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***Milindapañha* and the Role of Buddhism as a Catalyst for Public Communication and Discussion**

Abstract

As Amartya Sen has rightly noticed (Sen 2005: 182), one of Buddhist main principles was attaching special importance to discussions and dialogue. This argumentative tradition, which is traceable in Buddhism from the very beginning, for example in the texts of the Sutta Piṭaka or the so-called “Buddhist councils,” especially the third of them in the time of Aśoka, who in his edicts advocated respect for dissenting views, finds its exemplification in the *Milindapañha* — a Pāli Buddhist text, missing original version of which was probably written in Gāndhāri. The analysis of this text, taking into account a variety of possible influences in a multicultural environment of the region of its origin – Gandhāra and during its transmission, as well as the applied artistic means, will give us the opportunity to reconsider the crucial questions regarding the religious and ethnic identity of the Indo-Greek ruler and the attractiveness of Buddhism to the Greeks living in the region of Gandhāra in the second and first century BC. These questions, in a broader perspective, relate to the matters of the dialogue on its many levels: socio-political, intercultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Analysis of these levels enables us to notice the essence of the dialogue and its importance.

Keywords: Buddhism, Gandhāra, Indo-Greek, Menander, ethnic identity, accommodation

The text of the dialogue *Milindapañha* is one of the most obvious sources of knowledge of Greco-Buddhist relations in the times of the Indo-Greek kingdom (roughly the second and the first century BC) preserved to this day. It is a story about the meeting of the Indo-Greek ruler Milinda (Greek Μέγανδρος, Menander¹) with the sage Nāgasena and the conversion of this ruler to Buddhism as a result of the

1 Most researchers identify Milinda with Menander I Soter. However, I suggest that Milinda may be identified with Menander II Dikaios (cf. Kubica 2021).

meeting and discussion. Because this text is at the crossroads of interests of many disciplines, such as classical philology, Indology, Buddhist studies, *etc.*, therefore a vast literature surrounding it has accrued.²

However, having to deal with any phenomenon, especially as old and well known as the text of the dialogue *Milindapañha*, it is worth recalling the admonition by Chesterton: “Now, there is a law written in the darkest of the Books of Life, and it is this: If you look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times, you are perfectly safe; if you look at it the thousandth time, you are in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time.” (Chesterton 1904: 23–24) And therefore, one may ask a question, if there is still anything unsettling in the dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Milinda and the Buddhist sage Nāgasena? We live in a blessed time of facilitated accumulation of data. But this blessing hides also a curse. This curse is revealed in cognitive dissonance experienced by human beings, as described by Festinger, namely, “the individual strives towards consistency within himself” (Festinger 1962: i). When interpreting the text, we therefore have to bear in mind a few layers of striving for consistency in the course of the formation, transmission, interpretation and reception of the text, namely, Menander’s personal inclinations, presentation by the author for the purpose of the work, objectives of the translator, interpretation by the recipients and the researchers and our own interpretation. Only such an approach will allow us to drain the grain of gold in the sand.

Thus, in this article the following questions are reconsidered: to what extent is the text of the *Milindapañha* influenced by Platonic dialogues? Subsequently, if we rule out the possibility of a Greek influence and treat the text as an original Buddhist text, another question arises: whether Menander was really converted to Buddhism? If, by any chance, the answer is positive, then the further interpretation of the text is straightforward. But if Menander was not a Buddhist in the strict sense, and the text is treated as an original Buddhist text, another question appears: why Menander was the protagonist of the Buddhist dialogue? Subsequently, the evidence in support of the thesis about the existence of Menander’s image as a ruler associated with Buddhism in collective memory is presented. Whether Menander was actually a Buddhist, or whether he was just perceived so by the posterity, more interesting from the anthropological point of view is the question about the attractiveness of Buddhism to the Greeks living in the region of Gandhāra in the second and first century BC. This question leads us to the closing remarks on the importance of Buddhism in the development of attitudes, which are important for the emergence of the democracy, such as toleration and respect for divergent views.

