

❖ Further selections from the *Sutta Piṭaka* ¹

From *Majjhima-nikāya*, 72 ²

Questions that Tend Not to Edification: Vaccha

Vaccha, the wandering ascetic, spoke to the Blessed One as follows:

–How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?

Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.

–But how is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?

Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.

–How is it, Gotama? Does Gotama hold that the world is finite...that the soul and the body are identical...that the saint exists after death...that the saint both exists and does not exist after death...that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?

Nay, Vaccha...the theory that the world is eternal is a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and *nirvāṇa*...

[And similarly for the other theories which have been listed]

This is the objection I perceive to these theories, so that I have not adopted any one of them.

–But has Gotama any theory of his own?

The Tathāgata, O Vaccha, is free from all theories; but this, Vaccha, does the Tathāgata know: the nature of form, and how form arises, and how form perishes; the nature of sensation...of perception...of mental formations... of consciousness, and how consciousness arises, and how consciousness perishes. Therefore say I that the Tathāgata has attained deliverance and is free from attachment, inasmuch as all imaginings, or agitations, or false notions concerning an ego or anything pertaining to an ego have perished, have faded away, have ceased, have been given up and relinquished.

–But, Gotama, where is the priest reborn who has attained to this deliverance for his mind?

¹ The source-numbers below are the volume and page numbers from the Pāli Text Society's standard edition. Small changes were made to the translations to improve style, to be gender-inclusive, etc.

² Translated by H.C. Warren (1915), *Buddhism in Translation*, Harvard UP, pp. 123-128.

Vaccha, to say that he is reborn would not fit the case...to say that he is not reborn would not fit the case...to say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case...to say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case...

–Gotama, I am at a loss what to think in this matter, and I have become greatly confused, and the faith in Gotama inspired by a former conversation has now disappeared.

Enough, O Vaccha! Be not at a loss what to think in this matter, and be not greatly confused. Profound, O Vaccha, is this doctrine, recondite, and difficult of comprehension, good, excellent, and not to be reached by mere reasoning, subtle, and intelligible only to the wise...Therefore, Vaccha, I will now question you, and do you make answer as may seem to you good.

What think you, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were to burn in front of you...[and] someone were to ask you, “On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?” What would you answer, Vaccha?

–I would answer, Gotama, “It is on fuel of grass and wood that this fire burning in front of me depends.”

But, Vaccha, if the fire in front of you were to become extinct...[and] if someone were to ask you, “In which direction has that fire gone—east, or west, or north, or south?” What would you say, O Vaccha?

–The question would not fit the case, Gotama. For the fire which depended on fuel of grass and wood, when that fuel has all gone, and it can get no other, being thus without nutriment, is said to be extinct.

In exactly the same way, Vaccha:

All form by which one could predicate the existence of the saint, all that form has been abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground like a palmyra-tree, and become non-existent and not liable to spring up again in the future. The saint, O Vaccha, who has been released from what is styled form, is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the mighty ocean. To say that he is reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case.

[And so of feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.]

From *Majjhima-nikāya*, 68³

Questions that Tend Not to Edification: Mālunkyāputta

Now it happened to the venerable Mālunkyāputta, being in seclusion and plunged in meditation, that a consideration presented itself to his mind, as follows:

“These theories which the Blessed One has left unelucidated, has set aside and rejected—that the world is eternal, the world is not eternal, that the world is finite, that the world is infinite, that the soul and the body are identical, that the soul is one thing and the body another, that the saint

³ Translated by Warren (op. cit.), pp. 117-122.

exists after death, that the saint does not exist after death, that the saint both exists and does not exist after death, that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death—these the Blessed One does not elucidate to me...If the Blessed One will elucidate to me [these theories], I will lead the religious life under the Blessed One. If the Blessed One will not elucidate to me [these theories], I will abandon religious training and return to the lower life of the layperson...”

Pray, Mālunkyāputta, did I ever say to you, ‘Come Mālunkyāputta, lead the religious life under me, and I will elucidate to you [those theories]’?

—No, truly, venerable Sir...

That being the case, vain man, whom are you so angrily denouncing? Mālunkyāputta, anyone who should say [such a thing]—that person would die...before the Tathāgata had ever elucidated them to that person.

It is as if, Mālunkyāputta, a man had been wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends...were to procure for him a physician or surgeon; and the sick man were to say, ‘I will not have this arrow taken out until I have learned whether this man who wounded me...was tall, or short, or of the middle height...’

The religious life does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does it depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal [and so of the other theories listed]. Whether the dogma obtain, Mālunkyāputta, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair, for the extinction of which in the present life I am prescribing...

