

“Like Children After Larks ...”

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And there may not be a silence of the speaker? said Dionysodorus.
Impossible, said Ctesippus.
Or a speaking of the silent?
That is still more impossible, he said.

Plato, *Euthydemus*, 300b.

From his Awakening to his total extinction, the Tathâgatha has not and will not speak a single word, because not to speak is the speech of Buddha.

Lankâvatârasûtra:

Socrates' exact words are unknown. Nor do we know precisely what the Buddha said. All we have, in both cases, are statements attributed to them. Our ignorance of their own words is irremediable. This is not the only trait that these two contemporaries share. The statements ascribed to them are similar in many ways, particularly the therapeutic concern that motivates them. Both the Athenian and Prince Gautama strive to cure the ravages of ignorance, to treat the ills ignorance engenders and eliminate its source. This common aim produces comparable results, such as the use of dialogue to remove illusory questions rather than the teaching of a doctrine.

Yet these overall similarities are deceptive. Socrates and Buddha symbolize profoundly different conceptions of knowledge and ignorance, of the search for truth and the sufferings of ignorance, of the relations among thought, language, and reality. Buddhist omniscience, which results from the Awakening, and the attainment of a “knowledge” both basic and ultimate which is the end-result of a non-discursive process, conflicts with Socratic “unscience,” which is the minimal knowledge of one's own ignorance that impels a permanent search, by exact thought and precise language, for durable satisfactions that will satisfy the soul.

To show the profound differences between Athens and Benares would require a long and detailed exposition. For example, we would have to explain how the birth of Greek philosophy, and its offspring science, was the result of the clear awareness—with its attendant incurable pain—that ignorance could not be definitively overcome. We would then show how the Buddhist Awakening, on the contrary, dissolves ignorance so perfectly that all partial inquiries, all unknown “objects,” vanish and reveal their emptiness. We would emphasize how the two maxims—“Know that you know nothing” and “Know that there is nothing to know”—imply distinct worlds, whose parallel histories have extended over twenty centuries.

This is clearly not the place for such a study. Here we can only hope to explore a single, rather limited aspect of this vast configuration: the Buddha’s silence. Preaching for more than forty years, traveling all around the basin of the middle Ganges, addressing diverse interlocutors, the Buddha of course said a lot. His words are supposed to have been faithfully recorded by listeners with accurate memories: “Thus have I heard ...”: this is the formula by which most of the *sutta* begin. Yet the Buddha was also often silent. One of his nicknames was “Sakyamuni,” which means the silent ascetic (*muni*) from Sakya. However, his silence is not equivalent to the muteness of the ascetic absorbed in meditation. The Buddha’s silence is often an “answer” to questions, and is an essential part of his teaching. What does this silence teach? What is the relationship between a prolix mass of preaching and something that perhaps exists at the center of this preaching, eluding all language? Is there a “kernel” of silence at the center of an indefinite proliferation of statements? An indirect answer to this question can be found in three statements recorded in classic texts of Indian Buddhism,¹ written in Sanskrit.

The first is an excerpt from the anonymous *Lankâvatârasûtra*: “From his Awakening to his total extinction, the Tathâgatha has not and will not speak a single word, because not to speak is the speech of Buddha.”² Part of this phrase seems to deny a factual truth: the preachings of Buddha, and the considerable number of dialogues attributed to him. What follows is still more enigmatic. What is speech that does not speak and yet whose silence is its

way of speaking? Are we not dealing here with an absurd statement, which implies that nothing can be said or thought? Apparently so, at least from the standpoint of our logic. But is there another standpoint? Identifying silence with speech is equivalent to saying: "silence can be the locus of speech," or "speech can be the locus of silence." This is even more obscure.

The second quote comes from Vimalakīrti: "To exclude all speech and to say nothing, to express nothing, not to speak, nor teach, nor name, this is how to enter into non-duality."³ One might now wonder why Buddha ever spoke, why he spent so much time and effort in preaching. Vimalakīrti speaks only in order to lead to silence. But must he not break this silence in order to lead there? Can a broken silence still be silent? Can one speak and be silent? Once again we encounter the same mystery.

The third quote perhaps offers the hint of a solution, although it may initially seem in fact to increase our bewilderment. In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* ("Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom"), which has been attributed to Nāgārjuna, we read: "The Buddha speaks automatically, through the pores of his skin, he preaches the law according to the desires of his listeners, although on his part there is neither application nor idea."⁴ A word stripped of all intentionality, devoid of its meaning-creating aim, without a speaker, diffused rather than uttered: could this be a word-as-silence? How could it be possible? And why would it be desirable?

