

CHAPTER 1

THE SOUL



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

1. “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 *kamma*. 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?¹⁰ Is it all of these combined? Or is it something outside of them that is Nāgasena?”

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

“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.”

“You, sir, have been reared in great luxury as becomes your noble birth. How did you come here, by foot or in a chariot?”

“In a chariot, venerable sir.”

“Then, explain sir, what that is. Is it the axle? Or the wheels, or the chassis, or reins, or yoke that is the chariot? Is it all of these combined, or is it something apart from them?”

“It is none of these things, venerable sir.”

“Then, sir, this chariot is an empty sound. You spoke falsely when you said that you came here in a chariot. You are a great king of India. Who are you afraid of that you don’t speak the truth?” Then he called upon the Bactrian Greeks and the monks to bear witness: “This King Milinda has said that he came here in a chariot but when asked what it is, he is unable to show it. Is it possible to approve of that?”

Then the five hundred Bactrian Greeks shouted their approval and said to the king, “Get out of that if you can!”

10. [See the note on the Five Aggregates of Being in the glossary.](#)

“Venerable sir, I have spoken the truth. It is because it has all these parts that it comes under the term chariot.”

“Very good, sir, your majesty has rightly grasped the meaning. Even so it is because of the thirty-two kinds of organic matter in a human body and the five aggregates of being that I come under the term ‘Nāgasena’. As it was said by Sister Vajīra in the presence of the Blessed One, ‘Just as it is by the existence of the various parts that the word “Chariot” is used, just so is it that when the aggregates of being are there we talk of a being’.”¹¹

“Most wonderful, Nāgasena, most extraordinary that you have solved this puzzle, difficult though it was. If the Buddha himself were here he would approve of your reply.”

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

2. “How many ‘rains’¹² do you have Nāgasena?”

“Seven, your majesty.”

“How can you say it is your seven; is it you who are seven or the number that is seven?”

Then Nāgasena said, “Your shadow is now on the ground. Are you the king, or is the shadow the king?”

“I am the king, Nāgasena, but the shadow comes into being because of me.”

“Just so, O king, the number of the years is seven, I am

11. S. i. 135.

12. A *bhikkhu*'s seniority is reckoned by the number of rainy seasons that have passed since his ordination.

not seven, but it is because of me that the number seven comes into being and it is mine in the same sense as the shadow is yours.”

“Most wonderful, Nāgasena, and extraordinary. Well has this puzzle been solved by you, difficult as it was.”

3. Then the king said, “Venerable sir, will you discuss with me again?”

“If your majesty will discuss as a scholar, yes; but if you will discuss as a king, no.”

“How is it then that scholars discuss?”

“When scholars discuss there is a summing up and an unravelling; one or other is shown to be in error. He admits his mistake, yet he does not become angry.”

“Then how is it that kings discuss?”

“When a king discusses a matter and advances a point of view, if anyone differs from him on that point he is apt to punish him.”

“Very well then, it is as a scholar that I will discuss. Let your reverence talk without fear.”

“It is well your majesty.”

“Nāgasena, I will ask a question”, said the king.

“Ask it sir.”

“I have asked it, your reverence.”

“Then I have answered.”

“What have you answered?”

“What have you asked?”

Thinking, “This monk is a great scholar, he is quite able to discuss things with me”, the king instructed his minister, Devamantiya, to invite him to the palace with a

large company of monks and went away muttering, “Nāgasena, Nāgasena.”

4. So, Devamantiya, Anantakāya and Mankura went to Nāgasena’s hermitage to accompany the monks to the palace. As they were walking along together Anantakāya said to Nāgasena, “When, your reverence, I say, ‘Nāgasena’ what is that Nāgasena?”

“What do you think that Nāgasena is?”

“The soul, the inner breath, which comes and goes.”

“But if that breath, having gone out, should not return would that man still be alive?”

“Certainly not.”

“And when those trumpeters and the like have blown their trumpets does their breath return to them?”

“No venerable sir, it doesn’t.”

“Then why don’t they die?”

“I am not capable of arguing with you sir, pray tell me how it is.”

“There is no soul in the breath. These inhalations and exhalations are merely constituent powers of the bodily frame.” Then the elder¹³ talked to him on the *Abhidhamma* and Anantakāya was satisfied with his explanation.

5. Then, after the monks had arrived at the palace and finished their meal, the king sat down on a low seat and asked, “What shall we discuss?”

“Let our discussion be about the *Dhamma*.”

13. *Thera* (elder) is nowadays normally used only for *bhikkhus* of ten or more years standing but Nāgasena was only seven rains. [See Question 2 above](#).

Then the king said, "What is the purpose, your reverence, of your going forth and what is the final goal at which you aim?"

"Our going forth is for the purpose that this suffering may be extinguished and that no further suffering may arise; the complete extinction of grasping without remainder is our final goal."

"Is it, venerable sir, for such noble reasons that everyone joins the Order?"

"No. Some enter to escape the tyranny of kings, some to be safe from robbers, some to escape from debt and some perhaps to gain a livelihood. However, those who enter rightly do so for the complete extinction of grasping."

6. The king said, "Is there anyone who is not reborn after death?"

"Yes there is. The one who has no defilements is not reborn after death; the one who has defilements is reborn."

"Will you be reborn?"

"If I die with attachment in my mind, yes; but if not, no."

7. "Does one who escapes from rebirth do so by the power of reasoning?"

"He escapes both by reasoning and by wisdom, confidence, virtue, mindfulness, energy and concentration."

"Is reasoning the same as wisdom?"

"No. Animals have reasoning but they do not have wisdom."

8. “What, Nāgasena, is the characteristic mark of reasoning; and what the mark of wisdom?”

