions asked by countless interlocutors who parade in the Pali canon has provoked interpretations among Buddhist scholars to this day. This is how the well-known question of the "Buddha's silence" arose. In this paper, I have tried to give a critical overview of these interpretations, as well as to problematize them by asking whether it was a matter of "silence" at all or a special strategy used for pedagogical purposes. Building on this and through the analysis of other similar examples from the Theravada literature, a specific "typology of silence" has been developed, which sheds light on the different roles that silence plays in this form of Buddhism. This is how the ascetic silence, the silence according to the convention, the pedagogical silence and, in the end, the silence about the ultimate reality were identified. Of course, these types of use of silence and contrast with its opposite, sound, more precisely in the religious context with speech, are not typical only for Buddhism, but also for other religions. Therefore, in the continuation of the paper, the situation in Orthodox Christianity is analyzed through two examples. One is the reflection on the role of silence in the ascetic life of early Christians, which we find in the works of Evagrius of Pontus, one of the important early church fathers from the 4th century and one of the founders of the spiritual tradition within Eastern Christianity. The second is the hesychastic movement, with its three phases: purification (katharsis), illumination (theoria) and deification (theosis), and the practice of "quietude" or mental prayer. All this made it possible to draw several parallels in the final part of the paper between the role of silence in the ascetic practice of Theravada Buddhism and early Orthodox Christianity.

Keywords: *Buddhism, Orthodox Christianity, silence, Buddha, Evagrius of Pontus, hesychasm*

Introduction

It is really hard to dispute with the claim that the modern life offers to us quite rare opportunities to experience silence. Traffic noise, news media dramatic reports,

screaming of various marketing channels or peoples' voices are constantly around us. On top of that, our mobile devices are producing an endless stream of notifications, announcements, mails, messages, photos, music or video clips, constantly hijacking our attention and disturbing internal balance. This disturbance then reflects as a new layer of noise in our head: noise of thoughts, myriad of internal comments and memories. Having all this in mind, there are two facts we are all aware of: first, silence is something that in the modern world doesn't come to us spontaneously anymore; and second, we therefore need to actively pursue it, as it is vital for our well-being.

One of the main ways of that pursuit leads through religious practice, where silence in its most fruitful moments is by rule accompanied with solitude, constituting a powerful ground for our greater sanity and a vehicle of spiritual development. As Thomas Aquinas puts it: "Solitude, like poverty, is not the essence of perfection, but a means of perfection." This close connection between silence and religion in its various forms and expressions indicates that the problem of regaining inner equilibrium with the help of silence is not a new one. In our time the importance of silence just became more obvious.

Silence plays the crucial role in various religious systems, but here we will limit our discussion to two of them: Buddhism and Christianity. Or more precisely, the focus of our investigation will be the words (and the silence) of the Buddha as preserved in the Pāli Canon and the writings of Evagrius of Pontus, one of the early Church fathers and an influential figure among the founders of Christian mysticism. By reviewing the legacy of these two figures, we will try to answer some pertinent questions: what does silence mean in the framework of both religious systems, can we distinguish different types and usages of silence and, finally, what are the similarities and differences between two religious traditions regarding their understanding and use of silence. We will try to show that use to be much broader than usually considered, covering four categories of pedagogical silence, ascetic silence, silence about ultimate reality and finally silence of convention. But let us start with one of the examples for the pedagogical silence which so far was the most discussed one in the literature on Buddhism and latter expand the subject with some new examples from the Buddhist and early Christian literature.

The Enigma of the Buddha's Silence

"Silence of the Buddha" is far from being a new research topic in Buddhist studies and the literature accumulated so far is substantial.¹ But in discussing

1 E. g. Coomaraswamy (1943), Radhakrishnan (1946), Organ (1954), Murti (1955), Beck (1958), Hick (1989), Pannikar (1990), Tilakaratne (1993), Velez de Cea (2004), Karunadasa (2007).

this issue researchers were predominantly focusing on the well known case from the *Cūḷamālunkya Sutta* (M 63), where a monk asks the Buddha a series of ten questions, but doesn't get the answer.² Therefore, these questions were labeled *avyākata*, “unexplained” or “undeclared”.

“These speculative views have been undeclared by the Blessed One, set aside and rejected by him, namely: (1) ‘the world is eternal’ and (2) ‘the world is not eternal’; (3) ‘the world is finite’ and (4) ‘the world is infinite’; (5) ‘the soul is the same as the body’ and (6) ‘the soul is one thing and the body another’; and (7) ‘after death a Tathagata exists’ and (8) ‘after death a Tathagata does not exist’ and (9) ‘after death a Tathagata both exists and does not exist’ and (10) ‘after death a Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist.’”³

A lot of interpretative effort was invested in resolving the enigma why the Buddha remained silent, with ideas leading in different, often conflicting directions. Based on previous writings on the topic, T. W. Organ was the first to create a classification of possible solutions to the enigma of the Buddha's silence and came up with six answers.⁴ The first one could be labeled as Conformity and assumes that the Buddha had nothing new to offer, as he accepted the current views of his age. This view was advocated by those authors who strongly believed Buddhism is a version of Brahmanism and therefore the Buddha's teaching consists of just reformulated ideas contained already in the Vedas and the early Upanishads. Thus, Coomaraswamy writes, “the more profound our study, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish Buddhism from Brahmanism”.⁵

