



# The story of Malunkyaputta

We usually expect religions to give us answers to the big questions of life, such as how the universe began, why we are here, and whether our souls survive after death. The Buddha was not so concerned with these questions, however. He considered these matters to be vain metaphysical speculation because they are questions that can never be satisfactorily answered. He insisted that religious teaching must be practical. It should not aim to satisfy intellectual curiosity but, instead, it should lead to complete freedom from suffering. If a religious teaching does not do this then he considered it of little value. The Buddha did not begin with big philosophical questions; his starting point was everyday experience. Some of the Buddha's disciples did not appreciate his approach.

There is a well-known story of one disciple, named Malunkyaputta, who complained that the Buddha had not given him the answers he was looking for. He accused the Buddha of failing to answer his questions because he did not in fact know the answers and he was not honest enough to admit that was the case.

The ten questions on which the Buddha was silent are:

1. Is the universe eternal?
2. Is the universe not eternal?
3. Is the universe finite?
4. Is the universe infinite?
5. Is the soul the same as the body?
6. Are the soul and the body two separate things?
7. Does the Buddha continue to exist after death?
8. Does the Buddha no longer exist after death?
9. Does the Buddha both exist and not exist after death?
10. Is the Buddha both non-existent and not non-existent after death?

Malunkyaputta challenged the Buddha to answer the questions if he knew the answers, and said that if he did not know them then he should be honest and admit that. He then threatened to leave the Buddhist community if the Buddha did not respond to his satisfaction.

The Buddha replied by pointing out that he had never promised answers to such questions to any of his disciples in the first place, and therefore he could not be accused of misleading them. He then went on to tell the story of the man who is wounded with a poisoned arrow.



A man is seriously wounded by a poisoned arrow. His relatives take him to a surgeon, but he insists that he does not want the arrow to be removed until he has established who shot it, what social background the assailant came from, his name and what he looks like. And on top of this, he insists he needs to know what sort of bow was used, what sort of arrow and what wood the arrow was made of. Only then will he accept treatment. In such a situation, said the Buddha, the man would surely die before all this information could be gathered. Likewise, one might well die before understanding the answers to these ten metaphysical questions. Malunkyaputta was convinced by this and remained a monk.

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side



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