

Study Guide to MN 63 *Culamalunkya Sutta*

The Importance of Having the Appropriate View

In pursuing the Buddhist path, it is important to understand which views and questions place you on that path and which do not. There are many ‘spiritual’ views and concerns that might appear important or even essential but that are not helpful to the process of liberation. In this discourse the Buddha refuses to answer eight questions that a monk is staking his monastic life on. The Buddha declares that these are of no importance for the Buddhist path, that they are unconnected to the goal of Buddhist practice. To exemplify this teaching the Buddha offers his famous simile of the man who refuses to have an arrow pulled out of his body until he receives answers to a series of irrelevant questions.

In this sutta the Buddha is clearly applying the principle we saw in MN 58 that he only teaches what is true and beneficial. While it is possible that the Buddha might have had true answers to the eight questions asked of him, his refusal to answer is because it would not be beneficial to do so.

Note:

In reading the suttas in English it is important to question the accuracy of the translation. Sometimes subtle choices in translation can have a big impact on the meaning of a passage. For example, in paragraph six Bhikkhu Bodhi has, “if there is the view ‘the world is eternal,’ the holy life cannot be lived.” In contrast Thanissaro Bhikkhu has “it’s not the case that when there is the view, ‘The cosmos is eternal,’ there is the living of the holy life.”

The original Pali could be translated more literally strict fashion as,
“The living of the holy life would be in there being the view, ‘The world is eternal’: Such is not the case”

or:

“That the living of the holy life would be when there is the view, “The world is eternal’: Such is not the case.”

Contrary to the way Bhikkhu Bodhi has translated the sentence, the Pali does not suggest that merely holding the view that the world is eternal would prevent living the holy life. The Pali seems to say that the holy life is not lived if it is based on the idea that the world is eternal. One could hold the view without it interfering with living the holy life.

Reflection:

In this sutta the Buddha declares that eight different views are not beneficial to living the holy life. Can you think of other ‘spiritual’ views that might similarly be unconnected to the Buddhist path to liberation? Has the simile of the man wounded by the arrow ever characterized your questioning, explorations, or decisions?