The next possibility, Unorthodoxy, is quite opposite. This means the Buddha rejected the current views and as they were implied in what he was asked to explain, his silence was a formal expression of that stance. Another option, we call it Agnosticism, is that being a kind of agnostic in this matter, the Buddha had no views of his own. This opens up another hotly debated question, the one of Teacher's omniscience, particularly stressed in Mahayana schools. The fourth possibility, Exclusivism, is that while knowing answers for all speculative problems, he didn't disclose them on the ground that his interlocutor is not yet mature enough

2 These questions also appear at several other places in the Pali Canon, like *Poṭṭhapāda sutta* (D 9), *Nivāpa Sutta* (M 25), *Aggivačchagotta Sutta* (M 72), *Rūpāññāna Sutta* (S 33:1), *Cinta Sutta* (S 56.8), *Kokanuda Sutta* (A 10:96), *Paṭhamanānātitthiya Sutta* (Ud 54) etc. When it comes to the texts outside of the Pali Canon and preserved in Sanskrit or Chinese translations, ten questions turns into fourteen, as the first two pairs, related to the world which might be eternal and (spatially) infinite, are transformed into two tetralemas (*catuṣkoṭi*): A, not A, both A and not A, neither A nor not A.

3 Bodhi (1995), p. 533. Numbers inserted by me.

4 Organ (1954).

5 Coomaraswamy (1943), p. 45.

to understand them. This has often been connected to a questionable idea that besides the teaching for ordinary people, the Buddha also taught esoteric one, for initiated only. Such a view could be challenged by several quotations from the Pali Canon, where the Buddha explicitly confirms he doesn't hide any part of his teachings. The most telling among them is found at the end of the *Mahāparinibbana Sutta* (D 16). But, as it is known, many later Buddhist schools exploited this idea to explain their later appearance in the history of Buddhism and also to give credibility to their innovative teachings.

The fifth option formulated by Organ is that Gotama considered language as inadequate in two ways. The first is that questions itself were wrongly formulated, implying the existence of something that doesn't exist in the supposed way. The language is also inadequate by its inability to express reality and thus not precise enough to formulate appropriate answers to the monk's questions. This Transcendental position led the Buddha to the conclusion that the best answer would be to remain silent. And finally comes Pragmatism as the sixth possibility to explain the Buddha's silence. It was simply used as a skillful mean, as after pondering on metaphysical questions of Mālunkyaputta, the Buddha considered answering them as a waste of time and energy. Debating metaphysical questions does not move us closer to the real goal of the Dhamma, liberation from the cycle of rebirth and suffering, even for an inch. This last, pragmatic hypothesis seems confirmed by the Buddha himself, as he, after his interlocutor left, explained to his personal attendant Ānanda:

“Why have I left that undeclared? Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana”.⁶

After such an explicit answer, strengthened by a memorable simile with the man shot by an arrow, it seems odd that this episode, firstly, was named “silence of the Buddha” and, secondly, provoked such a diversity of interpretations. It does seem that questions were simply wrongly formulated and unlike in some other cases when he would reformulate a question before answering it, this time the Teacher for certain reason decided not to do what he was asked to.

Early Buddhist scholars spilled a great deal of ink discussing this question. Among aforementioned options, T.R.V. Murti clearly favored the Transcendental solution of the enigma, writing that “silence can only be interpreted as mean-

⁶ Bodhi (1995), p. 536.

ing the consciousness of the indescribable nature of the Unconditioned Reality.”⁷ Here he clearly follows a stance of his own teacher S. Radhakrishnan, who in his study about the Buddha writes: “If the Buddha declined to define the nature of the Absolute or if he contented himself with negative definitions, it is only to indicate that absolute being is above all determinations.”⁸ Whatever cannot be defined may be responded to only by silence.

A different, Pragmatic option was supported by R. Panikkar in his analysis of the Buddha’s relationship to the idea of the Absolute, He notices “holy indifference” on the part of the Buddha “not for things of little account, but for the thing that human beings – in the excess of their zeal – have always regarded as the most important, most transcendent in their lives”,⁹ and it is a question of God’s existence. As this is what the Buddha was actually asked about, Panikkar claims, he goes to the root of the problem not by direct denial of God, but by demonstrating “superfluity” of the very question, as the answer that would satisfy all unenlightened beings cannot quite be found. Further on, the Buddha’s silence is a sign of “vacuity” of any possible response, not so much “because the number of answers is roughly equal to that of the population of the earth, but essentially because the response is inevitably conditioned by the question... And then it will scarcely be the ultimate answer that is asked for and expected”.

