CHAPTER III
A CRITICAL EXPOSITION OF THE DOCTRINE
OF THE SELF IN MILINDAPANHA
The Milindapañha\(^1\) (or the Questions of King Milinda as it is translated in English) is a unique philosophical work of the semi-canonical Pāli literature. It\(^2\) occupies a central place in the development of the Buddhist doctrines and may be regarded as a link between the texts of early Buddhism and those of the later metaphysical schools. Its philosophical depth has been widely recognised both in the East and the West. Apart from its metaphysical and ethical significance, it possesses great literary and historical values too, which take it to the heights of such an eminence that no other work of semi-canonical literature could surpass. Milindapañha has been widely translated and studied in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Korea, Indo-China and Japan. Many translations\(^3\) in European and other

\(^{1}\)Cf. "The title of the work is given in MSS. as Milindapañham (neut.) or Milindapañhā (plur.), but the Buddhists of Ceylon generally say Milindapañhā (mascu.)." V. Trenckner (ed.), Milindapañha (London, 1880), p. vi. (Also cited by Winternitz, op. cit., p. 174). We have preferred to use Milindapañha.


languages are available.

The manuscript of the text has not been found in India, but luckily it is being preserved in Ceylon; the Ceylonese version is in Pāli. The author of the text as also the date of the work are unknown. But Buddhaghosa, the famous Buddhist commentator has cited the Milinda-panha at several places in his works as the most authoritative work after the Pitakas. The text was, in all probability, written round the first century B.C. Perhaps the original was in Sanskrit which unfortunately has been lost. In the Pāli version many accretions and interpolations are noticeable, adding to its subject-matter. It is also clear from its Chinese translation and from the peculiar character of the last portions of the book that the original Sanskrit version was shorter. Rhys Davids in his scholarly introduction to the text has given other details which may be of interest to the students of history of Buddhist literature. Mrs. Rhys Davids has exhaustively described the work in a full

Finot, Les Questions de Milinda, Paris, 1923 (French tr. of Books I-III); F. O. Schrader, Die Fragen des Königs Menadros, Berlin, 1907. (German tr. of authentic parts only); Nyān tiloka, Die Fragen des Milinda, 2 Vols., Leipzig and München-Neubiberg, 1919, 1924 (Complete German Translation); Sumangala Hīnātikumburē, Milinda Prasnaya (Sinhalese), Colombo, 1887.

volume. On the literary merits of the work, Rhys Davids is quite eloquent:

"The author, or authors, have an unusual command of language, both in the number of words used and in the fitness of the words chosen in each case. There is a great charm in the style, which rises occasionally throughout the book to real eloquence; and there is considerable grasp of the difficult and important questions involved." 

Rhys Davids goes to the extent of considering the book as a master-piece and ranks it very high:

"I venture to think that the 'Questions of Milinda' is undoubtedly the master-piece of Indian prose; and is the best book of its class, from a literary point of view, that had then been produced in any country."

The work consists of interesting dialogues between king Milinda (Menander) and the venerable Buddhist philosopher Nāgasena. Dealing with deep and knotty metaphysical problems, Milinda being dissatisfied with


7Questions I, p. xlviii.
the shallow religious and philosophical arguments of philosophers, was in search of a true and really worthy teacher whom he found in Nāgasena. Milinda's doubts and dilemmas regarding many metaphysical issues got ably analysed and answered in a masterly manner by Nāgasena. We may in this connection quote Rhys Davids once again:

"And to a devout Buddhist, in whose eyes the book he was reading offered a correct solution of the most serious difficulties in religion, of the deepest problems of life, — ...."\(^8\)

These dialogues are completely negativistic in approach, questioning the reality of the self and its liberation and of God. The empiricism of the Buddha is carried forward to its logical conclusion. The work may be regarded as an attack on the dogmatism of religion, going beyond the caution with which the Buddha approached the orthodox religions of his times. While Buddha was silent on ultimate questions of metaphysics, the Milindapañha is emphatically negative to these questions. Radhakrishnan remarks:

"Suspended judgement was Buddha's attitude; reckless repudiation was Nāgasena's amendment. In working out with remorseless logic the consequences of Buddha's ideas, he has

