

The Questions of King Milinda

(Selected Passages)

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Introduction

In the land of the Bactrian Greeks, there was a city called Sagala, a great centre of trade. Rivers and hills beautified it, delightful landscapes surrounded it, and it possessed many parks, gardens, woods, lakes and lotus-ponds. Its king was Milinda, a man who was learned, experienced, intelligent and competent, and who at the proper times carefully observed all the appropriate Brahminic rites, with regard to things past, present and future. As a disputant he was hard to assail, hard to overcome, and he was recognized as a prominent sectarian teacher.

One day, a numerous company of Arhats, who lived in a well-protected spot in the Himalayas, sent a messenger to the Venerable Nagasena, then, at the Asoka Park in Patna, asking him to come, as they wished to see him. Nagasena immediately complied by vanishing from where he was and miraculously appearing before them.

And the Arhats said to him: "That king Milinda, Nagasena, constantly harasses the order of monks with questions and counter-questions, with arguments and counter-arguments. Please go, Nagasena, and subdue him!"

But Nagasena replied: "Nevermind just this one king Milinda! If all the kings of India would come to see me with their questions, I could well dispose of them, and they would give no more trouble after that! You may go to Sagala without any fear whatever!"

And the elders went to Sagala, lighting up the city with their yellow robes which shone like lamps, and bringing with them the fresh breeze of the holy mountains.

The Venerable Nagasena stayed at the Sankheyya hermitage together with 80,000 monks. King Milinda, accompanied by a retinue of 500 Greeks, went up to where he was, gave him a friendly and courteous greeting, and sat on one side. Nagasena returned his greetings, and his courtesy pleased the king's heart.

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THE CHARIOT

And King Milinda asked him: "How is Your Reverence known, and what is your name, sir?"

"As Nagasena I am known, O Great King, and as Nagasena do my fellow religious habitually address me. But although parents give name such as Nagasena, or Surasena, or Virasena, or Sihasena, nevertheless, this word "Nagasena" is just a denomination, a designation, a conceptual term, a current appellation, a mere name. For no real person can here be apprehended."

But King Milinda explained: "Now listen, you 500 Greeks and 80,000 monks, this Nagasena tells me that he is not a real person! How can I be expected to agree with that!" And to Nagasena he said: "If, Most Reverend Nagasena, no person can be apprehended in reality, who then, I ask you, gives you what you require by way of robes, food, lodging, and medicines? Who is it that guards morality, practises meditation, and realizes the [Four] Paths and their Fruits, and thereafter Nirvana? Who is it that killing living beings, takes what is not given, commits sexual misconduct, tell lies, drinks intoxicants? Who is it that commits the Five Deadly Sins? For, if there were no person, there could be no merit and no demerit; no doer of meritorious or demeritorious deeds, and no agent behind them; no fruit of good and evil deeds, and no reward or punishment for them. If someone should kill you, O Venerable Nagasena, would not be a real teacher, or instructor, or ordained monk! You just told me that your fellow religious habitually address you as "Nagasena". Then, what is this "Nagasena"? Are perhaps the hairs of the head "Nagasena?"

"No, Great King!"

"Or perhaps the nails, teeth, skin, muscles, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, serous membranes, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, excrement, the bile, phlegm, pus, blood, grease, fat, tears, sweat, spittle, snot, fluid of the joints, urine, or the brain in the skull-are they this "Nagasena"?"

"No, Great King!"

"Or is "Nagasena" a form, or feelings, or perceptions, or impulses, or consciousness?"

"No, Great King!"

Then is it the combination of form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness?"

"No, Great King!"

"Then is it outside the combination of form, feelings, perceptions, impulses, and consciousness?"

"No, Great King!"

"Then, ask as I may, I can discover no Nagasena at all. This "Nagasena" is just a mere sound, but who is the real Nagasena? Your Reverence has told a lie, has spoken a falsehood! There is really no Nagasena!"

Thereupon, the Venerable Nagasena said to King Milinda: "As a king you have been brought up in great refinement and you avoid roughness of any kind. If you would walk at midday on this hot, burning, and sandy ground, then your feet would have to tread on the rough and gritty gravel and pebbles, and they would hurt you, your body would get tired, your mind impaired, and your awareness of your body would be associated with pain. How then did you come on foot, or on a mount?"

"I did not come, Sir, on foot, but on a chariot."

"If you have come on a chariot, then please explain to me what a chariot is. Is the pole the chariot?"

"No, Reverend Sir!"

"Is then the axle the chariot?"

"No, Reverend Sir!"

"Is it then the wheels, or the framework, of the flag-staff, or the yoke, or the reins, or the goad-stick?"

"No, Reverend Sir!"

