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Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta

The Shorter Discourse to Māluṅkyā,putta | M 63/1:426-432

Theme: Right priorities in life & how to end suffering

Translated by Piya Tan ©2003

1 The double-horned question

Although Buddhist literature is vast and encompasses a wide range of human knowledge, the Buddha's purpose in teaching the Dharma is for the sake of spiritual liberation. This sutta is a clear statement why the Buddha does not explain matters that are not connected with the purpose of the path and the goal, namely, the ending of suffering in oneself. Like the parable of the raft (M 1:134), **the simile of the poisoned dart** (M 1:429) [5b] here shows the pragmatism of early Buddhism.

The Buddha does not answer Māluṅkyā,putta's questions regarding the ten "unexplained" or "undetermined" (*avyākata*) theses for two reasons. Firstly, they are not connected to the spiritual path and goal. In fact, such speculations distract one from one's spiritual development and liberation. Secondly, these theses are by their very nature unanswerable—they are questions wrongly put. To say "yes" or "no" to any of such questions is to accept them as valid.

This is like one's answering "yes" or "no" to a question such as "Where does a fire go when it is extinguished?" The question does "not apply," it is "wrongly put" (*na upeti*) (M 72.19/1:487). Gethin in *Foundations of Buddhism* gives a modern example: To answer "'yes' or 'no' to a question such as 'Are Martians green?'" one is "drawn into accepting the validity of the question" (1998:68).¹ A similar type of question is the "double-horned question" (*ubhato,koṭṭika pañha*) or dilemma (where answering either way would bring an unwelcome conclusion), and as such does not have a definite (*ekamsa*) answer, as recounted in **the Abhaya,rāja,kumāra Sutta** (M58.6/1:393 f). In **the (Asibandhaka,putta) Kulā Sutta** (S 42.9/4:322-325), however, the Buddha answers the two-horned question proposed by the Nigaṇṭhas.²

The Buddha's not answering these ten questions does not mean that he lacks the knowledge of the answers. On the contrary, the Buddha's knowledge is vast. In **the Sīmsapā Sutta** (S 56.31), the Buddha declares that the things he knows through self-knowledge is as vast as the leaves in the *sīmsapā* Forest, but he has not taught these things "because they are not connected to the goal, not connected to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion, to letting go, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana." (S 56.31/5:437 f)

2 The 10 undeclared statements

The Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta is one of those suttas dealing with the well known 10 *avyākata*, "the unexplained, undeclared" theses or speculative views "set aside" (*thapanīya*) by the Buddha due to their indeterminable nature and as questions wrongly put.³ The ten points are as follows

The world

1. The world is eternal (*sassato loko*);
2. The world is not eternal (*asassato loko*);
3. The world is finite (*antavā loko*);
4. The world is infinite (*anantavā loko*).

¹ Another modern example is the Christian evangelist's trick of drawing the unwary into a one-sided indoctrination by asking "What do you think of Christ?" (Matt 22:42). The Buddhist answer is the noble silence. Cf D 25.20/3:53.

² In **Milinda,pañha**, however, the double-horned question is used skillfully by way of Buddhist apologetics. See also Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 334 f, 350-352.

³ Cf U 66. See **The Buddha's Silence** = SD 44.1. **Readings:** (1) Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 242 ff, 334 f, 350-352, 473 ff; (2) Collins 1982:131-138 (§4.2); (3) Harvey 1995: 83-88 (*avyākata* questions), 239-245 (on propositions 7-10 on the tathāgata); (4) Gethin 1998:66-68 (on **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S**, M 63). See also: (1) Intro to **Mahāli S** (D 6) in D:RD 1:186-190; (2) Intro to **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** (M 58) tr in SD 7.12.

The self (or soul)

5. The self is the same as the body (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*);
6. The self and the body are separate (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*).

The Tathāgata⁴

7. The tathāgata [One Thus Come] exists after death (*hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā*);
8. The tathāgata does not exist after death (*na hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā*);
9. The tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death (*hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā*);
10. The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death (*n'eva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param, maraṇā*).⁵

The Cūḷa Māluṅkyāputta Sutta is very similar to **the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta**, except for the latter's poisoned dart simile and conclusion (on the 4 noble truths). Apparently, there is only one group of suttas that share a common topic in their origin stories (*nidāna*), that is, those concerning Vaccha,gotta.⁶ The Chinese Āgamas place **the Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta** (M 72)⁷ and **the Mahā Vaccha,gotta** (M 73)⁸ in the Saṃyukta Āgama, together with the other Vatsa,gotra Sūtras, constituting the Vatsa,gotra cycle.⁹

The well known 10 points are discussed in the following suttas:¹⁰

Aggi Vaccha,gotta Sutta	(M 72),
Cūḷa Māluṅkyāputta Sutta	(M 63 <i>passim</i> /1:426-437) = SD 5.8,
Vaccha,gotta Sutta	(M 72 <i>passim</i> /1:483-489) = SD 6.15,
Vacchagotta Saṃyutta	(S 33/3:257-263),
Abyākata Saṃyutta	(S 10/4:374-403),
Āhu Sutta	(U 6.4/66-69), and
Titthā Sutta	(U 6.5/69 f).

and also listed in a number of other places in the Pāli Canon, such as:

Brahmajāla Sutta	(D 1.1.29-31/1:12-39) [most detailed explanation of “the world”],
Mahāli Sutta	(D 6.16-19/157 f) [only on “the self” (<i>jīva</i>)], ¹¹
Poṭṭhapāda Sutta	(D 9.25-30/1:187-190) = SD 7.14, ¹² and
Pāsādikā Sutta	(D 29.30-33/135-138) [only on the tathāgata's state].

