

The Function of Silence in *Āgama* Literature

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Abstract:

Instances in *Āgama* literature that portray the observance of silence can have different functions, depending on the context. A particularly well-known instance of such silence, reportedly observed by the Buddha when confronted with an inquiry after the existence or non-existence of a self, could be viewed as a distant ancestor to the *kōan/gōngàn* (公案) practice popular in various meditation traditions of East-Asian Buddhism.

Keywords:

Communal harmony, disagreement, *gōngàn*, *kōan*, silence, tetralemma, unanswered questions, Vacchagotta, Vatsagotra

Introduction

In what follows I study the function of silence in early Buddhist oral literature, based on selected passages from the textual corpus of the *Āgamas* (and Pāli *Nikāyas*).¹ The present exploration stands to some extent in continuity with my previous studies dedicated to the function of abbreviation,² by way of providing an additional perspective on the overall theme of what the absence of explicit communication communicates; that is, what is being said when nothing is being said.

I.1 Communal Harmony

The early Buddhist attitude toward silence does not amount to a wholesale recommendation or rejection. In line with a general pattern of giving prominence to ethical repercussions of any intentionally undertaken activity, the question at stake is how far the observance of silence has beneficial outcomes. The distinction to be drawn in this way can be exemplified with two narratives describing monastics observing silence as a way of ensuring communal harmony. Here and below, my discussion of such episodes is only meant to draw out their narrative implications, without implying any historicist assumption.

One of these narratives occurs in the *Cūḷagosīṅga-sutta* and the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, together with their parallels. According to the relevant passage, a group of three monastics were living together in silent harmony, punctuated by meetings every five days to discuss the Dharma.³ This depiction is in line with an indication provided in another discourse, which

1. On the role of silence in Christian monasticism and penitentiary see Brox 2019.

2. Anālayo 2020, 2021a, and 2022a.

3. MN 31 at MN I 207,24 and MN 128 at MN III 157,16, with parallels in MĀ 72 at T I 536b6 and MĀ 185 at T I 729c20, which envisage that on such occasions they might either discuss Dharma or observe silence together,

reports the Buddha instructing his disciples that, whenever they come together, they should either discuss the Dharma or else observe silence.⁴

The exemplary way of living together in communal harmony, described the *Cūḷagosiṅga-sutta* and the *Upakkilesa-sutta*, can be contrasted with a narrative of another group of monastics who had reportedly vowed to maintain silence during the whole of the rainy season retreat. The different *Vinaya* versions of this narrative agree in recording the Buddha's strong censure of the adoption of such behavior.⁵ The contrast that emerges in this way between these two narratives, which otherwise share several descriptive elements, conveys that resorting to silence should be done only when this is appropriate, rather than making a blanket rule of not speaking at all. In fact, the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel include the alternatives of remaining silent and speaking among occasions for the exercise of clear comprehension.⁶ In other words, there is a need to know when silence is appropriate. According to a poem found in the *Dhammapada*, one does not become a sage just by observing silence.⁷

I.2 Silent Agreement and Disagreement

The nature of silence as something to be evaluated from its context becomes also evident in its function to express either agreement or disagreement. A standard function of expressing agreement can be identified in those instances when silence functions as a reply to an invitation. The phrase used for such occasions expresses that the person “consented by remaining silent” (*adhivāsesi tuṅhībhāvena / adhvāsayati tūṣṇī(ṃ)bhāvena*).⁸

The nuance of agreement would perhaps also be relevant to a debate setting, where to remain silent implies that one has been forced to agree to the opponent's position and hence has lost the debate.⁹ An instance illustrating a misunderstanding, based on precisely this

and in EĀ 24.8 at T II 629a24, which only mentions their living together in silence, without a reference to regular meetings.

⁴ MN 26 at MN I 161,32 and MĀ 204 at T I 775c29. MN 26 stands alone in additionally qualifying such silence to be “noble,” *ariyo*. The idea of a noble type of silence as an alternative to discussion on Dharma recurs elsewhere in the early discourses; for Pāli instances see AN 8.2 at AN IV 153,9, AN 9.4 at AN IV 359,19, Ud 2.2 at Ud 11,19, Ud 3.8 at Ud 31,16, Ud 3.9 at Ud 32,12 and for Chinese *Āgama* discourses see DĀ 10 at T I 54c28, DĀ 11 at T I 58b28, DĀ 30 at T I 114b20, MĀ 72 at T I 536b7, MĀ 185 at T I 729c21, and EĀ 40.1 at T II 735c4. Another employment of the notion of noble silence, already noted by Ruegg 1989: 210, is to designate the stillness of the mind to be gained by attaining the second absorption; see SN 21.1 at SN II 273,12 and SĀ 501 at T II 132a17. The commentary on SN 21.1, Spk II 233,11, clarifies that this passage should not be taken to convey that the type of noble silence that functions as an alternative to discussing the Dharma invariably involves the attainment of the second absorption (or higher ones).

