Mil 5.1.7 — 7. Question on the Disappearance of the True Teaching

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Text

Milinda’s Questions

Questions on Dilemmas

Supernatural Powers Chapter

7. Question on the Disappearance of the True Teaching

“Venerable Nāgasena, this too was said by the Blessed One: ‘Now, Ānanda, the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years.’ And again, at the time of his final nibbāna, when the wanderer Subhadda asked a question, the Blessed One said: ‘If these monks, Subhadda, were to live rightly, the world would not be empty of arahants.’ This statement is a complete utterance, without exception, and without qualification. If, Venerable Nāgasena, the Tathāgata said, ‘Now, Ānanda, the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years,’ then the statement ‘the world would not be empty of arahants’ is false. If the Tathāgata said, ‘the world would not be empty of arahants,’ then the statement ‘the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years’ is also false. This is a two-horned dilemma. It is more tangled than the tangled, stronger than the strong, more knotted than the knotted. It has now come to you. Show here the power and range of your wisdom, like a sea-monster that has gone into the middle of the ocean.”

“This was indeed spoken by the Blessed One, your majesty: ‘Now, Ānanda, the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years.’ And at the time of his final nibbāna, he said to the wanderer Subhadda: ‘If these bhikkhus, Subhadda, were to live rightly, the world would not be empty of arahants.’ But those words of the Blessed One, your majesty, differ in meaning and differ in phrasing. The one is a limit placed on the Dispensation; the other is an exposition of practice. The two are far removed from each other. Just as, your majesty, the sky is far removed from the earth, hell is far removed from heaven, the wholesome is far removed from the unwholesome, and pleasure is far removed from pain, in the same way, your majesty, those two statements are far removed from each other.

But, your majesty, so that your question may not be in vain, I will explain it in accordance with its essence. When the Blessed One said, ‘Now, Ānanda, the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years,’ he was pointing out its decline and setting a limit on what remained: ‘Ānanda, the true Dhamma would have lasted a thousand years if women had not gone forth. Now, Ānanda, the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years.’ Now, your majesty, when the Blessed One spoke in this way, did he declare the disappearance of the true Dhamma, or did he reject the penetration (i.e. realisation of the Dhamma)?” “Certainly

not, venerable sir." "He set a limit by declaring what remained, your majesty, while proclaiming what was lost. Just as, your majesty, a man whose goods have been lost might take everything that remained and announce to the people, 'This much of my property is lost; this is what is left.' In the same way, your majesty, the Blessed One, proclaiming what was lost, told gods and humans what remained: 'Now, Ānanda, the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years.' So what the Blessed One said, 'the true Dhamma will last only five hundred years,' is a statement of the limit of the Dispensation.

But when, at the time of his final nibbāna, he spoke to the wanderer Subhadda, praising the ascetics, saying 'If these bhikkhus, Subhadda, were to live rightly, the world would not be empty of arahants,' that is an exposition of practice. You, however, are treating the limit and the exposition as one and the same in essence. But if you wish, your majesty, I will explain it by making them one in essence. Listen well, and attend carefully, with an undistracted mind.

Here, your majesty, suppose there were a lake filled with fresh water, brimming up before one's eyes, bounded and enclosed by an embankment. While the water in that lake was not yet exhausted, a great rain cloud, pouring down continuously one shower after another, rained down upon it. Would the water in that lake, your majesty, come to depletion or exhaustion?" "Certainly not, venerable sir." "For what reason, your majesty?" "Because of the continuity of the rain, venerable sir." "In the same way, your majesty, the lake of the true Dhamma, the excellent teaching of the Conqueror, is filled with the fresh, stainless water of good conduct, virtue, qualities, duties, and practice. It is brimming up, standing as though it had overtopped the highest realm of existence. If the Buddha's sons were to make the rain-cloud of good conduct, virtue, qualities, duties, and practice pour down continuously, one shower after another, then this lake of the true Dhamma, the excellent teaching of the Conqueror, would last for a long time, a long span of years, and the world would not be empty of arahants. It was with reference to this meaning that the Blessed One said: 'If these monks, Subhadda, were to live rightly, the world would not be empty of arahants.'

Again, your majesty, suppose a great mass of fire were blazing, and people kept adding dry grass, sticks, and cow dung to it, one load after another. Would that mass of fire go out, your majesty?" "Certainly not, venerable sir. It would blaze more and more, shine more and more." "In the same way, your majesty, throughout the ten-thousandfold world-system the excellent teaching of the Conqueror blazes and shines through good conduct, virtue, qualities, duties, and practice. If, your majesty, the Buddha's sons were in addition to practice constantly and diligently, endowed with the five factors of striving, if they trained with eager desire in the three trainings, and if they fully perfected the training in conduct and in virtue, then this excellent teaching of the Conqueror would last more and more, for a long time, a long span of years, and the world would not be empty of arahants.

Here, your majesty, suppose people were to polish a bright, smooth, well-cleaned, lustrous, spotless mirror again and again with fine, delicate red-ochre powder. Would any dirt, mud, dust, or grime arise on that mirror, your majesty?" "Certainly not, venerable sir. It would only become cleaner still." "In the same way, your majesty, the excellent teaching

of the Conqueror is naturally stainless, free of the dust and grime of the defilements. If the Buddha's sons were to keep watch over this excellent teaching through good conduct, virtue, qualities, duties, practice, austerity, and the ascetic practices, then this excellent teaching of the Conqueror would last for a long time, a long span of years, and the world would not be empty of arahants. It was with reference to this meaning that the Blessed One said: 'If these monks, Subhadda, were to live rightly, the world would not be empty of arahants.' The Teacher's dispensation, your majesty, is rooted in practice; it has practice as its cause; it endures as long as practice is not lost."

"Venerable Nāgasena, you speak of 'the disappearance of the true Dhamma.' What is that disappearance of the true Dhamma?" "There are these three disappearances of the Dispensation, your majesty. What are the three? The disappearance of attainment, the disappearance of practice, and the disappearance of the outward sign. When attainment has disappeared, your majesty, even one who practices well does not achieve realisation of the Dhamma. When practice has disappeared, the training rules laid down fall away, and only the outward sign remains. When the outward sign has disappeared, the lineage is cut off. These, your majesty, are the three disappearances."

"Venerable Nāgasena, the question has been well explained: the profound has been made clear, the knot has been untied, the doctrines of opponents have been destroyed, broken, and robbed of their lustre. You have come face to face with the best of the leaders of orders, a bull among them."

Question on the Disappearance of the True Teaching seventh