A different list of speculative views are given in the **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38).¹³ It is likely that these questions or statements formed a sort of questionnaire amongst the ancient Indian wanderers to determine a person's position. The Buddha left these questions aside, declaring that they have nothing to

⁴ For a canonical def of *tathāgata*, see **Pāsādika S** (D 29.28 f/3:135 f); also Toshiichi ENDO 1997:195-206 (ch V). On the ineffability of the *tathāgata*, see Harvey 1995:235-245. See foll §3.

⁵ This tetralemma is found in many places in the Canon. In **Param,marāṇa S** (S 16.12/2:222 f) the Buddha mentions it to Mahā Kassapa; in **Anurādha S** (S 22.86/3:116-119). The tetralemma is mentioned by lemma in 4 suttas in Saṃyutta (S 24.15-18/3:215 f). The **Abyākata Saṃyutta** contains some suttas dealing with it (S 44.2-8/4:381-397); see S:B 1080 n165. For a philosophical discussion, see K N Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963: 350 & Kügler 2003:100 f. For a detailed analysis of the 10 points in terms of the tetralemma, see Intro (2).

⁶ His Skt name is probably **Vatsa** or **Vaiśa**, rarely Vatsa,gotra (Mvst 3.364.16); Chin 婆蹉種.

⁷ **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72), SA 962 = T 2.245, SA2 196 = T2.444. See SD 6.15 Intro (2-3) (2004).

⁸ **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 73), SA 964 = T 2.246, SA2 198 = T2.446.

⁹ This cycle is examined by Richard H Robinson, “Some methodological approaches to the unexplained points,” 1972:313-317.

¹⁰ On these 10 *avyākata*, see Ñāṇananda, *Concept and Reality*, 1971:95-99 & John Hick, *Disputed Questions*, 1993:105-118 (ch 6).

¹¹ Where see T W Rhys Davids' Intro to his tr (D:RD 1:186 -188).

¹² The *avyākata* theses in the context of **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9) are discussed by Ñāṇananda in his *Concept and Reality* (1971:95-99).

¹³ M 38.23/1:264 f = SD 7.10.

do with spiritual development [§§25-26]. Walshe notes that this is only possible “if the word *tathāgata* had a pre-Buddhist meaning, which may well be the case” (D:RD 555.219).

3 The meaning of *tathāgata*

The word *tathāgata* literally means “one who has gone that way, or one who has gone to such a state” (Norman 1991a:6).¹⁴ However, after the Buddha’s passing, the word *tathāgata*, like *sugata* (which originally must have simply meant “one who has fared well”),¹⁵ is also used specifically of the Buddha.¹⁶ In some contexts, they clearly refer to the Buddha;¹⁷ in others, the Buddha would use *tathāgata* reflexively, that is, when referring to himself¹⁸ or generically (the Buddhas).¹⁹ Often enough, too, he is recorded as using the first person pronoun, *aham*.²⁰

Buddhaghosa, in his commentary on **the Brahma, jāla Sutta** (D 1), for example, gives lengthy and fanciful etymologies and explanations of the word *tathāgata*.²¹ However, it is interesting, notes Norman, that when the word *tathāgata* is used in a question directed to the Buddha, which he refuses to answer, the commentaries still do not take *tathāgata* in the sense of the Buddha, but explain it as *satta* ‘being.’” (1991a: 6)

We are accustomed to take the word *tathāgata* as being synonymous with Buddha, but it is very unlikely that all those who were discussing these questions in the passages recorded in the Udāna²² were actually discussing whether the Buddha lives or does not live after death. It is noteworthy that the commentarial tradition followed by Dhammapāla explains *tathāgata* as *attā*.²³ “Does the self exist after death?” Although the list of questions which we have is clearly a stereotyped one, we can assume that it was based upon questions which occupied the mind of the religious teachers who were contemporary with the Buddha. The four questions concerning the existence of a *tathāgata* after death are in fact included among those to which Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta is reported by Ajātasattu to have given a prevaricating answer.²⁴ (Norman 1991a:2)

¹⁴ See also IB Horner’s n on *tathāgata* and *aham* at M:H 2:xxviii f.

¹⁵ SED sv *sugata*; qu by Norman 1991a:6.

¹⁶ As in **Āyācana S** (S 6.1), where Brahmā Sahampati laments: *Nassati vata bho loko vinassati vata bho loko. Yathā hi nāma tathāgatassa arahato sammā, sambuddhassa appossukkatāya cittaṃ namati no dhamma, desanāyā ti* S 6.1/1:137); in **Sūkaramkhatā S** (S 48.58): *Kin nu kho Sāriputta atthavasāṃ sampassamāno khīṇāsavo bhikkhu tathāgate vā tathāgata, sāsane vā paramaṇi, paccākāraṃ pavattamāno pavatteti* (S 48.58/5:233-235; for the last three words of the phrase, cf **Dhamma, cetiya S**, M 89/2:120; **Mānatthaddha S**, S 7.15/1:178).

¹⁷ Eg, *tathāgato vā tathāgata, sāvako vā* (**Cha-b, bisodhana S**, M 112.12/3:33), **Thera, vagga** of the Dasaka Nipāta (A 5:156-160 x15); *tathāgatassa vā tathāgata, sāvakassa vā* (**Kasi, bhāradvāja S**, Sn 1.4/p75), where *aham* is also used by the Buddha; *tathāgatassa sāvako* (**Mahā Parinibbāna S**, D 16/1:142 f).