Was *Milindapañha* influenced by Platonic dialogues?

Let us start from the beginning, that is, from examining the origins of the dialogue *Milindapañha* or *The Questions of King Milinda*. The text, which is preserved, is unfortunately not original. It is either a translation or an elaboration on some original work, most likely a dialogue. *Milindapañha* is only one of the preserved

2 I discuss the history of research into the *Milindapañha* elsewhere (Kubica 2014). It is also worth adding some more recent research, such as the chapter by Stefan Baums “Greek or Indian? The Questions of Menander and Onomastic Patterns in Early Gandhāra” in the volume *Buddhism and Gandhāra. An Archaeology of Museum Collections* edited by Himanshu Prabha Ray (2018) or my chapter “Reading the *Milindapañha*: Indian historical sources and the Greeks in Bactria” in the volume *The Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek World (The Routledge Worlds)* edited by Rachel Mairs (2021).

versions. It is written in Pāli. But we know also about Thai, Burmese, Chinese (Takakusu 1896, Demiéville 1924), and doubtful³ Tibetan (Waddell 1897) versions of that text. The original was most probably written in Gāndhāri⁴. According to Richard Salomon, *Milindapañha* is “the earliest explicit testimony of the encounter of Buddhism with the cosmopolitan cultures of Gandhāra” (Salomon *et al.* 1999: 5).

The fact that the Greek ruler is the main character of an Indian text drew the attention of some European researchers to the *Milindapañha*. Some scholars have tried to fit the dialogue within a Greek/Hellenistic milieu. Albrecht Weber (1890: 927), for example, hypothesized about the connection of the *Milindapañha* with the Platonic dialogues. But apart from some superficial resemblances it is hard to see any influence of Platonic dialogue on the *Milindapañha*. William Woodthorpe Tarn (1938) went even further in his overemphasizing Greek influence on the origin of that dialogue by postulating an existence of a short Greek text, in which the king questioned an invented figure, the Buddhist sage Nāgasena. He further used that theory of the Greek original to explain certain resemblances between the *Milindapañha* and the Letter of Pseudo-Aristeas and to show that both texts referred to the tradition of the well-known Alexander-questions. Tarn’s hypothesis has been refuted by Jan Gonda (1949), who contradicted his arguments.

However, apart from the refutation of Tarn’s arguments, we can also provide positive evidence for the Indian roots of the *Milindapañha*. And that is what scholars do on the other side of the imaginary wall between the East and the West; namely they place the text in the context of the Asian milieu, where it actually belongs as a work of art. For example, Laurence Waddell, a Scottish explorer, Professor of Tibetan and collector in Tibet, on whom the character of Indiana Jones is probably based, in his early article (Waddell 1897) draws a comparison with Tibetan⁵ and Chinese⁶ versions of the *Milindapañha* to show that it was based on the traditional tale of a dialogue between a king of Bengal or of South-Eastern India and the sage Nāgasena. This theory has not, however, met with a positive response from other researchers. Anyway, scholars now agree that the original of the *Milindapañha* was Indian, and its versions, as well as other Indian texts, such as the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, or the *Upaniṣadic* and *Itihāsa* dialogues, provide a lot of comparative material.

Some researchers are now shifting away from trying to trace cross-cultural influence⁷. I, too, believe that the similarities between this dialogue and other dialogues of this type do not prove influence, but indicate a certain common convention, which I called *the convention of a persuasive dialogue* (Kubica 2014). In order to prove the existence of this convention and to trace the mechanism of an independent development as opposed to influence, I compared the *Milindapañha* with the text of the *Kitab al Khazari* (or *The Kuzari*), written in the 12th century by Judah Hallevi, which is an independent text, yet surprisingly similar to our dialogue. Therefore, I concluded that two such similar dialogues, between which no direct influence can be proved, are similar because they share a common convention, typical of this type of dialogue.