The three quotes don't add up. They revolve around a mystery. In order to clear up some of the obscurity it may be useful to summarize some of the principal characteristics shared by the diverse schools of Indian Buddhism.

Buddhism above all is a form of therapy. More than a religion or a philosophy, it is a "medical-doctrine" that leads to deliverance, an end to suffering. This cessation is a result of the extinction of the "thirst," that is to say the desire, caused by ignorance. By "seeing" things as they are (impermanent, conditioned, lacking their own nature), one ceases to desire and therefore to suffer. This "seeing" is not simply theoretical. Buddhist "knowledge" is not acquired through intellectual effort alone; it is not attained through reasoning. Although it does not exclude a form of rational judgment, this knowledge remains inseparable from the progress away

from desire, the gradual and continuous movement toward detachment. Sapience (*prajñā*), and the intellectual activity it implies, can not be dissociated from meditation and contemplation; and both are subordinated to the cure—*nirvana*.

To remain silent in the face of anguished and anguishing questions is a cathartic act. By refraining from answering, the Buddha contributes to the effacement of the inquiry. The questions only create obstacles on the road to the only goal that matters: deliverance, an end to suffering. Even the most theoretical question has an element of passion in it. This is why the Buddha always remains silent when asked any—as he often is—of the ten list-like, speculative (“metaphysical,” we would call them) questions, which most notably concern the finite or infinite nature of the universe and the mortal or immortal nature of the soul.

Such preoccupations only delay, burden, and mislead us on our way to nirvana. There is no point in speculating about what we can't know. Here silence becomes a therapeutic fast. By remaining silent in the face of his interlocutor's questions on the finite or infinite nature of the universe, on the soul's mortality or immortality, the physician-Buddha is prescribing, by his very muteness, a refusal of metaphysical torment. This silence, however, ought not to be taken as a dogmatic rejection of all speculative systems. It is not at all a matter of a denial on principle, conceived in the name of some skeptical “anti-intellectualism”; and even less is it a moral condemnation of the desire to know. Buddhism is a pragmatic medicine. Everything, as we have said before, is subordinated to the goal, that is to say an end to suffering. If metaphysical speculation contributes to it, then it is certainly to be recommended. However, experience teaches that such speculation is useless. It is therefore not an absolute evil (there is nothing Buddhist in the idea of an absolute evil); it is a relative one.

This assertion is confirmed in a rarely discussed Palian *sutta*,⁵ in which the Buddha lists those cases where he is silent and those where he speaks. He bases his decision on a particular relationship among the true, the pleasant, and the useful. He does not speak falsely, unpleasantly, and uselessly. Nor does he speak truly and pleasantly but uselessly. He does, however, speak truthfully and usefully at the right moment, whether the listener finds it pleasant

or unpleasant. The key here is not that the true win out over the pleasant—which is Socratic—, but that the useful win out over the true—which is Buddhist, and a sign of its pragmatic attitude.

The notion of "the middle way" allows us to address the relevance of these therapeutic silences in another way. A constituent element of Buddhism's specificity, the middle way finds expression in the Buddhist idea of practical behavior (neither the search for pleasures nor for painful self-mortification), in its psychology (neither mental dispersion nor the strain of obsession; neither the desire to live nor the desire for self-destruction), and in its "metaphysics" (neither eternal life nor annihilation; neither being nor non-being). This last point clearly distinguishes Buddhism's middle way from Greek conceptions of "the golden mean." It is not a matter of reaching some "centrist" position, situated at an equal distance from two opposites and characterized uniquely by moderation. Rather one must try to forge a path between affirmation and negation, to progress between opposed arguments, in a "space" that either avoids their antagonism or where the opposition ceases to have meaning.

This fundamental operation, difficult to conceptualize, is at work in Buddha's silence. When he is silent in "answer" to questions of a metaphysical character, he is not acting solely as a therapist trying to produce an effect in a given circumstance. He is silent also because the doctrines that oppose competing theories on the mortality or the immortality of the soul, the infinite or finite nature of the universe, etc., are *both wrong*. Or rather, to be more precise, they are neither right nor wrong, from the point of view (the "place") of the Buddha. Once we have accepted this, there is nothing more to say on the subject.

This assertion may be disconcerting. Faced with two contrary assertions, most of us would find it as impossible to hold both opinions simultaneously as to affirm neither of them. I can not say that it is raining and that it is not raining. Equally, it would seem, I must necessarily either say that it is raining or that it is not raining. These two laws usually seem indissoluble to us. Buddhists however dissociate them. In rejecting the simultaneous affirmation of two contrary positions Buddhists accept, rationally, the first constraint. But they totally reject the second. The fact that I

can not simultaneously assert that it is raining and that it is not raining does not necessarily entail that I must deny or affirm anything ... because I can remain silent. The "silence of the middle," so to speak, marks this hesitation between affirmation and negation. This silence "says": "it neither rains nor doesn't 'not-rain'." This simultaneous negation of the two terms of the alternative can in no way be equated with their joint affirmation. "Neither yes nor no" is not equivalent to "yes and no."

