This is what I heard. Once, the Fortunate One [the Buddha] was staying in Sāvatthī, in Jeta’s grove in Anāthapiṇḍika’s park.

There, the venerable Mālukya was living in solitary seclusion. Mālukya reflected as follows. “There are certain speculative matters that the Fortunate One has left undetermined, set aside, and rejected. Is the world eternal, or is the world not eternal? Is the world infinite, or is the world finite? Is the life force identical to the body, or is the life force different from the body? Does a person who has come to know reality exist after death; not exist after death; both exist and not exist after death; or neither exist nor not exist after death? These are the matters that the Fortunate One has not determined. It does not please me or seem right to me that the Fortunate One has not determined these matters. I will approach the Fortunate One and ask him the reason for this refusal. If he determines these matters for me, then I will continue the training. If he does not determine these matters for me, then I will abandon the training and return to the lowly world.”

So, in the evening, Mālukya emerged from his solitude and approached the Fortunate One. After exchanging greetings, he sat down and said, “When I was in solitary seclusion, it occurred to me that you have left undetermined, set aside, and rejected certain speculative matters. Is the world eternal, or is the world not eternal? Is the world infinite, or is the world finite? Is the life force identical to the body, or
is the life force different from the body? Does a person who has come
to know reality exist after death; not exist after death; both exist and
not exist after death; or neither exist nor not exist after death? These
are the matters that you have not determined.

"It does not please me or seem right to me that you have not deter-
mined these matters. So I thought that I would approach you and ask
you the reason for this refusal. If you determine these matters for me,
then I will continue the training. If you do not determine these mat-
ters for me, then I will abandon the training and return to the lowly
world. So if you know the answers to these questions, then answer me!
If you do not know, then it is straightforward for a person who does not
know or see to say, 'I do not know, I do not see.'"

The Buddha replied, "Mālukya, did I ever say to you, 'Come,
Mālukya, train with me, I will determine for you whether the world is
eternal or not eternal, infinite or finite,' and so on?"

"No, you did not," responded Mālukya.

"In that case, you fool of a man (2.1), who do you think you are, and
what is it that you are repudiating?"

The Buddha continued, "Mālukya, if anyone were to say, 'I will not
enter the life of training under the Fortunate One until he determines
for me whether the world is eternal or not eternal, infinite or finite,' and
so on, I would still not determine those matters, and in the mean-
time that person would die.

"It is, Mālukya, as if a person would be shot by an arrow [2.3] thickly
smear with poison, and his friends, companions, and relatives would
hire a physician to remove the arrow. But that person would say, 'I will
not have this arrow removed until I know who shot it; whether he was
of the upper, middle, or low class; his name and family; whether he was
tall, short, or of medium stature; whether he was black, brown, or
light-skinned; whether he lived in such and such a town, village, or
city; and until I know whether the bow that was used to shoot the
arrow was a longbow or a crossbow; and until I know whether the bow-
string that was used to shoot the arrow was made from the swallowwort
plant, from samba hemp, sinew, māruva hemp, or from the bark of the
kbrin tree; and until I know whether the shaft was made from wild or
cultivated wood; and until I know whether the feathers on the shaft
were those of a vulture, crow, hawk, peacock, or stork; and until I know
whether the sinew used to wrap the shaft was from a cattle, water buf-
falo, deer, or monkey; and until I know whether the arrow that was
used to wound me was razor-tipped, curved, tubular, calf-toothed, or
oleander.

"All of this would remain unknown to that person, Mālukya, and in
the meantime he or she would die. So, too, Mālukya, someone might
say, 'I will not enter the life of training under the Fortunate One until
he determines for me whether the world is eternal or not eternal, in-
finite or finite,' and so on. Still, these matters would remain undeter-
mined, and in the meantime that person would die.

"Mālukya, because there is the speculative view The world is eternal,
the training life cannot be cultivated. And because there is the specu-
lative view The world is not eternal, the training life cannot be cultivated.
Whether there is the view The world is eternal or the view The world is
not eternal, whether there is the view The life force is different from the
body or the view The life force is the same as the body, and so on, still there is
birth, there is aging, there is death; still there is sadness, regret, unease,
depression, and anxiety. It is the destruction of all of this in this very
world, that I make known.

"It is for this reason, Mālukya, that you should bear in mind that
which I have not determined, because it is indeterminate, and
that which I have determined, because it is determinate. What have I
not determined? I have not determined The world is eternal, I have not
determined The world is not eternal, I have not determined The life force
is different from the body, I have not determined A person who has come to
know reality exists after death, A person who has come to know reality does not
exist after death, A person who has come to know reality both exists and does not
exist after death, or A person who has come to know reality neither exists nor does
not exist after death.

"And why, Mālukya, have I not determined these matters? To do so
does not lead to what is beneficial, to the beginning of training, to dis-
enchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowing,
to awakening, to unbinding. That is the reason that I have not deter-
mained these matters.

"And what, Mālukya, have I determined? I have determined This is
unease. I have determined *This is the arising of unease*. I have determined *This is the cessation of unease*. I have determined *This is the path leading to the cessation of unease*.

