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An Assessment of the Highlights in the Milindapañha

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Summary

In recent years the Milindapañha (The Questions of King Milinda) has been very popular in Europe and Asia. The warm reception it received from the academic circles is remarkable. This could be judged by its translations in English, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi, Sinhalese, Sanskrit, Prakrit and so forth. This essay is an attempt to assess the highlights in the text. It may be noted in passing, that the present author is privileged to be the translator of its Chinese version published in Beijing in 1997. For a fair assessment, we have listed four major topics in regard to the historical, doctrinal, philosophical and devotional aspects of Buddhism. They are: (1) King Milinda in Indian history (2) Who is the real Nāgasena? (3) Milinda and the six teachers and (4) The trend and transformations of Buddhist doctrines.

As the original Pali version has been in circulation for over a thousand years, it appears inevitable that interpolations were made from time to time by various individuals. From the historical perspective, the story of King Milinda's renouncement of the world to become a mendicant, and the episode of his visit to the six teachers are really incredible and astonishing. As Milinda passed away in a military camp, and as he and the six teachers lived in different centuries, these stories were fabricated for a specific purpose, namely, for enhancing the prestige of Nāgasena, and the glory of Buddhism.

p. 2 ↴

The section concerning the process of rebirth is of interest to those who wish to trace the development of Buddhism. Earlier, the theory on transmigration was based on "Mind, matter, and deed" (nāma, rūpa and kamma), but later, a new element known as "gandhabba" was in vogue. It is an entity somewhat similar to an "ātman" (soul). As Buddhism does not believe in such a speculative hypothesis, it should be considered an infiltration from a foreign source.

In a similar way, other areas within the scope of this article are also critically examined and evaluated.

Keywords: 1.Milinda 2.Highlights 3.Assessment

The publication of the Milindapañha edited by V. Trenckner in 1880 and its first English translation by T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda in the Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford 1890~1894) attracted the attention of the intelligentsia in the West. Later, I. B. Horner made a second English translation entitled *The Milinda Questions* (London 1969). Besides, there are other translations in European or Asian languages such as the German version by Nyanatiloka (1919~1924) which was reedited by Nyanaponika (1985); the French version of pages 1-89 or the Pali text by Louis Finot (1923) which was revised and reedited by Edith Nolot with a new introduction (1992); a new French translation by Edith Nolot (Paris 1995) and a Russian translation by A. V. Paribok (Moscow 1989). Among the East Asian languages there are two Japanese translations: One was made from the Siamese edition by Kanamori Nishimata (1939~40), and the other was based upon Trenckner's edition by Nakamura Hajime and Hayashima Kyōshō (1963~64). [1] In addition, there is a new Chinese translation, also based on Trenckner's work entitled *Nan-chwan milan-wang wenn jing* (《南傳彌蘭王問經》) by W. Pachow (Beijing 1997). [2] From the list of translations cited above, one may envision its popularity among the academic researchers in Europe and Asia. This is a rare honour being accorded to a Buddhist text of the Theravādin tradition in recent times.

However, the Milindapañha is no stranger to the Chinese public. It was translated into Chinese by the name of *Na-shian bii-chiou jing* (《那先比丘經》) [3] being included in the *Eastern Jinn Record* or *Dong-jinn-luh* (《東晉錄》) or *A Catalogue of Buddhist Translations of*

the Eastern Jinn Period, 317-420 C.E.). [4] Unfortunately, the Chinese Buddhist public did not pay much attention to it. Because firstly, it was not a product of distinguished translators such as Kumārajīva or Hsüan-tsang, secondly, it was classified as a Hīnayāna text and thirdly, the rendering was not inspiring or lucid enough for people to take a liking to it. Inspire of all this, when one compares it with the first 90 pages of the Pali version, one would appreciate its unsophisticated simplicity which would enable us to examine their differences, and decide as to which one has preserved the authentic traditions.

I. King Melinda in Indian History

From the historical point of view, the conquest of northern India by King Alexander, the great (356~323 B.C.) of Macedonia was an unusual event in human history, in that a bridge of communication was established between Europe and Asia for the first time. As a sequel, the cultural exchange between Greece and India, especially the influence of Grecian art on the Gandhra school of Indian sculpture, was an outstanding achievement. Since then, it was believed that the cultural life in India had entered a new phase of activities and progress. In this connection, our study on the activities of King Milinda is in order. For a Greco-Bactrian king to be honored with a title of "Maharajasa Dharmika Menandrasa" (Milinda, the righteous king) [5] was unusual, and to construct a monument in the form of a stupa to enshrine the ashes of

Milinda, should be considered extraordinary. Probably, the most valuable gift given to him from the Indian people was the composition of the Milindapañha (The questions of King Milinda). This text is the subject-matter on which we now propose to carry out a critical investigation. There are two principal players here: King Milinda and

p. 5

Nāgasena. We shall consider the role played by Milinda first, then discuss the claims that (1) He was a mighty king of Sāgara, (2) He conversed with Nāgasena on Buddhist teachings, (3) He abdicated his throne in favour of his son and became a Buddhist mendicant. [6] These assertions have not yet been proven. The facts given in the following subheadings enable us to solve some of the problems:

(1) Milinda, the King of Sāgara—It has been generally accepted that King Milinda of Greeco-Bactrian descent ruled in Sāgara (modern Sialkot in the Punjab) around 160~140 B.C. This is a statement made by V. A. Smith. [7] On the other hand, Ray Chaudhuri was of the opinion that his political activities took place in the first century B.C. This was based on a claim from the Milindapañha that he (Milinda) would be born 500 years after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa. [8] His place of birth was Alexandria Dipa, under the Caucasus (modern Kandahari in southern Afghanistan) which is about 200 yojanas (1400 miles) from Sāgara and about 12 yojanas (80 miles) from Sāgara to Kashmira. His extensive territory consisted of Bactria, Gandhra, Peshawar, Upper Kabul Valley, the Punjab, Sind, a part of Kathiawar and the United Province. [9] In 155 B.C. he invaded Magadha for expanding his sphere of influence. The mission was unsuccessful as there were internal conflicts and border disputes with his neighbour. Therefore, he hurriedly returned home with empty hands. [10]

During his reign, coins of gold, silver and copper were struck bearing legends such as "BASILEFS DIKAIUO MENANDROU," "MAHARAJASA DHARMIKASA MENANDRASA" and "BASILEUS SOTEROS MENANDROS" [11] on one side, and a portrait of Milinda

p. 6

wearing a military headdress on the other. Among the portraiture some appear youthful while others look middle-aged. This may indicate that some were made earlier than others. The distribution of coins was extensive, and many of them were found in more than 20 locations around the Indus River area, Kabul Valley, Western United Province and so forth. [12] These facts definitely establish King Milinda's existence and his political activities.

(2) Did Milinda converse with a Nāgasena? —The answer to this question appears to be a difficult one as many Pali scholars seem unable to arrive at a unified conclusion. For instance, Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids was of the opinion that in the first century B.C. a court clerk of Milinda made a record of about 20 of their dialogues, and they were engraved on copper plates. In the course of time (around 90~40 B.C.) the text was translated from Prakrit to Sanskrit, and later from Sanskrit to Pali by ancient teachers in Ceylon, but the exact dates were unknown. In 1777 or 1747 Hinaṭikumburē Sumaṅgala translated it into Sinhalese from Pali, and it was published

in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1877.[13] This suggests that they might have met and had conversations. On the other hand, T. W. Rhys Davids held a quite different view. He considered it “a book of didactic ethics and religious controversy cast into the form of historical romance.”[14] Continuing this trend he declared:

. . . These are not real conversations. What we have before us is really an historical romance, though the didactic aim overshadows the history.[15]

In another passage he analyzed the motive and structure of the dialogues and made the following observation:

p. 7

King Milinda played a very subordinative part, as the questions were put into his mouth, but the solution, to give opportunity for which the questions or dilemmas are invented, are the really, important part of the work, and these are put into the mouth of Nāgasena.[16]

The preceding statements, undoubtedly, severely criticized the alleged event of interviews and dialogues between Milinda and Nāgasena. On the basis of these arguments one should be able to arrive at a suitable conclusion. One may say that the entire structure wears a mask of dialogue, but really, it is a monologue in substance.

(3) Did he become a Buddhist mendicant? —In regard to the claim that he became a Buddhist bhikkhu (pabbajjā), it is unsubstantiated and speculative. Because firstly, it appeared at the end of the Pali version as an epilogue which is absent in the Chinese translation,[17] and secondly, concerning the death of Milinda, Plutarch, a Greek historian, recorded it in his treatise saying: “He dies in camp.”[18] If Milinda had actually become a Buddhist bhikkhu living a secluded life of a mendicant in a monastery, it is against the Vinaya rules to cause harm to any living beings (a pārājika offence), not to speak of his participating, actively, in a battle field. It is not clear under what circumstances he passed away. If it is true, then, the claim of his becoming a mendicant is unacceptable, as he could not be a monk and a combatant at the same time. However, the foregoing description does not suggest that Milinda had no connection with the Buddhist traditions or practices. We are informed by Plutarch that Milinda was a just and popular king. When he passed away, his subjects in various cities in India clamoured to erect a memorial monument to enshrine his remains. The competition was so explosive that the

p. 8

contesting parties were on the verge of starting a conflict. Finally, they settled on sharing equally the ashes, and constructed stupas in his honour in their own locations.[19] This reminds us of a similar incident which occurred at the time of the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa.[20] One may argue that it is not indicative of a special Buddhist connection, as it was originated from the general Indian public. But how can one explain the dedication of a composition entitled Milindapañha? It is likely that he was friendly towards the Buddhist community, or on a certain occasion, he might have expressed the sentiment that he would like to be regarded as an upāsaka or

something similar to that. On the basis of the facts noted above, we believe that the chances of his becoming a Buddhist mendicant is very remote, if not impossible.

II. Who is the Real Nāgasena?

Besides King Milinda, bhikkhu Nāgasena was another prominent personality who played a big part in this drama. In fact, he played a leading role, and Milinda was in a subordinate position, in that he accepted all the answers given to him by the Buddhist teacher. Probably, it was intended in that way from the writer's point of view. If so, then, the historicity of Nāgasena would trigger a flood of suspicion. To serve as a biographical outline, the Pali text has given us the following information: (1) Both Nāgasena and Milinda in their previous existence were members of the Buddhist saṅgha.[21] (2) He condescended to be born as a human being after being entreated by Indra, king of the Gods, because he was a deity of the Thirty-Three Heavens (Tāvātimsa-bhavana) known as Mahāsena.[22] (3) Bhikkhu Rohaṇa was commissioned to convert him and he visited Nāgasena's family for a period of seven years. Unfortunately,

p.