We can see here a fundamental opposition between Aristotelian logic and metaphysics (and thus, either directly or indirectly, all of Western thought), and the Buddhist point of view. For Aristotle (in his *Metaphysics*, books *Gamma* and *Kappa*), the principal of non-contradiction (with its two laws that we just outlined) guarantees the distinction between beings and underpins their real difference (for if one denies this principal, substance would be indistinguishable from its accidents and thus no longer recognizable), as well as ensures the possibility of discourse and the veracity of knowledge. In this way being, the thinkable, and the sayable are established together. For Buddhists, the principal of non-contradiction governs what we can say and think but has no bearing on the real—which is beyond the thinkable and sayable, and surpasses the limits of our perceptions. Thus what Buddhists reject is not the principal of non-contradiction—which remains, for them as for everyone, the law of all discourse—but its ontological scope.

The final distinctive trait of Buddhism to be discussed here is the doctrine of the absence of *âtman* (the soul or self), the search to "expel" or put "out of action" (rather than denying) the existence of any permanent and organizing principal, as much in things as people. Nothing, neither the "object" or the "subject," has a self. Everything is devoid of an individual nature. The Buddhist universe is a regulated succession of discontinuous and instantaneous phenomena, without support or substrate, in a state of perpetual appearance-disappearance. Only the coarseness of our senses, the illusions of our desire and our language, cause us to believe in the being of ourselves and of things. In this sense there is no system of thought more anti-substantialist, more analytically subversive, than Buddhism.

The preceding remarks may allow us to treat the question of silence in a different way, to analyze Buddha's mute response to

metaphysical questions from a logical and not psychological point of view. If the *âtman* is a term without referent, then silence is the only answer to questions about it. There is no answer because there is no question. If the "soul" denotes no reality, to ask whether it is mortal or immortal is tantamount to asking whether the son of sterile woman is or is not feeling well, or whether a turtle's hair is coarse or soft.⁶

This logical clarification should not, however, mask the most acute problem, which is now perceptible: the irreducible antagonism between Buddhist doctrine and all forms of language. If reality is an imperceptible flux of instantaneously evanescent points, if it is devoid of all individuality (without "persons" or "things"), then no language can describe it. This is because all languages are constitutively based on separate and permanent units, on stable conceptual arrangements and fixed dichotomies.

The inquiry into the Buddha's silence is now reversed. Instead of asking, "Why is he silent?" we must ask: "How can he speak?" Language is not only inadequate in the sense that it seems inherently unfit to express the real, but also because it inevitably generates illusions and ignorance. All grammars—and especially those of the Indo-European languages—tend to make us believe that there exists an agent independent of the act; a subject to which certain qualities can be referred; a substance about which one can predicate accidents; and a thinker behind the thought. There is not a single linguistic act that does not draw the speaker into a network of mirages. To speak is to be unaware. From this it must be concluded that only silence is true, and the truth is unspoken. To know is to be silent. Speech misleads.

How then is it possible for the Buddha to preach? Several texts indicate that he was painfully aware of this problem. Here are two examples, which will bring us back to our starting point. In the most ancient of the Canons, the Buddha, just after his Awakening, expresses himself in the following terms, which have subsequently been often repeated: "Reached in truth by me is this doctrine (*dhamma*), profound, difficult to see, but excellent, devoid of reasoning and reflection, subtle, knowable only by the wise."⁷ The attainment of Awakening is part of an intuitive, not a dialectical, process: omniscience and silence. Witness Vimalakirti: "To exclude all speech

and to say nothing, to express nothing, not to speak, ..." However, the "setting in motion of the wheel of law" (preaching) does not, for Buddha, consist in the attainment of non-duality (rather it is assumed to have already been attained): it consists of speaking without emerging from this non-duality. Yet all speech is based on duality, especially the duality of affirmation-negation. The task is therefore impossible. Some of the texts attest to this impossibility.