Accordingly, Mālunkyāputta, bear always in mind what it is that I have not elucidated, and what it is that I have elucidated. And what have I not elucidated? I have not elucidated [the theories that have been listed]. And why, Mālunkyāputta, have I not elucidated these? Because this profits not, nor has to do with the fundamentals of religion, nor tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, the supernatural faculties, supreme wisdom, and *nirvāṇa*; therefore have I not elucidated them.

And what have I elucidated? Suffering have I elucidated, the origin of suffering have I elucidated; the cessation of suffering have I elucidated; and the path leading to the cessation of suffering have I elucidated. And why have I elucidated these? Because this indeed profits, has to do with the fundamentals of religion, and tends to aversion, absence of passion, cessation, quiescence, knowledge, supreme wisdom, and *nirvāṇa*; thus have I elucidated it. Accordingly, Mālunkyāputta, bear always in mind what it is that I have not elucidated, and what it is that I have elucidated.

From *Samyutta-nikāya*, 22.59 ⁴

Discourse on Not-Self (The Second Sermon)

Bodily form, monks, is not the self (*anattā*). If this body, monks, were the self, this body would not be subject to sickness, and it would be possible in the case of the body to say, “Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.” Now, because the body is not the self, monks, therefore the body is subject to sickness, and it is not possible in the case of the body to say, “Let my body be thus, let my body not be thus.”

Feeling is not the self. . . Perception is not the self. . . Mental formations are not the self. . .

Consciousness is not the self. For if consciousness were the self, this consciousness would not be subject to sickness, and it would be possible in the case of consciousness to say, “Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.” Now, because consciousness is not the self, therefore consciousness is subject to sickness, and it is not possible in the case of consciousness to say, “Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.”

What think you, monks, is the body permanent or impermanent?

–Impermanent (*anicca*), Lord.

But is the impermanent painful or pleasant?

–Painful, Lord.

But is it fitting to consider what is impermanent, painful, and subject to change as, “this is mine, this am I, this is my self”?

–No indeed, Lord.

[And so of feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.]

Therefore in truth, monks, whatever body, past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, low or eminent, near or far, is to be looked on by one who duly and rightly understands, as, “all this body is not mine, not this am I, not mine is the soul.”

[And so of feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.]

Thus perceiving, monks, the learned noble disciple feels loathing for the body, for feeling, for perception, for mental reactions, for consciousness. Feeling disgust one becomes free from passion, through freedom from passion one is emancipated, and in the emancipated arises the knowledge of one’s emancipation. This disciple understands that destroyed is rebirth, the religious life has been led, done is what was to be done, there is naught beyond this world.

⁴ Translated by E.J. Thomas (1927), *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*. Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 88-89.

From *Samyutta-nikāya*, 22.45⁵

Three Marks of Existence

Monks, form is impermanent (*anicca*). What is impermanent is suffering (*dukkha*). What is suffering is nonself (*anattā*). What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.” When one sees this thus as it really is with correct wisdom, the mind becomes dispassionate and is liberated from this defilement by non-attachment.

[And so of feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.]

By being liberated, the mind is steady; by being steady, it is content; by being content, a monk is not agitated. Being unagitated, one personally attains *nirvāṇa*. One understands: “Destroyed is birth, the spiritual life has been lived, what had to be done has been done there is no more coming back to any state of being.”

From *Khuddaka-nikāya*, 18.4

Milinda Pañha: No Essences⁶

Then the venerable Nāgasena spoke to Milinda the king as follows: Your majesty ... did you come afoot, or riding?

—*Bhante*, I do not go afoot: I came in a chariot.

Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, declare to me the chariot. Pray, your majesty, is the pole the chariot?

—Nay, verily, *bhante*.

Is the axle the chariot?

—Nay...

Are the wheels the chariot?...Is the chariot-body the chariot? ...Is the banner-staff the chariot?...Is the yoke?... Are the reins?... Is the goading-stick?... Pray, your majesty, are pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, bannerstaff, yoke, reins, and goad unitedly the chariot?

—Nay, verily, *bhante*.⁷

Is it, then, your majesty, something else besides pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, banner-staff, yoke, reins, and goad which is the chariot?

—Nay, verily, *bhante*.

Your majesty, although I question you very closely, I fail to discover any chariot. Verily now, your majesty, the word ‘chariot’ is a mere empty sound. What chariot is there here? Your majesty, you speak a falsehood, a lie: there is no chariot. Your majesty, you are the chief king in all the continent of India; of whom are you afraid that you speak a lie? Listen to me, my lords, ye

⁵ Translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2005). *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Wisdom Publications.

⁶ Translated by Warren (op. cit.), pp. 129-133.

⁷ A negative answer is not obvious in this case, but perhaps it is warranted by some kind of sorites argument.

five hundred Yonakas, and ye eighty thousand priests! Milinda the king here says thus: “I came in a chariot;” and being requested “Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, declare to me the chariot,” he fails to produce any chariot. Is it possible, pray, for me to assent to what he says?