9

he failed even to obtain a spoon of food or a drink of water.[23] (4) He was a master of the Abhidhamma and attained arhatship when he was 20 years of age. [24] (5) By means of his supernatural power, he disappeared from Pāṭaliputra (Patna) and returned to the Himalaya mountains.[25] Indeed, this is a wonderful description. However, we are surprised to learn that we could not find any of the aforesaid events in the Chinese translation. Why? one may wonder.[26]

The variation may suggest that certain versions followed a particular tradition, or new elements were added to them for a specific purpose, such as to enhance the prestige of a leading personality. In our case, Nāgasena was the target. As they are found only in the Pali version, we suspect that Buddhaghosa, the renowned commentator and author of the Samanta-pāsādikā[27] of the 5th century C.E. might have made contributions to the biographical section of the Milindapañha. Because, in describing the life sketch of Moggalīputta Tissa, the alleged president of the third Buddhist council during the reign of King Asoka, Buddhaghosa made us understand that Tissa was a deity in heaven, and his birth on earth was the result of a request made by the Buddhist saṅgha, that he was converted by Siggava and Candavajji by means of begging alms from his family for seven years, and that a prophecy was bestowed on him by the Blessed One. All the foregoing details concerning Tissa are applicable to Nāgasena with minor differences. On the basis of the above, we suggest that Buddhaghosa transferred the good attributes of Tissa as noted in the Samantapāsādikā to Nāgasena in the Milindapañha. To

p. 10

substantiate our hypothesis we cite an observation made by P.S. Jaini, editor of the Milinda-Ṭīkā= Madhurāttha-pakasini concerning an ancient tradition. It was believed

that Buddhaghosa “was actively responsible in revising or even in recasting the Milindapañha.” [28] Moreover, Jaini stated that the author of the Milinda-Tikā had noted that “the first five introductory verses . . . as well as other several sentences consisting of prologue and epilogue were made (kata) by Bhandanta Buddhaghosa”[29] Thus, we may state that Buddhaghosa had a hand in reshaping certain sectors of the Milindapañha.

As a bhikkhu, Nāgasena seemed to possess great intelligence, eloquence and learning. He was a master of Abhidhamma and Vinaya, and well-versed in Buddhist traditions and history as found in the Mahāsaraniibbana-sutta and other texts. In the Pali version there is a list of 57 adjectives such as he was the leader of an Order, the leader of a group, the teacher of a group, well-versed in the Piṭakas and the Vedas . . . pointing out the way of dhamma, carrying the torch of dhamma, blowing the trumpet of dhamma, roaring a lion’s roar and thundering out Indra’s thunder and so forth,[30] in order to eulogize his excellent achievement and extraordinary qualities. We concur that the said assessment suits Nāgasena remarkably well, if there ever existed such a person. On the other hand, the embodiment of perfection in the name of Nāgasena might be a fantasy being personified, or one may say that the entire story was created out of pure imagination by the author of Milindapañha. If that is the case, then, the author would identify himself with “Nāgasena,” and eventually he and “Nāgasena” would become one and indistinguishable. If this hypothesis is acceptable, then, “Nāgasena is only a sound.”[31] as King Milinda used to make such a remark.

p. 11

From the geographical locations which were associated with the activities of Nāgasena, such as Kashmir, the Himalayas, Pāṭaliputra, Sāgara, Alasanda (Alexandria), Kalasi (near Kashmir) etc., it is fairly certain that Nāgasena was a resident of central or northern India—that is to say, somewhere from the Gangetic coast to the regions in Kashmir and the Punjab. In addition, many renowned rivers like the Ganges, Jumnā, Mahī, Sarabhū and Sarassatī have their origin in northern India, and the author seemed to be familiar with them. Rhys Davids made a suggestion saying that “the author of Milindapañha lived in northern India, perhaps in the Punjab.”[32], although he did not name a particular city.

From what we have seen, it appears that we have not been able to collect much information concerning Nāgasena. This teacher seems to be shrouded partially in history, and partially in mystery. The chance of his having conversations with King Milinda is doubtful. However, if the author of Milindapañha happened to bear the name of “Nāgasena,” then the problem of identity would be solved. It is only then that we shall be able to answer the question: “Who is the real Nāgasena?”

III. King Milinda and the Six Teachers

We are informed by the Milindapañha that King Milinda paid a visit to the six teachers. They are: (1) Pūraṇa Kassapa, (2) Makkhali Gosāla, (3) Niḡaṇṭha Nātaputta, (4) Sañjaya Belatthiputta, (5) Ajita Kesakambala and (6) Pakudha Kaccāyana. However, he met with the first two teacher only, and the remaining four were left

out.[33] We consider this event very unusual and strange, because they were contemporaries of the Buddha and lived in Magadha in the sixth century B.C. In Buddhist literature they were known as heretical teachers. This term is impolite and improper. As a matter of fact,

p. 12

they were independent thinkers revolting against the domination of the Vedic and Brahmanical traditions such as theism, polytheism, monotheism, the belief in soul, rebirth, sacrifice, karma, the caste system and so forth. As a result, each school proclaimed its distinctive theories either in favour of materialism or agonisticism or fatalism or atheism or other principles. It may be noted that Gautama Buddha was one of the teachers being associated with this movement. In the end, only Buddhism and Jainism became successful as established religions. They are still popular in India and in Asian countries.