¹⁸ Eg *Idha Vāseṭṭha tathāgato loke uppajati* (D 13.40/1:249).

¹⁹ Eg *uppādā vatathāgatānam anuppādā vā tathāgatānaṃ ihiṭā va sā dhātu* (“whether tathagatas arise or not, this element stands,” S 12.10/2:25).

²⁰ See §4 in sutta here; and also **Vinaya: āham...jeṭṭho seṭṭho lokassa** (“I am the eldest, supreme in the world,” V 3:4); **Dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana S**: *n’eva tāvāham...anuttaraṃ sammā, sambodhiṃ abhisambuddho ti paccañ-ñāsīm* (“So long...I did not claim to have awakened to the incomparable full awakening,” S 56.11.13/5:422).

²¹ DA 59-68. Elsewhere, he gives a shorter def: **tathāgato ti, atthahi kāraṇehi bhagavā tathāgato: tattha āgato ’ti tathāgato; tathā gato ti tathāgato; tatha, lakkhaṇaṃ āgato ’ti tathāgato; tathā, dhamme yathāvato abhisambuddho to tathāgato, tatha, dassitāya tathāgato; tathā, kāritāya tathāgato; abhībhavan-atthena tathāgato ti. tesam vitthāro Brahmajāla, vaṇṇanāyama pi. Mūla, pariyāya, vaṇṇanāyama pi vutto y’eva** (SA 2:287, 25-32). An even shorter def: *tattha tathāgatassa ti tathā gato ti evam ādīhi kāraṇehi tathāgatassa* (SA 1:66, 21-22). For a detailed discussion on **tathāgata**, see Toshiichi ENDO, *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism*, 1997:195-206 (ch 5), 305.

²² **Tittha S** (U 6.4/66-69), about monks embroiled in speculative arguments, and which has the famous parable of the blind men and the elephant.

²³ *Tathāgato param maraṇā ti ettha tathāgato ti attā. taṃ hi diṭṭhi, gatiko kāraka, vedak’ādi, saṅkhātāṃ nicca, -dhuvādi, saṅkhātāṃ vā tathāgata, bhāvāṃ gato ti, tathāgato ti vohāraṭi* (UA 340, 5-8 ad U 67, 14).

²⁴ D 1:58, 36-59, 8.

There is a simple rule behind the Buddha's manner of addressing himself, and this has to do with the two levels of language: the worldly (*lokiya*) and the supramundane (*lok'uttara*), or the conventional (*sammuti*) and the ultimate (*param'attha*). When the Buddha is addressing worldly situations or matters, he uses *aham* and its related forms, but when he is speaking on a supramundane level, he uses *tathāgata*. This passage from **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** shows a good variety of such usages:

2.25a “Ānanda, what does the Order of monks expect of me? I have taught the Dharma, Ānanda, making no distinction between inner and outer: the Tathāgata has no ‘guru’s fist’ in respect of teachings.

If there is anyone who thinks: ‘I (*aham*) shall take charge of the order,’²⁵ or ‘The order should refer to me (*mam*),’²⁶ then let him make some statement about the order. But, Ānanda, it does not occur to the Tathāgata, to think, ‘I (*aham*) shall take charge of the order,’ or ‘The order should refer to me (*mam*).’ So why should the Tathāgata make a statement about the order?

2.25b Ānanda, I (*aham*) am now old, worn out, burdened with years, my journey done, I have reached the sum of my days, I am turning eighty. Ānanda, just as an old cart is kept going by being held together with straps, even so the Tathāgata’s body is kept going by being strapped up.

Ānanda, it is only when the Tathāgata pays no attention to all the signs and by the ending of certain feelings, enters and dwells in the signless concentration of mind, that the Tathāgata’s body knows comfort. (D 16.2.25/2:99)

4 Brahma, jāla Sutta

4.1 The Brahma, jāla Sutta (D 1)²⁷ gives the fullest explanation of the undeclared points 1-4 (the world)²⁸ and 5-6 (the self)²⁹ in its discussion on the 62 wrong views.³⁰ The undeclared points 1-2 are elaborated in “the eternalist view” (1-4) and “the partial-eternalist view” (5-8) of the Brahma, jāla Sutta.

4.2 The eternalist view. The first set of wrong views (1-4) listed in the Brahmajāla Sutta are those regarding speculating about the past (*pubb'anta, kappā*) by way of “**the eternalist view**” (*sassata, vāda*). This wrong view regards “the self and the world are eternal,” that is, holding the view that

the self and the world are eternal, barren, steadfast as a mountain peak, as a pillar firmly fixed, and though these beings roam and wander in samsara, pass away and re-arise, yet they (the self and the world) exist just like eternity itself. (D 1.1.32/1:14)³¹

Such a wrong view, says the Brahma, jāla Sutta, may arise through anamnesis or recollection of past lives in any of the four following ways:

- (1) based on one’s recollecting of up to 100,000 past lives;
- (2) based on one’s recollecting of up to 10 aeons (*kappā*) or world cycles (“contraction and expansion,” ie the pulsating universe);
- (3) based on one’s recollecting of up to 40 aeons or world cycles;
- (4) based on reasoning (*takka*).

²⁵ *Aham bhikhu, saṅgham pariharissāmī ti.*

²⁶ *Mam'uddesiko bhikkhu, saṅgho ti.*

²⁷ SD 25.

²⁸ That is, the 4 extensionist views (*antānanta, vāda*) [9-12] (D 1.2.16-21/1:22-24).