\(^8\) Loc. cit.
unwittingly revealed their inadequacy."\(^9\)

The Milindapañha consists of seven 'books' viz., i. Bāhira kathā, ii. Lakkhana pañha, iii. Vimaticchedana pañha, iv. Mendaka pañha, v. Anumāna pañha, vi. Dhutaṅkathā and vii. Opammakathā pañha. An analysis of the contents is given in the work itself.\(^10\) The first book 'Bāhira Kathā' or 'The Secular Narrative' is introductory and historical in nature. In the beginning there is a description of Sāgala — the beautiful city of Yonakas, and the capital of Milinda's kingdom, then the previous birth history (pubba-yoga) of two persons (Milinda and Nāgasena) is narrated. An account of Nāgasena as based on the Tripitaka is also given. His admission as novice into the Order, his conversion to Buddhism and attainment of Arahatship are explained in detail. Milinda enters into a discussion with Āyupāla and confutes his arguments. Then it is narrated that Nāgasena after having made tours of various places as a Bhikkhu arrives at Sāgala, where a band of Samaṇas attended on him. Being an erudite scholar and a philosopher of extraordinary intellect, he is highly honoured there. Milinda wanted to have

\(^9\)S. Radhakrishnan, op. cit., p. 346.

\(^10\)1. Their previous history (Pubba-yoga).
2. The Milinda problems.
3. Questions as to distinguishing characters.
4. Puzzles arising out of contradictory statements.
5. Puzzles arising out of ambiguity.
6. Discussions turning on metaphor." Questions I,
philosophical discussions with some capable teacher. When Milinda heard of Nāgasena, he went to see him in Saṅkhēyya hermitage, where the latter was staying. At the end of the first book, it is related that at the sight of Nāgasena, Milinda became perplexed and nervous. Over excited with fear his foreboding remarks were:

"Many the talkers I have visited,
Many the conversations I have had,
But never yet, till now, to-day, has fear,
So strange, so terrible, o'er powered my heart.
Verily now defeat must be my lot,
And victory his, so troubled is my mind."

The second book, 'Lakkhana pañḥha' or 'The Distinguished Characteristics of Ethical Doctrine' is the most famous portion of the Milindapañḥha, since it deals with the central problem of the Buddhist philosophy viz. argumentations regarding the unreality of the self, which we shall take up in detail in the following pages. The king seems to have been satisfied with the answers of Nāgasena regarding the impermanent nature of the self and was converted to Buddhism. There are conversations between Milinda and Nāgasena on the important ethical and metaphysical problems which are illustrated with the help of similes and analogies. The principal issues discussed in the book are, individuality

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11Ibid., p. 39.
and name, the famous chariot simile, soul and breath, Buddhist renunciation and its aim, rebirth, distinction between wisdom and intelligence, existence of the soul, thought and sight, sensations etc.

The third book 'Vimaticchedana pañha' or 'The Removal of Difficulties' deals with the metaphysical, psychological and ethical problems like suffering, renunciation, Nirvāṇa, karma, transmigration, soul and memory.

'Mendaka pañha' or 'The Solving of Dilemmas' is the title of the fourth book of the Milindapañha. It is the longest of all the books and presents a chronological account of some of the Buddhist doctrines. The subject-matter of this book is very vast and varied. There are as many as eighty-two dilemmas of different nature confronted by Milinda and they are solved by Nāgasena in a witty manner to dispel all the doubts of the king. Important metaphysical problems like karma and Nirvāṇa are also discussed during the course of the conversation.

'Anumāna pañha' or 'The Problem of Inference' is the title of the fifth book which describes various ethical and psychical values attained by an Arahat in a blessed state. It is beautifully explained with the help of an allegory of the 'City of Righteousness' (Dhammanagara), which became one of the most famous allegories in Pāli literature.
The sixth book 'Dhutaṅkathā' or 'The Voluntary Extra Vows' presents a description of the ascetic austerities and practices to be observed for the realisation of Arahatship — the dilemma already discussed in book iv. Other important questions dealt with in this book are: Nirvāṇa, advantages of vows, good qualities that come for keeping vows, importance of vows for the attainment of Arahatship, details of thirteen extra-purity practices (Dhutaṅgas), thirty graces of true recluse etc.