Before we take up the topic concerning the authenticity of Milinda's visit, we may briefly summarize their theories and practices as follows:

(1) Sañjaya Belatthiputta—In regard to an indecision, this teacher believed that our knowledge about the truth is inadequate. If an erroneous view was made, we would bitterly repent of such a mistake. Therefore, one should not make a judgment. His critics called him a coward. However, this agnostic approach is noticeable in early Buddhism. For instance, the Buddha refused to answer a question on metaphysical speculations, such as whether the sage would or would not exist after death, or whether the world has or has not an end.[34] Well, have we solved the simple question: "Which comes first, the hen or the egg?"

(2) Ajita Kesakambala—This teacher was a materialist. He did not believe in almsgiving, sacrifice, offering, the fruition of good or evil karma. He claimed that there was no self (soul) or entity beyond the material body and its deeds. Therefore, he encouraged people to pursue happiness to its utter limit, because one might die the next day. The followers of this school are generally known as Cārvakas or Lokāyatas.[35]

p. 13

(3) Makkhali Gosāla—He was a fatalist and a leader of the Ajivikas. He believed that one's destiny had already been predetermined. Thus, no amount of good deeds such as virtuous conduct, vows, penance or chastity could change the course of events, nor could they have any effect on one's future birth. According to him, everyone has to experience fully the allotted measure of sorrow and joy in one's lifetime, and nobody can escape from it.[36]

(4) Pūraṇa Kassapa—This teacher was an antinomian who shared some of the views preached by Makkhali Gosāla. He believed that any good action such as liberality, self-conduct, abstinence and honesty would acquire no merit. On the other hand, if anyone performed an act of stealing, adultery, lying and so forth, no sin or crime was committed. In other words, he did not accord recognition to morality or immorality, right action or wrong doing. This extreme form of free speech without restraint would be unacceptable in a civilized society.[37]

(5) Pakudha Kaccāyana—He was an atomist, a forerunner of the Vaisheshika school. He upheld a theory of the seven elements. They are: The bodies of earth, water, fire, air, joy and sorrow, with life as the seventh. He believed that they are neither made nor ordered but existing eternally in a firm, stable, no-change and no-development state. A human is an embodiment of these elements, therefore, “Even if a man cleave another’s head with a sharp sword, he does not take life, for the sword-cut passes between the seven elements.” It is obvious that he discarded morality and social ethics, and showed no regard to human rights whatsoever.[38]

(6) Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta—This teacher was none other than Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism. He was a senior

p. 14

contemporary of the Buddha and flourished in the 5th century B.C. He had a large following known as the naked ascetics. The religious life of the Jain monks is “subjected to rigorous courses of penance and fasting in order to set their souls free of the karma already acquired.” [39] They hold the view that an individual consists of a soul closely associated with matter. When the soul is freed from matter, one may be able to gain salvation and enjoy the bliss of emancipation. However, their notion of soul (jīva) is different from the Vedantic ātman, viz., anything on earth such as trees, stones, rivers, mountains and so on are living and have a jīva. They practise the principle of ahimsā (non-violence) and observe strict disciplinary rules. In regard to the theory of karma, they emphasize that the effect of evil deeds would not be terminated for ages to come, until one had suffered all the consequences.

There are many similarities between Buddhism and Jainism. As the Buddha was a junior contemporary of Mahāvīra, Buddhism may have borrowed from Jainism certain concepts and practices. However, they were modified in order to suit the needs of the Buddhist situation.[40]

The preceding observations may serve as an introduction to the six teachers and their doctrines. Our principal objective here is to ascertain whether or not King Milinda had actually met with them. It is extremely doubtful that the claim could stand critical scrutiny. As this story is an imitation of a previous source, we shall refer you to an episode which occurred in Magadha in the 5th century B.C. According to the Samañña-sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya we are told that King Ajātasattu, son of King Bimbisāra, paid visits to the six teachers and enquired about their respective teachings. However, he was not satisfied with the response and informed the Buddha of his

p. 15

disappointment.[41] We believe this was a true event, because the kings of Magadha were contemporaries of the Buddha as well as of the six teachers. At that time the soil of Magadha was fertile and her people were generous and friendly. Besides, being away from the Vedic cultural dominance, the kingdom became a center of free thinking and unconventional ventures. Thus, many intellectuals and revolutionary personalities such as the founders of Buddhism and Jainism, were attracted to take up residence there. They were actively supported by King Bimbisāra and his son Ajātasattu. Eventually, some of these schools of thought became established religions.

On the contrary, the claim of Milinda's visit to the six teachers is groundless and unsubstantiated. We shall list the following reasons in support of our argument:

(i) According to V. A. Smith, the political activities of Milinda took place around 160~140 B.C.[42] In terms of time-counting, the date of Milinda's birth was several hundred years after the six teachers had lived their lives and passed away. Could anyone enjoy a longevity of three or four hundred years from the 5th to the 2nd century B.C.? As we have not yet seen such a precedent, our answer is in the negative.