"Then is it the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins, and goad which is the "chariot"?"

"No, Reverend Sir!"

"Then, is this "chariot" outside the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins and goad?"

"No, Reverend Sir!"

"Then, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot at all. This "chariot" is just a mere sound. But what is the real chariot? Your Majesty has told a lie, has spoken a falsehood! There is really no chariot! Your Majesty is the greatest king in the whole of India. Of whom then are you afraid, that you do not speak the truth?" And he exclaimed: "Now listen, you 500 Greeks and 80,000 monks, this King Milinda tells me that he has come on a chariot. But when asked to explain to me what a chariot is, he cannot establish its existence. How can one possibly approve of that?"

The 500 Greeks thereupon applauded the Venerable Nagasena and said to King Milinda: "Now let Your Majesty get out of that if you can!"

But King Milinda said to Nagasena: "I have not, Nagasena, spoken a falsehood. For it is in dependence on the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flag-staff, etc, there takes place this denomination "chariot", this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name."

"Your Majesty has spoken well about the chariot. It is just so with me. In dependence on the thirty-two parts of the body and the five Skandhas, there takes place this denomination "Nagasena", this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name. In ultimate reality, however, this person cannot be apprehended. And this has been said by our sister Vajira when she was face to face with the Lord Buddha:

"Where all constituent parts are present, the word "a chariot" is applied. So, likewise, where the skandhas are, the term a "being" commonly is used."

"It is wonderful, Nagasena, it is astonishing, Nagasena! Most brilliantly have these questions been answered! Were the Lord Buddha Himself here, He would approve what you have said. Well spoken, Nagasena! Well spoken!"

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Personal Identity and Rebirth

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."

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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 illustration!"

"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!"

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Problems of Nirvana

The king asked: "Is cessation Nirvana?"

"Yes, your majesty!"

"How is that, Nagasena?"

"All the foolish common people take delight in the senses and their objects, are impressed by them, are attached to them. In that way, they are carried away by the flood and are not set free from birth, old age and death, from grief, lamentation, pain, sadness, and despair - they are, I say, not set free from suffering. But the well-informed holy disciples do not take delight in the senses and their objects, are not impressed by them, are not attached to them, and in consequence their craving ceases; the cessation of craving leads successively to that of grasping, of becoming, of birth, of old age and death, of grief, lamentation, pain, sadness, and despair - that is to say, to the cessation of all this mass of ill. It is thus that cessation is Nirvana."

"Very good, Nagasena!"

The king asked: "Do all win Nirvana?"

"No, they do not. Only those win Nirvana who, progressing correctly, know by their super knowledge those dharmas which should be known by super knowledge, comprehend those dharmas which should be comprehended, forsake those dharmas which should be forsaken, develop those dharmas which should be developed, and realize those dharmas which should be realized."

"Very good, Nagasena!"

The king asked: "Do those who have not won Nirvana know how happy a state it is?"

"Yes, they do."

"But how can one know this about Nirvana without having attained it?"

"Now, what do you think, your majesty? Do those who have not had their hands and feet cut off know how hard it is to have them cut off?"

"Yes, they do."

"And how do they know it?"

"From hearing the sound of the lamentations of those whose hands and feet have been cut off."

"So it is by hearing the words of those who have seen Nirvana that one knows it to be comforted."

"Well said, Nagasena!"

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The Nature of Nirvana

King Milinda said: "I will grant you, Nagasena, that Nirvana is absolute ease, and that nevertheless one cannot point to its form or shape, its duration or size, either by simile or explanation, by reason or by argument. But is there perhaps some quality of Nirvana which it shares with other things, and which lends itself to a metaphorical explanation?"

"Its form, O King, cannot be elucidated by similes, but its qualities can."

"How good to hear that, Nagasena! Speak then, quickly, so that I may have an explanation of even one of the aspects of Nirvana! Appease the fever of my heart! Allay it with the cool sweet breezes of your words!"

"Nirvana shares one quality with the lotus, two with water, three with medicine, ten with space, three with the wishing jewel, and five with a mountain peak. As the lotus is unstained by water, so is Nirvana unstained by all the defilements. As cool water allays feverish heat, so also Nirvana is cool and allays the fever of all the passions. Moreover, as water removes the thirst of men and beasts who are exhausted, parched, and thirsty, and overpowered by heat, so also Nirvana removes the craving for sensuous enjoyments, the craving for further becoming, the craving for the cessation of becoming. As medicine protects from the torments of poisons,

so Nirvana protects from the torments of the poisonous passions. Moreover, as medicine puts an end to sickness, so Nirvana puts an end to all sufferings. Finally, Nirvana and medicine both give security. And these are the ten qualities which Nirvana shares with space. Neither is born, grows old, dies, passes away, or is reborn; both are unconquerable, cannot be stolen, are unsupported, are roads respectively for birds and Arhats to journey on, are unobstructed and infinite. Like the wishing jewel, Nirvana grants all one can desire, brings joy, and sheds light. As a mountain peak is lofty and exalted, so is Nirvana. As a mountain peak is unshakeable, so is Nirvana. As a mountain is inaccessible, so is Nirvana inaccessible to all the passions. As no seeds can grow on a mountain peak, so the seeds of all the passions cannot grow in Nirvana. And finally, as a mountain peak is free from all desire to please or displease, so is Nirvana!"

