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THE OPENING DEBATE IN THE *MILINDAPAÑHA*

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Abstract

A comparison of the opening debate in the Chinese and Pāli versions of the *Milindapañha* shows a process of expansion in the latter. As a result, the dynamic underlying the debate appears to have to some extent become obfuscated.

Keywords

Debate; Milindapañha; Nāgasena; Not Self

Introduction

This article presents a comparative study and translation of the opening debate between the Bactrian King Milinda and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena.¹ A full account of their encounter is extant in Pāli, in the form of the *Milindapañha*, and in two Chinese translations, which appear to stem from a single original rendition.² In addition to these, extracts from this debate are found in an *Avadāna* collection extant in Chinese and in a discourse quotation given in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*.³

The importance of consulting the Chinese parallel to the *Milindapañha* has already been noted by Oskar von Hinüber,⁴ who points out that the “development of [the] Mil[indapañha] can be traced with the help of the ... Chinese translation.” This assessment finds confirmation in the comparative study below. By way of preparation for that, however, a brief look at principles of Indian debate is required.

Principles of Debate

The basic principles of debate can be appreciated with the help of a description of its contemporary practice in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Georges Dreyfus reports from his own training in debating that, when one is in an actual debate situation,⁵

it is crucial to remain calm and good-humored, while keeping an eye out for sharp rejoinders that can turn the presence of a large crowd to one's advantage. I remember an incident that took place while I was answering [challenges in a debate session] in Se-ra Jay. The abbot, Geshe Lob-zang Thub-ten, who was my teacher, made a joke at my expense, implying that my answers were weak. The whole assembly burst into laughter. I was not fazed and without blinking I replied, “Some may laugh, but I challenge them to back up their laughter!” The audience exploded. I had won the exchange.

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The actual argument has of course no logical weight; it does not prove anything. But the quick and astute way he replied won him the approval of the audience and thereby the upper hand in the debate situation.

The same basic pattern is already evident in the period of early Buddhism, as can be seen in the case of a debate recorded in the *Pāyāsi-sutta*.⁶ The Pāli version of this discourse has several parallels extant in Chinese, in addition to which a version of this debate is also extant from the Jain tradition.⁷ Needless to say, in the latter case the debate involves a Jain monk.

The *Pāyāsi-sutta* and its Chinese parallels depict a Buddhist monk debating a local king, a basic setting that bears considerable similarity to the *Milindapañha*. The topic at stake is the question of rebirth, which the materialist king denies. The actual debate begins with the king voicing his disbelief in rebirth with the phrase “there is no other world.”⁸ This is the standard phrasing apparently employed in the ancient setting to convey this particular ideological position. The Buddhist monk reacts to this statement by querying whether the sun and the moon belong to this world or to the other world. The king has to admit that they belong to the other world.

This is of course no argument for rebirth. But it is a valid reply in the context of a debate. The point at stake is not so much the providing of a logical proof. The existence of the sun and the moon have little to do with rebirth and certainly do not prove it. Yet, the monk’s reply is successful since he has exhibited his rhetorical skill by using a good argument that forces his opponent to retreat or even remain silent. This is what counts in a debate setting.⁹ It would be a misunderstanding to interpret this argument from a logical perspective.¹⁰ What counts is quickly giving a sharp reply.

Keeping in mind the nature and basic principles of debate helps to appreciate the encounter King Milinda apparently had with another Buddhist monk, before his meeting with Nāgasena. The story reports the king approaching the monk and asking two seemingly innocent questions. These were why the monk had gone forth and whether the purpose of his going forth could also be achieved by a lay person. When the monk affirmed the latter, the king drew the conclusion that it is useless to go forth as a monk, as one can reach the same purpose by remaining a householder. The monk remained silent, thereby admitting his defeat.¹¹

This episode shows Milinda’s debating strategies, presumably based on having developed familiarity with Indian debating practice. The first question regarding why the monk went forth can just appear like a polite inquiry in order to find out about the philosophy and conception of the final goal of the other’s doctrine or even just to make a personal contact. The follow-up question of whether the same can be attained by a lay person is a natural one to pose by someone who is not a monk himself. Perhaps in order to assure the king that the Buddha’s teaching is also relevant to householders, the monk gives an answer that, in the debate setting, leads to his defeat.

Now, the conclusion drawn by the king is not actually compelling. Even though lay practitioners may in principle reach the final goal, the same is more easily achieved if one decides to go forth. The monastic life, at least in its ideal form, is meant to afford the best possible conditions for progress on the path. A verse in the *Suttanipāta* compares the lay life to a peacock, whereas the path of a monastic compares to a goose, whose speed of flight the peacock can never match.¹²

However, to explain the situation appropriately, the monk would have to retract his earlier position of unqualified assertion. In order to avoid being bested, he should not just have flatly stated that lay disciples can reach the final goal but should have added a qualifier of some sort. Doing that would have forestalled the conclusion Milinda was ready to draw.