(ii) The six teachers used to live in the vicinity of Pāṭaliputra (Patna) in Magadha, and the capital of Milinda was in Sāgara (modern Sialkot). The distance between the two cities is several hundred miles apart. How did he travel to Magadha, by plane or by vehicle? If he did not go there by an aeroplane at that time, then, the visit to these teachers was pure invention.[43]

(iii) We are informed by this text that King Milinda could meet with two of the six teachers, viz., Pūraṇa Kassapa and Makkhali Gosāla. He humiliated them, as they could not respond to the

p. 16

complicated questions.[44] This gives us the impression that they used to reside at the same place, but it was not so. Therefore, he could not have seen them immediately one after the other.

(iv) The Chinese translation known as Na-shian bii-chiou jing does not mention the said episode at all.[45] It is most likely that an interpolation was made at a much later time.

The facts noted above suggest eloquently that the visit to the six teachers was pure fabrication. However, there might be a motivation behind it. One may suggest that although King Milinda had humiliated the six teachers, and other Buddhist leaders in refutation, ultimately Nāgasena conquered Milinda by means of eloquence and learning. Therefore, Nāgasena was the best teacher among men.

IV. The Trend and Transformation of Buddhist Doctrines

The topics concerning nibbana (nirvāṇa), buddhakāya, soul, karma, mind, matter, rebirth, transmigration, transfer of merit and dependence on a superior power are included in this text, although early Buddhist teachings such as the four noble truths, the eightfold noble path and other theories occupy a prominent position. In general, these are the essentials of Theravada Buddhism which has been popular in Southeast Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and nearby regions for centuries. However, in the course of time, Mahāyāna Buddhist principles appeared to have influenced the primary doctrines to a certain extent. We shall examine the following areas in order to point out the directions and changes in Buddhism. In this connection, we are reminded of the law of impermanence (anicca) preached by the Buddha. It has a universal application which includes the philosophical interpretations of Buddhism.

(1) Nibbana and Ākāsa—According to the Theravādin tradition, “ākāsa” (space) is the 5th of the five elements, viz., Earth, water, fire, air and space, therefore, it cannot be considered as an “asañkhata dhamma,” only “nibbana” deserves this honour. Because nibbana is not born of cause, it is stainless, dustless, pure, fair, birthless, ageless, deathless, blissful, cooled and without fear.[46] In addition, the other tributes of nibbana are such that one cannot say: “that it has arisen or that it has not arisen, or that it is arisable, or that it is past or future, or that it is cognizable by the eye or the ear or the nose or the tongue or the body.”[47] On the contrary, the author of Kathāvattu, a treatise attributed to Moggalīputta Tissa, strongly criticized the Uttarāsathakas and Mahimsāsakas for their erroneous views on ākāsa.[48] But the editor of Milindapañha accepted the claim that space and nibbana are “asañkhata dhammas,” and insisted that “they are not born of kamma, not born of cause and not born of physical change.” [49] Besides, the Pali version held the view that the 11 attributes of space are applicable to nibbana as well.[50]

In fact, this view originally belonged to the Sarvāstivādin school which had its headquarters in the Kashmir Valley. If the writer of the Milindapañha was a resident of the Punjab, he might have been influenced by that school. As a sequel, space is considered as an “asañkhata dhamma.”

(2) The dependence on a superior power—From time immemorial mankind has been subjected to various natural or man-made disasters such as fire, flood, war, earthquake, snow storm, tornado and other dangers. Being threatened by these forces, insignificant little creatures like us are really helpless and crying for

help. In general, people hope to escape from these painful experiences and wish that someone may take them to a wonderland where there is peace, happiness and prosperity. This promised land is none other than the imaginary heavenly paradise known to various religions. The belief of being born in Heaven is popular in Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, although the notion of Heaven, and the way of getting there is different. The Buddhist call it the Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha. The Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra shows us a marvelous picture of the Land of Bliss where one may enjoy all the comforts, and fulfill all the wishes nobody could have ever dreamed. The way to get there is by placing one’s faith in Amitābha Buddha, and by reciting his name constantly throughout one’s existence. For over a thousand years, the Pure Land school has been unusually popular in China and Japan, because its principles and observance are simple and easy to understand. It can be followed by everyone irrespective of age, gender or educational standard. Thus, the blessing of Amitābha Buddha will always be with those who have faith in him.[51]

The above is a brief explanation for placing one’s faith in a superior power. In expressing his doubts on this topic, King Milinda questioned the possibility of an individual who had performed evil deeds for a hundred years, could be born in Heaven on account of reciting the Buddha’s name at the time of death. The following dialogue between Milinda and Nāgasena Nāgasena may shed light on this matter:

“What do you think about this, sire? Could even a small stone float on the water without a boat?”

“No, Revered sir.”

“But would it not float on the water, sire, if even a hundred cartloads of stones had been loaded into a boat?”[\[52\]](#)

p. 19

To this question, Milinda’s answer was in the positive. This indicates that the belief in having faith (bhakti) in a superior power was popular at that time.

(3) The Buddha and dhammakāya—In Mahāyāna Buddhism the meaning of buddhakāya and dhammakāya is identical. The Vimalakīti-nirdeśa-sūtra states: “The buddhakāya is dhammakāya.”, and the chapter on dhammakāya of the Sṛīmala simhanāda-sūtra gives us this definition: “Dhammakāya is the reality of dharma of suchness.” On the contrary, its embodiment in Theravāda Buddhism has been “śīla, samādhi, mukti, ñāṇa and vimukti-ñāṇa.”[\[53\]](#) To confirm this interpretation we quote a dialogue between the Buddha and Ānanda from the Mahāparinibbana-sutta:

Ānanda, after my passing away, the dhamma and vinaya which I preached to you and established for you should be your teacher.