The seventh and the last book 'Opammakathā pañha' or "Similes of Arahatship" is absolutely different in nature and plan as compared to other books of the Milindapañha. It is a book of parables and its laconic style is perhaps indicative of the fact that the original text was considerably smaller and interpolations were made later on. Some scholars have even doubted the genuineness of the book. A long list of the qualities essential for the attainment of Arahatship is given. Then Milinda, after having heard very convincing answers from Nāgasena of hundreds of his puzzles expresses his entire satisfaction. Dispelling all his doubts and obstinacy, Milinda was over pleased with the Buddhist doctrines. The text ends with a happy note:

"Thenceforward the king and his mighty men continued in paying honour to Nāgasena. And the king had a Wihāra built called 'The Milinda
Wihāra’, and handed it over to Nāgasena, the Elder, and waited upon him and all the multitude of the Arahat Bhikshus of whom he was the chief with the four requisites of the Bhikshu’s life."\(^{12}\)

The problem of the nature of the self is one of the central questions of the Milindapañha. (In no other Buddhist text is this problem so emphatically expounded as in Milindapañha). The doctrine has been formulated and explained in various ways — directly, symbolically and rhetorically to king Milinda by the Buddhist sage Nāgasena, whose interpretation of the original doctrine of the Buddha (as we have already pointed out) is rationalistic and negativistic in approach. Radhakrishnan is also of this opinion:

"Nāgasena seems to commit Buddha to a negative dogmatism which denies soul, God and a future for the liberated. He is a thorough going rationalist, who adopted the scientific method rigorously and tore off the screen of make-believe which pious hands had woven round the image of truth to disguise its uglier aspects."\(^{13}\)


\(^{13}\)S. Radhakrishnan, op. cit., p. 346.
Nāgasena rejects outright as erroneous and unwarranted the notion of permanent reality of the self by emphasising its superficiality and untenability. In his view there is no permanent soul or ego.\textsuperscript{14} Belief in such a soul is merely illusory. There is no being, no permanence, but only becoming, change. Being is a continuous process. Nothing is fixed and static; the worldly phenomena are in a state of constant flow.\textsuperscript{15} So the postulate of the permanent character of reality is vague. Nāgasena points out clearly with the help of numerous illustrations (which we shall take up in the subsequent pages) that there is no permanent individuality or identity of the subject.

After introducing the characters of the dialogues the work goes on from the introductory 'Secular Narrative' (Bāhira kathā) to take up the problem of individuality as the very first question in Lakkhana pañha. The underlying idea is that there is no self (Na puggalo upalabhati), which incidentally is also the first doctrine to be discussed in the Kathāvatthu.\textsuperscript{16} In this dialogue Milinda asks the Buddhist sage his name and this query leads to

\textsuperscript{14} Questions I, pp. 40, 67, 89, 132.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., pp. 66-67; Questions II, pp. 102, 371.

an important discussion regarding the denial of the self.
The passage may be quoted in full:

"And Milinda began by asking, 'How is your Reverence known, and what, Sir, is your name?' 'I am known as Nāgasena, O king, and it is by that name that my brethren in the faith address me. But although parents, O king, give such a name as Nāgasena, or Śūrasena, or Vīrasena, or Śīhasena, yet this, Sire, — Nāgasena and so on — is only a generally understood term, a designation in common use. For there is no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter'."17

It is clear from this passage that Nāgasena is of the view that things, names, epithets, appellations and designations are all empty, there is nothing real in them, but the human situation, especially the moral situation, is such that assumption of the moral agent appears to be unavoidable. In the dialogues, Milinda puts the matter clearly:

"If, most reverend Nāgasena, there be no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter, who is it, pray, who gives to you members of the Order your robes and food and lodging and necessaries for the sick?

17 Questions I, p. 40."
Who is it who enjoys such things when given? Who is it who lives a life of righteousness? Who is it who devotes himself to meditation? Who is it who attains to the goal of the Excellent Way, to the Nirvāṇa of Arahats? And who is it who destroys living creatures? who is it who takes what is not his own? who is it who lives an evil life of worldly lusts, who speaks lies, who drinks strong drink, who (in a word) commits any one of the five sins which work out their bitter fruit even in this life? If that be so there is neither merit nor demerit; there is neither doer nor causer of good or evil deeds; there is neither fruit nor result of good or evil Karma. — If, most reverend Nāgasena, we are to think that were a man to kill you there would be no murder, . . . .

