

Personal Identity Rebirth and Kamma

by

Buddhism

Bhikkhu Nagasena to King Milinda



Introduction –

King Milinda (Menander in Sanskrit) conquered Kubal region (today's Afghanistan) and central India during mid second century B.C. The Indian referred to him as "the Greatest King in all India".

With the heritage of Greek culture and learning, he was earnest to familiarize himself with the Indian culture and learning. However, for a long time, he was unable to find an Indian philosopher or a religious leader whom he could regard as a worthy opponent in debate, until he met Nagasena. Nagasena was the leader of a company of the Buddhist Order, and highly esteemed by the people.

*The debate between King Milinda and Nagasena remarked the confrontation between philosophy and wisdom of the East and those of the West. Nagasena was aware that his performance might determine the future of the Buddhist community. The historical debate was recorded with a total of 262 questions and answers, entitled *Milindapanha*, or *Questions of King Milinda*.*

The questions were asked step by step through the various aspects of Buddhism, and the answers were given in a clear, striking and wholly appropriate way, so that the King was totally convinced by the profound doctrines of Buddhism.

Later, the King became a lay believer and donated a monastery named Milinda. Furthermore, it is said that he relinquished the throne to his son, and became a monk, in time gaining the status of an arahat.

Buddhism had already begun to exercise an important influence upon not only the Greek world of the West, but also Sri Lanka and Burma in the south and China in the east. This was also a period of transition to Mahayana Buddhism, as the success of Nagasena to convert a monarch was directly allied to the spirit of the later followers of Mahayana Buddhism.

Today, Milindapanha, is still regarded as an introduction to Buddhism, and used in Theravada Buddhism as a manual of instruction for the Bhiksus

The king asked: "When someone is reborn, *Venerable Nagasena*, is he the same as the one who just died, or is he another?"

The elder replied: "He is neither the same nor another."

"Give me an illustration!"\

"What do you think, Great King? When you were a tiny infant, newly born and quite soft, were you then the same as the one who is now grown up?"

No, that infant was one, I, now grown up, am another."

"If that is so, then, Great King, you have had no mother, no father, no reaching, no schooling! Do we then take it that there is one mother for the embryo in the first stage, another for the second stage, another for the third, another for the fourth, another for the baby, another for the grown-up man? Is the school-boy one person, and the one who has finished school another? Does one commit a crime, but the hands and feet of another are cut off?"

"Certainly not! But what would you say, Reverend Sir, to all that?"

The elder replied: "I was neither the tiny infant, newly born and quite soft, nor am I now the grown-up man; but all these are comprised in one unit depending on this very body."

Give me a simile!"

"If a man were to light a lamp, could it give light throughout the whole night?"

"Yes, it could."

"Is now the flame which burns in the first watch of the night the same as the one which burns in the second?"

"It is not the same."

"Or is the flame which burns in the second watch the same as the one which burns in the last one?"

"It is not the same."

"Do we then take it that there is one lamp in the first watch of the night, another in the second, and another again in the third?"

"No, it is just because of the light of the lamp shines throughout the night."

"Even so must we understand the collocation of a series of successive dharmas. At rebirth one dharma arises, while another stops; but the two processes take place almost simultaneously (i.e. *they are continuous*). *Therefore, the first act of consciousness in the new existence is neither the same as the last act of consciousness in the previous existence, nor it is the another.*"

"Give me another simile!"

"Milk, once the milking is done, turns after sometimes into curds; from curds it turns into fresh butter; and from fresh butter into ghee. Would it now be correct to say that the milk is the same thing as the curds, or the fresh butter, or the ghee?"

"No, it would not. But they have been produced because of it."

"Just so must be understood the collocation of a series of successive dharmas."

Personal Identity and Karma

The king asked: "Is there, Venerable Nagasena, any being which passes on from this body to another body?"

"No, Your Majesty!"

"If there were no passing on from this body to another, would not one then in one's next life be freed from the evil deeds committed in the past?"