"Well said, Nagasena! So it is, and as much I accept it."

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The Realization of Nirvana

King Milinda said: "In the world one can see things produced of karma, things produced from a cause, things produced by nature. Tell me, what in the world is not born of karma, or a cause, or of nature?"

"There are two such things, space and Nirvana."

"Do not, Nagasena, corrupt the Jina (Buddha)'s words, do not answer the question ignorantly!"

"What did I say, Your Majesty, that you speak thus to me?"

"What you said about space not being born of karma, or from a cause, or from nature, that was correct. But with many hundreds of arguments has the Lord Buddha proclaimed to His disciples the way to the realization of Nirvana, and then you say that Nirvana is not born of a cause!"

"It is true that the Lord has with many hundreds of arguments proclaimed to His disciples the way to the realization of Nirvana, but that does not mean that He has spoken of a cause for the production of Nirvana."

"Here, Nagasena, we do indeed enter from darkness into greater darkness, from a jungle into a deeper jungle, from a thicket into a denser thicket, in as much as we are given a cause for the realization of Nirvana, but no cause for the production of that same dharma (Nirvana). If there is a cause for the realization of Nirvana, we would also expect one for its production. If there is a son's father, one would for that reason also expect the father to have had a father; if there is a pupil's teacher, one would for that reason also expect the teacher to have had a teacher; if

there is a seed for a sprout, one would for that reason also expect the seed to have had a seed. Just so, if there is cause for the realization of Nirvana, one would for that reason it must have also expect a cause for its production. If a tree or creeper has a top, then for that reason it must also have a middle and a root. Just so, if there is a cause for the realization of Nirvana, one would for that reason also expect a cause for its production."

"Nirvana, O King, is not something that should be produced. That is why no cause for its production has been proclaimed."

"Please, Nagasena, give me a reason, convince me by an argument, so that I can understand this point!"

"Well then, O King, attend carefully, listen closely and I will tell you the reason for this. Could a man with his natural strength go up from here to the Himalaya mountains?"

"Yes, he could."

"But could that man with his natural strength bring the Himalaya mountains here?"

"No, he could not."

"Just so, it is possible to point out the way to the realization of Nirvana, but impossible to show a cause for its production. Could a man, who with his natural strength has crossed in a boat over the great ocean, get to the farther shore?"

"Yes, he could."

"But could that man with his natural strength bring the farther shore of the great ocean shore here?"

"No, he could not."

"Just so, one can point out the way to the realization of Nirvana, but one cannot show a cause for its production. And what is the reason for that? Because that dharma (Nirvana) is unconditioned."

"Then, Nagasena, is Nirvana unconditioned?"

"So it is, O King, unconditioned is Nirvana, not made by anything. Of Nirvana one cannot say that it is produced, or unproduced, or that it should be produced; that it is past, or present, or future; or that one can become aware of it by the eye, or the ear, or the nose, or the tongue, or the body."

"In that case, Nagasena, you indicate Nirvana as a dharma which is not, and Nirvana does not

exist."

"Nirvana is something which is recognizable by the mind. A holy disciple, who has followed the right road, sees Nirvana with a mind which is pure, sublime, straight, unimpeded and disinterested."

"But what then is that Nirvana like? Give me a simile, and convince me by arguments. For a dharma which exists can surely be illustrated by a simile!"

"Is there, Great King, something called wind?"

"Yes, there is such a thing."

"Please, will Your Majesty show me the wind, its colour and shape, and whether it is thin or thick, long or short?"

"One cannot point to the wind like that for the wind does not lend itself to being grasped with the hands, or to being untouched. But nevertheless there is such a thing called 'wind'."

"If one cannot point to the wind, one might concluded that there is no wind at all."

"But I know, Nagasena, that there is wind, I am quite convinced of it, in spite of the fact that I cannot point it out."

"Just so, Your Majesty, there is Nirvana, but one cannot point to Nirvana, either by its colour or its shape."

"Very good, Nagasena. Clear is the simile, convincing is the argument. So it is, and so I accept it: There is a Nirvana."