²⁹ That is, the first 4 eternalist views (*sassata, vāda*) [1-4] (D 1.1.30-35/1:12-17) and other speculations about the past [5-18] (D 1.2.1-15/1:17-22): see also the 39 views [19-57] regarding the self (speculations about the future) (D 1.3.38-41/1:40 f).

³⁰ See RH Robinson’s “Some methodological approaches to the unexplained points,” 1972:318 f.

³¹ *Sassato attā ca loko ca vañjho kūta'ṭṭho esika-ṭṭhāyi-ṭṭhito, te ca sattā sandhāvanti saṃsaranti cavanti upapajjanti, atthi tv-eva sassata, samam.*

4.3 The partial-eternalist view. The second set of wrong views (5-8) listed in the Brahma,jāla Sutta are those speculating about the past by way of “the partial-eternalist view” (*ekacca,sassata,vāda*). This wrong view regards “the self and the world are both eternal and not eternal,” based on the speculation that some beings (like Brahmā or Creator) are eternal and some (like the speculator himself) are not (D 1.2.1-15/1:17-22), or, if he is a logician (*takkī*) or one who relies on reasoning alone (that is, who think along a rationalist dualism), he may think thus (wrong view 8):³²

That which is called “eye,” or “ear,” or “nose,” or “tongue,” or “body”—that self is impermanent, unstable, not eternal, subject to change. But that which is called “mind,” or “mentality,” or “consciousness”—that self is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and it will remain the same just like eternity itself. (D 1.2.13/1:21)³³

4.4 The extension view. The undeclared points 3-4 are elaborated in “the extension view”³⁴ (*antānanta,vāda*) (9-12) of the Brahma,jāla Sutta, that is,

- (1) this view that the world is finite;
- (2) this view that the world is infinite;
- (3) this view that the world is finite in a vertical direction but infinite across;
- (4) this view that the world is neither finite nor infinite. (D 1.2.16-21/1:22-24)

The first three wrong views here are those of meditators who have reached a certain level of mental concentration, but not beyond, perceiving only up to that level, thus holding the above respective views. In the case of (1), the speculator thinks, “This world is finite and bounded (by a circle)” (*antavā ayam loko parivaṭṭamo*), basing his wrong view on his limited meditation concentration. The second speculator similarly thinks, “This world is infinite and unbounded” (*anantavā ayam loko अपरियन्तो*). The third thinks, “This world is finite and infinite” (*antavā ca ayam loko ananto ca*), that is, finite upward and downward, but infinite across (horizontally). The fourth wrong view is based on reasoning:

Here, bhikkhus, some recluse or brahmin is a rationalist [logician, *takkī*], an investigator (*vimamsī*). He declares his view, shaped by reason, deduced from his investigations, following his own mental genius, thus: “The world is neither finite nor infinite. Those recluses and brahmins who declare it to be infinite and bounded speak falsely. Those who declare it to be infinite and boundless speak falsely. Those who declare it to be both finite and infinite speak falsely. The world is neither finite nor infinite. (D 1.2.20/1:23 f)³⁵

4.5 The eel-wiggler. The fourth view here—that of the rationalist or investigator—appear simply to be the denial of the preceding three propositions based on speculator’s reasoning and argumentation. As Robinson, points out (1972), this last view’s “formal structure is the same as that of the eel-wiggler’s case” (wrong views 13-16) (1972:318 f). In the first type of eel-wiggling (*amarā,vikkhepa*), the Buddha declares,

³² Wrong views 5-7 due to partial-eternalism are respectively as follows: (5) theism; (6) the polytheism of beings who were gods corrupted by play; (7) polytheism of beings who were gods corrupted by mind.

³³ *Yam kho idam vuccati cakkhun ti pi sotam ti pi ghānan ti pi jivhā ti pi kāyo ti pi ayam attā anicco addhuvo asassato vipariṇāma,dhammo. Yañ ca kho idam vuccati cittan ti vā mano ti vā viññānan ti vā ayam attā nicco dhuvo sassato avipariṇāma,dhammo sassata,samañ that’eva ṭhassatī ti.*

³⁴ The term “extensionists” was first used by TW Rhys Davids, D:RD 1:35 ff. The Pāli *antānanta* = *anta* (finite) + *ananta* (infinite); *antānanta,vādī* = “those who hold that the world is finite and those who hold that the world is infinite,” a dvandva.

³⁵ *Idha bhikkhave ekacco samaṇo vā brāhmaṇo vā takkī hoti vimamsī. So takka,pariyāhatam vimamsā’nucaritam sayam,paṭibhānam evam āha: n’evāyam loko antavā na panānanto. Ye te samaṇa,brāhmaṇā evam āhamsu: antavā na panānanto. Ye te samaṇa,brāhmaṇā evam āhamsu: antavā ayam loko parivaṭṭamo ti tesam musā. Ye pi te samaṇa,brāhmaṇā evam āhamsu: ananto ayam loko अपरियन्तो to tesam pi musā. Ye pi te samana,brāhmaṇā evam āhamsu: antavā ca ayam loko ananto cāti tesam pi musā. N’evāyam loko antavā na panānanto ti.*

Here, bhikshus, some recluse or brahmin does not understand as it really is what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. He thinks, “I do not understand as it really is what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. If, without understanding, I were to declare something to be wholesome or unwholesome, my declaration might be false. If my declaration should be false, that would distress me, and that distress would be an obstacle to me.” Therefore, out of fear and loathing of making a false statement, he does not declare anything to be wholesome or unwholesome.

