

The Parable of the Arrow*

"Consider, Malunkyaputta, this story of a man wounded by a poisoned arrow. His friends, relatives, and well-wishers gather around him and a surgeon is called. But the wounded man says, 'Before he takes out this arrow, I want to know if the man who shot me was a Kshatriya, a Brahmin, a merchant, or an untouchable.'

"Or he says, 'I won't let this arrow be removed until I know the name and tribe of the man who shot me.'

"Or: 'Was he tall, short, or of medium height?'

"Or: 'Was he black, brown, or yellow-skinned?'

"What do you think would happen to such a man, Malunkyaputta? Let me tell you. He will die.

"And that is what happens when a man comes to me and says, 'I will not follow the Dhamma until the Buddha tells me whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether the world is finite or infinite, whether the soul and the body are the same or different, whether the liberated person exists or does not exist after death, whether he neither exists nor does not exist after death.' He will die, Malunkyaputta, before I get a chance to make everything clear to him.

"Being religious and following Dhamma has nothing to do with the dogma that the world is eternal; and it has nothing to do with the dogma that the world is not eternal. For whether the world is eternal or otherwise, birth, old age, death, sorrow, pain, misery, grief, and despair exist. I am concerned with the extinction of these.

"Therefore, consider carefully, Malunkyaputta, the things that I have taught and the things I have not taught. What are the things I have not taught?

"I have not taught that the world is eternal. I have not taught that the world is not eternal. I have not taught that the world is finite. I have not taught that the world is infinite. I have not taught that the soul and the body are the same. I have not taught that the soul and the body are different. I have not taught that the liberated person exists after death. I have not taught that he does not exist after death. I have not taught that he both exists and does not exist after death; that he neither exists nor does not exist after death.

"Why, Malunkyaputta, have I not taught all this? Because all this is useless, it has nothing to do with real Dhamma, it does not lead to cessation of passion [grasping and agitation], to peace, to supreme wisdom, and the holy life, to Nirvana. That is why I have not taught all this.

"And what have I taught, Malunkyaputta? I have taught that suffering exists, that suffering has an origin, that suffering can be ended, that there is a way to end suffering.

"Why, Malunkyaputta, have I taught this? Because this is useful, it has to do with real Dhamma, it leads to the cessation of passion [grasping and agitation], it brings peace, supreme wisdom, the holy life, and Nirvana. This is why I have taught all this.

"Therefore, Malunkyaputta, consider carefully what I have taught and what I have not taught."

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