3 Laurence Waddell claims the existence of Tibetan version, but it is not preserved.

4 See: Salomon *et al.* (1999: 5), Von Hinüber ([1996] 2000: 83).

5 Conversation between Nāgasena and Ananta; in the Tantrik section of the *Kālacakra* cyclopaedia (Waddell 1897: 231–2).

6 Conversation between Nāgasena and Nanda; dialogue dated to AD 472 (transl. Takakusu 1896, Demiéville 1924).

7 For example: Sick (2007).

Was Menander a Buddhist?

Moving to the next question, we assume that we have before us a dialogue based on the Gandhāran original, showing the conversion of the Indo-Greek ruler. One may ask a question, whether Menander was actually a Buddhist? In order to answer that question, one ought to first ask, what it means to be a Buddhist? The answer to this question is not that simple due to a lack of rigid boundaries defining the rules of participation in the Buddhist religion. Furthermore, as Rhys Davids (1890: xvii) suggested, the *Milindapañha* is in fact an historical romance with primarily didactic aim. Therefore, one should expect that the historical truth has been tailored to the purpose of the dialogue. And even if we assume that the text presents the historical truth, still it cannot be the basis for inference about the inner attitude of the king or his sincere conversion. As we read in Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (XIV 110): "Truth is always strange, Stranger than Fiction."

It is also important to see the distinction between religion as faith and religion as identity, as illustrated by Ayesha Jalal (2000). Even in such a seemingly rigid frame as Islam, Jalal finds cases, where reason prevails over blind religiosity, as for example in the case of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, who, when asked if he was a Muslim, said that he was only half Muslim: he drank wine but did not eat pork. According to Jalal, "Muslimness, however defined, cannot be seen in isolation from the myriad other social relationships informing the worldview of the individual Muslim" (Jalal 2000: 4). The same reminder must be taken into account in the case of Buddhism. Even if Menander was a Buddhist, he was not only a Buddhist. The role of reason in the idea of identity, as discussed by Amartya Sen (2005), should not be disregarded. Sen in his essay on the issue of Indian identity contradicts the theory of Michael Sandel, who represents the 'communitarian' position, "which argues that one's identity is a matter of 'discovery', not choice" (Sen 2005: 290). Following Sandel's theory, Menander allegedly discovered his identity and attachment to the Buddhist community; whereas according to the opposing theory presented by Sen, Menander determined his identity by rational choice. Both theories seem to be justified. However, the theory of rational choice made by Menander is confirmed in the view presented by Jason Neelis, who argues that Menander "probably supported a wide array of religious groups seeking his support, just like any other South Asian ruler" (Neelis 2011: 106).

We managed to plant a few new trees in our forest of doubts. But can we see a ray of light? We could examine the signifiers of Buddhist identity in the time of Menander and see subsequently, how they can be applied to the testimonies about Menander. The source most relevant for that purpose are the edicts of Piyadassi (Aśoka) addressed to the Greeks living on the border of his kingdom. Maybe they can provide an indication of what the Greeks from the time of Aśoka and later recognized as Buddhist identity? As it can be inferred by the bilingual edition of the edicts of Piyadassi, the language was not a determinant of the Buddhistness, neither was the territory, nor the provenance. What was therefore essential in being a Buddhist? In my opinion, it was a respect for other people's views and willingness to discuss. In this respect, the Indo-Greek ruler may have discovered his identity in Buddhism, not because he was converted to Buddhism, but because he was a Buddhist. His democratic inclination towards discussion corresponded with the spirit of Buddhism. Such interpretation of the text of the *Milindapañha* would confirm Sandel's theory about the identity. However, the text gives a lot more evidence in support of the theory paying attention to reason in the idea of identity, for example in Menander's active search for rational response to his doubts. We may say in Akbar's words, as presented by Sen, that Menander transcended 'marshy land' of unquestioned tradition and un-reflected response (Sen 2005: 292).

Why Menander was the protagonist of the *Milindapañha*?