Here, dhamma and vinaya go hand in hand, one represents the Buddha’s teaching, and the other the disciplinary rules governing the daily conduct of the disciples. They would serve the function of a guiding light after the Buddha’s death. In other words, dhamma and vinaya are regarded as dhammakāya. Further, the Milindapañha argues that although the Buddha had passed away, one could no longer see him, nor could one know his whereabouts, but one could see him and point out his whereabouts through dhamma.[\[54\]](#) This trend of thought coincides with the Saṃyutta-nikāya which says:

Whoever sees the dhamma, sees me, and whoever sees me, sees the dhamma.[\[55\]](#)

In this connection, it appears that the Milindapañha is in the right direction. Because it declares that one could pinpoint the location

p. 20

of the Tathāgata by means of dhammakāya, although he resides in an invisible realm of nirvāṇa.

Thus, one may envision the sophisticated interpretation of dhammakāya.

(4) The transference of merit—In early Buddhism, the objective of the disciples of the Buddha was to avoid doing evil in thought and action in order to achieve moral perfection, and attain the fruition of arhatship. They are called śrāvakas. In contrast, there is a group of followers known as bodhisattvas. A bodhisattva is extraordinary in

many ways. He observes the practice of morality, and cultivates meritorious deeds in terms of pāramīs or perfections. He is absolutely selfless sacrificing his own life for the sake of saving humanity. The following quotation may serve as an illustration:

For I have taken upon myself by my own will, the whole of the pain of all things living. Thus I dare try every abode of pain, in every part of the universe, for I must not defraud the world of the root of good. I resolve to dwell in each state of misfortune through countless ages . . . for the salvation of all beings There I shall give myself into bondage to redeem all the world from the forest of purgatory, from rebirth as beasts, from the realm of death.[56]

The above is from the Śikṣāsamuccaya by Śāntideva of the 7th century C.E. Indeed, such a powerful resolve for doing good to others is extraordinary.

For the purpose of comparison, we quote a statement from the Milindapañha concerning the transference of merit which runs as follows:

And if for a hundred years, sire, a man will advert to the good deeds (kusala) he had done, then, while he is repeatedly adverting

p. 21

to it, the good deeds increase more and more; and it is possible for him to share those good deeds with whomever he likes.[57]

In tracing the development of Buddhism, if one compares the spirit of altruism of a bodhisattva to the objectives of a śrāvaka, one may say that the latter has a long way to go in the process of attaining buddhahood. However, the act of transferring merit to others is the first step in the right direction.

(5) The soul and transmigration—Ancient India believed in a soul and its transmigration. Buddhism adopted the concept of rebirth, but rejected the notion of a soul, hence we have the doctrine of “anattā” (non-soul). As a way of explanation, the Buddhist argue strongly that the five skandhas: form, sensation, perception, predisposition and consciousness; the six sense organs: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind; and the objects of the sense organs: colour, sound, smell, taste, touch and phenomenon (dhamma) would serve the purpose of an individual’s mental and physical functions. There is not an entity or a soul which transmigrates from existence to existence aside from this. When Nāgasena was asked to explain “What or who is Nāgasena?” his simplified answer was that “ ‘Nāgasena’ exists as a denotation, appellation, as a current usage, merely as a name. But according to the highest meaning the ‘person’ (puggala) is not got at here.”[58] This is to say that the soul does not exist when the combined factors of mind and matter are taken away.

It is of interest to know how Nāgasena answered the question concerning “What transmigrates?” According to him, it is mind and form (nāma and rūpa) which create a link between the present and future existence by means of karma (deed), either good or evil. Let us listen to his response to this:

This name and form does not itself reconnect, sire, but, sire, by means of this name and form one does a lovely or evil deed, and because of this deed another name and form reconnects.[59]

Here, karma is the cause of transmigration, and the soul has nothing to do with it.

In regard to the process of rebirth, Nāgasena gave us an illustration using the transmission of light from one lamp to another lamp. The light in the second is derived from the first, but the first lamp did not lose anything at all.[60] Once again, the soul and its function in transmigration is denied. The Buddhists believe that it is the karmic force which propels the sentient beings to experience endless sufferings in the sea of saṃsāra.

The law of impermanence has its constant presence everywhere. Now, we notice there are changes in the process of rebirth. The early concept of “name and form reconnects” has been replaced by an element known as “gandhabba,” along with other necessary conditions for a successful pregnancy.[61] This gandhabba is supposed to be “A samsaric entity seeking rebirth and about to enter a womb.” It is also supposed to be an entity existing after an individual’s death and before its being conceived in the next birth (antarābhava). [62] In this connection, may we question whether gandhabba is similar to that of an “ātman”? If the answer is in the positive, then we should say that an infiltration of a foreign influence had made a strong impact on the theory of “Name and form reconnects,” at an unknown date. Therefore, it changed the characteristics of the original teachings of early Buddhism.