From this it follows that while an assumption of a moral agent may be unavoidable, but it may be difficult to establish the reality of that agent. Perhaps names

18 Ibid., pp. 41-42.

19 Cf. "A seeing, a hearing, a conceiving, above all a suffering, takes place; but an existence, which may be regarded as the seer, the hearer, the sufferer, is not recognised in Buddhist teaching." H. Oldenberg, Buddha, His Doctrine, His Order, Eng. tr. W. Hoey (Calcutta, 1927), pp. 253 f.
merely indicate a particular individual and differentiate him from other individuals. Names do not have a connotation; one cannot form a complete idea of a person merely by his name. But there is no proof of a permanent identity behind names. Nor can parts of the individual be identified with the whole individual e.g. in the dialogues it is explained that when we say Nāgasena, it does not follow that any one of his particular aspects is called Nāgasena. The hair on his head, the heart and other organs of the body, the blood, the sweat the fat, the tears, the serum, the saliva etc. are all individual aspects of Nāgasena's physical person and none of these, either individually or collectively, can be called Nāgasena.20 Neither is the self outward form (Rūpa), or the sensation (Vedanā), or the ideas (Sāññā), or the confections (Saṃkhārā), or the consciousness (Viññāna).21 Hence to find any identity or difference between the self and the skandhas is untenable.22

20 Questions I, p. 42.
21 Loc. cit.
Is Nāgasena 'a mere empty sound'? In asking this question, Nāgasena points to something which is so very basic to the Buddhist doctrine. The reality of the self cannot be rationally proved, but in human pain and suffering one does have inkling of individuality.

The famous discourse based on the analogy of the chariot appears in the text in detail. It is used by Nāgasena in an attempt to prove the unreality of the self. Just as the chariot is nothing but a conglomeration of wheels, axle, and the body, similarly the self is nothing but the totality of the five skandhas or the aggregates of body, feeling, perception, disposition and consciousness. Comparison of the self to the chariot is nothing new in Indian philosophy. It is used by Kathopanisad, and it is also found in Plato. In Buddhist philosophy the illustration first appears in Samyutta Nikāya, which

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23 Questions I, p. 43.

24 "Know the Self as the lord of the chariot and the body as, verily, the chariot, know the intellect as the charioteer and the mind as, verily, the reins." S. Radhakrishnan (ed. and tr.), The Principal Upanisads (London, 1953), 3.3, p. 623.


Nāgasena takes over in Milindapañha. Chariot is a name or designation of a thing for common everyday use or of popular expression. One understands by this not the various parts taken individually, but the thing as a whole as an organic unity without which we cannot understand its working. Thus if we touch the chariot and say "This is a chariot", we cannot touch the whole chariot, but only one of its parts, but despite this we refer to the whole chariot. In a similar manner the five skandhas or the aggregates constitute the self (which has no permanent reality). The composite nature of the self can be explained only by the unity of the parts as a whole and not by every part, though the cessation of the activity of any of these five aggregates means that the self ceases to be what it is. The skandhas cannot have reality of their own individually.27 The passage may be quoted in full:

"And the venerable Nāgasena said to Milinda the kind: 'You, Sire, have been brought up in great luxury, as beseems your noble birth. If you were to walk this dry weather on the hot and sandy ground, trampling under foot the gritty, gravelly grains of the hard sand, your feet would hurt you. And as your body would be in pain, your mind would be disturbed, and

you would experience a sense of bodily suffering. How then did you come, on foot, or in a chariot?
'I did not come, Sir, on foot. I came in a carriage'.
'Then if you came, Sire, in a carriage, explain to me what that is. Is it the pole that is the chariot?'
'I did not say that.'
'Is it the axle that is the chariot?'
'Certainly not.'
'Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?'
And to all these he still answered no.
'Then is it all these parts of it that are the chariot?'
'No, Sir.'
'But is there anything outside them that is the chariot?'
And still he answered no.
'Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in? It is a falsehood that your Majesty has spoken, an untruth! There is no such thing as a chariot! You are king over all India, a mighty monarch. Of whom then are you afraid that you
speak untruth? And he called upon the Yonakas and the brethren to witness, saying: 'Milinda the king here has said that he came by carriage. But when asked in that case to explain what the carriage was, he is unable to establish what he averred. Is it, forsooth, possible to approve him in that?'