⁵ Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, T 1428 at T XXII 836a12, Mahāsāṅghika *Vinaya*, T 1425 at T XXII 451a24, Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 131a2, Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1446 at T XXIII 1044c29 and Chung 1998: 179,1, Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1435 at T XXIII 165b8, and Theravāda *Vinaya*, Vin I 159,10; see also Heirman 2009: 64–68.

⁶ MN 10 at MN I 57,9 and MĀ 98 at T I 582b27. The whole exercise is absent from another parallel in EĀ 12.1; see also Anālayo 2013b: 51.

⁷ Dh 268; Rau 1959: 172 notes that the relationship between silence and becoming a sage is also taken up in the *Mahābhārata* 5.43.35, Kumar De 1940: 208, which, however, takes the following form: *maunād dhi sa munir bhavati*.

⁸ For example, DN 16 at DN II 88,10 and Waldschmidt 1951: 150, who in note 4 points to other occurrences of the same pericope in the same discourse and other Sanskrit texts, such as the *Divyāvadāna*, Cowell and Neil 1886: 65,28, or the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayavastu*, Dutt 1984: 225,12.

⁹ On debate in ancient India see, e.g., Solomon 1978: 833–875, Matilal 1987, and Bronkhorst 2007; on principles of debate in the Buddhist tradition Manné 1992, Todeschini 2011 and Anālayo 2012, 2013a, and

pattern, involves the Buddha remaining silent when being abused by an angry brahmin, whereon the latter reportedly came to the mistaken conclusion that he had defeated the Buddha.¹⁰ The need to reply in a debate can at times take a dramatic turn, when an opponent will find Vajrapāṇi/Vajrapāṇi hovering in the air, ready to split the opponent's head into piece with his thunderbolt unless a reply is given.¹¹

The observation of silence can, however, also serve as an expression of disagreement. An example is the narrative of how Raṭṭhapāla/Rāṣṭrapāla forced his parents to allow him to go forth by lying down on the ground in silence, refusing to take food.¹² Another occurrence of silence as a marker of disagreement can be seen in the report that the Buddha, on being asked to step on a cloth, remained silent and thereby expressed his unwillingness to do so.¹³ A related nuance emerges in another episode, according to which the Buddha remained silent instead of reciting the code of rules, since a member of the monastic community present on that occasion was not pure.¹⁴

This much does not yet exhaust the possible connotations of silence, since it can also serve to express embarrassment. This appears to be the sense relevant to a narrative according to which the Buddha had asked, in front of an assembly of monastics, if the recently ordained Anuruddha/Aniruddha and his friends were delighting in the monastic life. Presumably due to embarrassment, Anuruddha/Aniruddha and his friends reportedly remained silent even when this question was asked for a third time.¹⁵ Only when subsequently the question was addressed to them directly was it able to elicit a response. Whereas the case of Anuruddha/Aniruddha and his friends is equivocal, silence definitely serves to express embarrassment in descriptions of a disciple being rebuked by the Buddha for obstinately holding on to a misunderstanding of the Dharma.¹⁶

In addition to the above, silence can also express a realization of futility. An example appears to be an episode according to which Sāriputta/Śāriputra was contradicted three times in front of the Buddha, without anyone in the assembly expressing approval of his position. Since according to the conversational etiquette, reflected in the early discourses, stating something three times in a particular situation appears to be the limit to which one pursues a matter, the episode continues with Sāriputta/Śāriputra remaining silent,¹⁷ even though the ensuing events show that his position was actually correct.

Given that silence can apparently express consent, disagreement, embarrassment, and a realization of futility, it seems fair to conclude that the message conveyed by a particular

2021b.

¹⁰ SN 7.3 at SN I 163,26, with a similar denouement of events being found in SĀ 1153 at T II 307b15 and SĀ² 76 at T II 400c16. These three discourses are part of a series of reports of encounters between the Buddha and angry brahmins. The similarity in setting apparently led to some shifting around of textual material, as a result of which the episode under discussion is not found in what otherwise are considered to be parallel versions.