"And why, Mālukya, have I determined these matters? To do so leads to what is beneficial, to the beginning of training, to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowing, to awakening, to unbinding. That is the reason I have determined these matters.

"It is for this reason, Mālukya, that you should bear in mind that which I have not determined, because it is indeterminate, and that which I have determined, because it is determinate."

---

*This is what the Fortunate One said. Exalted, the venerable Mālukya rejoiced at the words of the Fortunate One.*
We remain transfixed there, enchanted by pleasure and flamboyant speculation.

(De-orientation)

Why do we persist in wandering ghostlike in the field of what St. Augustine refers to as "the delectable desolation"? The first *sutta* was explicit about part of the answer; namely, because of our unconscious, addictive inclination toward "pleasing, desirable, charming," et cetera, sensory phenomena. The present *sutta* identifies the role played by speculative questions in keeping us locked in an improper range of living. It also makes clear that the scope of the Buddha's project does not encompass what we normally take to be religion, philosophy, or "spirituality."

What counts as a legitimate question? Well, doesn't it depend on the scope of the matter at hand? The idea of proper range or "native domain" reappears here in a different context. Imagine that you are my music teacher. In the middle of a lesson on scales, I stop to ask you a question concerning German grammar. How would you react? Wouldn't you point out that the question is irrelevant and encourage me to concentrate on learning my scales? The structure of this exchange is essentially the same as that behind "A Brief Talk to Mālukya." But while the dissonance between subject matters in the present example—musical scales/German grammar—is apparent, it is not so obvious in the *sutta*. The reason is that we expect "religious" authorities such as the Buddha to have answers to the big questions of life and death, the kind that Mālukya is asking in the *sutta*. The dissonance arises from the facts that, first of all, such questions are really not questions at all and, second, the Buddha is not a religious authority. So, in this sense, the *sutta* serves as a corrective to certain presuppositions we are most likely bringing to our study of Buddhism.

We might alter the example some to correspond more closely to the tenor of Mālukya's questions. Imagine that I interrupt the lesson on scales to ask you, my music teacher, about the cosmic origins of music, or about whether the sound made by my instrument persists in some other dimension after it fades into silence. Now, these questions are really no more relevant to the learning of scales than is the one about German grammar. But because there is something intriguing about these questions, they seem legitimate; they seem, that is, to require answers. Questions like these stimulate the powerful human urge to weave narratives about the origins, dissolution, and death of the world and its beings, and what may lie beyond the world.

In the proposition, I use the term "flamboyant" to describe such speculations. I use that term because intriguing questions put themselves on display in a manner that demands our attention. They strut ostentatiously before our cognitive apparatus. How can you ignore speculation on life after death, the possibility of eternal damnation, theories of the supernatural, or the idea of an awesome force, of "God"? Once a question concerning such matters is posed, it comes to life, both personally and culturally, in the form of stories, or narrative strategies. These stories, of course, are called "answers" by those who hold them dear; and these answers are attempts to make sense of what is unknown. Since, in the Buddha's view, a primary constituent of human awakening is developing the natural capacity to "see things as they are," this equally natural human proclivity to spin narrative in the face of speculative matters is a serious obstacle. So a primary goal of Buddhist training is to cease grasping at the ungraspable. And a speculative notion is speculative precisely because of its ungraspable referent.

You may want to reflect for a moment on actual questions or speculative positions that you yourself hold dear. Generally, in our culture, such positions relate to ideas that are embedded in theistic worldviews, concerning God, creation, heaven and hell, angels, saints, Satan,
and so on. Very often, Buddhists, too, hold speculative positions concerning matters such as *karma*, the roles of *bodhisattva*, the availability of cosmic *buddha*, the potency of *mantra*, and so on. Even purportedly nonreligious secularists hold speculative views concerning matters such as the origin of the universe, the supremacy of science, and the power of reason. One of the central points of “A Brief Talk to Mālukya” is that the speculative questions swirling around such matters are not only useless to the Buddha’s path but counterproductive, and even destructive, to the human quest for happiness.

Now, having reflected, you may have discovered that what the Buddha would call a useless or speculative question is precisely one that you consider—and indeed is almost universally considered—a perfectly legitimate religious, philosophical, or “spiritual” query. So we need to ask: On what basis does the Buddha determine the value of a question? As the Buddha tells Mālukya in the *sutta*, the determining factor for an unworthy speculative position is that it leaves “birth, aging, death; sadness, regret, unease, depression, and anxiety”—in short, *dukkha* (see note 9.6)—undiminished. Even if you knew precisely how some supernatural being created the universe, the fact is that birth, aging, and human dissatisfaction would remain just as they are. Hence, speculations on, for example, the matter of cosmic creation are not only useless but also destructive distortions from the important—and knowable—matters concerning awakening. So what kinds of questions are worthy of attention? The Buddha’s answer is: those which lead “to what is beneficial, to the beginning of training, to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowing, to awakening, to unbinding.” So do you have a question about the nature of phenomena? If so, the Buddha can provide you with, or lead you to realizing for yourself, an answer. Why? Because (1) there is an answer (it is determinate, and hence not a speculative question) and (2) knowing the answer leads to profound well-being and ease.