Following Murti’s analysis, J. Hick employs an interesting division between various questions of the *avyākata* type into two groups of “unanswered” and “unanswerable”, indicating at the same time that to know the answer to those from both groups is not necessary or conducive to liberation. The first group:

consists of questions which are in themselves legitimate and admit of true answers. We do not definitively know those answers, although we can develop theories and dogmas about them. The first six ‘views’ listed, expressing pairs of positive and negative assertions – the eternity or non-eternity and spatial infinity or finitude of the universe, and mind-body identity or non-identity – are of this kind... Indeed it is possible that Gautama, after his enlightenment, did know the answers to these questions; at any rate later Buddhist writings speak of his omniscience. But it is still the case that, according to him, salvation/liberation does not depend upon such knowledge.¹⁰

Questions of “unanswerable” type are the remaining four, as well as those from the conversation with Vacchagota (M 72) inquiring about the state of a fully enlightened being, a Tathagata, beyond this life. After declaring them wrongly

7 Murti (1955), p. 48.

8 Radhakrishnan (1946), p. 59.

9 Panikkar (1990), p. 149.

10 Hick (1989), p. 345.

formulated, the Buddha tries to be more intelligible by using well known simile with the whereabouts of a flame after a fire is extinguished. “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 ordinary human categories... Here the translation of the *avyākata* as ‘the unanswerable questions’ seems more appropriate. It also seems proper to refer to their subject-matter as mysteries, realities that are beyond human comprehension and expression.” Hick thus comes again to the Transcendental category as an answer to the alleged mystery of the Buddha’s silence.

The whole of this discussion was turned into a completely different direction by A. Velez de Cea’s conclusion that the silence of the Buddha is actually non-existent:

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as the silence of the Buddha regarding the undetermined questions. The undetermined questions are not inexpressible, unanswered or unanswerable. In fact, the Buddha answered them in very explicit ways and for more than one reason.¹¹

The Buddha himself did not hold any of ten views and when asked about them, he simply used different ways among the four strategies of answering: directly, by analyzing and separating, by counter question and by setting the question aside. The reasons for this were, as we already saw, pragmatic, but Velez de Cea points out also to a cognitive and affective ones. The cognitive reasons are related to the Buddha’s insight into the process of dependent origination and elimination of ignorance, mainly regarding the true nature of the five aggregates and called “identity view” (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*). By clearly seeing selflessness of the aggregates, the Buddha also uprooted the latent tendency to become attached to them. This Velez see as an affective reason for the Buddha’s answers to the undetermined questions. Further on, he stresses the novelty of his approach: “The distinction between these two kinds of reasons, cognitive and affective, does not appear in former interpretations of the silence of the Buddha” and discuss concrete examples illustrating both types of reasons. In conclusion, he discusses on one possibility to talk about the silence of the Buddha, and it is related to the limitation of the Teachings itself:

If by definition the Buddha limits himself to teach suffering and its cessation, then it is logical to expect silence about what happens after the cessation of that suffering. This silence, however, must be relative, for soteriological purposes, after the cessation of defilements at the moment of awak-

¹¹ Velez (2004), p. 125.

ening, but it is absolute after the cessation of aggregates or *nibbāna* without remainder.¹²

Elaborating on Velez de Cea's position, A. Tilakaratne in his *Nirvana and Ineffability* claims that "it is not altogether correct to say that the Buddha did not answer the avyakṛta questions. Although he did not answer these and many other such questions in 'yes' and 'no' terms, he did answer them in a different manner."¹³ He further compares the Buddha's dialogues with Malunkyaputta (M 63) and Vacchagotta (M 72) and points out that in the second one the Buddha gives an answer, describing Vacchagotta's standard ten questions as "speculative views". When after that his interlocutor asks about after-death status of an arahant, the Buddha compares an arahant with the fire which extinguishes due to a lack of fuel. This shows, concludes Tilakaratne, "that the Buddha was not silent, nor is it the case that he refrained from answering these questions at all times." The reason why he hadn't answered to Malunkyaputta in the same fashion, speculates Tilakaratne, "may be understood depending on the context. It is possible that, before deciding on the type of the answer, the Buddha took into consideration the special circumstances under which such questions were put to him." Another reason for not answering may be psychological, as "it is clear that the very questions are a result of an 'un-arahant' mentality" and a person attached to a whole spectrum of unfounded assumptions would not be able to understand the answer properly.

So far we were discussing a very limited material related to the silence of the Buddha, namely various ideas on why he remained silent when asked a set of metaphysical questions. However, as we will see, there is a number of other aspects of silence in Buddhism as well as in Christianity to be discussed. But before we look for textual examples of these aspects in both traditions, it would be helpful to review the very term of silence and see what typology of it could be devised and later applied to the material discussed.

Typology of Silence

The word "silence" possesses an extraordinary richness of meaning in the vocabulary of sacred. It is not only acoustic phenomenon, but also indicates a change of a mindset, a turning around and looking straight into our heart. One way to measure the full depth of that meaning, but also to safely stay in the limits of religious practice, is to contrast silence with a word. For example, the Ju-

¹² Velez (2004), p. 139.