And when questioned about this or that point, he resorts to evasive statements and to endless equivocation, “I do not take it thus, nor do I take it in that way, nor do I take it in some other way. I do not say that it is not, nor do I say that it is neither this nor that.” (D 1.2.23/1:25-27)

While this first eel-wiggler fears being distressed by failure (D 1.2.24), the second fears that “desire, lust, hate or ill-will” (*tattha me assa chando vā rāgo vā doso vā paṭigho vā*) might arise in him (D 1.2.25). The third fears that he would be outwitted or left dumbfounded by clever debaters and hair-splitters (D 1.2.-26). And the fourth is simply dull and stupid (*mando hoti momūho*) (D 1.2.27). In every case, they resort to equivocation. In the light of this discussion, Robinson concludes:

The fourth lemma [of the *avyākata* theses] seems to have meant equivocation to early Buddhists. The rejection of this lemma, together with the explicit statements attributed to Gotama and his disciples to the effect that he knew what was to be known, should dispel the view that Gotama refused to assert the unexplained points because he was agnostic about them. (1972:318 f)

On the contrary, **the Brahma, jāla Sutta** declares, by way of a refrain after each section, the reason for the Buddha’s refusal to affirm or deny the undeclared statements, thus in the Buddha’s own words:

This [each of the 62 wrong views], the tathāgata understands. And he understands, “These standpoints, thus grasped and thus misapprehended, will lead to such a future destination, to such a state in the world beyond. And the tathāgata understands what transcends them, yet even that understanding he does not misapprehend. And because he is free from misapprehension, he has known for himself [within himself, *paccattam*] the cool [happy] state. Having understood as they really are the arising and passing away of feelings, their satisfaction, their dangers, and the escape from them, the tathāgata, bhikshus, is liberated through non-clinging.

These, bhikshus, are those truths that are deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, sublime, beyond the ken of reasoning, subtle, to be understood by the wise, which the tathāgata, having realized for himself through direct knowledge, expounds to others; and it is concerning these that those who rightly praise the tathāgata in accordance with reality would speak. (D 1.1.36/1:16 f, *passim*)

4.6 The spatial view. The last four speculative questions concern the state of the tathāgata, here referring to an awakened saint, that is, which of these four statements is true:

- (7) The tathāgata [one thus gone or self]³⁶ exists after death;
- (8) The tathāgata does not exist after death;
- (9) The tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death;
- (10) The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death.

These speculative questions belong to the same category as the question asked by a “certain monk” in **the Kevalāḍḍha Sutta**,³⁷ as regards to “Where do these four primary elements—earth, water, fire, air—cease without remainder?” The *where* of this question should be well noted. While the ancient Indian sages and seekers generally discuss existence in outer *spatial* terms,³⁸ the Buddha speaks in terms of inner space, of

³⁶ On the tr, see above (3).

³⁷ D 13.67b-85/1:215-223.

³⁸ See eg S Schayer, “Dat mahāyānistische Absolutum nach der Lehre der Mādhyamikas,” *Orientalische Literaturzeitung*, 1935:401-415; and RH Robinson, “Some methodological approaches to the unexplained points,” 1972: 321 f.

the six senses.³⁹ This spatial notion is clearly evident in the certain monk's question. Similarly, we have to understand the underlying notion (the unspoken assumptions) behind the four speculative questions, that is, "Does the deceased tathāgata have a spatial location, and is he perceptible to the senses?"

Early Upaniṣadic asseverations place the realm of the immortal, the liberated, variously in the *brahmaloka*, *svargaloka*, or the trans-solar region. It is quite literally and spatially the highest cosmic plane. (RH Robinson 1972:321)

Obviously, the answer has to lie outside of such a universe, as something non-temporal and non-spatial, or what is sometimes called "the realm of cessation" (*nirodha, dhātu*),⁴⁰ that is, a non-spatial (*apatiṭṭhita*) realm.⁴¹

This problem posed by these four speculative questions is also answered in **the Kaccāyana, gotta Sutta** (S 12.15), which opens with the Buddha declaring:

"This world, Kaccāna, mostly⁴² depends upon a duality: upon [the notion of] existence and [the notion of] non-existence.⁴³

But for one who sees **the arising of the world**⁴⁴ as it really is with right wisdom, there is [no notion of] non-existence regarding the world.

And for one who sees **the ending of the world** as it really is with right wisdom, there is no notion of existence regarding the world.⁴⁵ (S 12.15.4-5/2:17)

³⁹ See eg EJ Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1933:128.

⁴⁰ D 33.1.10(14)/3:215.

⁴¹ See RH Robinson 1972:322 f. On the connection of this discussion to the state of the tathāgata after death, see **Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S** (M 63) = SD 5.8 Intro (3.6).

⁴² "Mostly," *yebhuyyena*, here refers to ordinary beings (ie, excluding noble saints) who hold on to the extreme notions that either something exists (*atthitā*) (eternalism, *sassata*) or that it not exist (*n'atthitā*) (annihilationism, *uccheda*) (SA 2:32). See foll n.

⁴³ Bodhi: "In view of these explanations [see prec n] it would be misleading to translate these two terms, *atthitā* and *natthitā*, simply as 'existence' and 'non-existence' and then to maintain (as is sometimes done) that the Buddha rejects all ontological notions as inherently invalid. The Buddha's utterances at **22:94 [Puppha S]**, see Intro above], for example, show that he did not hesitate to make pronouncements with a clear ontological import when they were called for. In the present passage *atthitā* and *natthitā* are abstract nouns formed from the verbs *atthi* and *natthi*. It is thus the metaphysical assumptions implicit in such abstractions that are at fault, not the ascriptions of existence and nonexistence themselves." (S:B 734 n29). Here I have followed Bodhi in rendering *atthitā* as "the notion of existence" and *n'atthitā* as "the notion of non-existence."