In delineating the types of questions that he is counting as legitimate, the Buddha is simultaneously demarcating the range of his teachings. We are used to thinking of a religious figure as someone whose realization encompasses the whole of life, from the creation of the cosmos through social norms, governance, gender relations, diet, etcetera, to the afterlife and the ultimate end. The Buddha emphatically states in “A Brief Talk to Mālukya” that his knowledge is of one thing.

From one perspective, this one thing is the destruction of *dukkha*; from another, it is “awakening” or “unbinding”—*nirvāṇa* (see note 12.1). Since the overcoming of unease/realization of unbinding is a purely human matter as opposed to a supernatural one, what must be knownable. How could it not be? It is in order to determine such matters that the Buddha teaches.

**NOTES**

2.1. "Is the world... after death?" Mālukya’s questions are flawed in at least four ways: first, they are laden with hidden presuppositions; second, they cannot be answered; third, they serve to proliferate storytelling; and fourth, they are distracting. Since many of our own questions and speculations about the big matters of life and death are structurally similar to Mālukya’s, it will be worthwhile to look at these four flaws in some depth.

**Presupposing**. The questions, as posed, reveal such a “thicker of views,” as the Buddha elsewhere phrases it, as to be incoherent (see the discourses to Vacchagotta: *Majjhimanikāya* 71–73). That is, each of the questions contains far-reaching assumptions about the matters at hand. The person asking the question already has made up his or her mind about, for example, the existence of a “life force” (the term, *jīva*, is often translated as “soul”), or about the strict dichotomy of being/non-being, or about just what is designated by the term “world.” In each instance, an active, if largely unconscious, conceptual schema is pushing the question along. This hidden schema gives the question a piñata-like quality: each time you take a whack at answering it, some more stuff—presuppositions, assumptions, axioms, personal idiosyncrasies, and so on—falls out. So, like a piñata, the question being posed may have a legitimate enough *appearance*, but in reality its substance is the hidden sugary stuff.

**Indeterminate**. Even given that the questions being posed were transparently coherent, they are not answerable. There is, in fact, a modern-day story along the lines of the question *Does a buddha exist after death?* A practitioner asked the teacher whether or not there was life after death. The teacher answered, “I don’t know.” The student, somewhat crestfallen, said, “But I thought that you were an enlightened master.” “Yes,” the master responded, “but not a dead one.” The master in this story knows that any possible answer would be not an answer at all but a mere expression of a belief, or of a hope, or of something else other than real knowledge.

**Narrative**. A prescribed answer of the sort just mentioned is at heart a story. Apparently, one of the jobs of a religious tradition is to provide a
story in the face of the unknown. Do you want to know how the world was
created? How it will end? What happens when you die? Well, the place to
find the answer is your religious text of choice—the Bible, the Koran, the
Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, even certain later Buddhist śāstras (in Sanskrit)
and tantras, for that matter. The answer will, of course, come in the form
of a story. No, the answer is a story. I don’t say “just” a story, because we
all know the tremendous power of religious narratives to spur people
equally to acts of heartwarming compassion and to acts of monstrous vio-
ence. The problem with narratives is thus not that they are ineffectual; it
is that they are pointing in the wrong direction. A Buddhist teacher I
know has a stock answer to any question even hinting at the metaphysical:
“You already know.” That is, the answer is to be found in immediate expe-
rience. But, concomitant with such an (immediate, imminent) answer is,
of course, the dissolution of the very (metaphysical) question.

Distracting. This last point shows the final reason that the questions
being posed by Māñjuśrī are flawed; namely, they are distracting. If I am
cought up in narratives about the issues of life and death, I am not attend-
ing to the actual processes of life and death. All language, of course, has a
certain metaphorical, figurative quality to it. But, in reading the sūtras pre-
ented here, I think you will find that the Buddha’s language, even when
he is literally telling stories, always points directly to life as it is lived, to life
as it is experienced immediately. Why? Because awakening is awakening
to life. Awakening is awakening to the world, to being, to existence, as it is.
This being so, to what should you be attending? Well, it’s right in front of
you. No story is required to see that. Just look!

2.2. “you fool of a man”: Māñjuśrī’s demand that the Buddha answer such irrele-
vant questions reveals Māñjuśrī’s utter lack of the most basic understand-
ing of the nature of “the training” and of the tenor of the Buddha’s
teachings. What has Māñjuśrī been doing all this time?

2.3. “shot by an arrow”: With this famous simile of the arrow, the Buddha illus-
trates in graphic and somewhat slapstick terms the absurdity of misap-
piled questioning and speculation. Although there may be situations in
which the questions being posed here are pertinent (say, in a court of law),
given the victim’s immediate situation, these same questions are not only
pointless but life-threatening. The simile is also suggestive of the ther-
apeutic nature of the Buddha’s teachings. The physician is, of course, the
Buddha, and the victim is, well, you. The Buddha knows how to relieve
you of the poison arrow of detrimental states of mind and ways of being,
but certain of your entrenched views stand in the way of allowing the
teachings to do their work. Do you know which ones?