¹³ Tilakaratne (1993), p. 117.

deo-Christian tradition declares the unity of word and world: creation is first and foremost a result of the divine speech. The Gospel of John starts with the famous sentence: "In the beginning was the word".¹⁴ But to this assertion we could add that before thus described beginning there was the silence out which the word was formed and heard. A word is clearly distinguishable just on the background of the silence. Or, using another metaphor, the best way we can see written words is as a black text on the white paper. Here the surrounding whiteness of the paper could be understood as the all-encompassing silence of the cosmos, the birthplace of our world. In it, the transcendent, unoriginate and infinite God who is one with the silence, who is the silence, chooses to break it by speaking. In that context, the relationship between silence and a word is hierarchical. Being a background from which every word comes, something that precedes and also follows that word, an ultimate noiselessness, silence can be understood as more fundamental than discourse. It can exist independently of words. To evade limitations imposed by English language, this meaning of silence can be better illustrated by the Russian word *tishina*. It denotes the silence of a forest, a cave, a desert or a cosmos and carries with it the sense of the English word 'stillness'. Since here there is only a silence, but no one to hear it, let us label this type of silence a *silence of absence*.

Observing from another, interpersonal angle, both silence and words as parts of a discourse could be considered equal. They exist thanks to each other. Words come after silence and silence comes after words. Here, same as words, silence is also capable of producing meaning. And although we consider words as our main vehicle of communication, it is true that there are cases when silence communicates more eloquently than words. The second meaning of silence as cessation of a speech is captured by another Russian word, namely *molchanie*. And *molchanie* could be also understood as continuation of a conversation, this time by means of silence. This type of silence, since it is part of conversation, could be labeled a *silence of presence*.

The interpersonal character of the latter case of silence allows for further distinctions. The rules of etiquette and decorum sometimes dictate us to remain silent and this can be labeled a *silence of convention*. Silence of presence may be also employed as *pedagogical silence*, when a teacher wants to transmit his message to his disciples non-verbally. Closely associated to this is a self-imposed *ascetic silence*, as a part of spiritual training inside an ascetic community. Finally, in some other cases specific to religious context, we come across a *silence about the ultimate reality*, when a follower through prayer or meditation is faced with

14 John 1:1.

an indescribable Absolute, be it God or the ultimate reality. Or in the words of Evagrius of Pontus:

Every proposition has as predicate, either genus or difference or species or property or accident or that which is composed of these. None of the things that have been said, however, can be taken with regard to the Holy Trinity. *Let the unspeakable be worshiped in silence.*¹⁵

Varieties of Buddhist Silence

Words “silence” (P. *mona* and *tuṇhībhāva*, Skt. *mauna*) and “silent” (P. *tuṇhī*) appear in the Pali Canon in various contexts. Let us explore the most frequent of these cases to uncover the main possible uses of these terms by the Buddha and his leading disciples. It seems proper to start with the Buddha himself and one of his epithets, which is Sakyamuni, “silent sage from the Sakya clan”. An epithet *muni* as one who took a vow of silence has a long tradition in India, appearing as early as the Vedas:

The munis, girdled with the wind, wear garments soiled of yellow hue.¹⁶
They, following the wind’s swift course go where the Gods have gone before.¹⁷

Chāndogya Upanishad, while explaining the practice of a student (*brahmacarya*), also explains what does a vow of silence mean: “And what people normally call a vow of silence (*mauna*) is, in reality, the life of a celibate student, for it is through the life of a celibate student that one finds the self and then thinks of it.”¹⁸

Ascetic Silence

Certainly the vow of silence as a form of ascetic silence, as we called it, was in India one of devotional actions in many non-Vedic schools too. As Tilakaratne says: “In the Indian context, it seems customary to refer to one who lives a religious life as *muni*, perhaps, because silence may have been an obvious characteristic of them.”¹⁹ Thus, among Jains, where male ascetics were also called *muni*, one of the festive days of a religious calendar is a day solely devoted to silence. It is called ‘Silence Eleventh’ (*maunekadaśī*) and falls on the eleventh day of the

¹⁵ *Gnostikos*, 41.

¹⁶ It is interesting that the great muni, the Buddha, would later adopt the same color for the robes of his disciples.

¹⁷ *Rig Veda*, hymn X, 136. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Rig_Veda/Mandala_10/Hymn_136.

¹⁸ Olivelle (1998), p. 279.

¹⁹ Tilakaratne (1993), p. 99.

bright half (i.e. when the moon is waxing) of the month of Mārgaśīrṣa (November/December).

Probably the most striking example of an ascetic silence in the Pali Canon is embodied by a silent sage, *muni*, as an ideal worth striving to. It is found in the famous *Khaggavissāṇa Sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*. This long poem is actually a collection of verses which were, according to tradition, uttered by various *paccekabuddhas*, often translated as “silent Buddhas”. The sutta gives us an insight into their true character and an exceptional value of a solitary life, as the verses explain how they became disenchanted with the world, went forth, and attained enlightenment:

Having seen radiant [bracelets] of gold,
skillfully fashioned by a goldsmith,
clashing together in pairs on the arm,
one should live alone like a rhinoceros horn.