Regardless of the personal inclinations of Menander, the question remains why Menander was the protagonist of the Buddhist dialogue? In other words, what was the intention of the author? Putting aside fanciful theories about the Greek influence, and assuming that the text is originally Buddhist, it is generally accepted that the aim of the dialogue is didactic. But in my opinion, the original text was primarily dedicated to Buddhist propaganda and the active search for patronage.

Neelis (2011) shows the importance of patronage for the development and expansion of Buddhism. The possible existence of Buddhist religious orders was dependent on generous support of the wealthy rulers and merchants. Buddhism, therefore, had to live in symbiosis with these groups and constantly seek their support. This need, well understood, can explain a lot of problems regarding the non-uniformity of doctrine and the diversity of schools of Buddhism over time and in different parts of India and Asia. Also the text of the *Milindapañha* and its editions should be analysed in the context of an active search for patronage by the Buddhist order. This is manifested *inter alia* in the discussed before convention of a persuasive dialogue, challenging the sectarian teaching, dispelling doubts about the teaching of the Buddha, and presentation of the conversion of a ruler about whom Assagutta said: “As a disputant he is hard to equal, harder still to overcome, he is the acknowledged superior of all the founders of the various schools of thought. He is in the habit of visiting the members of the Order and harassing them by questions of speculative import” (Rhys Davids 1890: 12); thus showing such a stubborn Indo-Greek ruler as converted to Buddhism may have served in a certain sense to lure other rulers (potential sponsors) to sympathize with the teaching of the Buddha.

We can call this phenomenon accommodation. Both parties took advantage of the situation for their own purposes. Menander was converted to Buddhism only in so far as he rated it profitable, or, in other words, only within his reason. On the other hand, the author of the *Milindapañha* took advantage of the memory of Menander and accommodated it to his dialogue. We cannot therefore claim that this is an historical Menander, just as there is nothing historical in the Algonquian Christ the *Great Manitou*; we can call it a misinterpretation by members of other ethnic group in order to fit to their worldview. This is a typical phenomenon connected with the so-called middle ground, as described by Richard White (1991).

Menander’s image in the collective memory

In order to support the thesis of accommodation of Menander’s image as a ruler promoting Buddhism, we have to provide the evidence for the existence in the collective memory of such an image of the ruler. If the author wanted to achieve the objective of the dialogue, he had to appeal to some experience on the recipient side. If Menander had not been associated with Buddhism, the text would not have been accepted in a Buddhist environment. And indeed, we have at least a few evidences of the Buddhistness of Menander: an anecdote in Plutarch’s *Præcepta gerendae reipublicae*⁸ about Menander, who thanks to his

8 Plut. *Mor.* 821 D and E: Μενάνδρου δέ τινος ἐν Βάκτροις ἐπεικῶς βασιλεύσαντος εἶτ’ ἀποθανόντος ἐπὶ στρατοπέδου, τὴν μὲν ἄλλην ἐποιήσαντο κηδείαν κατὰ τὸ κοινὸν αἱ πόλεις, περὶ δὲ τῶν λειψάνων αὐτοῦ καταστάντες εἰς ἀγῶνα μόλις συνέβησαν, ὥστε νειμάμενοι μέρος ἴσον τῆς τέφρας ἀπελθεῖν, καὶ γενέσθαι μνημεῖα παρὰ πᾶσι τοῦ ἀνδρός.

righteous rule gained such popularity that after his death various cities divided his ashes among themselves and built $\mu\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (probably stūpas) commemorating him⁹; in Kṣemendra's *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* (LVII 15), where Menander (Milindra) is presented in the transformed Buddhist legend instead of Kaniṣka; and on the coins of Menander II Dikaios,¹⁰ where the use of the epithet Dharmika may indicate the reference to the Buddhist dhamma.¹¹

These references indicate that the memory of Menander as a Buddhist ruler was deeply rooted, far-reaching and long-standing. Also the Greeks living in the kingdom of Menander might have been Buddhist monks contributing to the spread of Buddhism, as indicated by the story in the *Mahāvamsa* (chapter XXIX) about Yona therā (Greek elder) Mahadhammarakkhita, who came from Alasanda, the city of the Yonas (probably Alexandria on the Caucasus), with thirty thousand bhikkhus (monks) to dedicate the Great Stūpa in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. The fact that the Greek sages were active proselytizers of Buddhism during the time of Menander may also indicate that the ruler promoted Buddhism.