When he had thus spoken the five hundred Yonakas shouted their applause, and said to the king: 'Now let your Majesty get out of that if you can?'

And Milinda the king replied to Nāgasena, and said: 'I have spoken no untruth, reverend Sir. It is on account of its having all these things — the pole, and the axle, the wheels, and the framework, the ropes, the yoke, the spokes, and the goad — that it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of "Chariot".' "

Similarly thirty-two kinds of organic matter in the human body and five constituent elements of being cannot also explain the thing corresponding to the name Nāgasena.29

The chariot discourse is concluded by a quotation

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28 Questions I, pp. 43-44.

29 Ibid., p. 44.
from *Samyutta Nikāya*:

"'Just as it is by the condition precedent of the co-existence of its various parts that the word 'chariot' is used, just so is it that when the Skandhas are there we talk of a 'being'." 30

Thus Nāgasena is merely a name or a designation to denote a corporeal form, but as an absolute form it has no permanent reality.

The doctrine in the *Milindapañha* is traceable to the earlier texts like *Digha Nikāya*, 31 *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Kathāvatthu*, 32 *Visuddhimaṇḍa* etc., where the orthodox Buddhist view is clarified in no uncertain terms. Thus it may be said that the idea of the self as formulated in the *Milindapañha* is only an elaboration and elucidation of the original teaching of the Buddha. Attention may be invited to the narrative of Bhikkhuni Vajirā in *Samyutta Nikāya* 33 and more particularly to a passage in *Visuddhimaṇḍa*:

30 Cited in *Questions I*, p. 45.

31 *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, p. 263.


33 B.K.S. I, p. 16.
"Just as the word "chariot" is but a mode of expression for axle, wheels, chariot-body, pole and other constituent members, placed in a certain relation to each other, but when we come to examine the members one by one, we discover that in the absolute sense there is not chariot;..."

Merely by putting together the parts in a mechanical order, the idea of the 'whole' as desired cannot be grasped. The idea of the various parts however can only be attained by reference to the thing of which they are parts. Now here the whole object is only an expression and the parts together make up the whole. In an absolute sense the ontological reality of the whole is doubted, but then this can lead to infinite regress. If each of these parts is itself regarded as a whole consisting of parts, then 'the whole' is only an expression. Thus the identity of either the part or the whole is open to doubt. In exactly the same way the words 'living entity', and the 'ego' are but modes of expression for the five aggregates or skandhas. But when we further examine the elements of being one by one

one, we discover none of them as having any identity in the same sense as the 'ego' has no identity. Thus in the absolute sense there is only name and form, 'nāma-rūpa'.

This is a phenomenalist position which is taken over by Nāgasena in the Milindapañha and this leads to complete scepticism in Nāgarjuna's Mādhyamika system. But Nāgasena's arguments may be cited here:

"The king said: 'You were talking just now of name-and-form. What does "name" mean in that expression, and what "form"?'

'Whatever is gross therein, that is "form": whatever is subtle, mental, that is "name".'

'Why is it, Nāgasena, that name is not reborn separately, or form separately?'

'These conditions, great king, are connected one with the other; and spring into being together.'

'Give me an illustration.'

'As a hen, great king, would not get a yolk or an egg-shell separately, but both would arise in one, they two being intimately dependent one on the other; just so, if there were no name there would be no form. What is meant by name in that expression being intimately

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35Visuddhimagga, Chap. XVIII, Warren, pp. 133-34.
dependent on what is meant by form, they spring up together. And this is, through time immemorial, their nature."  

The individual here is a psycho-physical organism composed of the five aggregates; in other words, he is a 'nāma-rūpa' complex, i.e. a complex of mind and body.