¹¹ MN 35 at MN I 231,30, SĀ 110 at T II 36a15, and EĀ 37.10 at T II 716a7. Lamotte 1966: 115 and Flood 1989: 23 note that in such situations Vajrapāṇi/Vajrapāṇi will only be visible to the Buddha and his opponent. On the threat of splitting the opponent's head to pieces in ancient Indian literature see also de La Vallée Poussin 1932, Hopkins 1932: 316, Insler 1989/1990, and Witzel 1987.

¹² MN 82 at MN II 58,11: *tunhī ahoṣi*, Waldschmidt 1980: 366: *tūṣṇīm*, Speyer 1909/1970: 119,13: *tūṣṇīm*; a similar indication is also found in one of the parallels extant in Chinese, MĀ 132 at T I 623c17: 默然不答.

¹³ MN 85 at MN II 92,26 and Silverlock 2009: 76 (folio 341 verso5).

¹⁴ See the comparative study of this episode in Anālayo 2016.

¹⁵ MN 68 at MN I 463,5 and MĀ 77 at T I 544b29.

¹⁶ See, e.g., MN 22 at MN I 132,28 and its parallel MĀ 200 at T I 764a7.

¹⁷ AN 5.166 at AN III 194,15, MĀ 22 at T I 450a15, and Up 2038 at D 4094 *ju* 69b4 or P 5595 *tu* 78a2.

instance of silence depends on the context. In other words, there is a need to evaluate each occurrence within its narrative setting and against the overall background of early Buddhist thought.

II.1 The Case of Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra

The above exploration provides a background for assessing what is perhaps the most famous instance of silence, reportedly observed by the Buddha on being asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra about the existence of a self. By way of introducing the setting of this instance of silence, here is a translation of a version of this episode extant in the *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99):¹⁸

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying at Rājagṛha in the Bamboo Grove, the Squirrel's Feeding Place. Then the wanderer Vatsagotra approached the Buddha and, holding his hands with palms together [in homage], exchanged friendly greetings. Having exchanged friendly greetings, he withdrew to sit to one side and said to the Buddha:

“How is it, Gotama, is there a self?”

At that time the Blessed One was silent and indeed did not reply. In the same way [Vatsagotra asked] three times. At that time, the Blessed One also for three times did not reply. At that time the wanderer Vatsagotra thought: “I have already asked the recluse Gotama thrice and yet not seen him reply. I shall just leave.”

Then the venerable Ānanda was standing behind the Buddha and holding a fan to fan the Buddha. At that time, Ānanda said to the Buddha: “Blessed One, that wanderer Vatsagotra asked three times. For what reason has the Blessed One not replied? Will it not increase the bad and mistaken view of that wanderer Vatsagotra, [leading him] to say that the recluse [Gotama] is unable to reply on being asked?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda: “If I had replied saying that the self exists, that would have increased his former wrong view. If I had replied saying that there is no self, would this not have increasingly confused his former confusion, [leading him] to say that he formerly had a self that has from now on been annihilated? Given his former [belief] that the self exists, which then is the view of eternalism, this now being annihilated would then become the view of annihilationism.

The Tathāgata teaches the Dharma situated in the middle, apart from these two extremes, that is, because of the existence of this matter, that matter exists; because of the arising of this matter, that matter arises, that is, conditioned by ignorance are formations ... up to ... birth, old age, disease, death, worry, sorrow, vexation, and pain cease.”

When the Buddha had spoken this discourse, hearing what the Buddha had said the venerable Ānanda was delighted and received it respectfully.

Two parallels to the above discourse, found in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and in another *Samyukta-āgama* collection (T 100), report that the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra asked two questions, inquiring once if the self exists and then if the self does not exist.¹⁹ According to another parallel extant in the form of a discourse quotation in the *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*, he asked three times the same question, although here the question is if the self does not

^{18.} SĀ 961 at T II 245b9 to 245b25.

^{19.} SN 44.10 at SN IV 400,15 and SĀ² 195 at T II 444c3.

exist.²⁰

The parallels agree that the Buddha remained silent and did not give any reply, which motivated the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra to leave. The *Samyutta-nikāya* version just reports that he left, without recording any reflection that motivated him to do so, whereas the other *Samyukta-āgama* discourse just reports his realization that he had not received a reply, without mentioning either his decision to leave or his actual departure. As a result, in this version it is not entirely clear if he should be visualized as still present during the ensuing exchange with Ānanda.

