# The Buddha as a Teacher

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23:10

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed One, the Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

I'm going to talk about the extraordinary ability of the Buddha to teach. There's no doubt he was a very charismatic person, but that would not necessarily make him a good teacher. He certainly was an extraordinarily charismatic person, but this in itself would not have made him a particularly skilled teacher.

He had the ability to teach large groups—monastics, nuns, and lay people—and adapt his teaching to them. He was especially acute when talking to individuals, catching their moods and opinions, and through various techniques was able to correct their views and practices. He was particularly skillful when he spoke to individuals. He was able to capture their moods, their opinions, and thanks to different techniques, he was able to correct their opinions, their points of view, and also their practice.

Now, he wasn't always successful. A character called Dandapani went away clicking his tongue. It didn't always happen. A certain character called Dandapani walked away shaking his tongue—that is, expressing his disapproval.

The usual way he discussed subjects was to first listen fully to what the other was saying, then he would repeat back to them what they had just said to make sure they both understood. He would correct the person by a Socratic method of questions and answers. Once the Buddha had expressed his position, he would then restate it again clearly, and usually he would add a metaphor or an analogy, as he would say, because some people understand better that way.

Over the next few Buddha celebration days, I hope to take one technique after another and use a discourse to illustrate it.

This is the shorter discourse with Malunkyaputta. Malunkyaputta was the son of Malunkhya, who was married to a relative of the king of Kosala. He became a *samaṇa*, a wandering ascetic. When he heard the Buddha speak, he took ordination under him, but he didn't attain liberation until he was very old.

Now while Malunkyaputta was alone meditating near Savatthi in Jeta's Grove and Anathapindika's monastery, he had been considering the subjects the Buddha would not answer. These were the metaphysical questions of the day, and he came to a decision that if the Buddha didn't give him satisfactory answers to his questions, he would lose confidence and leave the Sangha.

So, in the late afternoon, Malunkyaputta came out of retreat and went to the Buddha. He bowed, sat down to one side, and told the Buddha of his thoughts:

"Venerable Sir, while I was alone in meditation, the following thought arose in my mind. These speculative views have been left undeclared by the Blessed One, set aside and rejected by him. Namely, the world is eternal or the world is not eternal. The world is infinite or the world is finite. The soul is the same as the body, or is the soul one thing and the body another? And after the death of the *Tathāgata*—tha t's the Buddha—does he exist or after death does he not exist? Or after death does the *Tathāgata* both exist and not exist? Or after death does the *Tathāgata* neither exist nor not exist?"

"Now, if the Blessed One knows, then let the Blessed One declare that to me, and I will lead the holy life under you. If the Blessed One does not know, then it is simple for one who does not know, does not see, to say, 'I do not know, I do not see.' Then I will abandon the training and return to the lay life."

"Well now, Malunkyaputta, did I ever say to you, 'Come Malunkyaputta, lead the holy life under me, and I will declare to you whether I have answers to these questions or not?'"

"No, Venerable Sir."

"And did you ever say to me, 'Venerable Sir, I will lead the spiritual life under the Buddha only if the Buddha will declare these things to me?'"

"No, Venerable Sir."

So now the Buddha makes sure they both agree as to what has been said. "So it seems to me that I did not say to you, 'Come Malunkyaputta, lead the spiritual life under me and I will declare these things to you.' And you never said to me, sir, 'I will lead the spiritual life under the Buddha only if the Buddha will declare these things to me.' In which case, you foolish man, who are you and what are you rejecting?"

"Now, if anyone should say, 'I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares answers to these questions,' they will still remain undeclared by the *Tathāgata* and meanwhile the person would die."

Now, the Buddha uses his usual technique to support what he's saying with an allegory or a metaphor:

"Suppose, Malunkyaputta, 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. And the man would say, 'I will not let the surgeon pull the arrow out until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble, a brahmin, a merchant, or a worker, whether he was tall or short or middle height, whether the bow was long or a crossbow, what kind of feathers the shaft that wounded me was fitted with—whether those of a vulture, a heron, a hawk, a peacock, or a stork—and what kind of arrowhead it was that wounded me, whether it spiked, or razor-tipped, or curved, or barbed, or carved-toothed, or lancet-toothed.' All this would still be unknown to that man, and meanwhile he would die."

"So too, Malunkyaputta, if anyone should say, 'I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares on these questions,' they would still remain undeclared by the *Tathāgata*, and meanwhile that person would die."

Now the Buddha goes on to say that it's not true that the spiritual life cannot be led unless these speculative views are answered, and he reaffirms his position:

"Whether such views are answered or not, there is still birth, there is still ageing, there is still death, there is still sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. And it is the destruction of these, right here and now, that I prescribe for."

"Therefore, Malunkyaputta, remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared. And why have I left them undeclared? Because they are not beneficial. They do not belong to the fundamentals of the spiritual life. They do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to *Nibbāna*. That is why I have left them undeclared."

"And what have I declared? There is suffering and unsatisfactoriness. There is the origin of suffering and unsatisfactoriness. There is a cessation of suffering and unsatisfactoriness and there is a way leading to the cessation of suffering and unsatisfactoriness."

That is what the Blessed One said, and the Venerable Malunkyaputta was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.

So this discourse shows us how the Buddha generally taught by first listening and then probing and then finally stating his teachings and his use of metaphor. He would not be drawn into hypothetical, metaphysical or speculative discussions. They were simply not conducive to the spiritual aim of liberating oneself from *dukkha,* suffering and unsatisfactoriness. The Buddha tells us there is a limit beyond which reason and logic simply cannot go, and which can only be transcended and realised by direct experience.

Finally, the reason he refused to answer questions about himself—what happened to him after he died—was that these questions invariably arose from some idea of a self that would either exist or not exist, exist and not exist, and neither exist nor not exist.

I hope this little talk has been of some assistance, that it has not caused confusion. That by your careful practice and reading you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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