The next passage relevant to our purposes occurs in the discourse between Nāgasena and Anantakāya, when Nāgasena attempts to prove with the help of the illustrations of trumpeters and pipers that there is nothing like a soul in an inner breath. The traditional Indian doctrine of treating the breath in a mystical way as the self, is refuted in the passage. But Nāgasena says that in fact inhalations and exhalations that constitute breathing are merely physiological functions and have nothing to do with the self.  

Milinda thinks that the 'soul' or the empirical self (vedagu) may be regarded as 'living principle' within us which sees, hears, tastes, smells, feels and discriminates between things. The five or six senses are not united indiscriminately but in a causal order and this casual order to which these sensations are organised cannot be identified with the soul.  

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36 Questions I, pp. 76-77.
37 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
38 Ibid., pp. 86 f.
Abhidhamma is cited by Nāgasena:

"'It is by reason, O king, of the eye and of forms that sight arises, and those other conditions — contact, sensation, idea, thought, abstraction, sense of vitality, and attention — arise each simultaneously with its predecessor. And a similar succession of cause and effect arises when each of the other five organs of sense is brought into play. And so herein there is no such thing as soul (Vedagu)'."\(^{39}\)

There is no similar cause like the ego, but a conjunction of causes and effects (paccayā-sāmaggi). There is evidence neither of an internal seer nor of an internal hearer. The sensation of anything ceases as soon as it goes beyond the range of the sense organs. The characterisation of the self as permanent, eternal, unchanging and firm which is to be found in the orthodox Upaniṣadic view is rejected. One would look in vain for a self beyond the empirical subject. Even consciousness cannot be characterised in a definite and fixed manner. The senses are compared to the various windows of the palace from which one could look out from the east, or the west, or the north, or the south.\(^{40}\) Another simile in

\(^{39}\)Quoted in Questions I, pp. 88-89.

\(^{40}\)Questions I, p. 86.
this connection is that of a trough of honey in which hundred vessels of honey have been poured; if one were to be tied up and gagged and thrown into that trough, would he know whether the honey had been sweet or not?\textsuperscript{41} Thus the senses are capable of deciding the object only when it comes into their range and not otherwise. With the help of many picturesque similes Nāgasena also finds out that the causal connection between perception and thought is a natural connection where thought follows perception. It may become a natural habit arising out of the association that thought results from corresponding perception. The other familiar concepts of Buddhist psychology — Phassa (contact),\textsuperscript{42} Vedanā (sensation),\textsuperscript{43} Saññā (idea),\textsuperscript{44} Cetanā (conceived purpose),\textsuperscript{45} Viññāna (perception),\textsuperscript{46} Vitakka (reflection),\textsuperscript{47} Vicāra (investigation)\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., p. 88.
\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., p. 92.
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., p. 93.
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., p. 94.
\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., p. 94.
\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., p. 95.
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., pp. 95-96.
are defined by Nāgasena in an illustrative manner in the subsequent passages.

There is a passage in the *Milindapañha* which confirms the above view:

"The king said: 'These three, Nāgasena, — perception, and reason, and the soul in a being, — are they all different both in letter and in essence, or the same in essence differing only in the letter?'

'Recognition, O king, is the mark of perception, and discrimination of reason, and there is no such thing as a soul in beings.'

'But if there be no such thing as a soul, what is it then which sees forms with the eye, and hears sounds with the ear, and smells odours with the nose, and tastes tastes with the tongue, and feels touch with the body, or perceives qualities with the mind?'

The Elder replied: 'If there be a soul (distinct from the body) which does all this, then if the door of the eye were thrown down (if the eye were plucked out) could it stretch out its head, as it were, through the larger aperture and (with greater range) see forms much more clearly than before? Could one hear sounds better if the ears were torn away, or smell better if the nose were cut off, or taste
better if the tongue were pulled out, or feel touch better if the body were destroyed?'
'Certainly not, Sir.'
'Then there can be no soul inside the body.'

Nāgasena also denies that there is any substance in the view that there is soul in water. Water boils, and the hissing and the simmering are due to heat, but it is a mistake to regard these as signs of what possess life.

The employment of a number of similes gives this work a literary character, but Nāgasena makes an effective use of such similes in his attempt to prove the unreality of the self.

The doctrine of rebirth is commonly regarded as one of the doctrines of early Buddhism and cannot be ignored in this context. The question may be put in the following manner:

'If the self is not real and substantial, how is the process of births and rebirths possible?'