Thus if I had a partner, I would incur
[fond] words of address or verbal friction.
Looking out for this peril in the future,
one should live alone like a rhinoceros horn.²⁰

The ambiguity of the metaphor used in the last verse of each stanza (*eko care khaggavisāṇakappo*) later gave birth to a variety of interpretations and long-standing debate, as the Pāli word *khagga* (Skt. *khadga*) has two meanings, “rhinoceros” and “sword”. Anyhow, this unforgettable refrain in a very telling way praises solitary life and ascetic silence as the most beneficial for achieving the final goal of liberation.

Ascetic silence certainly represented a key part of a proper training of bhikkhus. They were expected to speak only when it is appropriate for the given situation and also beneficial for the listeners. In the *Dhamaññū Sutta* (AN 7:68) seven qualities of the monk who is accomplished in the Dhamma (*dhammehi saman-nāgato*) are listed. Two of them are related to our topic. The fifth quality is that he knows when it is time for seclusion, that means silence of presence in general. The sixth one is that he is “the one who knows the assembly” (*parisaññu*). The sutta further explains that the monk, being with different groups of people, knows how to behave, when is the right time to speak and when to just keep silent.

²⁰ Bodhi (2017), p. 163.

And how is a bhikkhu one who knows the assembly? Here, a bhikkhu knows the assembly: „This is an assembly of khattiyas, this is an assembly of brahmins, this is an assembly of householders, this is an assembly of ascetics. Among these, one should approach [this assembly] in such a way; one should stop in such a way; one should act in such a way; one should sit down in such a way; one should speak in such a way; one should remain silent in such a way.”²¹

The Buddha points out to this type of silence in *Pariyesana Sutta* (M 26) as well, when exhorts the monks: “When you gather together, bhikkhus, you should do either of two things: hold discussion on the Dhamma or maintain noble silence.”²² In other words, the teacher advises them to deepen their understanding of the teachings through mutual discussion or to maintain their minds in the state of watchfulness and inner silence. That bhikkhus took quite seriously such exhortation of the Teacher is visible by high regard they had for silent behavior. Thus, *Kandaraka Sutta* (M 51) records great admiration a visiting ascetic expressed for the silence of the community of monks. On other occasion, a large community of bhikkhus was sitting around the Buddha in a wood and were so silent that a king who were approaching the place was overwhelmed by fear from ambush, unable even to imagine that such a crowd could sit in perfect silence.²³

It is worth here pointing out that silence doesn't have an absolute worth in the value system of the Buddha, as it is evident from several episodes described in the *Vinaya Piṭāka*. On one occasion king Bimbisāra, seeing followers of other sects getting together periodically and explaining their teachings, suggested to the Buddha to introduce the same. The Teacher agreed, but monks would on these occasions just sat in silence. This practice was met with strong disapproval by some lay people attending these gatherings and eager to be instructed:

They looked down upon, criticised, spread it about saying: “How can these recluses, sons of the Sakyans, having assembled together on the fourteenth, fifteenth and eight days of the half-month, sit in silence, like dumb pigs? Ought not dhamma to be spoken when they are assembled together?”²⁴

The Buddha concurred with that criticism and allowed the monks to talk about Dhamma when assembled on the observance day. On some other occasion a group of monks took a vow of silence and spent the whole rains period of three months not uttering a word to each other. This was their idea of a perfect training and living on friendly terms. But on hearing that, the Buddha harshly criticized

21 Bodhi (2012), p. 1081.

22 Bodhi (1995), p. 254.

23 Walshe (1987), p. 92. *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (D 2).

24 Horner (1971), p. 131.

such practice, qualifying it as a characteristic of some other (unnamed) sects and as a breach of bhikkhu rules: “Monks, an observance of members of other sects, the practice of silence, should not be observed. Whoever should observe it, there is an offense of wrong-doing.”²⁵

Another interesting example comes from Buddhaghosa’s *Paramatthajotika*. In the commentary for the *Sutta Nipāta* verse 781, these words of the Buddha were recorded:

“Ānanda, one should not remain silent under all circumstances, simply thinking, ‘I am virtuous.’ For in the world:
When the wise man is in the midst of fools,
they do not know him if he does not speak.”²⁶

Here too the Buddha treads a middle path between complete silence and verbosity. It is obvious that according to him in a life of a bhikkhu there was a room for silence, but also for wise speaking. Like with all other of their actions, the teacher required his disciples to be mindful and clearly understand the difference between these two ways of action. This was their way of purifying the mind. One should resort to silence only when it is beneficial, skillful (*kusala*), when it is ennobling us. In all other cases, by not uttering a word, we are degrading ourselves to a level of dumb animals.

Thus, we come to the idea of a *noble silence*, which plays a very important role in the system of training in the Dhamma. When discussing noble silence (*ariyo tuṇhībhāvo*) two levels of meaning should be distinguished. The first is a narrow one, explained by Mahāmoggallāna in the *Kolita Sutta* (SN 21:1):

„Here, with the subsiding of thought and examination, a bhikkhu enters and dwells in the second *jhāna*, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without thought and examination, and has rapture and happiness born of concentration. This is called noble silence.”²⁷

In the commentary to this sutta it is further explained that the second *jhāna* is called noble silence because thought and examination (*vitakka-vicārā*) cease with it and by their cessation speech cannot occur.