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The Arhats and their Bodies

The king asked: "Does someone who is no more reborn feel any unpleasant feelings?"

The elder replied: "Some he feels, and others not."

"Which one does he feel, and which one not?"

"He feels physical, but not any mental pain."

"How is that?"

"The causes and conditions which produce feelings of physical pain have not ceased to operate, whereas those which produce feelings of mental pain have. And so it has been said by the Lord Buddha: Only one kind of feelings he feels, physical, and not mental."

"And when he feels a physical pain, why does he not escape into Final Nirvana, by dying quickly?"

"An Arhat has no more likes or dislikes. Arhats do not shake down the unripe fruit, the wise wait for it to mature. And so it has been said by the elder Sariputra, the Dharma's General:

"It is not death, it is not life I cherish.
I bide my time, as a servant waiting for his wage.
It is not death, it is not life I cherish.
I bide my time, in mindfulness and wisdom steeped."
"Well put, Nagasena!"

The king asked: "Is the body dear to you recluses?"

"No, it is not."

"But then, why do you look after it, and cherish it so?"

"Has Your Majesty somewhere and at some time in the course of a battle been wounded by an arrow?"

"Yes, that has happened."

"In such cases, is not the wound anointed with salve, smeared with oil, and bandaged with fine linen?"

"Yes, so it is."

"Then, is this treatment a sign that the wound is dear to Your Majesty?"

"No, it is not dear to me, but all this is done to it so that the flesh may grow again."

"Just so the body is not dear to the recluses. Without being attached to the body they take care of it for the purpose of making a holy life possible. The Lord Buddha has compared the body to a wound, and so the recluses take care for the body as for a wound, without being attached to it. For the Lord Buddha said:

"A damp skin hides it,
But it is a wound,
Large with nine openings.
All around it ozzes impure
And evil smelling matter."

"Well answered, Nagasena!"

The king asked: "What is the difference between someone with greed and someone without greed?"

"The one is attached, the other unattached."

"What does that mean?"

"The one covets, the other does not."

"As I see it, the greedy person and the one who is free from greed both wish for agreeable food, and neither of them wishes for bad food."

"But the one who is not free from greed eats his food while experiencing both its taste and some greed for tastes; the one who is free from greed eats his food while experiencing its taste, but without having any greed for it."

"Very good, Nagasena!"

The king asked: "For what reason does the common worlding suffer both physical and mental pain?"

"Because his thought is so undeveloped. He is like a hungry and excited ox, who has been tied up with a weak, fragile and short piece of straw or creeper, and who, when agitated, rushes off, taking his tender with him. So, someone whose thought is undeveloped, gets agitated in his mind when a pain arises in him, and his agitated mind bends and contorts his body, and makes it writhe. Undeveloped in his mind, he trembles, shrieks, and cries with terror. This is reason why the common worlding suffers both physical and mental pain."

"And what is the reason why Arhats feel only one kind of feelings, physical and not mental?"

"The thought of the Arhats is developed, well developed, it is tamed, well tamed, it is obedient and disciplined. When invaded by a painful feeling, the Arhat firmly grasps at the idea of its impermanence, and ties his thought to the post of contemplation. And his thought, tied to the post of contemplation, does not tremble or shake, remains steadfast and undisturbed. But the disturbing influence of the pain, nevertheless, makes his body bend, contorts it, makes it writhe."

"That Nagasena, is indeed a most wonderful thing in this world, that someone's mind should remain unshaken when his body is shaken. Tell me the reason for that!"

"Suppose, Your Majesty, that there is a gigantic tree, with trunk, branches, and leaves. If it were hit by the force of the wind, its branches would shake, but would the trunk also shake?"

"No, Venerable Sir!"

"Just so the thought of the Arhat does not tremble or shake, like the trunk of the gigantic tree."

"Wonderful, Nagasena, most admireable, Nagasena!"

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Conclusion

The king, as a result of his discussions with the Venerable Nagasena, was overjoyed and humbled. He saw the value in the Buddha's religion, gained confidence in the Triple Gem, lost his spikiness and obstinacy, gained faith in the qualities of the elder, in his observation of the monastic rules, his spiritual progress and his general demeanour; became trusting and resigned, free from conceit and arrogance. Like a cobra whose fangs have been drawn, he said: "Well said, well said, Nagasena! You have answered my questions, which would have given scope to a Buddha, you have answered them well! Apart from the elder Sariputra, the supreme General of the Dharma, there is no one in this religion of Buddha who can deal with questions as well as you do. Forgive my transgressions, Nagasena! May the Venerable Nagasena accept me as a lay-follower, as one who takes his refuge the Triple Gem from today onwards, as long as I shall live!"

(Special thanks to Brother Henry Chia)

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