

The Simile of the Chariot

From the *Milindapañha*

The Milindapañha ("Questions of Milinda") is a Pāli-language account of a dialog between a Buddhist monk Nāgasena and the Greco-Bactrian king Milinda. Milinda is almost certainly the Greek king Menander of Bactria (r. 165–130 BCE), whom the text says converted to Buddhism at the conclusion of the encounter, but there is no evidence that Nāgasena was a historical figure, making the meeting unlikely. The text as we have it was probably composed in northwest India around the beginning of the Common Era by an unknown author.

In the text, Milinda questions Nāgasena about the teachings of Buddhism, covering such topics as the nature of the Buddha, the order of monks and nuns, Buddhist ethics, and Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth. Among its most well-known dialogs is the following exchange on the Buddhist doctrine of non-Self (anātman).

King Milinda went up to Nāgasena, exchanged polite and friendly greetings, and took his seat respectfully to one side. Then Milinda began by asking:

“How is your reverence known, and what Sir, is your name?”

“O king, I am known as Nāgasena, but that is only a designation in common use, for no permanent individual can be found.”

Then Milinda called upon the Bactrian Greeks and the monks to bear witness: “This Nāgasena says that no permanent individual is implied in his name. Is it possible to approve of that?” Then he turned to Nāgasena and said, “If, most venerable Nāgasena, that is true, who is it who gives you robes, food and shelter? Who lives the righteous life? Or again, who kills living beings, steals, commits adultery, tells lies or takes strong drink? If what you say is true then there is neither merit nor demerit, nor is there any doer of good or evil deeds and no result of *karma*. If, venerable Sir, a man were to kill you, there would be no murder, and it follows that there are no masters or teachers in your Order. You say that you are called Nāgasena; now what is that Nāgasena? Is it the hair?”

“I don’t say that, great king.”

“Is it then the nails, teeth, skin, or other parts of the body?”

“Certainly not.”

“Or is it the body, or feelings, or perceptions, or formations, or consciousness?¹ Is it all of these combined? Or is it something outside of them that is Nāgasena?”

Still Nāgasena answered: “It is none of these.”

¹ The five *skandhas*.

“Then, ask as I may, I can discover no Nāgasena. Nāgasena is an empty sound. Who is it we see before us? It is a falsehood that your reverence has spoken.”

Nāgasena said, “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, or the flag-staff, or the yoke, or the reins, or the goadstick?”

“No, reverend Sir!”

“Then is it the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins, and goad?”

“No, reverend Sir!”

“Then is this ‘chariot’ outside [*i.e., something other than*] the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins, and goad?”

“No, reverend Sir!”

And Nāgasena said, “Then, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot at all. Just a mere sound is this ‘chariot’. But what is the real chariot? Your Majesty has told a lie, has spoken a falsehood! There really is 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?”

(To Assembly) “Now listen, you five-hundred Greeks and eighty-thousand monks, this king Milinda tells me he has come in 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 five-hundred Greeks thereupon applauded the Venerable Nāgasena and said to King Milinda: “Now let your Majesty get out of this if you can!”

Milinda said: “I have not, Nāgasena, spoken a falsehood. For it is in dependence on the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flag-staff, etc., that there takes place this

denomination *chariot*, this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation, and a mere name.”

Nāgasena replied, “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 *Nāgasena*, this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation, and a mere name. In ultimate reality, however, this person cannot be apprehended.”

Milinda said, “It is wonderful, Nāgasena; it is astonishing, Nāgasena! Most brilliantly have these questions been answered! Were the Buddha himself here, he would approve what you have said. Well spoken, Nāgasena, well spoken!”

[translated from the Pāli by Edward Conze]