In the account given in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, Ānanda just inquires why the Buddha had not given a reply, without bringing up the possible impact of such silence on the wanderer Vacchagotta's wrong view. The Pāli version also stands alone in not bringing up the notion of a middle path between the two extremes of eternalism and annihilationism, exemplified by way of dependent arising. Nevertheless, the parallels agree on the Buddha explaining that, if he had taught the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra that there is no self, this would just have further confounded the latter.²¹

In sum, alongside several variations the parallels agree on two main points: When asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra about the existence (or absence) of a self, the Buddha remained silent. When later his attendant Ānanda requested an explanation of this silence, the Buddha pointed out that to declare the doctrine of not self to the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra would only have increased the latter's confusion.²²

This suggests the function of silence in this instance to be to some extent similar to the case of Sāriputta/Śāriputra, mentioned above, who remained silent even though the position he had taken was correct. In both cases, the motivation for silence appears to be the realization that it is useless to affirm what the speaker knows to be true. In the case of Sāriputta/Śāriputra, the realization of uselessness reflects the preceding narrative of him being repeatedly contradicted. In the present case, the realization of uselessness would reflect the Buddha's assessment that to provide the correct answer was futile, as it would have worsened the confused state of mind of his visitor.

20. Up 9031 at D 4094 *nyu* 88b6 or P 5595 *thu* 136a3.

21. SN 44.10 at SN IV 401,9, SĀ² 195 at T II 444c13, and Up 9031 at D 4094 *nyu* 89a4 or P 5595 *thu* 136b2.

22. This agreement among the parallels puts into perspective the following assessment of the Buddha's silence by Pérez-Remón 1980: 258: "If the teaching of the Buddha had as its central dogma the doctrine of absolute *anattā*, the only answer available to him would have been the negative one, *n'atth'attā* ... The very fact that the possibility of giving an affirmative answer, *atth'attā* is somehow contemplated belies the opinion that the Buddha's conviction and preaching was in favour of absolute *anattā*." Another relevant assessment is the proposal by Thānissaro 1999/2018: 60 that "to answer either yes, there is a self, or no, there isn't, would be to fall into extreme forms of wrong view that make the path of Buddhist practice impossible." The actual texts make it quite clear that the concern is about the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra getting confused and drawing a wrong conclusion by way of eternalism and annihilationism. The question at stake is not that the denial of a self as such is an extreme that stands in contrast to the Buddhist path of practice or that the possibility of an affirmative answer being envisaged by the non-Buddhist wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra conveys a position taken in Buddhist doctrine. As already noted by Rahula 1959/1974: 64, the Buddha "did not want to say 'there is no self', because that would unnecessarily, without any purpose, have confused and disturbed poor Vacchagotta ... He was not yet in a position to understand the idea of *Anatta*." Similarly, Harvey 1995: 38 reasons that "Vacchagotta would have been 'bewildered' at the denial of s/Self because, having formerly suspected that he had an eternal Self, he would feel that he had *lost* it if told that such a s/Self did not exist."

II.2 The Role of Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra

The conclusion proposed above can be pursued further by reviewing the roles of the three protagonists involved in the episode. The point in what follows is not to pretend some form of certainty about what actually happened on the ground in ancient India, which in view of the limitations of the textual sources is not possible.²³ Instead, the point is only to discern narrative patterns from the viewpoint of the background they provide—from the emic viewpoint of the reciters and their audiences—to the episode examined above.

Āgama literature regularly presents the Buddha as a highly skilled teacher, capable of assessing accurately the comprehension abilities of the members of his audience and thereby able to tailor his instruction accordingly. For him to choose silence in anticipation that a correct reply will create confusion in the listener is quite in keeping with this role.

Ānanda in turn features as the faithful and devoted attendant of the Buddha, having developed such intimacy with his teacher that, even though he has no telepathic powers, he often is shown to divine what the Buddha wishes to happen.²⁴ For him to be depicted as being surprised by the Buddha's silence and needing to query the latter about the reasons for his refusal to reply conveys that this episode should be reckoned as rather unusual.