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49 Questions I, pp. 132-33.

50 Questions II, pp. 85-90.

51 Rebirth is due to the unending chain of causation which is explained by Nāgasena with the help of very common similes of seed and fruit, and hen and egg. Questions I, pp. 79-80.
Prima facie, there appears to be a contradiction here. The difficulty has already been dealt with to some extent in Kathāvatthu and like the Kathāvatthu, the Milindapañha also treats the question elaborately in order to explain and remove the seemingly formidable anomaly. The common view about the transmigration of the soul, from which the orthodox Indian systems shape their doctrine of karma and transmigration — speaks of the soul as passing from one individual to another, as one changes clothes. But early Buddhism rejects any explanation of transmigration of the soul in terms of change from one embodiment to another. Thus the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth is different from the transmigration of the soul in the orthodox Indian systems. In rebirth it is not the so called soul or the self or the ego which passes from one life to the other, but only the deeds

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54 Cf. "Hinayānism admits action without an agent, transmigration without a transmigrating soul. It is the 'character' which transmigrates, not the 'soul'.” C. D. Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy (London, 1960), p. 80; cf. "In Buddhism there is no actor apart from action, no perceiver apart from perception. In other words there is no conscious subject apart from consciousness." Compendium, p. 7; cf. also Visuddhimagga, Chap. XVII, Warren, pp. 238-41.
are transferred to a new birth. Rebirth for the Buddhists is 'Kammasantati' or the continuation of previous karmas.\textsuperscript{55} It is the 'rebirth without transmigration'.\textsuperscript{56} The discussion between Nāgasena and Milinda on the problems of the self and transmigration agrees with the early Buddhist view:

"The king said: 'Is there such a thing, Nāgasena, as the soul?'

'In the highest sense, O king, there is no such thing.'....

The king said: 'Is there any being, Nāgasena, who transmigrates from this body to another?'

'No, there is not.'

'But if so, would it not get free from its evil deeds.'

'Yes, if it were not reborn; but if it were, no.'....

'... this name-and-form commits deeds, either pure or impure, and by that Karma another name-and-form is reborn. And therefore is it not set free from its evil deeds?'\textsuperscript{57}

The same idea is to be found in another passage:

\textsuperscript{55}Cf. "A round of karma and of fruit; The fruit from karma doth arise, From karma then rebirth doth spring; And thus the world rolls on and on." Visuddhimagga, Chap. XIX, Warren, p. 247.

\textsuperscript{56}Questions I, p. 111.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., pp. 111-12.
"The king said: 'What is it, Nāgasena, that is reborn?'
'Name-and-form is reborn.'"\(^{58}\)

Thus it is the name and form which undergo continuous births and the newly born name and form are not the same as they were in the previous births, though the good and bad actions performed in the previous birth determine the new configuration.\(^{59}\) This point has been clarified by Nāgasena with the help of various illustrative similes. A thief who steals a mango from a tree which is grown from another mango planted in the ground, would still be punishable. He cannot escape guilt by saying that the mango he took was different from the mango that was planted in the ground.\(^{60}\) Again, one has to accept responsibility for setting the neighbour's field on fire if he has kindled the fire. One cannot escape from the responsibility that the fire which was left burning was a different one from that which burnt the neighbour's field.\(^{61}\) As if these illustrations are not enough, Nāgasena gives more illustrations. The flame which burns the whole village comes from the flame of the lamp with the light of which

\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 71.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., pp. 71-72.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 72.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., pp. 72-73.
one takes meals, in that case one cannot escape the responsibility of burning the whole village. Further, when a man promises to marry a girl and goes away and in the meanwhile another man comes and takes her away, the former could still claim before a court of law that it is his own girl that is being carried away. The second man cannot escape the responsibility by saying that the girl which promised to marry the first individual was different from the one which he took away.

There is also an illustration which is familiar to the students of the problem of causality in Indian philosophy — the illustration of the milk and curd. The curd here may be regarded as derived from the milk. Nāgasena remarks:

"Just so, great king, it is one name-and-form that finds its end in death, and another that is reborn. But that other is the result of the first, and is therefore not thereby released from its evil deeds (its bad Karma)."

