

Speculations Undeclared from the *Culamalunkya Sutta*

One of the Buddha's most notable teachings was his practical rejection of most metaphysical speculation. In this passage from the *Culamalunkya Sutta*, he teaches Mālunkyāputta, a disciple, that efforts to answer speculative questions such as whether the world is eternal are fruitless. They are like a man shot with an arrow who refuses to allow medical treatment until he is told the social caste of his attacker, his name, size, skin color, his home town, and the details of his weapon. Before he learned all this, he would die. The Buddha left such speculative metaphysics undeclared because they do not lead to the direct meditative experience of enlightenment that overcomes suffering.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Sāvattthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapindika's Park.

Then, while the venerable Mālunkyāputta was alone in meditation, the following thought arose in his mind:

“These speculative views have been undeclared by the Blessed One, set aside and rejected by him, namely: ‘the world is eternal’ and ‘the world is not eternal’; ‘the world is finite’ and ‘the world is infinite’; ‘the soul is the same as the body’ and ‘the soul is one thing and the body another’; and ‘after death a Tathāgata¹ exists’ and ‘after death a Tathāgata does not exist’ and ‘after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist’ and ‘after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist.’ The Blessed One does not declare these to me, and I do not approve of and accept the fact that he does not declare these to me, so I shall go to the Blessed One and ask him the meaning of this.” ...

“Suppose, Mālunkyāputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say: ‘I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a brahmin or a merchant or a worker.’ And he would say: ‘I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me was tall or short or of middle height; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me was dark or brown or golden-skinned; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such a village or town or city; ... until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow; ... until I know whether the [118] bowstring that wounded me was fibre or reed or sinew or hemp or bark; ... until I know whether the shaft that wounded me was wild or cultivated; ... until I know with what kind of feathers the shaft that wounded me was

fitted—whether those of a vulture or a crow or a hawk or a peacock or a stork; ...

“All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die....

“Mālunkyāputta, if there is the view ‘the world is eternal,’ the holy life cannot be lived; and if there is the view ‘the world is not eternal,’ the holy life cannot be lived. Whether there is the view ‘the world is eternal’ or the view ‘the world is not eternal,’ there is birth, there is aging, there is death, there are sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now....

“Therefore, Mālunkyāputta, remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared. And what have I left undeclared? ‘The world is eternal’—I have left undeclared. ‘The world is not eternal’—I have left undeclared. ‘The world is finite’—I have left undeclared. ‘The world is infinite’—I have left undeclared. ‘The soul is the same as the body’—I have left undeclared. ‘The soul is one thing and the body another’—I have left undeclared. ‘After death a Tathāgata exists’—I have left undeclared. ‘After death a Tathāgata does not exist’—I have left undeclared. ‘After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist’—I have left undeclared. ‘After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist’—I have left undeclared.

“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 Nibbāna.² That is why I have left it undeclared.

“And what have I declared? ‘This is suffering’—I have declared. ‘This is the origin of suffering’—I have declared. ‘This is the cessation of suffering’—I have declared. ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’—I have declared.

“Why have I declared that? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why I have declared it.

“Therefore, Mālunkyāputta, remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared.”

That is what the Blessed One said. The venerable Mālunkyāputta was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

SOURCE: *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, pp. 533-6

¹Tathāgata—(“transcendent one”) one who has realized the truth.

²Nibbāna—*nirvana*.