⁴⁴ The terms *samudaya* and *nirodha* are commonly tr respectively as "origin" and "cessation." However, from the teachings of this Sutta, which underlies the Buddha's Teaching as a whole, they are better rendered as "arising" and "non-arising." Payutto: "Generally speaking, the word 'cease' [or 'end'] means to do away with something which has already arisen, or the stopping of something which has already begun. However, *nirodha* in the teaching of Dependent Origination (as also in *dukkhanirodha*, the third of the Noble Truths) means non-arising, or non-existence, of something because the cause of its arising is done away with. For example, the phrase 'when *avijjā* is *nirodha*, *saṅkhārā* are also *nirodha*,' which is usually taken to mean, "with the cessation of ignorance, volitional impulse ceases," in fact means that 'when there is no ignorance, or no arising of ignorance, or when there is no longer any problem with ignorance, there is no volitional impulses, volitional impulses do not arise, or there is no longer any problem from volitional impulses.' It does not mean that ignorance already arisen must be done away with before the volitional impulses which have already arisen will also be done away. Where *nirodha* should be rendered as cessation is when it is used in reference to the natural way of things, or the nature of compounded things... There is no need [here] to try to stop them, they cease of themselves." (Payutto 1994:106 f)

⁴⁵ The 2 sentences of this verse are the two extremes rejected by the Buddha in **Lokāyatika S** (S 12.48/2:77), including 2 more: that all is unity and that all is plurality. Comy: In terms of dependent arising, "the origin of the world" is the direct conditionality (*anuloma paccay'ākāra*), "the ending of the world" is the reverse conditionality" (*paṭiloma paccayākāra*). Here the world refers to formations (*saṅkhāra*). In reflecting on the direct-order dependent arising, (seeing the rise of phenomena) one does not fall into the notion of annihilationism; reflecting on the reverse dependent origination, (seeing the ending of phenomena) one does not fall into the notion of eternalism. (SA 2:33).

The saint in nirvana cannot be described in terms of any of such speculative statements of epistemology, nor in terms of the being and non-being of ontology, nor in terms of any other philosophical category.

5 Māluṅkyā,putta

Māluṅkyā,putta represents the modern intellectual who is more interested in speculative notions and philosophical arguments than in personal development. Through the Buddha's wisdom, he realizes the true purpose of the spiritual life and what the real and immediate questions of life are. Māluṅkyā,putta appears again in the following **Mahā Māluṅkyā,putta Sutta** (M 64), where he is the occasion for the Buddha's teaching on the five lower fetters⁴⁶ and on the latent tendencies (*anusaya*) of wrong views (M 64).

Although this sutta does not mention Māluṅkyā,putta's fate, the Māluṅkyā,putta S (S 4:72-76 = 35.95) records how Māluṅkyā,putta, in his old age, approaches the Buddha for a "teaching in brief" to go for a solitary retreat. The Buddha reproaches him for doing it so late, yet praises him as an example to other monks.

The Saṃyutta Commentary says that in his youth, Māluṅkyā,putta had been negligent and wallowed in sensual pleasures (SA 2:382). Now in his old age, he decided to dwell in the forest and meditate. After receiving a brief discourse on the six sense-bases from the Buddha, Māluṅkyā,putta goes into solitary retreat and attains arhathood. His verses are found in **the Theragāthā** (Tha 399-404, 794-817). A shorter version of this story is found in **the Aṅuttara** (A 2:248 f = 4.254) without the verses.

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The Shorter Discourse to Māluṅkyā,putta

M 63/1:426-432

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika's Park in Prince Jeta's grove near Sāvattihī.

The ten theses

2 Now, while the venerable Māluṅkyā,putta was alone in meditation, this thought⁴⁷ arose in his mind:

"These speculative views⁴⁸ have been left undeclared [unanswered] by the Blessed One, set aside⁴⁹ and rejected by him, namely:

The Buddha's teaching on the origin and ending of the world (in terms of the five aggregates) is found in **Loka S** (S 12.44/2:73 f).

⁴⁶ There are **the 10 fetters** (*saṃyojanā*), namely: Self-identity view (*sakkāya,diṭṭhi*), spiritual doubt (*vicikicchā*), attachment to rules and rites (*sīla-b,bata,parāmāsa*), sensual lust (*kāma,rāga*), repulsion (*paṭigha*), greed for form existence (*rūpa,rāga*), greed for formless existence (*arūpa,rāga*), conceit (*māna*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), ignorance (*avijjā*) (S 5:61, A 5:13, Vbh 377). In some places, no. 5 (*kāma,rāga*) is replaced by illwill (*vyāpāda*). The first 5 are the lower fetters (*oram,bhāgiya*), and the rest, the higher fetters (*uddham,bhāgiya*). The lower fetters are so called because they lead to birth in the sense-spheres.

⁴⁷ *Parivittakka*.

⁴⁸ *Diṭṭhi,gatāni*. These 10 theses are better known as *avyākata*, "the unexplained" or questions "set aside" (*thapanīya*) by the Buddha. They are listed in a number of suttas: **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9) = SD 7.14, **Pāsādikā S** (D 29), Cūḷa Māluṅkyā,putta S (M 63), **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72) = SD 6.15, **Vacchagotta Saṃyutta** (S 3:257 ff); **Abyākata Saṃyutta** (S 4:374-403); etc. See KN Jayatilleke 1963:242 ff, 473 ff. See U 66. In **Milinda,pañha**, the double-

The world

- (1) The world is eternal;
- (2) The world is not eternal;
- (3) The world is finite;
- (4) The world is infinite.