The first belongs to the ancient Canons of the Hinayana "Little Vehicle." In it there is a scene, one that has disconcerted most commentators, in which the Buddha, just after the Awakening, gives thought to foregoing preaching. According to the Canon of the *Theravâda*, he thinks the following: "If I were in truth to preach this doctrine and the others were not to understand me, it would be no torment for me."⁸ The Canon of *Mahîsâsaka* has him say: "If I were to preach I would weary myself in vain, exhaust myself beyond measure."⁹ We find the same kind of affirmation in the *Dharmaguptaka*.¹⁰ This hesitation is disconcerting. Moreover, if one accepts the verisimilitude of the narrative, it becomes virtually incomprehensible. Here the Buddha seems to hesitate because of fatigue, which is completely antithetical to the ideals of compassion and devotion that motivate him. His attitude seems to imply laziness and egoism at the very moment when, having reached the Awakening, he is by definition beyond torment, beyond egoism and exhaustion.

In the three versions of the episode that we have, the intervention of an outside force—a *deus ex machina*—is required in order to put an end to his hesitation. A personification of Brahman, *Brahmâ Sahampati*, appears before Buddha; he orders him to preach and is obeyed. It is thus from the outside that the summons to speak comes. There is also something unlikely about Buddha receiving the impetus to carry out his duty from a mythological personage, eminent as the personage may be.

This episode can be explained differently if one considers it an expression, using the forms of myth and legendary biography, of the impossibility of fulfilling one's duty, a duty that consists of progressing from outside language—through the Awakening, the intuitive grasp of the law governing everything, the middle way—to a putting into words that will facilitate access to the out-

side world. Here indeed is where exhaustion lurks. What could be a more never-ending and futile endeavor than to try to free words by means of other words? It is surely no accident that the call to speech, which puts an end to Buddha's hesitation in a rather artificial manner, comes from a personification of Brahman, who is indissolubly linked, in Indian thought, to the problem of language. The Word, in an allegorical vein, orders Silence to be heard.

The second example, which comes from a major text of the already quoted "Great Vehicle," the *Mahâprajñâpâramitâsâstra*, is more explicit. Here the impossibility of the task is directly acknowledged. But this time the Buddha laughs about. Let us quote the text: "[...] laughter has all kinds of causes: there is joyous, angry, timid laughter. The spectacle of strange and ridiculous things makes us laugh. We laugh at strange customs and extraordinary difficulties, although it is not in this case a matter of an absolutely extraordinary difficulty. The *dharma* are non-born, un-destroyed, absolutely empty, unsayable, unnamable, inexpressible; and yet they must be named and be identified with phenomena when we address beings whom we want to lead to deliverance: this creates an enormous difficulty. Imagine a fireplace a hundred *yojana* long; imagine a man carrying a bundle of dry grasses across this fireplace without allowing a single blade to burn; that would be a feat. The Buddha faces the same difficulty when he takes these dry grasses—which are the eighty thousand items of the law—and tries to penetrate the true character of the *dharma* without being burned by the fire to which he is attached by the grasses. He must traverse the fire upright and without pausing. That is why the Buddha laughs; it is because of all these kinds of difficulties that the Buddha laughs with all his might."¹¹

Where to find a word that can extinguish itself, speak without speaking, and has the particular ability to overcome the obstacle of speech by doing away with itself? There is, both in the statements directly attributed to Buddha and in the treatises of the Indian Buddhist tradition, a particular style of expression that may offer a practical means of overcoming this impossibility. Most of the key terms of Buddhist doctrine are expressed either negatively or, even more often, on the basis of a privative prefix. Thus many of the crucial notions of Buddhist thought are designated by words that begin with the prefix *a*, which as in Greek indicates an absence: *any-*

tia, impermanence, *anâtman*, “deprived of its own nature,” *avidya*, non-knowledge, the ignorance that generates illusion and suffering, *acitta*, the absence of thought (which is not the disappearance of thought but is, on the contrary, the inverse of ignorance, a theme to which we will return), *avihimsa*, non-violence, etc.

This list could be lengthened: Buddhism tends to multiply these kinds of terms. All of them have in common the fact that they affirm nothing (and of course deny nothing, since negation is always, to a certain degree, an affirmation). These privative terms, whose quantity and repetition are a particular feature of Buddhist discourse, tend to undermine the existence of the utterance even as it is uttered, and to clear a passage, within language, between silence and words. Moreover, these terms are not synonymous with what we mean by “concept.” Concepts—as the Latin *concapitur* or the German *Begriff* indicate—regroup, surround, clutch, and enclose.

Buddhist privative notions, on the other hand, strive to disencumber, unshackle, loosen. Their aim is to detach, disentangle, free us from illusion, not to take hold of reality. These self-effacing procedures of Buddhist discourse can be considered an attempt to produce a word that “recovers” and “returns to” silence. No discourse can achieve it totally; otherwise it would annihilate itself. The purpose of the silence in Buddhist discourse is to come as close to it as possible. The problem with which we began—that of a silence that could exist within speech—is now perhaps a bit more comprehensible.

