

BUDDHISM TABLE 3

KING MILINDA AND HIS CHARIOT

Now Milinda the king went up to where the venerable Nāgasena was, and addressed him with the greetings and compliments of friendship and courtesy, and took his seat respectfully apart.

Milinda: “How is your Reverence known, and what, Sir, is your name?”

Nāgasena: “I am known as Nāgasena, O king. But although parents, O king, give such a name as Nāgasena, it is only a generally understood term, a designation in common use. For there is no permanent individuality [=anātman] involved in the matter.”

Milinda: “If, most reverend Nāgasena, there is no permanent individuality [=anātman] involved in the matter, who is it, pray, who gives to you and members of your order your robes and food and lodging and necessities for the sick? Who is it who enjoys such things when given? Who is it who lives a life of righteousness? You tell me that your brethren in the Order are in the habit of addressing you as Nāgasena. Now what is that Nāgasena? Do you mean to say that the hair is Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena: “I don’t say that, great king.”

Milinda: “Or is it the nails, the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the nerves, the bones, are any of these that is Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena: “No, o great king.”

Milinda: “Is it the form then, that is Nāgasena, or the sensations, perceptions, volition or consciousness [= the Five Skandhas], that is Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena: “No, o great king.”

Milinda: “But is there anything outside the five skandhas that is Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena: “No, o great king.”

Milinda: “Who then is the Nāgasena we see before us?”

Nāgasena: “If you, great king, came in a chariot, explain to me what that is. Is it the pole that is the chariot?”

Milinda: “I did not say that.”

Nāgasena: “What about the wheels, the axle, the framework? Are these parts the chariot?”

Milinda: “No, sir.”

Nāgasena: “Then I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound.”

Milinda: “It is no account of its having all these things – the pole, and the axle, the wheels and the framework – that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of ‘chariot’.”

Nāgasena: “Very good! Your Majesty has rightly grasped the meaning of ‘chariot’. And just even so it is on account of all those things you questioned me about, that I come under the generally understood term ‘Nāgasena’. For it was said, Sire, by our Sister Vajira in the presence of the Blessed One: ‘Just as it is by the condition precedent of the coexistence of its various parts that the word ‘chariot’ is used, just so is it true that when the *skandhas* are there we talk of a ‘being’.”

Milinda: “Most wonderful, Nāgasena, and most strange. Well done, well done, Nāgasena.”

(extracted from the *Milindapañha* [The Questions of King Milinda])