Does a layman arhat die the same day?¹

NĀGASENA’S VIEW

There is the well known tradition that if a lay person were to become an arhat,² he must ordain the very same day, or he will die (pass away into parinirvana) that day itself. However, this view is not found in any of the canonical texts.³ The earliest reference to such a belief is found in the Milinda,pāṇha (around 100 BCE), which states that while a lay person can become an arhat, on attaining that state, he must either renounce the world that day itself or he would pass away into final nirvana that very day.⁴

Nāgasena’s view that the layman arhat would pass away the same day if he does not ordain,⁵ however, is not supported by any sutta or early teaching. It is possible that his view is based on laymen arhat stories, such as that of the layman arhat Bāhiya’s death on the day he attains arhathood. This event, however, is merely incidental. Bāhiya, due to the ripening of his past karma, is gored to death by a cow or a goat. He is not destined to die that day (which would be determinism), but simply that a past vengeful enemy (a woman he had abused in a past life), reborn as the beast, took her revenge.⁶

POSSIBLE EXPLANATION

Since the start of the Sutta Discovery translation series (2002), I have thought of a possible reason for this tradition regarding the layman arhat. As the arhat does not have any more desire as we know it, especially that in connection with our body, he would not bother about looking for food to quell his hunger. Understandably, such a conduct would not sustain human life for very long, perhaps for a week. The point remains, however, that when the lay arhat ordains as a monastic, he is bound by the Vinaya to go on almsround and keep on living for the sake of the Dharma, that is, for the bene-

³ Miln is regarded as canonical—part of the Khuddaka Nikāya—only in Burma (Myanmar), but not by any other Buddhist school, even in our times.
⁴ “If, maharajah, a layman streamwinner attains arhathood, there are only two destinies for him, no other: either he attains parinirvana that very day, or he must gain the monk status” (yadi mahārūpā upūsaka sotāpanno arahat-tam sacchikaro, dve va tassa gatiyo bhavanti, anānīīā: tasmiīī y’eva divase parinibbūyeyya vā bhikkhu, bhūvaiīī vā upagaccheyya) (Miln 164,8-11). This view is also mentioned at MA 3:196.
⁵ Miln 264-266; cf 242-244, 246-252.
⁶ On Bāhiya’s story, see (Jhāna) Bāhiya S (U 1.10/6-9) & SD 33.7 (2); also Ap 2:475 ff; AA 1:282; DhA 2:209 ff; UA 77 ff; cf Dh 142. There is another famous layman arhat, ie, Yasa, who joins the order that same day (V 1:17): see V 1:15-20; DhA 1:72, & also The great commission = SD 7.6. The Comy also mentions Santati the privy councillor, Uga, sena the treasurer’s son, and the boy Viṭa, sakō as examples of layman arhats (MA 3:196). On laymen arhats, see Nalaka,pāṇa S (M 68) = SD 37.4 (4) & Laymen saints = SD 8.6 (13).
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fit of other beings. The final confirmation that Nāgasena’s view is wrong, then, would be ac-
counts, or even a single account, of a layman arhat who lives beyond a day.

NO CANONICAL SUPPORT

The suttas or the Vinaya has no detailed accounts of layman arhats that would throw some light
here. Hence, whatever arguments that we have on this question must be from silence (ex silen-
tio), which is not helpful here. Nevertheless, it is hard to reconcile Nāgasena’s view of the one-
day window for a layman arhat with, say, the Buddha’s spending 49 days (7 weeks) without
food immediately after his awakening, enjoying the bliss of meditation in various postures.7

By definition, the Buddha too is an arhat, and if he is able to survive without food for that long,
it is also possible for other arhats to do so. Even if the layman arhats, due to their lack of Bud-
dha qualities, might not last so long without food, they could surely survive beyond a day or
even a week, without food.

In fact, there is strong internal evidence that does not favour the one-day life window of a lay-
man arhat. The (Mahānāma) Gilayāna Sutta (S 55.54), for example, records the Buddha as
declaring how the awakening of even a lay follower as being no different from that of a monk’s:

If he says thus, “My mind has turned away from the Brahmā world and is directed to the
cessation of self-identity,”—then, Mahānāma, there is no difference between a lay fol-
lower who is thus liberated in mind and a monk who has been liberated in mind for a
hundred years, that is, there is no difference between the one liberation and the other.”

(S 55.54.19/4:410) = SD 4.10

Nāgasena’s argument, as such, is clearly to impress king Milinda, so that he holds the monastic
order in high esteem. It is likely that Nāgasena’s views reflected a possible tension between
monastic hegemony and the increasing prevalence of lay Dharma practice in his own times.8 On
a darker note, this unattested view of the layman arhat seems to be the start to the downgrad-
ing of the arhat ideal, which reached its nadir in later Mahāyāna (such as in the Lotus Sutra).

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7 On the 7 weeks, see SD 26.1 (S): http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/26.1-
Dhamma-Abhidhamma-piya.pdf
8 For further discussion on the layman arhat’s destiny, see esp Laymen saints = SD 8.6 (13-20).