Unlike this state of complete inner stillness, a wider meaning of the noble silence, that of just focusing attention to an object, can be discovered in the *Duti-*

25 Horner (1971), p. 211. *Mūgabbata* is a custom of being dumb (*mūga*) for three months.

26 Bodhi (2017), p. 1041.

27 Bodhi (2000), p. 713.

yakāmbhū Sutta (SN 41:6). There three kinds of formations (*saṅkhārā*) are discussed. Among them the verbal one (*vacīsaṅkhāro*) is again described as consisting of thought and examination as the mental factors responsible for articulation of speech: “First one thinks and examines, then afterwards one breaks into speech; that is why thought and examination are the verbal formation.”²⁸ The commentary to this sutta claims that when the Buddha advises „either speak on the Dhamma or observe noble silence” he aims at saying that even attention to a meditation object, without achievement of any *jhāna*, can be considered a noble silence.

In its widest meaning, the term noble silence encompasses all examples of abstaining from speech for the sake of training, which would characterize them as instances of ascetic silence. It might be silence of endurance, when faced with unfounded accusations or insults. Thus, the Buddha would remain silent too when, out of hostility and hatred, someone approaches and starts scolding him. Faced with such a degree of hostility, he knows that any debate is fruitless. When, in the *Asurindaka Sutta* (SN 7:3), the brahmin proclaims a victory after such “debate”, the Buddha has a message for him:

“One who repays an angry man with anger
 Thereby makes things worse for himself.
 Not repaying an angry man with anger,
 One wins a battle hard to win”.²⁹

In some other cases it might be silence of appreciation and respect, when deeply touched by what our senses provide or by what emerges from the depths on our inner life. All these types of noble silence is thus naturally closely related to the right speech as a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path: abstaining from uttering harsh, insulting words, also lies or boasting, divisive words and, finally, just chit-chat. In all these cases it is far more beneficial, not only for a *bhikkhu*, but for a lay person too to resort to the noble silence and avoid falling into a trap of unmindful talking.

Silence of Convention

There are many examples in the Pali Canon of what we already labeled a silence of convention. The frequent cases when the Buddha is invited for a meal by a lay devotee are in the suttas described in a quite stereotypical way. He wouldn't accept the invitation for two consecutive times and just after the invita-

²⁸ Bodhi (2000), p. 1322.

²⁹ Bodhi (2000), p. 258.

tion was made for the third time, he would accept it simply by remaining silent. This seems to be a wider custom in India of the Buddha's time, as we see in Jain sutras too, that monks when going an alms round also accepted donated food in silence. Later, after the meal, the Buddha would spend some time in silence,³⁰ before giving a Dhamma talk for the host and his family.

But there are similar cases when the Buddha's silence didn't imply acceptance. One of them is found in the *Bodhirājakumāra Sutta* (M 85), when prince Bodhi invites the Buddha for a meal. After arrival, he was asked to step on the white cloth spread over the stairs at the entrance of the prince's palace. Commentary explains that the childless prince spread the cloth with the idea: "If I am to have a son, the Buddha will step on a cloth". The Buddha knew that, due to bad past kamma, the prince is destined to remain childless and stopped right at the entrance. Although an invitation to enter and step on the cloth was repeated for three times, he remained silent and refused to come in. Finally, Ānanda had to intervene and request the cloth to be removed.

It is well known that the time of the Buddha was marked by a very lively and extensively practiced tradition of formal debates in ancient India. Involvement in this practice, as might be gleaned from the suttas, aimed at proving one's own spiritual superiority in front of a curious audience and attracting new followers. This can be illustrated by the Buddha's debate with a Jain follower Saccaka, whose both parents were skilled debaters. As usual, the debate was finished once the opponent was not able to respond to the challenge and stayed speechless:

When this was said, Saccaka the Nigantha's son sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, and without response.³¹

In *Alagadūppama Sutta* (M 22) there is a case with a similar outcome. However, this time there is no real debate, but the Teacher admonishes the monk for promoting wrong views. Here too silence indicates a sense of bewilderment and defeat of a monk Arittha in a discussion.³²

A special example of silence of convention is seen when Sangha discusses an internal issue (*sanghakamma*). There the importance of silence as a medium of communicating communal consensus is remarkable. The decision is made when everyone present has nothing to add and keeps silent when invited by the presiding bhikkhu to further discuss it. This type of agreement appears also during or-

30 Bodhi (1995), p. 748.

31 Bodhi (1995), p. 328. *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* (M 35).

32 Bodhi (1995), p. 226.

dination ceremony, when the silence of the bhikkhus marks their consent for the aspirant to be accepted into the Sangha.

Pedagogical Silence

When previously discussing the topic of the “silence of the Buddha”, we’ve already seen one of the examples of how silence was used by him in pedagogical purposes. He would turn back the question to his interlocutor for further consideration and reformulation, indicating at the same time that suppositions the question was based on should also be reevaluated. This was just one example of the Buddha as a skillful teacher, famous for his ability to transmit the message using the most appropriate means, depending on the occasion and the abilities of his audience. When speaking with a farmer, the Buddha would often use metaphors related to weather, agriculture, crops etc.

