



www.dhammadstream.org

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Summary

This article tells the story of a dialogue (from a series of dialogues) between the Buddhist sage Nagasena and the Indo-Greek King Menander (Pali: Milinda). The King converted to a Buddhist after his dialogues with Venerable Nagasena.

Milinda Panha (Questions of King Milinda)

The Greek King, Milinda, or Menander, ruled North-western India about the middle of the Second Century B.C. According to the text, he was converted to Buddhism by a Buddhist Monk named Nagasena. (1)

The King was a well-informed scholar, philosopher, debater, and being well versed in many branches of learning. He had also the ability to probe vigorously any subject.

The dialogue presented below, demonstrates Ven. Nagasena "possessed wisdom that transcended reason itself ... (born of direct) ... experiential data rather than metaphysical" (2).

"Reverend Nagasena" said the King, "when a man is born does he remain the same (being) or become another?"

"He neither remains the same nor becomes another".

"Give me an example!"

"Suppose a man were to light a lamp, would it burn all through the night?"

"Yes, it might."

"Now, is the flame which burns in the middle watch the same as that which burned in the first?"

"No, Your Reverence,"

"So, is there one lamp in the first watch, another in the middle, and yet another in the last?"

"No, the lamp gives light all through the night."

"Similarly, your Majesty, the continuity of phenomena is kept up. One person comes into existence, another passes away, and the sequence runs continuously without self-conscious existence, neither the same nor yet another."

"Well said, Reverend Nagasena. Reverend Nagasena" said the King, "is it true that nothing transmigrates, and yet there is rebirth?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"How can this be? Give me an illustration."

"Suppose your Majesty, a man lights one lamp from another - does the one lamp transmigrate to the other?"

"No, Your Reverence."

"So, there is rebirth without anything transmigration!"

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?"

"Your Majesty, do those who have not had their hands and feet cut off know how bad 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 a happy state."

"Very good, Nagasena!"

The King asked (3) "For what reason does the common worldling suffer both physical and mental pain?"

"Because his thought is so undeveloped...Someone whose thought is undeveloped gets agitated in his mind when pain arises in him, and his agitated mind bends and contorts his body. Undeveloped in his mind he trembles, shrieks and cries with terror."

"The thought of the Arhats is developed, well developed, it is tamed, it is obedient and disciplined. When invaded by a painful feeling, the Arhat firmly grasps at the idea of 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: ' Just as when "there is a gigantic tree - if it were hit by the force of the wind, its branches would shake, but would the trunk also shake?"

"No, Venerable Sir!"

From the King's experience, notwithstanding many years' training the mind in worldly pursuits, he was obviously unable to fathom Truth directly for himself."

At this point the reader may be inclined to the view that intellectualism is a totally inadequate way of understanding reality, of developing sanity. In itself, intellectualism does not generate wisdom; however there are many roads that can lead a person to find the Dhamma. In the King Milinda's case he did, as a result of his discussion with Ven. Nagasena, perceive the worthiness of the Buddhist Path and subsequently became a lay follower of the Buddha. It is written that he attained the level of Sotapan (Stream Enterer) on his deathbed - the first level of realisation in Buddhism.

Also, a person can remove the delusion that knowledge is wholly or mainly derived from pure reason by trying to do it! There will be the dissatisfaction produced by not being able to know reality directly and, at that point, an aspect of the First Noble Truth will be understood experientially.

This discovery is often the first step towards perceiving Buddhist Teachings as plausible. Further investigation may prove to be an excellent vehicle to gain understanding of Buddhism and thus develop confidence in the practice.

References

(1) "The Buddhist Tradition - in India, China and Japan" p. 21, Edited by William Theodore de Barry, 1969. First Edition 1972. Published in U.S.A. by Random House Inc., New York, ISBN 0-394-716 06-5. A "Vintage" book.

(2) "A King' s Dialogue with a Philosopher Monk" by Nanda Leang Mei Yoke, pp. 95, 99. Article published in "The Young Buddhist" Prince Siddhartha's 26th Birth Centenary Commemoration issue. Published in 1976 by the Singapore Buddhist Youth organisation - 31 Hari Raya, Singapore 20, ML (P) 482/76.

(3) "Buddhist Scripture's" Edward Conze, p 161. ISBN 014 044 0887, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England. First published 1959 and reprinted 9 times up to 1977.