The self

- (5) The self [the soul] is the same as the body;
- (6) The self and the body are separate.

The tathāgata⁵⁰

- (7) The tathāgata [thus come] exists after death;
- (8) The tathāgata does not exist after death;
- (9) The tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death;
- (10) The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death.

“The Blessed One does not declare them for me, and I disapprove of this fact. So I shall go to the Blessed One and ask him the meaning of this.

If he declares whether

The world is eternal, or the world is not eternal;

The world is finite, or the world is infinite;

The self is the same as the body, or the self and the body are separate;

The tathāgata exists after death; he does not exist after death; he both exists and does not exist after death; or he neither exists nor not exist after death;

—then I will lead the holy life under him. If he does not declare them for me, then I will give up the training and return to the lay life.”⁵¹ [427]

Māluṅkya,putta sees the Buddha

3 Then, when it was evening, the venerable Māluṅkya,putta rose from meditation and went to the Blessed One. After paying homage to him, he sat down at one side and said to him:

“Here, bhante, 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,... . If he does not declare them for me, then I will give up the training and return to the low life.

(1) “If the Blessed One knows: ‘*The world is eternal,*’ then let the Blessed One declare to me: ‘The world is eternal’;

(2) “If the Blessed One knows: ‘*The world is not eternal,*’ then let the Blessed One declare to me: ‘The world is not eternal.’

—”If the Blessed One does not know either: ‘*The world is eternal,*’ or ‘*The world is not eternal,*’ then it is honest⁵² for one who does not know and who does not see to say, ‘I do not know, I do not see.’

“If the Blessed One knows:

(3) ‘*The world is finite,*’ ...

(4) ‘*The world is infinite*’ ...;

(5) ‘*The self is the same as the body,*’ ...

(6) ‘*The self and the body are separate*’ ...;

(7) ‘*The tathāgata exists after death,*...’ [428]

horned question is used skillfully by way of Buddhist apologetics. See also Jayatilleke 1963:226-228, 334 f, 350-352. See also **Abhaya Rāja,kumāra S** = SD 7.12 Intro.

⁴⁹ *Thapitāni* can also be “proved or demonstrated,” that is, “by other schools” (see Jayatilleke 1963:242).

⁵⁰ See Intro (3). On the ineffability of the tathāgata, see Harvey 1995:235-245.

⁵¹ *Hīnāy’āvattissāmi*, lit “return to what is low.”

⁵² *ujukam hoti*, lit “it is (something) straightforward.”

(8) ‘*The tathāgata does not exist after death,*’ then let the Blessed One declare to me: ‘The tathāgata does not exist after death.’

(9) “If the Blessed One knows: ‘*The tathāgata both exists and not exists after death,*’ then let the Blessed One declare to me: ‘The tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death.’

(10) “If the Blessed One knows: ‘*The tathāgata neither exists nor not exists after death,*’ then let the Blessed One declare to me: ‘The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death.’

“If the Blessed One does not know either: ‘*The tathāgata both exists and not exists after death,*’ or ‘*The tathāgata neither exists nor not exists after death,*’ then it is honest for one who does not know and who does not see to say, ‘I do not know, I do not see.’

The Buddha’s reply

4 “Now, Māluṅkyāputta, have I ever said to you: ‘Come, Māluṅkyāputta, lead the holy life under me and I will declare to you: ‘*The world is eternal,*’...or ‘*The tathāgata neither exists nor not exists after death.*’?”

“No,.”

“Have you ever told me: ‘I will lead the holy life under the Blessed One and the Blessed One will declare to me: ‘*The world is eternal,*’...or ‘*The tathāgata neither exists nor not exists after death?*’”

“No, bhante.”

“That being so, O hollow man,⁵³ **who is there to abandon what?**”⁵⁴

5a “If anyone should say thus: ‘I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares to me, ‘*The world is eternal,*’...or ‘*The tathāgata both exists and not exists after death,*’ [429] that would still remain undeclared by the tathāgata and meanwhile the person would die.

The simile of the poisoned dart

5b Suppose, Māluṅkyāputta, a man were wounded by a dart,⁵⁵ thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and blood relatives, brings a physician who is dart-remover⁵⁶ to treat him.

If he were to say,⁵⁷ ‘I will not let the dart-removing physician pull out this dart until I know whether the man who wounded me is a kshatriya [noble] or a brahmin [priest] or a vaishya [merchant] or a shudra [worker].’

Or, if he were to say, ‘I will not let the dart-removing physician pull out this dart until I know the name and the clan of the man who wounded me.

...until I know whether the man who wounded me is tall or short or of medium height.

⁵³ *Mogha, purisa*, lit “empty person,” sometimes tr “foolish one.” See **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22.6/1:132 = SD 3.13 n (“hollow man”).

⁵⁴ *Ko santo kam paccāikkhasi*, rendered by Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi as “who are you and what are you abandoning?” (D:ÑB 534). This I think is the crux (or thesis) of the sutta, where the Buddha’s answer here could be taken to be a hint at the higher purpose of the spiritual life, namely, the realization of non-self and dependent origination. This very same remark is made by the Buddha to Sunakkhata on his leaving the Order (**Paṭika S**, D 3:3), rendered by Walshe as “who are you and what are you giving up?” (D:W 534). Thanissaro’s rendition “who are you to be claiming grievances/making demands of anyone?” makes the Buddha sound somewhat arrogant! (Similarly Rhys Davids at D:RD 3:8). This interpretation *might* apply there but certainly not in our sutta.