Why was Buddhism attractive for the Greeks?

Assuming that Menander actually supported Buddhism because of rational motives, one should ask, what were the motives? In other words, what was particularly attractive in Buddhism for the Greeks? Or perhaps they chose Buddhism as an alternative? In psychology the so-called negative identity may be distinguished as opposed to the positive identity. It occurs when adolescents adopt an identity in direct opposition to a prescribed identity. But, in my opinion, a similar situation may also occur in the case of ethnic or religious identity. Then the decisive factor in the choice of a particular identity is the opposition to other alternatives. In the time of Menander Buddhism was an alternative to Brahmanism, ignoring other, less influential religious groups. And in fact the sources for the period from the fall of the Mauryan dynasty, and the dominance of the Śuṅga dynasty confirm the sharp divisions on both, political and religious line.

Around 185–149 BC large part of India was under the rule of Puṣyamitra Śuṅga, whose realm extended as far as Śākala (Pāli Sāgala), the capital of Menander's kingdom, described in the second chapter of the first book of the *Milindapañha*. In the *Aśokāvadāna*¹² Puṣyamitra is described as a ruthless persecutor of Buddhism. However, it has been pointed out that in the same text Aśoka is described as similarly cruel. But there is a certain difference: Aśoka defends the purity of Buddhism, while Puṣyamitra is persecuting Buddhism in order to achieve eternal fame in the likeness of Aśoka. In my opinion, one should not compare these two passages, since their didactic aim is different. But that does not prevent some researchers from drawing conclusions denying the historicity of the persecution of Buddhism by the Brahmins (*cf.* Elst 2002).

9 Similar story is also told about Buddha in *Mahā-parinibbāna-suttanta* (*The Book of the Great Decease*) VI: 58-62 (ending), translated by Rhys Davids in the Buddhist Suttas, Vol. XI of The Sacred Books of the East.

10 As mentioned above (reference 1), I am inclined to identify the character of the dialogue *Milindapañha* with Menander II Dikaios rather than Menander I Soter. The coins of Menander I Soter depict mostly Greek symbols, such as Athena Alkide-mos or Winged Nike.

11 These references are discussed by the author of the present article elsewhere (Kubica 2014 and Kubica 2021).

12 See: Strong (1983: 292–4)

According to Lamotte, “To judge from the documents, Pushyamitra must be acquitted through lack of proof” (Lamotte 1988: 109). However, it must be noted that the archaeological material, e.g. the destroyed Deokothar or Sanchi stūpas, suggests intensified persecution of Buddhism in the time of Puṣyamitra. According to Marshall, the Sanchi stūpa might have been vandalized by Puṣyamitra and then restored by his successor Agnimitra (Marshall 1990: 38). However, not all researchers agree on this (cf. Thapar [1961] 2012: 251).