With a basic appreciation of rules of debate in general and of Milinda's characteristic approach in place, it is now time to turn to the first exchange between the king and Nāgasena, based on the Chinese version.¹³

Translation (Part 1)

The king asked Nāgasena in turn: "Dear, what is your name?"

Nāgasena said: "My parents gave me the name Nāgasena and in turn called me Nāgasena. At times my parents called me Wéixiān, at times my parents called me Shǒuluóxiān, and at times my parents called me Wéijiāxiān. By reason of such usages, all people recognize me. All people in the world just have such names."

The king asked Nāgasena: "Who is Nāgasena?" The king asked again: "Is the head Nāgasena?"

Nāgasena said: "The head is not Nāgasena."

The king asked again: "Are the eyes, ears, nose, or mouth Nāgasena?"

Nāgasena said: "The eyes, ears, nose or mouth are not Nāgasena."

The king asked again: "Are the neck, shoulders, arms, feet, or hands Nāgasena?"

Nāgasena said: "They are not Nāgasena."

The king asked again: "Are the thighs or lower legs Nāgasena?"

Nāgasena said: "They are not Nāgasena."

The king asked again: "Is the countenance Nāgasena?"

Nāgasena said: "It is not Nāgasena."

The king asked again: "Is [the experience of] pain and pleasure Nāgasena?"

Nāgasena said: "It is not Nāgasena."

The king asked again: "Is [the doing of what is] wholesome and evil Nāgasena?"

Nāgasena said: “It is not Nāgasena.”

The king asked again: “Is the body Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena said: “It is not Nāgasena.”

The king asked again: “Are the liver, lungs, heart, spleen, veins, intestines, or stomach Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena said: “They are not Nāgasena.”

The king asked again: “The countenance, [the experience of] pain and pleasure, [the doing of what is] wholesome and evil, the body, and the mind – are these five things in combination rather Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena said: “They are not Nāgasena.”

The king asked again: “In case there is no countenance, [experience of] pain and pleasure, [doing of what is] wholesome and evil, body, and mind – is the absence of these five things rather Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena said: “It is not Nāgasena.”

The king asked again: “Is the sound of the respiration Nāgasena?”

Nāgasena said: “It is not Nāgasena.”

The king asked again: “What is Nāgasena?”

Study (Part 1)

The above exchange shows Milinda employing the same basic approach of beginning by asking an innocent question: What is your name? Nāgasena deals with this better than the other monk, as he forestalls the drawing of unwarranted conclusions by immediately clarifying that there are alternative names and that any of these is simply a matter of designation. Although the texts do not explicitly indicate this, it seems fair to assume that, given Milinda’s earlier success with the other Buddhist monk, Nāgasena is here shown to be careful with apparently innocent questions, by qualifying immediately what he had said.

Milinda was reportedly acquainted with the different philosophical tenets in the ancient Indian setting, so that it seems reasonable to assume he may have had at least a superficial acquaintance with basic Buddhist ideas. In the ancient setting, a Buddhist teaching that would naturally have received much attention by others and for this reason would have been popularly known (though not necessarily understood properly) is the doctrine of not self. This often takes the form of a deconstruction, such as by analyzing the individual into five aggregates and then showing that each of these fails to meet the requirements that would justify it being considered a permanent and autonomous self.¹⁴

Such deconstruction of the self as a cardinal Buddhist tenet was and still is puzzling to those who are not well versed in Buddhist doctrine.¹⁵ To someone accustomed to thinking in terms of a reified sense of self, its denial in Buddhist

thought can easily seem misconceived and incoherent. Perhaps the present passage can be taken to imply that the king is portrayed as trying to explore this presumed weakness of Buddhist philosophy by using the basic procedure of deconstruction to lead to the absurd and thereby self-contradictory conclusion that Nāgasena does not exist.

Said simply, the argument would be that, given that Nāgasena has communicated his name, what exactly has he been talking about? On adopting the Buddhist deconstruction of a self, nothing can supposedly be found to which the name really refers. The expectation would then be that, faced with this dilemma, Nāgasena either has to confess that his previous statement, in which he announced his name, is not really correct or else implicitly admit that the Buddhist deconstruction of a self is not a coherent way of arguing. On this interpretation, it could be assumed that Milinda would have been ready to use any affirmation that Nāgasena indeed exists, despite the king's inability to find him, to conclude that, on the same reasoning, the self exists, despite any inability to find it among the aggregates.

