



There is No Self From the *Milindapañha*

Then drew near Milinda the king to where the venerable Nagasena was; and having drawn near, he greeted the venerable Nagasena, and having passed the compliments of friendship and civility, he sat down respectfully at one side. And the venerable Nagasena returned the greeting, by which, truly, he won the heart of king Milinda.

And Milinda the king spoke to the venerable Nagasena as follows:—

“How is your reverence called? Bhante, what is your name?”

“Your majesty, I am called Nagasena, my fellow-monks, your majesty, address me as Nagasena: but whether parents give one the name Nagasena, or Surasena, or Virasena, or Sihasena, it is, nevertheless, your majesty, but a way of counting, a term, an appellation, a convenient designation, a mere name, this Nagasena, for there is no self here to be found.”

Then said Milinda the king,—

“Listen to me, my lords, you five hundred Yonakas, and you eighty thousand monks! Nagasena here says thus: ‘There is no self here to be found.’ Is it possible, pray, for me to assent to what he says?”

And Milinda the king spoke to the venerable Nagasena as follows:—

“Bhante Nagasena, if there is no self to be found, who is it then furnishes you monks with the monkly requisites, —robes, food, bedding, and medicine, the reliance of the sick? who is it makes use of the same? who is it keeps the precepts? who is it applies himself to meditation? who is it realizes the Paths, the Fruits, and Nirvana? who is it destroys life? who is it takes what is not given him? who is it commits immorality? who is it tells lies? who is it drinks intoxicating liquor? who is it commits the five crimes that constitute ‘proximate karma?’ In that case, there is no merit; there is no demerit; there is no one who does or causes to be done meritorious or demeritorious deeds; neither good nor evil deeds can have any fruit or result. Bhante Nagasena, neither is he a murderer who kills a monk, nor can you monks, bhante Nagasena, have any teacher, preceptor, or ordination. When you say, ‘My fellow-monks, your majesty, address me as Nagasena,’ what then is this Nagasena? Pray, bhante, is the hair of the head Nagasena?”

“No, truly, your majesty.”

“Is the hair of the body Nagasena ? “

“No, truly, your majesty.”

“Are nails...teeth...skin . . . flesh . . . sinews . . . bones . . . marrow of the bones . . . kidneys . . . heart . . . liver . . . pleura . . . spleen . . . lungs . . . intestines . . . mesentery . . . stomach . . . faeces . . . bile . . . phlegm . . . pus . . . blood . . . sweat . . . fat . . . tears . . . lymph . . . saliva . . . snot . . . synovial fluid . . . urine . . . brain of the head Nagasena?”

“No, truly, your majesty.”

“Is now, bhante, form Nagasena?”

“No, truly, your majesty.”

“Is sensation Nagasena?”

“No, truly, your majesty.”
 “Is perception Nagasena?”
 “No, truly, your majesty.”
 “Are the psychic constructions Nagasena?”
 “No, truly, your majesty.”
 “Is consciousness Nagasena?”
 “No, truly, your majesty.”
 “Are, then, bhante, form, sensation, perception, the psychic constructions, and consciousness unitedly Nagasena?”
 “No, truly, your majesty.”
 “Is it, then, bhante, something besides form, sensation, perception, the psychic constructions, and consciousness, which is Nagasena?”
 “No, truly, your majesty.”
 “Bhante, although I question you very closely, I fail to discover any Nagasena. Truly, now, bhante, Nagasena is a mere empty sound. What Nagasena is there here? Bhante, you speak a falsehood, a lie: there is no Nagasena.”
 Then the venerable Nagasena spoke to Milinda the king as follows:—
 “Your majesty, you are a delicate prince, an exceedingly delicate prince; and if, your majesty, you walk in the middle of the day on hot sandy ground, and you tread on rough grit, gravel, and sand, your feet become sore, your body tired, the mind is oppressed, and the body-consciousness suffers. Pray, did you come afoot, or riding?”
 “Bhante, I do not go afoot: I came in a chariot.”
 “Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, declare to me the chariot. Pray, your majesty, is the pole the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Is the axle the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Are the wheels the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Is the chariot-body the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Is the banner-staff the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Is the yoke the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Are the reins the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Is the goading-stick the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Pray, your majesty, are pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, banner-staff, yoke, reins, and goad unitedly the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Is it, then, your majesty, something else besides pole; axle, wheels, chariot-body, banner-staff, yoke, reins, and goad which is the chariot?”
 “No, truly, bhante.”
 “Your majesty, although I question you very closely, I fail to discover any chariot. Truly now, your majesty, the word chariot is a mere empty sound. What chariot is there here? Your majesty, you speak a falsehood, a lie: there is no chariot. Your majesty, you are the chief king in all the continent of India; of whom are you afraid that you speak a lie? Listen to me, my lords, you five hundred Yonakas, and you eighty thousand monks!

Milinda the king here says thus: ‘I came in a chariot,’ and being requested, ‘Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, declare to me the chariot,’ he fails to produce any chariot. Is it possible, pray, for me to assent to what he says?”

When he had thus spoken, the five hundred Yonakas applauded the venerable Nagasena and spoke to Milinda the king as follows:—

“Now, your majesty, answer, if you can.”

Then Milinda the king spoke to the venerable Nagasena as follows:—

“Bhante Nagasena, I speak no lie: the word ‘chariot’ is but a way of counting, term, appellation, convenient designation, and name for pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, and banner-staff.”

“Thoroughly well, your majesty, do you understand a chariot. In exactly the same way, your majesty, in respect of me, Nagasena is but a way of counting, term, appellation, convenient designation, mere name for the hair of my head, hair of my body . . . brain of the head, form, sensation, perception, the psychic constructions, and consciousness. But in the absolute sense there is no self here to be found. And the priestess Vajira, your majesty, said as follows in the presence of The Blessed One:—

Even as the word of “chariot” means
That members join to frame a whole
So when the Groups appear to view,
We use the phrase, “A living being.”

“It is wonderful, bhante Nagasena! It is marvelous, bhante Nagasena! Brilliant and prompt is the wit of your replies. If The Buddha were alive, he would applaud. Well done, well done, Nagasena! Brilliant and prompt is the wit of your replies.”

“The Question of King Milinda” (*Milindapañha*). Trans. T. W. Rhys Davids. *Sacred Books of the East*. Vol. 35. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890.

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