The role of Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra in *Āgama* literature is that of time and again exhibiting a keen interest in what appears to have been something of a standard questionnaire in the ancient Indian setting, employed to ascertain the position taken by another on the nature of the world, the soul, and the destiny of a fully realized one after death.²⁵ The latter takes the form of a tetralemma, envisaging that a Tathāgata exists after death, does not exist, both, or neither. Notably, the reports of the Buddha's standard reaction to being presented with these alternatives do not show him as adopting silence. In other words, such encounters are strictly speaking not instances of the Buddha's silence and for this reason have not been taken up in the survey provided above. In such cases, instead of remaining silent, the Buddha is on record for dismissing each alternative.²⁶ The reason for such dismissal appears to be the implicit premise underlying the tetralemma about the Tathāgata's postmortem condition, namely that the term was taken to refer to a self. Since from a Buddhist perspective no such self exists, it becomes impossible to take up any of the four alternative positions, as each case would implicitly affirm the mistaken premise.²⁷

Although the different discourses that have the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra as their protagonist are not presented in some form of chronological order, the report in the *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta* and its Chinese parallels of his eventual conversion, going forth as a Buddhist monastic, and becoming an arahant, is clearly meant to provide a closure to these

^{23.} See in more detail Anālayo 2022b.

^{24.} According to Malalasekera 1937/1995: 251, in his role as the Buddha's attendant Ānanda "was always at hand, forestalling the Master's slightest wish."

^{25.} Malalasekera 1938/1998: 805 comments that "his discussions were chiefly concerned with such mythical questions as to whether the world is eternal ... the existence or otherwise of the Tathāgata after death, etc."

^{26.} For example, one of the discussions involving Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra, found in MN 72 at MN I 484,7, reports at first the Buddha indicating *na kho aham ... evaṃdiṭṭhi*, and when pressed on the same topic again at MN I 486,22 giving the clarification *na upeti*. The parallel SĀ 962 at T II 245c1+26 similarly proceeds from 我不作如是見, 如是說 to 不然. Another parallel has only a counterpart to the first of these two types of rejection, SĀ² 196 at T II 445a4: 我不作是見, 不作是說. The same holds for yet another parallel, Up 3057 at D 4094 *ju* 157a3 or P 5595 *tu* 181a7: 'di lta mi lta zhiṅ 'di skad du mi smra'o. Alongside such variations, the parallels clearly agree in presenting the Buddha as explicitly voicing his dismissal rather than just remaining silent.

^{27.} See in more detail Anālayo 2018: 37–44 and 2022c.

episodes.²⁸ Another relevant discourse is the *Aggivaṅga-sutta*, which in agreement with its parallels reports an attempt by the Buddha to convey the impossibility of ascertaining the destiny of a Tathāgata after death with the example of an extinct fire, which cannot be said to have gone in one or the other direction.²⁹

Besides conveying that the four alternatives of the tetralemma are not applicable, this type of explanation could indeed be imagined to cause the wanderer Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra to begin questioning the premise underlying his questionnaire. Against this background, in the episode translated above, which shows him questioning the paradigmatic assumption that there is a self, silence may indeed be viewed as offering the most appropriate response. It would have avoided increasing his delusion, even leading him to adopt the opposite wrong view of the one he already held. Instead, the Buddha's silence appears to have the role of stimulating him to remain in a state of inquiry about the matter, rather than giving him a ready-made answer that he would anyway have misunderstood. In spite of having arrived at questioning his premise of the self, the mental condition of Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra should clearly be considered as not yet mature enough to let go of that premise. For this reason, any statement by the Buddha would have been interpreted from within the paradigm of his belief in a self, and hence a denial of the existence of a self would have been taken to imply the view of annihilationism.

Notably, the introductory narrations in the Chinese parallels to the *Mahāvācchagotta-sutta* report that on this occasion the Buddha also at first remained silent when Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra requested permission to ask a question. He reportedly only agreed to reply after announcing that he would only give a short answer.³⁰ All versions of the discourse continue with Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra gaining inspiration to go forth on hearing how many of the Buddha's disciples have realized various stages of progress to awakening.

The message conveyed by this narrative appears to be that the Buddha was in a way trying to wean Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra from expecting his unclarity to be resolved through replies given by another and instead directed him to examine the matter himself. According to the *Mahāvācchagotta-sutta* and its parallels, this indeed happened, in that Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra joined the Buddhist order and eventually reached awakening himself, thereby coming to have a firsthand experience of the absence of a self. This concords with the suggested appropriateness of not providing him with a clear reply in the episode translated above, which due to the inability of Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra to step out of his paradigmatic assumption regarding a self would at that time only have led to a mental closing down rather than fostering the mental opening needed for letting go of this paradigmatic assumption.