In the Pāli version, the king presses his point more strongly by accusing Nāgasena of falsehood, inasmuch as there is no Nāgasena to be found.¹⁶ Yet, Nāgasena is not short of a reply, which takes the following form in the Chinese version.¹⁷

Translation (Part 2)

Nāgasena asked the king: “[You came in] what is called ‘a chariot.’¹⁸ What is a chariot? Is the axle the chariot?”

The king said: “The axle is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the rim the chariot?”

The king said: “The rim is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Are the spokes the chariot?”

The king said: “The spokes are not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the hub the chariot?”

The king said: “The hub is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the drawbar the chariot?”

The king said: “The drawbar is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the yoke the chariot?”

The king said: “The yoke is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the carriage’s framework the chariot?”

The king said: “The carriage’s framework is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the pole [of the canopy] the chariot?”

The king said: “The pole [of the canopy] is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the canopy the chariot?”

The king said: “The canopy is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the combined assembly of all these wooden parts, placed to one side, rather the chariot?”

The king said: “The combined assembly of all these wooden parts, placed to one side, is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “In case there is no combined assembly of all these wooden parts, is that rather the chariot?”

The king said: “The absence of the combined assembly of all these wooden parts is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “Is the sound [of driving] the chariot?”

The king said: “The sound is not the chariot.”

Nāgasena said: “What is the chariot?”

The king was silent in turn and had nothing to say.

Nāgasena said: “It is taught in a Buddhist discourse: ‘Just as by means of the combined assembly of all these wooden parts one constructs a chariot and thereby gets a chariot, similarly it is for a person.’”

Study (Part 2)

Nāgasena’s reply employs the same deconstruction strategy but now applied to a lifeless object. As he explicitly indicates at the end of his argument, his presentation is inspired by a canonical precedent. This precedent involves a nun facing a challenge by Māra. In reply to a reference to a “sentient being” in Māra’s challenge, the nun clarifies that this term stands for something composite and not a substantial and unchanging entity. In order to convey this point, she employs the simile of a chariot, which is similarly composite, as it is made up of various parts.¹⁹

In a detailed study of this episode,²⁰ Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā explains that the nun’s “illustration is not a denial of the conditioned existence of a chariot or a self, but a calling into question [of] the shift from concept to ontology evident in Māra’s pressing her on the characteristics of a ‘being’.” Importantly, in this canonical precedent, “the notions or terms ‘chariot’ and ‘being’ are not problematized as such.” Instead, the point is simply to clarify the nature of what these terms should be taken to imply.

The reply by Nāgasena silences the king. In the narrative setting, he could hardly have been aware of the canonical precedent set by the chariot simile, which Nāgasena adjusts to the present context by employing the same deconstruction strategy used earlier by the king. This move must have been unexpected to the

king, since one does not normally relate the deconstruction of the self to something inanimate.

According to the Pāli version, Nāgasena started his reply by asking if the king had come in a chariot, which the king affirms. The same could be implicit in the Chinese version, for which reason it has been supplemented in the translation above. Such an inquiry would then employ the very same strategy of posing an innocent question, leading up to a rebuttal in the same way the king had employed earlier. In the Pāli version this takes the form of pointing out that, since the king is unable to establish the existence of a chariot, his earlier affirmation of having travelled in one appears to be a falsehood.²¹

The exploration of the debate dynamics thus far has been based on the Chinese version. A substantial difference occurs at the outset of the relevant portion in the Pāli version (corresponding to part 1 of the translation of the Chinese version given above), which proceeds as follows:²²

Translation (Part 3)

Then King Milinda said this to the venerable Nāgasena: “Venerable sir, how are you known? Venerable sir, what is your name?”

[Nāgasena replied:] “Great King, I am known as Nāgasena and, Great King, my companions in the holy life address me as Nāgasena. Yet, though my parents gave me a name like ‘Nāgasena’ or ‘Sūrasena’ or ‘Vīrasena,’ or ‘Sīhasena,’ this is but a designation, Great King, a convention, a concept, a verbal expression, ‘Nāgasena’ is just a name, as there is no person to be found here.”

Then King Milinda said this: “Good sirs, let the five hundred Bactrian Greeks and the eighty thousand monks listen to me. This Nāgasena speaks thus: ‘there is no person is to be found here.’ Is it appropriate to approve of this?”