When he had thus spoken, the five hundred Yonakas applauded the venerable Nāgasena... Then Milinda the king spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows: “*Bhante* Nāgasena, I speak no lie: the word ‘chariot’ is but a way of counting, term, appellation, convenient designation, and name for pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, and banner-staff.”

Thoroughly well, your majesty, do you understand a chariot. In exactly the same way, your majesty, in respect of me, Nāgasena, is but a way of counting, term, appellation, convenient designation, mere name for the hair of my head, hair of my body... brain of the head, form, feeling, perception, mental reactions, and consciousness. But in the absolute sense there is no ego here to be found.

Then the priestess Vajira, your majesty, said in the presence of the Blessed One:

Even as the word of ‘chariot’ means
That members join to frame a whole;
So when the groups appear to view,
We use the phrase, ‘a living being.’

Milinda Pañha: Karma and Rebirth ⁸

Then the king asked:

–What is it, Nagasena, that is reborn?

Name-and-form is reborn.

–Is it the same name-and-form that is reborn?

No, but by this name-and-form deeds are done, good or evil, and by these deeds (*karma*) another name-and-form is reborn.

–If that be so, Sir, would not the new being be released from its evil *karma*?...

Just because it is reborn, O king, it is therefore not released from its evil *karma*.

–Give me an illustration.

Suppose, O king, some man were to steal a mango from another man, and the owner of the mango were to seize him and bring him before the king, and charge him with the crime. And the thief were to say: ‘Your Majesty! I have not taken away this man’s mangoes. Those that he put in the ground are different from the ones I took. I do not deserve to be punished.’ How then? Would he be guilty?

–Certainly, Sir. He would deserve to be punished.

But for what reason?

–Because in spite of whatever he may say, he would be guilty in respect of the last mango which resulted from the first one that the owner set in the ground.

⁸ Translated by T.W. Rhys Davids (1890). *The Questions of King Milinda, Part II*. Oxford UP, pp. 2, 6-9.

Just so, great king, deeds good or evil are done by this name-and-form and another is reborn. But that other is not thereby released from its *karma*.

–Give me a further illustration...

It is like the fire which a man, in the cold season, might kindle, and when he had warmed himself leave still burning, and go away. Then if that fire were to set another man's field on fire, and the owner of the field were to seize him and bring him before the king and charge him with the injury, and he were to say: 'Your Majesty! It was not I who set this man's field on fire. The fire I left burning was a different one from that which burnt his field. I am not guilty.' Now would the man, O king, be guilty?

–Certainly, sir.

But why?

–Because in spite of whatever he might say, he would be guilty in respect of the subsequent fire that resulted from the previous one.

And so, great king, deeds good or evil are done by name-and-form and another is reborn. But the other is not thereby released from *karma*...

The king said:

–You were talking just now of name-and-form. What does 'name' mean in that expression, and what does 'form' mean?

Whatever is gross is 'form'; whatever is subtle, mental is 'name'.

–Why is it, Nagsena, that name is not reborn separately, or form separately?

These conditions, great king, are connected one with the other; and spring into being together.

–Give me an illustration.

As a hen, great king, would not get a yoke or an egg-shell separately, but both would arise in one, they two being intimately dependent one on the other; just so, if there were no name there would be no form. What is meant by name in that expression being intimately dependent on what is meant by form; they spring up together. And this is, through time immemorial, their nature...

Where there are beings who, when dead, will be reborn, there time is. Where there are beings who, when dead, will not be reborn, there time is not; and when there are beings who are altogether set free (who, having attained *nirvāṇa* in their present life, have come to the end of that life), there time is not—because of their having been quite set free.

From *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, 12.15 ⁹

Dependent Origination

That things have being, O Kaccāna, constitutes one extreme of doctrine; that things have no being is the other extreme. These extremes, O Kaccāna, have been avoided by the Tathāgata, and it is a middle doctrine he teaches:—

On ignorance depends mental formations;
On mental formations depends consciousness;
On consciousness depend name and form;
On name and form depend the six organs of sense;
On the six organs of sense depends contact;
On contact depends sensation;
On sensation depends desire;
On desire depends attachment;
On attachment depends existence;
On existence depends birth;
On birth depend old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair.

Thus does this entire aggregation of misery arise. But:

On the complete fading out and cessation of ignorance ceases mental formations;
On the cessation of mental formations ceases consciousness;
On the cessation of consciousness cease name and form;
On the cessation of name and form cease the six organs of sense;
On the cessation of the six organs of sense ceases contact;
On the cessation of contact ceases sensation;
On the cessation of sensation ceases desire;
On the cessation of desire ceases attachment;
On the cessation of attachment ceases existence;
On the cessation of existence ceases birth;
On the cessation of birth cease old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair.

Thus does this entire aggregation of misery cease.

⁹ Translated by Warren (op. cit.), p. 166.