

Sensory Clarity – 1 of 2 – No Self As Thing ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 There is a famous scripture which serves as a Buddhist FAQ, Frequently Asked Questions,
00:00:16 document or might be in some ways looked upon as a Buddhist catechism.
00:00:22 And it's called the Questions of King Melinda.
00:00:26 It's in the Pali literature.
00:00:28 Melinda was a historical person.
00:00:33 And interestingly enough, although his questions are recorded in Buddhist literature preserved
00:00:41 in Southeast Asia, King Melinda was a westerner.
00:00:47 He was King Menandros, who was part of what was left in Northwest India after Alexander
00:00:57 the Great died.
00:01:00 There were these Greek rulers.
00:01:04 We say India, but this is India in its broadest sense.
00:01:08 It would now be part of Afghanistan, actually, Bactria, where his kingdom was centered.
00:01:15 This is a sort of early dialogue between East and West.
00:01:20 Because he asks a series of questions to a Buddhist monk named Nagasena.
00:01:27 Before this whole discussion starts, Nagasena asks the king, are you willing to have a discussion
00:01:35 with me and perhaps have disagreements and whatever, and even debate?
00:01:40 Are you willing to do it the way an academic would do it?
00:01:47 Or are you going to do it the way a king would do it?
00:01:52 And Nagasena says, what do you mean?
00:01:54 He said, well, if academics have a disagreement and one sort of gets the better of the other
00:01:59 or shows them to be incorrect, it's just, you know, they just accept that.
00:02:05 If a king is shown to be incorrect, he executes you.
00:02:11 So which way are you going to do it?
00:02:15 Like an academic or like he's like, you know, because if you're going to do it like a king,
00:02:18 I'm out of here.
00:02:19 He may have been an arhat, but he wasn't stupid with regards to the preservation of his low
00:02:30 self by his gandas.
00:02:34 So the king says, who are you and whatever?

00:02:38 And he says, well, I'm called Nagasena, but there is no thing called Nagasena.

00:02:43 And then the king tries to sort of trip him up on something.

00:02:47 And so then Nagasena makes this metaphor that's very famous in Buddhist literature.

00:02:54 He says, well, your majesty, when you arrived here, how did you get here?

00:03:01 Well, I was in my chariot.

00:03:04 And then he goes through all the different parts of the chariot.

00:03:07 And he says, well, is there really a thing called the chariot?

00:03:12 Are the wheels the chariot, the hub, the bed, the axle tree, the yoke, et cetera, et cetera.

00:03:19 He goes through all these parts, and the king has to agree, no, that's not the chariot.

00:03:25 That's not the chariot.

00:03:26 And then Nagasena says, and it's the same with us.

00:03:30 There's just rupa, vedana, sanjna, sankhara, and vijnana.

00:03:38 That doesn't constitute a self called Nagasena.

00:03:44 And the king sort of gets it in this scripture and says, OK, you're right.

00:03:54 You win on that one.

00:03:56 I guess I can see your point.

00:03:59 The point being that chariot as a thing is just a convention.

00:04:06 Usually I find the arhat Nagasena's argument unconvincing myself.

00:04:13 Does that sound arrogant and irreverent?

00:04:18 If it were really, really, really convincing, then all the philosophers of the world would

00:04:24 be saying, these guys are right.

00:04:27 But in fact, there's a lot of philosophical objections to this argument.

00:04:33 If you get some professional philosophers in and let them get to work on it, they might

00:04:40 really tear it apart.

00:04:42 I think he's right.

00:04:45 There is no thing called a self.

00:04:47 I'm not just quite sure that this particular metaphor clinches it as a proof, the way it

00:04:56 is portrayed as doing in the scripture.

00:05:00 But I would like to clinch it for the world so that there are no quibbles or objections

00:05:11 and everybody agrees.

00:05:13 Whoa, yeah, can't deny that.

00:05:16 I would like to suggest another angle of attack on this idea.

00:05:25 I agree with the idea.

00:05:28 I think it is one of the most important ideas in the history of the world.

00:05:35 One of the things that is noticeable in this argument is that rupa means the physical body.

00:05:45 It's not a sensory experience.

00:05:47 We know it exists through a sensory experience, but it's not being presented as a sensory

00:05:53 experience.

00:05:54 It's being presented as a concept, body as matter.

00:06:01 Samskaras are not direct sensory experiences for most meditators.

00:06:06 They can be for some meditators.

00:06:08 You can directly experience it.

00:06:11 Consciousness as an entity in its own right, as opposed to consciousness in a certain flavor,

00:06:18 such as Tutsite sound-feel-image-talk, that's not ordinarily experienced by most meditators.

00:06:25 What if we just take the parts that are direct sensory experience?

00:06:34 Why would we want to do that?

00:06:35 Because well, direct sensory experience as opposed to concepts can be brain-imaged.

00:06:45 My idea is let's take either broadly Vedanātami body, that is to say physical and emotional

00:06:54 sensations, so that would be touch-feel, as they do within the Upa-Khin lineage, or let's

00:07:02 really look at the most gripping part of Vedanā, which is the emotional type pleasures and

00:07:09 pains that we go through.

00:07:11 Let's take the feel part and let's make sanjna, or concept, not a concept, but a sensory experience,

00:07:19 image-talk.

00:07:20 So let's sort of streamline the model to feel-image-talk.

00:07:30 Now I didn't just pull this out of nowhere.

00:07:37 There is an implication in my original school of Buddhism, Shingon, which is a form of Vajrayana,

00:07:47 that the sense of self arises through mental image, internal talk, and body sensations,

00:07:55 because the practices that are done in Shingon to have an experience of oneness with the

00:08:01 deity involve the physical type sensations in the form of mudras, mental images where

00:08:10 you visualize the deity in front and also yourself as a deity, and you visualize your

00:08:16 surroundings as the palace of the deity, and you replace your internal talk with the mantra.

00:08:23 And then you get the emotional feeling of the deity, whatever that tone is.
00:08:29 So there's an implication that body image-talk broadly and feel-image-talk more narrowly,
00:08:38 that these are sort of natural building blocks of identity.
00:08:44 If people tease apart the feel-image-talk, which is, there's nothing conceptual in that,
00:08:52 that's completely a sensory skill.
00:08:57 They get the same insight, oh, there's just feel-image-talk, there's no thing called a
00:09:02 self here.
00:09:04 So that's the way I have people work with this.
00:09:10 Now instead of using a classic metaphor of the chariot, I use a much more homey, like
00:09:23 your TV set or a computer monitor, not the liquid crystal ones, but the CRT ones.
00:09:36 That's my metaphor.