Then King Milinda said this to the venerable Nāgasena: “Venerable Nāgasena, if no person is to be found, then who offers you robes, alms food, dwellings, and medicinal requisites for the sick and who partakes of them? Who guards moral conduct? Who engages in [mental] cultivation? Who realizes path and fruit, Nirvana? Who kills a sentient being? Who takes what is not given? Who engages in sexual misconduct? Who speaks falsehood? Who drinks alcohol? Who performs the five deeds of immediate [retribution]?”

There is therefore nothing wholesome, nothing unwholesome, there is no doing or causing to do of wholesome and unwholesome deeds, there is no fruition or ripening of good and bad deeds.

Venerable Nāgasena, if someone kills you there would be no killing of a sentient being for that one. Venerable Nāgasena, you also have no teacher, no preceptor, and no ordination.

You say this: 'Great King, my companions in the holy life address me as Nāgasena.' What here is Nāgasena? How is it, venerable sir, is the head hair Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "Is the body hair Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "Are the nails ... the teeth ... the skin ... the flesh ... the tendons ... the bones... the bone marrow ... the kidneys ... the heart ... the liver ... the diaphragm ... the spleen ... the lungs ... the bowels ... the mesentery ... the contents of the stomach ... the feces ... the bile ... the phlegm ... the pus ... the blood ... the sweat ... the fat ... the tears ... the grease ... the spittle ... the snot ... the oil of the joints ... the urine ... the brain in the head Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "How is it, venerable sir, is bodily form Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "Is feeling tone Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "Is perception Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "Are volitional formations Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "Is consciousness Nāgasena?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "How is it, venerable sir, is Nāgasena bodily form, feeling tone, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda asked:] "How is it, venerable sir, is Nāgasena apart from bodily form, feeling tone, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness?"

[Nāgasena replied:] "No, Great King."

[Milinda said:] "Venerable sir, although I have been asking and asking, I do not see that Nāgasena. Venerable sir, Nāgasena is just a sound. How could there be a Nāgasena? Venerable sir, you are speaking a falsehood, an untruth; there is no Nāgasena!"

Study (Part 3)

A crucial difference, compared to the ostensibly earlier Chinese version, is the addition of the phrase “there is no person to be found here” in Nāgasena’s first statement to the king. This changes his position, compared to the Chinese version, as he now takes the position of denying that there is a person at all.²³

Such denial appears to have motivated an extension of Milinda’s reply in the Pāli version, by way of querying who receives offerings and undertakes moral conduct, etc. It is only after this additional line of argument that the deconstruction of the name Nāgasena falls into place, similar in kind to what is found in the Chinese version, with some differences in details.

That the present difference is indeed a case of later expansion can be seen from its lack of inner coherence. At first, Milinda argues that a denial of the person makes no sense, since it results in the inability to provide a coherent account of subjective experience and the need for moral restraint, etc. Yet, in the ensuing part Milinda deconstructs Nāgasena and arrives at the result that no Nāgasena can be found, thereby contradicting the point he has just made.

In order to reply to Milinda argument, in the way it is now found in the Pāli version, there would have been no need for Nāgasena to bring in the chariot simile. Instead, he could have just called the king out for making an incoherent argument, pointing out that what Milinda had said earlier does not match what he said subsequently.²⁴

The addition of the argument that there is no person, and its corresponding reply that there is no chariot, seems to obfuscate the point made by Nāgasena, as well as by the nun to whom the simile is attributed. As pointed out by Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā,²⁵ the nun’s reference to a sentient being and a chariot does certainly not propose “a metaphysical affirmation of their conventional existence but ultimate or absolute non-existence.” Yet, this is what the opening debate between Milinda and Nāgasena in the Pāli version of the *Milindapañha* has come to convey, thereby inaugurating a shift in perspective on the significance of the chariot simile as an illustration of the doctrine of not self that appears to have had a lasting influence in later Buddhist traditions.