When talking to noblemen and rulers, he would support his message by comparisons based, for example, on a skill of waging a war or governing. And when approached by “metaphysician” like Mālunkyaputta, he didn’t hesitate to remain silent. In all of his dialogues he was asked an enormous number of questions and, as briefly referenced before, he would generally deal with them in four ways: (1) directly answering, (2) answering by analyzing a question first, (3) by counter question and (4) by setting a question aside. The last of them could be labeled a pedagogical silence, as it was also a way of teaching, this time transferring a lesson non-verbally.

We already shed some light to the last option in the discussion subtitled “The Enigma of the Buddha’s Silence”. Quite similar case of pedagogical silence is the Buddha’s conversation with the ascetic Vacchagota, described in the *Ānanda Sutta* (SN 44:10).

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta approached the Blessed One... and said to him:

“How is it now, Master Gotama, is there a self?”

When this was said, the Blessed One was silent.

“Then, Master Gotama, is there no self?”

A second time the Blessed One was silent.

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta rose from his seat and departed.

When later Ānanda asks the Teacher about the event, The Buddha explains his silence was an expression of the middle way. If he confirmed the existence of a self, explains the Teacher, he would be in the camp of eternalists and would not

support the arising of the knowledge that all things are non-self (*anattā*). And if he denied, he would reinforce an annihilationist view that there is only this life and that the self or soul is identical with the body. Such a view further entails that there is no moral accountability for our actions, nor rebirth. Contrary to all this, the Buddha's insight into the reality of this world revealed that all phenomena are impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is also unsatisfactory. Because it will not last, sooner or later it will decay or change into something else. This change is a source of our frustration and unsatisfactoriness of all these phenomena. Also, we don't have control over this process, we cannot make these phenomena stable and fixed. In other words, the Buddha discovered that all life is a network of beings interacting, influencing and defining each other in a way that cannot be fully controlled. And exactly the totality of these causal relationships are what defines us as beings and not any supposed, forever fixed internal essence.

Therefore, Vacchagotta's question about existence or non-existence of self or something fixed and stable was meaningless. Something like asking a blind man whether light exists or not. The light is simply not part of his world and therefore the question doesn't have any value or meaning. Aware of that meaninglessness and probably having in mind a profile of the ascetic, the Buddha decided to apply pedagogical silence. He didn't want to give any food for his interlocutor's fruitless speculations, completely unrelated to the nature of true reality. By staying silent, the Buddha had not retreated from his role of a masterful teacher. He just had chosen a different communication formula, the one not relying on words. Of course, this approach is the most fruitful for those who are able to benefit from this kind of non-verbal teaching method. If Vacchagotta was one of them we can not conclude based on the sutta text.

A variant of pedagogical silence could be considered a way of teaching by a living example, as this is also a very powerful way of communicating liberating insight. Here „silence” doesn't mean only “not talking” unless and until one is invited or when the audience is ready, but that one emits joyful calm and serenity in a way the others are able to appreciate it. An example of silent transmission of the Dhamma, by mere appearance and charisma, beside the Buddha's, comes here to mind. The *Vinaya Piṭaka* records Sāriputta's encounter with one of the first five Buddhist monks, the elder Assaji³³ and being immediately inspired by the elder's peaceful demeanor:

33 The other four Buddha's former companions in the ascetic life before his Awakening and the first monastics were Añña-Koṇḍañña, Bhaddiya, Vappa and Mahānāma.

He was pleasing whether he was approaching or departing, whether he was looking in front or looking behind, whether he was drawing in or stretching out (his arm), his eyes were cast down, he was possessed of pleasant behaviour.³⁴

When approached by Sāriputta and asked about his teacher and the teachings he proclaims, the elder Assaji's inner silence transpires outwardly as modesty and materializes in just a few words, aimed at the maintaining the outer silence too or at least avoiding verbosity:

Now, I, friend, am new, not long gone forth, fresh to this dhamma and discipline. I am not able to teach you dhamma in full, but I can tell you its purport briefly... Those things which proceed from a cause, of these the Truth-finder has told the cause, and that which is their stopping, the great recluse has such a doctrine.³⁵

Just this terse, but powerful statement was enough for Sāriputta to become a stream-enterer. But this transformation was made possible by the whole impression the elder Assaji made on Sāriputta by his inner and outer silence materialized in a minimal use of words.

Silence about the ultimate reality

The phenomenon of silence we are interested here is the one related to the Buddha's teaching on and also describing the final goal of the path he proclaimed – *nibbāna*. We can start with his very indicative claim right after Awakening: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise."³⁶ This claim can be taken as pointing into two directions: to the limits of the comprehension of the Teachings and also implying its infability. Both of them are, in a way, contradicted by the later history of Buddhism, as the teacher spend the rest of his life teaching the Dhamma and Buddhist schools in general are known by their voluminous Canons, comprising thousands of pages, many times surpassing, for example, the Bible. Therefore, starting from the quoted assertion, it might be confusing that Buddhism with the later rise of Abhidhamma minute analysis of the reality grew into a predominantly scholastic and a book-based tradition.