⁵⁵ *Salla*, sometimes rendered as “arrow” (*sara*). I’ve used “dart” which is also an archaic word for “arrow” (Webster’s 3rd New International Dictionary). Apparently a dart is smaller than an arrow but still shot from a bow (*dhanu*).

⁵⁶ *Salla, katta*, “one who works on (removes) a dart.” *Bhisakka* means “physician, doctor.” The Buddha is said to be “an unsurpassed barb-remover” (Sn 560). The word is often tr as “surgeon” but which has a broader connotation than *salla, katta*, which could also be rendered as “one who works with a dart” but still has a restricted sense than “surgeon.”

⁵⁷ *Vadeyya* is optative or “potential” (*sattamī*) tense, usually rendered “would say.” I have rendered all the optatives in these sentences freely to keep to idiomatic English rather than reflect the Pali syntax.

...until I know whether the man who wounded me is dark or brown or golden-skinned.
 ...until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such and such a village or town or city.
 ...until I know whether the bow⁵⁸ with which I am wounded is a longbow or a crossbow.
 ...until I know whether the bowstring with which I am wounded is fibre or reed or sinew or hemp or bark.
 ...until I know whether the shaft with which I am wounded is wild or cultivated.
 ...until I know whether the feathers fitted to the shaft with which I am wounded is from a vulture or a heron or a hawk or a peacock or a stork.
 ...until I know whether the sinew that binds the shaft with which I am wounded is that of an ox or a buffalo or a deer or a monkey.
 ...until I know whether the dart that wounded me is hoof-tipped or curved or barbed or calf-footed or oleander. [430]

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

So, too, Māluṅkyā,putta, if anyone were to say thus: “I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until he declares to me, ‘*The world is eternal*,’ ...or ‘*The tathāgata both exists and not exists after death*,’ that would still remain undeclared by the tathāgata and meanwhile the person would die.

The realities of life

6 Māluṅkyā,putta, 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 or not there is the view ‘*The world is eternal*,’ or the view ‘*The world is not eternal*,’ there is birth, there is ageing, there is death, [431] there are sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now.

If there is the view ‘*The world is finite*,’ ...

... ‘*The world is infinite*,’ ...

... ‘*The self [The soul] is the same as the body*,’ ...

... ‘*The self and the body are separate*,’ ...

... ‘*The tathāgata exists after death*,’ ...

... ‘*The tathāgata does not exist after death*,’

... ‘*The tathāgata both exists and not exists after death*,’ ...

... ‘*The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death*,’ the holy life cannot be lived.

Whether or not there is the view ‘*The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death*—there is birth, there is ageing, there is death, there are sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now.

The undeclared

7 Therefore, Māluṅkyā,putta, remember what I have left undeclared⁵⁹ as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared.

And what have I left undeclared?

(1) ‘*The world is eternal*,’ I have left undeclared;

(2) ‘*The world is not eternal*,’ I have left undeclared;

(3) ‘*The world is finite*,’ I have left undeclared;

(4) ‘*The world is infinite*,’ I have left undeclared;

(5) ‘*The self [The soul] is the same as the body*,’ I have left undeclared;

(6) ‘*The self and the body are separate*,’ I have left undeclared;

(6) ‘*The tathāgata exists after death*,’ I have left undeclared;

(8) ‘*The tathāgata does not exist after death*,’ I have left undeclared;

⁵⁸ *Dhanu*, see §5b n on *salla*.

⁵⁹ “Undeclared,” *avyākata* or *abyākata*, (1) undefined, unexplained, left without an answer; (2) indeterminate (neither *kusala* nor *akusala*); here sense (1) applies.

- (9) ‘*The tathāgata both exists and not exists after death,*’ I have left undeclared;
 (10) ‘*The tathāgata neither exists nor not exist after death,*’ I have left undeclared;

The purpose of the holy life

8 Why, Māluṅkyā,putta, have I left them⁶⁰ undeclared?

Because it is unbeneficial [not connected to the goal];

it is not connected to the Dharma;

it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life,

it does not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation [of suffering], to inner peace, to direct

knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.

That is why I have left them undeclared.

9 And what, Māluṅkyā,putta, have I declared?

‘**This is suffering,**’ I have declared;

‘**This is the arising of suffering,**’ I have declared;

‘**This is the ending of suffering,**’ I have declared;

‘**This is the path leading to the end of suffering,**’ I have declared.

10 And why, Māluṅkyā,putta, have I declared that?

Because, Māluṅkyā,putta, it is beneficial,

it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life,

it leads to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation [of suffering], to inner peace, to direct knowledge, to

awakening, to nirvana.

That is why I have declared them.

Therefore, Māluṅkyā,putta, [432] remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared.”

This is what the Blessed One said. The venerable Māluṅkyā,putta⁶¹ joyfully approved of the Blessed One’s word.

— evaṃ —

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⁶⁰ The Pali text uses *tam*, “that,” but I have rendered in the idiomatic plural in English since “that” refers to the ten undeclared theses, while the Pali refers to them as a set.

⁶¹ **Māluṅkyāputta S** (S 4:72-76/35.95 = SD 5.9) records how Māluṅkyāputta, in his old age, approaches the Buddha for a “teaching in brief” to go for a solitary retreat. The Buddha reproaches him for doing it so late, yet praises him as an example to other monks. After receiving a brief discourse on the six sense-bases from the Buddha, Māluṅkyā,putta goes into solitary retreat and attains arhathood.

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