

# The Buddha as a Teacher: The Discourse on Māluṅkyāputta

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 23:12

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa* — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I'm going to talk about the extraordinary ability of the Buddha to teach. I have no doubt that he 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. And 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, it didn't always happen. A certain character called Dandapāni went away clicking his tongue, expressing his disapproval.

The way he usually dealt with 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. After that, he corrected the person with a process of questions and answers of the Socratic type. Once he'd 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 Māluṅkyāputta. This speech is an example of the way he guided intellectuals away from conceptual, speculative thinking, by distancing them from too abstract and metaphysical ideas and instead by bringing them to a practical type of wisdom. And he had no fear of calling them fools when necessary.

Māluṅkyāputta was the son of Māluṅkyā, who was married to an official of the king of Kosala. He became a *samaṇa*, a wandering ascetic, and when he heard the Buddha speak, he took ordination under him, but he didn't attain liberation until he was very old.

One day, while Māluṅkyāputta was alone meditating near Sāvatti in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery, he was thinking about the topics to which the Buddha had not answered, the questions to which the Buddha had never given an answer. These were metaphysical questions of the time, and Māluṅkyāputta came to the decision that if Buddha had not given him satisfactory answers to these

questions, he would have lost all faith in him and would have left the Sangha.

In the late afternoon, Māluṅkyāputta left the retreat and went to the Buddha. He bowed, sat down on one side, and expressed his thoughts to the Buddha:

"Venerable Lord, while I was meditating alone, the following thought came to my mind. These questions, these speculative questions, have been left unanswered by the Blessed One. They have been abandoned and rejected by him. And they are as follows: the world is eternal or the world is not eternal; the world is finite or the world is infinite; the soul is the same thing as the body, or the soul is one thing and the body is another. And then again, after death, does the Tathāgata continue to exist, or after death does a Tathāgata not exist? Or again, after death does a Tathāgata both exist and not exist, or after death does a Tathāgata neither exist nor not exist?"

"If the Blessed One knows, then let the Blessed One declare that to me openly, and I will lead the holy life under your guidance. If the Blessed One does not know, then it is proper for one who does not know and does not see to say clearly, 'I do not know, I do not see.' In this case I will abandon the training and return to the lay life."

Now the Buddha makes sure they both agree as to what has been said: "Well then, Māluṅkyāputta, have I ever told you, 'Come, Māluṅkyāputta, lead the holy life under my guidance and I will declare to you whether or not I have the answers to these questions'?"

"No, Venerable Sir."

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

"No, Venerable Sir."

"So it seems that I did not tell you, 'Come, Māluṅkyāputta, lead the spiritual life under my guidance and I will declare these things to you.' And you never told me, 'Lord, I will lead the spiritual life under the guidance of the Buddha only if the Buddha will declare these things to me.' In this case, foolish man, who are you and what are you rejecting?"

"If anyone should say, 'I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares answers to these questions,' these would remain undeclared by the Tathāgata and in the meantime that person would die."

Now the Buddha uses his usual technique to support what he was saying with a metaphor or allegory:

"Suppose, Māluṅkyāputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison and his friends and companions, relatives and kinsmen, brought a surgeon to treat him. And the man would say, 'I will not allow the surgeon to extract this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble, a

brahmin, a merchant or a worker; whether he was tall, short or of medium height; whether the bow was a long bow or a crossbow; what kind of feathers were fitted to the arrow that wounded me — 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 was spiked, or razor-tipped, or curved, or barbed, or calf-toothed, or lancet-shaped.'

"All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die. In the same way, Māluṅkyāputta, if anyone should say, 'I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares answers to these questions,' these would remain undeclared by the Tathāgata and meanwhile that person would die."

The Buddha continues by saying that it is not true that spiritual life cannot be conducted without such speculative questions finding an answer, and reaffirms his position:

"Whether such questions find an answer 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 things, right here and now, that I prescribe.

"Therefore, Māluṅkyāputta, 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 foundations of the holy 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 the cessation of suffering and unsatisfactoriness, and there is the way that leads to the cessation of suffering and unsatisfactoriness."

That is what the Blessed One said, and the Venerable Māluṅkyāputta was satisfied and delighted by the words of the Blessed One.

This discourse shows how in general the Buddha taught — first by listening, then by probing, and then finally by stating his teaching 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. And finally, the reason why he refused to answer these questions about himself, the Tathāgata — that is, what would happen after his death — was that this type of question arose invariably from some idea of a self that would have existed or not existed, or have existed and not existed, or neither existed nor not existed.

I hope this little talk has been of some assistance and that it has not caused any confusion. May you,

through your careful practice and reading of the discourses, be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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