Endnotes

- ¹ This part of the debate has already been taken up for a comparative study by Minh Chau 1964: 47–49.
- ² A detailed study can be found in Demiéville 1924; see also Takakusu 1896, and Guang Xing 2009.
- ³ T 203 at T IV 492c₂₃; on T 203 see Willemen 1992 and 1994. For the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* quotation see the detailed study by Skilling 1998.
- ⁴ Von Hinüber 1996/1997: 83.
- ⁵ Dreyfus 2003: 258.
- ⁶ For a more detailed comparative study see Anālayo 2012 and 2013.
- ⁷ See Bollée 2002. A comparison of the Buddhist and Jain versions can be found in Leumann 1885: 470–539 and Ruben 1935: 143–151.
- ⁸ DN 23 at DN II 319,¹²: *n’atthi paraloko*; with its parallels in DĀ 7 at T I 43a₁: 無有他世; MĀ 71 at T I 525c₄: 無有後世; and T 45 at T I 831b₂₄: 無有來世. The last two deny more precisely a future world. It seems safe to assume that these two translations may also go back to an Indic original worded similarly to the phrase found in DN 23, with the translators perhaps adding 後/來 to express the underlying meaning.
- ⁹ On debate in ancient India see, e.g., Solomon 1978: 833–875, Matilal 1987, and Bronkhorst 2007; on principles of debate in the Buddhist tradition Todeschini 2011 and on debate in the *Dīghanikāya* Manné 1992.
- ¹⁰ An example would be Evans 2008: 61, who reasons that the “opening argument is to ask whether the sun and the moon are of this world or another ... [which involves] right away the use of false dilemma ... and consequent equivocation of the ‘other world’ of the sun and the moon and the ‘other worlds’ of rebirth.” Such reasoning reflects lack of awareness of the rules of debate; see in more detail Anālayo 2013: 17–18.
- ¹¹ Mil 20,²⁸ and T 1670B at T XXXII 705c₅.
- ¹² Sn 221.
- ¹³ T 1670B at T XXXII 706a₉.
- ¹⁴ This basic pattern can already be seen in what tradition considers to have been the second sermon given by the Buddha; see Allon 2020 for a survey of the parallel versions and a study of a Gāndhārī fragment version.
- ¹⁵ An example would be the reasoning by Batchelor 1997: 36: “A central Buddhist idea, however, is that no such intrinsic self can be found through analysis or realized in meditation. Such a deep-seated sense of personal identity is a fiction, a tragic habit that lies at the root of craving and anguish. How do we square this with rebirth, which necessarily entails the existence of something that not only survives the death of the body and brain but somehow traverses the space between a corpse and a fertilized ovum?” For a critical reply see Anālayo 2021: 123–126.
- ¹⁶ Mil 26,²³.
- ¹⁷ T 1670B at T XXXII 706a₂₈.
- ¹⁸ The supplementation “you came in” takes its inspiration from Mil 26,³², where in reply to an inquiry by Nāgasena the king states that he has come in a chariot.
- ¹⁹ SN 5.10 at SN I 135,²⁰, SĀ 1202 at T II 327b₉, SĀ² 218 at T II 454c₂₉, and Up 9014 at D 4094 *nyū* 82a₇ or P 5595 *thu* 128b₂; see also Bingenheimer 2011: 171, Anālayo 2014: 126, and Dhammadinnā 2020: 9.
- ²⁰ Dhammadinnā 2020, 13.
- ²¹ Mil 27,¹⁵. It is also worthy of note that in both versions the king departs on horse, rather than by using his chariot. Vasil’kov 1993: 68–69 comments on this contrast in the case of the *Milindapañha* that in this way the king “first visits Nāgasena in a chariot; but after the [first] discussion, in which he is defeated, he returns home on horseback ... One might suggest ... that the king abandons his chariot out of vexation, since it was precisely the celebrated ‘example of the chariot’ which the monk had just used to prove to him that he was wrong.” However, in that case, one would expect some more explicit allusion to this contrast. Hence, a more plausible explanation would be that “Milinda’s leaving behind the chariot after the [first] dispute with Nāgasena is a direct result of the king’s defeat in the debate. A traditional coupling of two motifs,

defeat in a contest, verbal or otherwise, and the surrender of the chariot to the victor, would seem to explain the strange incident of Milinda's departure on horseback."

²² Mil 25,5.

²³ This appears to reflect the theory of two truths, according to which, from the viewpoint of ultimate truth, a person does not exist at all. A more detailed exploration of this doctrinal shift, in relation to the chariot simile, is at present under preparation by Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, wherefore I do not follow this up further in the present context.

²⁴ An example for such pointing out an incoherent presentation, by noting that what has been said earlier does not match what has been said subsequently, can be found in MN 56 at MN I 376,30: *na kho te sandhīyati purimena vā pacchimam, pacchimena vā purimam*, with a parallel in MĀ 133 at T I 629b29: 汝之所說, 前與後違, 後與前違, 則不相應.

²⁵ Dhammadinnā 2020, 13.

Abbreviations

D	Derge edition
DĀ	<i>Dīrghāgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyamāgama</i> (T 26)
MN	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>
P	Peking edition
SĀ	<i>Samyuktāgama</i> (T 99)
SĀ ²	(another) <i>Samyuktāgama</i> (T 100)
SN	<i>Samyuttanikāya</i>
Sn	<i>Suttanipāta</i>
T	Taishō (digital)
Up	<i>Abhidharmakośopāyikāṭīkā</i>

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