(6) The great charity of King Vessantara (An old wine in a new

bottle) —In both Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism, the practice of dāna or charity by the wealthy to the less fortunate has been very popular. The donors who see to the daily requisites of the saṅgha are praised for their generosity, and their meritorious deeds will bring them prosperity in the present, and a heavenly existence in the future. Leading a life of poverty, the disciples of the Buddha are called “bhikkhus” (begging alms). This means that their livelihood depends on the good-will and charity of the public; without a supportive laity one cannot expect these mendicants to survive. Therefore, dāna ranks number one in the list of six pāramīs (religious practices). The benefit of giving is that it will eliminate one’s greed and miserliness, and create compassion towards the sentient beings. This is a brief introduction to the significance of gift-giving. Now, we shall focus our attention on King Vessantara’s story.

In the collection of Jātakas (birth stories) many heroic deeds such as giving away one’s eyes or body to other people are recorded. Our story is called Vessantara Jātaka. The essence of the tale is that King Vessantara for the sake of seeking the highest wisdom, he gave away his wife, son and daughter to a brahman to be used as slaves. Once the son made his escape and returned home, Vessantara tied him with creepers and handed him over to the brahman again. The son entreated him to leave

his sister alone, but he refused even to grant that request. This caused the child to make this remark: “Have you a heart of stone, father, that you can look upon our sufferings as we are being led away by the ogre into the vast forest and not keep us back?”^[63] At this point King Milinda questioned Nāgasena saying,

For the sake of seeking merit, how could he cause others experiencing pain? and why he did not give away himself as a charity?^[64]

p. 24

It is natural that such an act should be regarded as excessive and extremely difficult for everyone involved, especially from a humanist point of view. Here aNāgasena got his opportunity to show off his erudition and experience as an eloquent debater. He argued the case on behalf of Vessantara and pleaded for him that his course of action was fair and justifiable. The reasons are as follows:

(A) In terms of charity, one may even give up one’s own life. If so, to give away one’s wife and children for the sake of attaining the all-knowing wisdom, is definitely less harmful than giving up one’s life. In doing so, the king had a better choice.

(B) Owing to unfavourable circumstances a father may be deeply in debt. To pay off the debts, he may deposit his son in pledge or sell him. King Vessantara was searching for the treasure of dhamma, and the attainment of omniscience. Being unable to achieve that objective, he temporarily deposited his wife and children, or gave them away as a gift for the said purpose. Therefore, he only gave what others gave, only did what they did. Why should one so violently deprecate him for doing that?^[65]

(C) What the brahman requested of him was his wife and children, but not himself. One should give to the individual what he really wished for, otherwise he would not be satisfied with what he had obtained. Vessantara, being known as the Lord of Giving, he could give up his own life, should the occasion arise. Therefore, one should not underestimate the greatness of such a giver.

(D) Further, King Vessantara knew that his father had a deep affection for the grandchildren, and very soon he would redeem them with large amounts of gold, silver and merchandise. Thus, the children would be released in the near future. Moreover, the brahman was old, sick, almost being on the verge of death. Under these circumstances the royal children would no longer be used as slaves. ^[66]

p. 25

By using his erudition and eloquence, Nāgasena defended King Vessantara’s action admirably and convincingly. After listening to these inspiring arguments, perhaps, many would soften their criticism towards Vessantara’s impossible mission.

Conclusion

The preceding observations may serve as an assessment of the highlights in the Milindapañha. We considered the history of King Milinda, the likelihood of his having conversations with Nāgasena, the imaginary nature of his visit to the six teachers, the transformation of Buddhist doctrines, and made appropriate comments. We endeavour to seek the rationale for a particular situation. For instance, we think that there is no possibility for Milinda to visit the six teachers; but the motivation behind the claim appears to be justifiable, viz., the interpolators desired to enhance the prestige of Nāgasena.

As Buddhism has a history of over 2,500 years, now is the time to have a look at it from different angles, and to examine the changes as well as the circumstances which brought about the consequences. As a starting point, we are of the opinion that Milindapañha is a very important source for this purpose. It is true that it has been affiliated with the Theravādin tradition, one may consider it old-fashioned. However, it should be borne in mind that without a good knowledge of the past, the road to the future might be resting on shaky grounds.

Abbreviations

- BUD-2500 P. V. Bapat (ed.), 2500 years of Buddhism, Delhi: 1956.
- D Dīgha-nikāya.
- DKM Bhikkhu Pesala, The Debate of King Milinda, Delhi: 1991.
- DialB T. W. Rhys Davids (tr.), Dialogues of the Buddha, London: 1971.
- EHI V. A. Smith, The Early History of India, Oxford: 1994.
- INDO-G A. K. Narain, The Indo-Greeks, Oxford: 1957.
- JA Jātakas.
- KV Kathāvattu.
- Miln Milindapañha, V. Trenckner (ed.), London: The Pali Text Society, (1928) 1962.
- MilnT Milinda-Tikī, edited by P.S. Jaini, London: 1986.
- MilnQ C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Milinda Questions, London: 1930.
- M Majjhima-nikāya.
- MORA Plutarch, Moralia.
- MQ I. B. Horner (tr.), Milinda's Questions, London: 1969.
- QKM T. W. Rhys Davids (tr.), Questions of King Milinda, Oxford: 1890~1894.
- S Saṃyutta-nikāya.
- SIT Sources of Indian Tradition, Wm. Theodore De Bary (ed.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1958.
- T Taishō edition of the Buddhist Tripi.taka.