"Yes, that would be so if one were not linked once again with a new organism. But since, Your Majesty, one is linked once again with a new organism, therefore one is not freed from one's evil deeds."

"Give me a simile!"

"If a man should steal another man's mangoes, would he deserve a thrashing for that?"

"Yes, of course!"

"But he would not have stolen the very same mangoes as the other one had planted. Why should he deserve a thrashing?"

"For the reason that the stolen mangoes had grown because of those that were planted."

"Just so, Your Majesty, it is because of the deeds one does, whether pure or impure, by means of this psycho-physical organism, that one is once again linked with another psycho-physical organism, and is not freed from one's evil deeds."

"Very good, Venerable Nagasena!"

The king said: "Is it through wise attention that people become exempt from further rebirth?"

"Yes, that is due to wise attention, and also to wisdom, and the other wholesome dharmas."

"But is not wise attention the same as wisdom?"

"No, Your Majesty! Attention is one thing, and wisdom another. Sheep and goats, oxen and buffaloes, camels and asses have attention, but wisdom they have not."

"Well put, Venerable Nagasena!"

The king asked: "What is the mark of attention, and what is the mark of wisdom?"

"Consideration is the mark of attention, cutting off that of wisdom."

"How is that? Give me a simile!"

"You know barley-reapers, I suppose?"

"Yes, I do."

"How then do they reap the barley?"

"With the left hand they seize a bunch of barley, in the right hand they hold a sickle, and they cut off the barley with that sickle."

"Just so, Your Majesty, the yogin seizes his mental processes with his attention, and by his wisdom he cuts off the defilements."

"Well put, Venerable Nagasena!"

The king said: "When you just spoke of the other wholesome dharmas, which one did you mean?"

"I meant **morality, faith, vigour, mindfulness, and concentration.**"

"And what is the **mark of morality**?"

"Morality has the mark of providing a basis for all wholesome dharmas, whatever they may be. When based on morality, all the wholesome dharmas will not dwindle away."

"Give me an illustration!"

"As all plants and animals which increase, grow, and prosper, do so with the earth as their basis, just so the yogin, with morality as his support, with morality as basis, develops the five cardinal virtues, i.e. **faith, vigour, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom**

"Give me an illustration!"

"As the builder of a city when constructing a town, first of all clears the site, removes all stumps and thorns, and levels it; and only after that he lays out and marks off the roads and cross-roads, and so builds the city. Even so the yogin develops the five cardinal virtues with morality as his support, with morality as his basis."

The king said: "What is the **mark of faith**?"

"Faith makes serene, and it leaps forward."

"And how does faith make serene?"

"When faith arises it arrests the [Five] Hindrances, and the heart becomes free from them, clear, serene and undisturbed."

"Give me an illustration!"

"A universal monarch might on his way, together with his fourfold army, cross over a small stream. Stirred up by the elephants and horses, by the chariots and infantry, the water would become disturbed, agitated and muddy. Have crossed over, the universal monarch would order his men to bring some water to drink. But the king would possess a miraculous water-cleaning gem, and his men, in obedience to his command, would throw it into the stream. Then at once all fragments of vegetation would float away, the mud would settle at the bottom, the stream would become clear, serene and undisturbed, and fit to be drunk by the universal monarch. **Here the stream corresponds to the heart, the monarch's men to the yogin, the fragments of vegetation and the mud to the defilements, and the miraculous water-clearing gem to faith.**"

"And how does faith leap forward?"

"When the yogin sees that the hearts of other have been set free, he leaps forward, by way of aspiration, to the various fruits of a holy life, and he

makes efforts to attain the yet unattained, to find the yet unfound, to realize the yet unrealized."

"Give me an illustrated!"