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62 Ibid., p. 73.
63 Ibid., p. 74.
64 Ibid., p. 75.
Elsewhere, Nāgasena explains that he who is born is neither the same as he previously was, nor is he different. The baby which grows into a man, or the lamp which burns all through the night, or the milk which changes into curd are the similes given in this context. Nāgasena continues:

"'Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous. Thus neither as the same nor as another does a man go on to the last phase of his self-consciousness.'"

An individual who is not destined to be reborn, may be aware of the fact that he is not destined to be reborn "by the cessation of all that is cause, proximate or remote, of rebirth," i.e. by the cessation of all these causes that lead to rebirth. A regular path is laid down for those who would desire to escape from the sorrowful, transient and phenomenal world. The vicious

66 Questions I, p. 63.

67 Ibid., pp. 63-65.

68 Ibid., p. 65. Cf. "Being is, we may say, the procession — regulated by the law of causality — of continuous being at every moment self-consuming and anew begetting." Oldenberg, Buddha, His Doctrine, His Order, Eng. tr. W. Hoey (Calcutta, 1927), p. 262.

69 Questions I, p. 65.
circle of births, deaths and rebirths can be avoided
"by the cessation of all that leads to rebirth."70

In another relevant discussion on reincarnation
between Milinda and Nāgasena, an attempt has been made
to explain reindividualisation after death. It is
remarked by Nāgasena:

"A sinful being is reindividualised, a sinless
one is not."71

The Buddhist theory of rebirth, no doubt, emphasises the
importance of karma in human life, but ultimately, it also
supports the doctrine of the unreality of the self.

It has been seen in the preceding pages that this
great dialogue Milindapañha gives an important place to
the problem of the unreality of the self and its dialectical
argument is only an extension of the original Buddhist
teaching— anātmavāda or the denial of the reality of
the self. The canonical texts have expounded and explained
the teaching of the Buddha elaborately as we observed in
the previous chapter. The Milindapañha further elucidates
the doctrine which may truly be regarded as the raison
defre. of this thought. There is no wonder, therefore,
that anātmavāda is given much importance. The statement

70Ibid., p. 66.
71Ibid., p. 50.
"Na puggalo upalabbhati", that there is no individual (i.e. self), epitomises the main idea of the text. But Nāgasena gives a dialectical and dramatic touch to the discussion of the problem. There is no soul, there is no ego, it is merely for practical or conventional purposes that we call something the self, which on critical examination merely turns out to be a group of five skandhas of rūpa (matter), vedanā (feeling), saṃjñā (perception), saṃskāra (disposition) and vijñāna (consciousness). This analysis anticipates the later (Mahāyāna) distinction between the empirical and the transcendental — samvṛti and paramārtha.

Ordinary day to day experience which is emphasised, has no reality. According to Nāgasena the objects are merely names, even the name Nāgasena is a designation for common use, there is no reality beyond this name. Thus the negative dialectic of the Milindapañha has, as in the earlier dialogues of Buddhism, reduced both physical and psychical phenomena to a neutral entity of sense-aggregates only. What we call the self is an ever-changing

72Ibid., p. 40 n.

73Cf. "The idea of a soul when analysed comes to this, that certain qualities exist together. As body is a name for a system of qualities, even so soul is a name for the sum of the states which constitute our mental existence." S. Radhakrishnan, idem p. 393.
stream of psycho-physical processes subjectively so-conceived and there is nothing beyond the constantly fleeting sense-data, either on the subjective side or on the objective side.

And like the canonical texts the Milindapañha also interprets the doctrine of anātmavāda in terms of Pudgalanairātmya. The qualities, the properties as elements of existence or thought (which are called ultimate dharmas) constitute the world of objects and are regarded as real and eternal, but not the self. Its unity, like the unity of the objective world is only an appearance and serves at best, conventional or pragmatic purposes. It is in this context that the familiar illustration of a chariot has to be interpreted; there is no existence of the self apart from its constituent elements just as a chariot without the rod, axle, wheels etc. has no meaning. So the existing unity of the object is unreal but the elements of what it is composed of are regarded as existent. In short, the self is just a designation assigned to the groups of the skandhas and is not real.