《彌蘭陀王問經》重點評析

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提要

近幾年來《彌蘭陀王問經》（*Milindapañha*）在歐洲及亞洲都廣泛流行，學術界對它的熱中程度值得注意。這可從它被翻譯成英文、法文、德文、俄文、中文、日文、印度文、錫蘭文、梵文及古印度文（*Prakrit*）等看出。本文嘗試評析此經若干重點。過去筆者一直被認定為是此經中文譯本的譯者，該譯本於1997年在北京出版。為了公平審慎地做出評析，筆者列出包括歷史、教義、哲學及信仰等佛教四大主題，分別是：印度歷史中的彌蘭陀王，誰是真的那先比丘（*Nāgasena*）？彌蘭陀王與六位老師，佛教學說的趨勢與轉化。

由於此經的巴利文版本已經流傳逾千年，因此無可避免地常遭增刪竄改。從歷史的觀點來看，彌蘭陀王棄世托鉢為生的故事，以及他參訪六位老師的插曲，著實令人驚訝並無法置信。從他在軍營過世，以及他和六位老師生活在不同世紀來看，這些故事都是虛構的，目的只是為了增加那先比丘的威望以及佛教的光芒。

此經中有關轉世（*rebirth*）過程的段落，對有意探索佛教發展的學者來說是饒富趣味的。早先有關轉生（*transmigration*）的理論是建構在「名法、色法及業」（*nāma, rūpa and kamma*）上，但稍後所謂「乾闥婆」（*gandhabba*，食香者）的新說開始流行，它是類似「靈魂」（*ātman*，我）的獨存實體。由於佛教並不崇信這類空洞的理論，因此它應該是受外來文化的滲入影響。

如上所述，本文其他領域的討論，都是批判性的檢驗與評估。

關鍵詞：1.彌蘭陀王 2.重點 3.評析

- [1] Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Vol. 1996 Lix/2 p.382.
- [2] This was published by the China Social Sciences Publishing House, Beijing: 1997.
- [3] T.32, No. 1670A-1670B.
- [4] T.32, No. 1670B.
- [5] QKM. I.xxi.
- [6] Miln. p.420.
- [7] OXH. p.145.
- [8] BUD-2500. p.58; Miln. p.3.
- [9] BUD-2500. p.197.
- [10] EHI. p.255.
- [11] QKM. I. xxi.
- [12] BUD-2500. p.195-196; QKM. I. p. xx.
- [13] Miln. p.5.
- [14] QKM. I. p. xxiv.
- [15] Ibid. p. xvii.
- [16] Ibid. p.xvii.
- [17] Miln. p.420.
- [18] Mora. p.821. D-F; INDO-G.p.100; QKM. I. p. xx.
- [19] QKM. p.xxii; INDO-G. p.98.
- [20] Dial-B.II. p.189, 191.
- [21] Miln. p.420.
- [22] Miln. p.2-3.
- [23] Miln. p.6-7.
- [24] Miln. p.8-9.
- [25] Miln. p.18.

- [26] T. No. 1670A, 1670B.
- [27] T. No.1462, vol.14, ch.1. This text was translated into Chinese by Saṅghabhadra in 489 C.E.
- [28] DKM. p.x; Miln T. p.xii; MO. p.xix.
- [29] MilnT. p.xii.
- [30] Miln. p.22-23; MQ. I. p.28-29.
- [31] Miln. p.27; MQ. I. p.36.
- [32] QKM. pp.xliv-xlv.
- [33] Miln. p.5.
- [34] H. C. Warren, (tr.) Buddhism in Translation, pp.117-122, New York: 1988.
- [35] SIT. I. p.40, 297.
- [36] SIT. I. p.39.
- [37] SIT. I. p.39.
- [38] SIT. I. p.39; D. I. p.1-47 ff.
- [39] SIT. I. p.46-47.
- [40] SIT. I. pp.46-51.
- [41] DialB. I. pp.69-76; SIT. I. 47 ff.
- [42] OXH. p.145.
- [43] See note 7.
- [44] Miln. p.3.
- [45] T.32, No.1670B.
- [46] Miln. p.333; MQ. II. p.175.
- [47] Miln. pp.268-270; MQ. II. 88-89.
- [48] KV. VI. 6.
- [49] Miln. p.268-270; MQ. I. xlii.
- [50] Miln. p.321-322.

[51] T. 12. There are various Chinese translations of this text. The total amounts to 12, but only 5 are still in circulation.

[52] Miln. p.80; MQ. I. p.111.

[53] Ting Fo-pao, The Great Buddhist Encyclopedia (in Chinese), p.1380-1381.

[54] Miln. pp.53-54.

[55] S. III. 120.

[56] SIT. I. pp.61-62.

[57] Miln. p.297; MQ. II. 297.

[58] Miln. p.26-28.

[59] Miln. p.46; MQ. I.63.

[60] Miln. p.71; MQ. I. p.97.

[61] Miln. P.125.

[62] M.34. Mahātaṇhāsankhaya-sutta; The Middle Āgama, No.201. Char-tyi jieng 《? 帝經》. The Fo-kuang Buddhist Encyclopedia, p.1688. Taiwan: Fo-kuang-shan, 1989.

[63] Miln. p.275-285; MQ. II. p.96-109.

[64] Miln. p.275.

[65] Miln. p.279; MQ. II.103.

[66] Miln. p.282.