“Taking hold is the mark of reasoning, cutting off is the mark of wisdom.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“How do barley reapers reap the barley?”

“They grasp the barley into a bunch with the left hand and, with a sickle in the right hand, they cut the barley.”

“Just so, O king, the recluse takes hold of his mind with reasoning and cuts of the defilements with wisdom.”

9. “What, Nāgasena, is the characteristic mark of virtue?”

“Supporting, O king, for it is the basis of all good qualities: the five controlling faculties¹⁴ and the five moral powers,¹⁵ the seven factors of enlightenment¹⁶ the eight factors of the noble path,¹⁷ the four foundations of mindfulness¹⁸ the four right efforts,¹⁹ the four bases of success,²⁰ the four absorptions,²¹ the eight freedoms,²² the four modes of concentration²³ and the eight great

14. Confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

15. Confidence, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

16. Mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity.

17. Right view, –thought, –speech, –action, –livelihood, –effort, –mindfulness, and –concentration.

18. Mindfulness of the body, feelings, thoughts, and mind-objects.

19. Effort to prevent and remove unwholesome states and to develop and maintain wholesome states.

20. Eagerness, energy, tenacity, wisdom.

21. Four stages of one-pointedness or *jhāna*.

22. Eight stages of release of the mind by intense concentration.

23. Meditations on love, compassion, sympathetic-joy, and equanimity.

attainments.²⁴ Each of these has virtue as its support and in him who builds on it as the foundation all these good conditions will not decrease.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“Just, O king, as all forms of animal and plant life flourish with the earth as their support, so does the recluse, with virtue as the support, develop the five controlling faculties and so on.²⁵ And this was said by the Blessed One:

“When a wise man, established well in virtue,
Develops concentration and understanding,
Then as a *bhikkhu*, ardent and sagacious,
He succeeds in disentangling this tangle.”²⁶

10. “What is the characteristic mark of confidence?”

“Clarification and inspiration. As confidence springs up in the mind it breaks through the veil of the five hindrances and the mind becomes clear, serene and undisturbed; thus confidence clarifies. Inspiration is the mark when the meditator, perceiving how the minds of others have been set free, aspires to the attainment of what he has not yet reached, to the experience of what he has not yet felt and the realisation of what he has not yet understood. For this was said by the Blessed One:

“By confidence he crosses over the flood,
By vigilance the sea of life,

24. Four formless *jhānas* and four form *jhānas*.

25. cf. S. v. 45.

26. S. i. 13, 165, Vism. (opening verse).

By steadfastness all grief he stills,
By wisdom he is purified.”²⁷

11. “What, venerable sir, is the characteristic mark of energy?”

“Reinforcing, O king, so that those good qualities, which it supports, do not fall away.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“Just as, O king, when his army has been broken up by a larger one the king would call to mind every possible ally to reinforce his army and break up the large army. Thus reinforcing is the mark of energy. For this was said by the Blessed One:

“The energetic noble disciple, O monks,
Puts away unwholesomeness and cultivates good,
Shuns the blameworthy and develops the blameless,
And thus does he keep his mind pure.”²⁸

12. “What, Nāgasena, is the characteristic mark of mindfulness?”

“Noting and keeping in mind. As mindfulness springs up in the mind of the recluse, he repeatedly notes the wholesome and unwholesome, blameless and blameworthy, insignificant and important, dark and light qualities and those that resemble them thinking, ‘These are the four foundations of mindfulness, these the four right efforts, these the four bases of success, these the five

27. S. i. 214; Sn. v 184.

28. A. iv. 110.

controlling faculties, these the five moral powers, these the seven factors of enlightenment, these are the eight factors of the noble path, this is serenity, this insight, this vision and this freedom.’ Thus does he cultivate those qualities that are desirable and shun those that should be avoided.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“It is like a king’s treasurer who reminds his master of the size of the army and the amount of wealth in his treasury.”

“How is keeping in mind a mark of mindfulness?”

“As mindfulness springs up in the mind, he searches out the categories of good qualities and their opposites thinking, ‘Such and such qualities are beneficial and such are harmful’. Thus does he make what is unwholesome in himself disappear and maintain what is good.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“It is like the Prime Minister of the king who advises him on the right course of action. And this was said by the Blessed One:

“Mindfulness, I declare, O monks, is helpful everywhere.”²⁹

13. “What, Nāgasena, is the characteristic mark of concentration?”

“Leading, O king, for all good qualities have concentration as their chief; they incline to it, lead up towards it.”

“Give me an illustration.”

29. S. v. 115

“As the rafters of a house incline and lead up to the ridge-pole and the ridge-pole is the highest point of the roof. So too all good qualities incline and lead up to concentration. And this was said by the Blessed One:

“Monks, develop concentration, a monk who is concentrated sees things as they really are.”³⁰

14. “What, Nāgasena, is the characteristic mark of wisdom?”

“Illuminating,³¹ O king. When wisdom springs up in the mind it dispels the darkness of ignorance, causes the radiance of vision to arise, makes the light of knowledge shine forth and makes the noble truths plain. Thus does the meditator perceive with the clearest wisdom, the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and soullessness of all formations.”

“Give me an illustration.”

“It is like a lamp, O king, which in a dark room would illuminate it and make the objects there plainly visible.”

15. “These qualities that are so different, Nāgasena, do they bring about one and the same result?”

“They do, the destruction of the defilements of the mind, just as the various parts of an army such as elephants, cavalry, war chariots and archers bring about one result — the conquest of the opposing army.”

“Well put Nāgasena, you are clever in reply.”

30. S. iii. 13, v. 414; cf. Asl. 162.

31. As well as cutting off already given above.