But even if we assume an intense persecution of Buddhism in the days preceding the reign of Menander, the question remains about what this has to do with the Greeks living in these areas. Now, the hostility of the Greeks towards the Śuṅga dynasty is suggested by an episode described in the drama of Kālidāsa entitled *Mālavikāgnimitram*. This drama is a love story telling about the affection of King Agnimitra to Mālavikā. However, in the background of the play is shown the horse-sacrifice, the so-called *aśvamedha*, which was nearly interrupted by a cavalry squadron of the Greeks (*Yavanas*), who wanted to carry off the horse wandering on the right bank of the Indus river. However, it was prevented by Vasumitra, who was appointed to defend the horse. We learn about these events from a letter from Puṣpamitra (or Puṣyamitra) to his son Agnimitra. But we have to be careful here, because of at least two reasons, pointed by Tawney in his introduction to the translation of the text. Firstly, Agnimitra presented in the drama as a persecutor of Buddhism, in fact, was probably in opposition to his father in this respect. Thus, the historicity of Kālidāsa’s work is quite doubtful. Secondly, the author might not have an accurate information about the time of the Śuṅga dynasty (cf. Tawney [1875] 1891: iv-v). However, if we assume the historicity of the text, and hence, the hostility of the Śuṅgas towards the Greeks, as well as the hostility of the Śuṅgas towards Buddhism, it may follow that the Greeks supported Buddhism in opposition to the Śuṅgas. It is also worth mentioning that the action of the play is entwined with the story about the Aśoka tree, which blossoms at the end under the influence of the *dohada* ceremony. Because *Mālavikāgnimitram* is a literary text, it can be variously interpreted. Perhaps it suggests a symbolical victory of Brahmanism on several fronts – Brahmin ritual prevailed over the Buddhist symbol, just like Vasumitra over *Yavanas*. However, this interpretation is possible only if the name of the tree is connected with the name of Piyaḍassi Aśoka, what unfortunately is not so clear.¹³

Towards public communication and discussion

Another possible explanation of the reasons of assuming the Buddhist faith by the Greeks is the fact that Buddhism might have responded to their needs. Then the identity, which they adopt with the adherence to Buddhism, is a positive identity. But which needs of the Greeks could Buddhism meet? First of all, various sources indicate that Buddhism supported the trade, which could have been a source of income for many Greeks. Moreover, within Buddhism there were no such class divisions as within Brahmanism, according to which the Greeks were kṣatriyas degenerated to the status of śūdras, because they neglected the rituals (*Mahābhārata* XIII 2103; 2159). Buddhism was therefore not so hermetic, but allowed for a greater plurality and cosmopolitanism. Buddhism was oriented to propaganda, even, or maybe especially, among foreigners. According to Gonda “Buddhism was inclined to internationalism, intent

13 In the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* a story about certain cannibal Saśoka, who met with a sage, who advised practice of *dharma* and predicted that Saśoka will be reborn as a sorrow-removing tree, the aśoka.

on missionary propaganda, and eager to win the favour and the support of mighty men” (Gonda 1949: 58). Buddhism allowed for dissent and, therefore, prompted to discuss various points of view. And as we see in the text of the *Milindapañha* Menander was willing to talk and eager to overcome the opponents in the discussion. And his need was met with a positive response from the Buddhists. As Sen has rightly noticed, one of the specific characteristics of Buddhism was its commitment to public communication and discussion, which “was responsible for the fact that some of the earliest open public meetings in the world, aimed specifically at settling disputes between different views, took place in India in elaborately organized Buddhist ‘councils’” (Sen 2005: 182).

Conclusion

To sum up, it hardly seems likely that *Milindapañha* was inspired by Platonic dialogues. Thus, we are dealing with an encounter of cultures: original Buddhist text and Menander, Indo-Greek ruler as its protagonist presented as converted to Buddhism. In fact, it is not so easy to judge whether or not Menander was really a convert. Rather, it seems that he may have supported Buddhism for rational motives. While the author of the dialogue chose him for the protagonist using the image of Menander as a ruler associated with Buddhism in the collective memory. As it turns out, Buddhism may have been extremely attractive to the Greeks living in the region of Gandhāra in the second and first century BC especially because of its democratic nature. Aśoka by his 12th MRE (Major Rock Edict) commanding respect for other sects and learning from one another, laid the foundation for an open public debate, and hence for democracy, because, as Sen has noticed, the tradition of open public discussion is “an essential aspect of the roots of democracy” (Sen 2005: 81). For a democratic system in India we had to wait a bit longer, but the democratic spirit hovered for a long time in these lands, where the Indo-Greek king Milinda discussed with the Buddhist monks the paradoxes of the teachings of Buddha.

I hope that this article, if it does not answer any questions, especially in an authoritarian voice, will at least be a catalyst for a discussion in the spirit of Buddhist tolerance and respect for divergent views.

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