The same basic attitude of discouraging intellectual proliferation and instead fostering a sense of inquiry appears to hold for the report of the Buddha's silence in all versions of the episode translated above. These clearly convey that silence had to be maintained because a straightforward reply would have caused Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra to conclude that he had lost the self he earlier believed to have had. In other words, the central issue at stake here would

²⁸ The report of his becoming an arahant/arhat can be found in MN 73 at MN I 496,31, SĀ 964 at T II 247b27, SĀ² 198 at T II 447a22, and T 1482 at T XXIV 964c26.

²⁹ MN 72 at MN I 487,11, SĀ 962 at T II 245c28, SĀ² 196 at T II 445b17, Up 3057 at D 4094 *ju* 158a2 or P 5595 *tu* 182b2; on the fire simile employed here see also, e.g., Jayatilleke 1963/1980: 289–291, Siderits 1979: 496, Harvey 1990: 66f, Tilakaratne 1993, 78f, Ñāṇananda 2010, and Lin 2022, 155.

³⁰ SĀ 964 at T II 246b15, SĀ² 198 at T II 446a13, and T 1482 at T XXIV 963a18.

be his sense of who he believed himself to be. In the end, this is indeed the underlying trajectory of a concern with the standard questionnaire on the destiny of a Tathāgata after death, namely to find out about the nature of a self in its relationship to liberation and thereby find out about one's own nature.

Now, this basic procedure of refusing to give a straightforward reply and instead, through remaining silent, forcing the other to turn the inquiry inward and stay with a sense of investigation and calling into question metaphysical assumptions could perhaps be seen as a distant precedent to the practice of *kōan/gōngàn* (公案) in Chan, Seon, Thiên, and Zen Buddhism. One of the different forms such practice can take is precisely an inquiry into the sense of who one believes oneself to be.³¹ This would align with the case of Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra, in the sense that the Buddha's silence would have encouraged him to continue to remain in a state of inquiry about his assumption of having a self and thereby about who he believed himself to be. Guo Gu (2016: 5f) explains about such forms of practice in Chan Buddhism that they

provide an impossibility, an impasse, so that you are left with a great sense of not knowing, impenetrability, and wonderment. They give you nothing to hang on to, so all words, concepts, and everything you have ever known about yourself, or this and that, falls away ... This experience of impenetrability, wonderment, and irresolvable impasse is ... the great questioning mind. This is the whole point of the gong'an method ... by using this method you can apprehend your original true nature, your intrinsic freedom.

Guo Gu (2016: 11) adds that “Chan teaches that the self or ‘I’ is just an illusion ... your true nonabiding nature *is* freedom, the freedom of no-self.”

In the hope of not overstating my case, it does seem to me fair to propose that a sense of not knowing, of nothing to hang on to, of being immersed in inquiry, would quite probably be a fitting description of how the mental state of Vacchagotta/Vatsagotra should be imagined after the Buddha had reportedly reacted to his repeated questions by just remaining silent. Moreover, the eventual solution to this inquiry does take the form of an apprehension of his true nature—in the above-mentioned sense of “freedom of no-self”—as a result of having become an arahant/arhat. All this of course does not turn this episode into an actual instance of *kōan/gōngàn* practice. Nevertheless, it does seem to me reasonable to propose that the function of the probably most famous instance of silence in *Āgama* literature to some degree foreshadows a form of practice that became prominent in East-Asian meditation traditions.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
CBETA	Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association
D	Derge
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>

³¹ An example for this type of inquiry occurs right away in the first case in the *Blue Cliff Records*, T 2003 at T XLVIII 140a15: 是什麼人?, the same phrase being found repeatedly in other cases in this work (I am indebted to Guo Gu for drawing my attention to this pattern). Buswell 2018: 79 already noted a parallelism between such *kōan/gōngàn* practice and the Pāli commentarial suggestion in P I 251,8 that the *satipaṭṭhāna* practice of mindful walking should be accompanied by querying “who goes?” and “whose is this going?”; see also Anālayo 2003: 139. Noting such parallelism is of course not in any way meant to deny the distinct Chinese roots of *kōan/gōngàn* practice, on which see, e.g., Foulk 2000.

EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
P	Peking
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
Spk	<i>Sāratthappakāsinī</i>
T	Taishō (CBETA)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā</i>
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>

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