³⁴ Horner (1971), p. 52.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

³⁶ Bodhi (1995), p. 260.

There is an apparent contradiction between ineffability of the final truth and such verbosity, which is not unique to Buddhism. One of the explanations might point to the fact that the ineffable truth of a meditative experience or *nibbāna* is what characterizes the goal, while all this ocean of words, instructions and metaphors is only the way or vehicle bringing us closer to that goal. Although it is obvious fact that religious experience, as any other for that matter, can never be fully expressed in linguistic terms, words are the best what we invented so far for that purpose. But where words fall short of expectations, the Buddha, similarly to the other religious teachers, inclines towards use of metaphors or silence that we labeled silence about the ultimate reality. Here ultimate reality can be understood as a *nibbāna*, a direct experience of an awakened mind.

As remarked above, The Buddha had to overcome the inadequacy of ordinary language who is substantially oriented, describing essence where there is absence. This was, no doubt, a difficult task, because the medium of instruction was prone to misunderstanding. This is, as Tilakaratne defines it: “the challenge the Buddha had to face as a teacher who intended to show people the way out of the quagmire of substances. In a manner of speaking, this has to be done by using language against itself. In this context, the Buddha makes such statements as there is no person, no individual, no soul etc., which are mostly negative.”³⁷ This negative type of discourse, which borders with silence by the fact that often obscures more than it reveals, is particularly noticeable when *nibbāna* is being described: “There exists, monks, that which is unborn, that which is unbecome, that which is uncreated, that which is unconditioned.” And after declaring that the born, become, co-arisen and conditioned is „seat of disease”, the Buddha continues: „The escape from this is calm, beyond the sphere of logic, being that which is stable, that which is unborn, that which is not co-arisen; grief-free, dustless, this tract is the cessation of states involving dukkha, the pacification of formations, bliss”. Here, as we see it, “calm, beyond logic” points to this ultimate state of internal silence and peace that is unique characteristic of an arahant.

Here is one more example of this “negative” discourse, a description of *nibbāna* or unconditioned reality, describing what it is not, and staying silent on what it is. The method might be compared to a work of a sculptor, chipping away excess of material in a block of stone, with a form left at the end. Just in this case, it is more difficult to construe the meaning, as we are dealing with contours of something immaterial:

37 Tilakaratne (1993), p. 139.

There is that sphere (*āyatana*) where there is no earth, no water, no fire nor wind; no sphere of infinity of space, of infinity of consciousness, of nothingness or even of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there, there is neither this world nor the other world, neither moon nor sun; this sphere I call neither a coming nor a going nor a staying still, neither a dying nor a reappearance; it has no basis, no evolution and no support: this, just this, is the end of dukkha.³⁸

As we shall see later, this negative method of describing ultimate reality is nothing unique, but is well-known in Christian thought on God too, as apophatic theology.

(To be continued...)

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TIŠINA U THERAVADA BUDIZMU I PRAVOSLAVNOM HRIŠĆANSTVU: PRIMERI BUDE I EVAGRIJA PONTSKOG

Rezime

Budino odbijanje da odgovori na neka od pitanja koja su mu postavljali bezbrojni sagovornici koji defiluju u Pali kanonu izazvalo je niz interpretacija među proučavaocima budizma sve do danas. Tako je nastalo poznato pitanje „Budino ćutanje“. U ovom radu sam pokušao da dam kritički pregled tih tumačenja, kao i da ih problematizujem pitanjem da li se tu uopšte radilo o „ćutanju“ ili o naročitoj strategiji korišćenoj u pedagoške svrhe. Nadovezujući se na to i kroz analizu drugih sličnih primera iz theravada literature, razvijena je specifična „tipologija tišine“, koja osvetljava različite uloge koje tišina igra u ovoj formi budizma. Tako je identifikovana asketsku tišina, tišina po konvenciji, pedagoška i, na kraju, tišina o krajnjoj stvarnosti. Naravno, ovakvi vidovi korišćenje tišine i kontrastiranja sa njenom suprotnošću, zvukom, tačnije u religijskom kontekstu sa govorom, nisu tipični samo za budizam, već i za druge religije. Zato se u nastavku rada analizira situacija u pravoslavnom hrišćanstvu i to kroz dva primera. Jedan je promišljanje uloge tišine u asketskom životu ranih hrišćana, koja nalazimo u delima Evagrija Pontskog, jednog od važnih ranih crkvenih otaca iz IV veka i jednog od utemeljitelja duhovne tradicije unutar istočnog hrišćanstva. Drugi je isihastički pokret, sa njegove tri faze: pročišćenje (katharsis), iluminacija (theoria) i oboženje (theosis) i praksom „tihovanja“ ili umne molitve. Sve to je omogućilo da se u završnom delu rada povuče nekoliko paralela između uloge tišine u asketskoj praksi theravada budizma i ranog pravoslavnog hrišćanstva.

Ključne reči: Budizam, pravoslavno hrišćanstvo, tišina, Buda, Evagrije Pontski, isihazam