"Suppose that a great cloud were to burst over a hill-slope. The water then would flow down the slope, would first fill all the hill's clefts, fissures, and gullies, and would then run into the river below, making its bank overflow on both sides. Now suppose further a great crowd of people had come along, and unable to size up either the width or the depth of the river, should stand frightened and hesitating on the bank. But then the some man would come along, who, conscious of his own strength and power, would firmly tie on his loin-cloth and jump across the river. And the great crowd of people, seeing him on the other side, would cross likewise. Even so the yogin, when he has seen that the hearts of others have been set free, leaps forward, by aspiration, to the various fruits of the holy life, and he makes efforts to attain the yet unattained, to find the yet unfound, to realise the yet unrealized. And this is what the Lord Buddha has said in the Samyutta Nikaya:

"By faith the flood is crossed, By wakefulness the sea; By vigour ill is passed; By wisdom cleansed is he.

"The king asked: "And what is the **mark of vigour**?"

"Vigour props up, and when propped up by vigour, all the wholesome dharmas do not dwindle away."

"Give me a simile!"

"If a man's house were falling down, he would prop it up with a new place of wood, and so supported, that house would not collapse.

"The king asked: "And what is the **mark of mindfulness**?"

"When mindfulness arises, one calls to mind the dharmas which participate in what is wholesome and unwholesome, blameable and blameless, inferior and sublime, dark and light, i.e. these are the four applications of mindfulness, there are the four applications of mindfulness, these are the four right efforts, these are the four roads to psychic power, these are the five cardinal virtues, these are the five powers, these are the seven limbs of enlightenment, this is the holy eightfold path, this is calm, this is insight, this

is knowledge and this is emancipation. Thereafter, the yogin tends those dharmas which should be tended, and he does not tend those which should not be tended; he partakes of those dharmas which should be followed, and he does not partake of those which should not be followed. It is in this sense that calling to mind is a mark of mindfulness."

"Give me a simile!"

"It is like the treasurer of a universal monarch, who each morning and evening reminds his royal master of his magnificent assets: So many elephants you have, so many horses, so many chariots, so much infantry, so many gold coins, so much bullion, so much property; may your majesty bear in this mind! In this way he calls to mind his master's wealth."

"And how does mindfulness take up?"

"When mindfulness arises, the outcome of beneficial and harmful dharmas is examined in this way: These dharmas are beneficial, these harmful, these dharmas are helpful, these unhelpful. Thereafter, the yogin removes the harmful dharmas, and takes up the beneficial ones; he removes the unhelpful dharmas, and takes up the helpful ones. It is in this sense that mindfulness takes up."

"Give me a comparison!"

"It is like the invaluable adviser of a universal monarch who knows what is beneficial and what harmful to his royal master, what is helpful and what is unhelpful. Thereafter what is harmful and unhelpful can be removed, what is beneficial and helpful can be taken up."

The king asked: "And what is the **mark of concentration**?"

"It stands at the head. Whatever wholesome dharmas there may be, they all are headed by concentration, they bend towards concentration, lead to concentration, incline to concentration."

"Give me a comparison!"

"It is as with a building with a pointed roof: Whatever rafters they are, they all converge on the top, and bend towards the top, meet at the top, and the

top occupies the most prominent place. So with concentration on relation to the other wholesome dharmas."

"Give me a further comparison!"

"If a king were to enter a battle with his fourfold army. then all his troops: The elephants, cavalry, chariots, and infantry, would be handed by him, and would be ranged around him. Such is the position of concentration in relation to the other wholesome dharmas."

The king then asked: "Then, what is the **mark of wisdom**?"

"Cutting off is, as I said before, one mark of wisdom. In addition, it illuminates."

"And how does wisdom illuminate?"

"When wisdom arises, it dispels the darkness of ignorance, generates the illumination of knowledge, sheds the light of cognition, and makes the holy truths stand out clearly. Thereafter the yogin, with his correct wisdom, can see impermanence, ill, and not self."

"Give me a comparison!"

"It is like a lamp which a man would take into a dark house. It would dispel the darkness, would illuminate, shed light, and make the forms in the house stand out clearly."

"Well put, Nagasena!"

Source - <http://web.singnet.com.sg/~rjp31831/nagasena.htm#ID>