The question of “automatic” speech, of speech “without application or concept,” remains, however, obscure. To grasp its meaning we must return to what the Buddhists of the Mahayanian “Great Vehicle” call *acitta*, absence of thought. The term is deceptive. It does not mean lack of thought: there exists, for instance, the term *cittâcitta*, which means “thought-as-absence-of-thought.” An “empty” thought but not a disappearance of thought. It is characterized by an absence of closure, of determinacy, application and stability. Such “thinking,” from inside our points of reference, can seem only insignificant or non-existent. However, as a lived experience, *acitta* is continuous, abundant, and bountiful, revealing that what we call “application” and “determinacy” are only illusions engendered by the closures of thought, by the dis-

continuities we introduce into the flux.¹²

At this point the Buddha ceases to speak, at least in the sense that we usually employ this term. He may emit sounds, but for him they will be devoid of all signification. He will speak in a "desemantized" way. In other words his speech will be a form of silence, at least from our point of view, because "from his point of view" silence and speech are indistinguishable: "Where no gratuitous affirmation exists, there is no one to preach, no one to hear or understand."

At this point should an additional step be taken? Or should we subtract one? Or should we stop believing that we are moving at all? We had imagined that we had to travel to—or return to—silence; that there was an outside and inside of speech; that we had to progress from one to the other, but with difficulty, impossibly; we thought that the Buddha's point of view and ours would be distinct. All these thoughts are signs of a continued search for understanding which, from the Buddhist point of view, means that we are still straying.

Sapience (*prajñā*) does not culminate in knowledge but in the "understanding" that there is nothing to know or understand. While Socrates offered a knowledge of ignorance, Buddhism joins, without distinguishing them, a paradoxical "omniscience" to a "knowledge-that-doesn't-know." The maieutic method is a pursuit of words without content: Socrates-the-Torpedo speaks so that the other, seeing the inanity of his remarks, will be converted to the *logos*. The Buddha speaks so that the other will understand that all is emptiness and that in the end there is nothing to say.

The end of the voyage is its starting point. The voyage might have seemed infinite, exhausting: but there was no voyage. Buddhism's profound intuition, which finds its development in the "Great Vehicle," is that there is no other bank: there isn't the slightest difference between nirvana and world. Nor between speech and silence. The silence of the Buddha is neither a way of speaking nor of being silent. This silence is not a figure of language, nor does it constitute a reserve, not even a dodge. It is empty.

We must put an end to the pathos of silence. We must stop believing in a silence packed with a meaning capable of providing sanctuaries and surprises. Silence only actualizes the natural vacu-

ity of language, emptying it from the inside and allowing speech, like everything else, to slip away from itself. Silence does not have to be created. It lives in each word. To Socrates goes the last word: "And we cut a poor figure; we were like children after larks, always on the point of catching the art, which was always getting away from us."¹³

Notes

1. The varying contexts of these three statements, their respective chronological positions, and the different schools of the "Great Vehicle" to which their authors belonged, imply certain dissimilarities that need to be accounted for. For the purposes of this paper, however, it was decided to treat them as one.
2. *The Lankavatârasûtra*, Transl. by D.T. Suzuki, London, 1932, p. 143.
3. *L'Enseignement de Vimalakîrti (Vimalakîrtinirveda)*, Traduit et annoté par Etienne Lamotte. (Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain. Louvain, 1962), p. 317.
4. *Mahâprajñâpâramitsâstra*, attributed to Nâgârjuna. Traduit et annoté par Etienne Lamotte. (Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, vol. 1 Louvain, 1949), p. 560.
5. *Abhayarajakumarâsutta*, *Majjhima-Nikâya* no. 58, Pali Text Society, London, pp. 392-396.
6. These comparisons are inspired by those used by Vasubhandu.
7. *Majjhima-Nikâya* no. 26, Pali Text Society, London, pp. 211-214.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Mahîsâsaka, *Vinaya*, Tokyo, 1924-1929, pp.130-134.
10. Bareau, A. *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dans les Sûtrapitaka et les Vinayapitaka* vol. 1 (Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris, 1963, p. 138.
11. *Mahâprajñâpâramitsâstra*, p. 442.
12. For further development of this point see Guy Bugault, *La notion de 'prajna' ou de sagesse selon les perspectives du 'Mahayana.'* (Publications de l'Institut de civilisation indienne, Paris, 1968), especially pp. 175-186 and 202-203.
13. Plato. *Euthydemus*, 291B trans. by B. Jowett, New York, 1920, Vol. 2, p.153.