

## Does a layman arhat die the same day?<sup>1</sup>

### NĀGASENA'S VIEW

There is the well known tradition that if a lay person were to become an arhat,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The earliest reference to such a belief is found in **the Milinda,pañha** (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.<sup>4</sup>

Nāgasena's view that the layman arhat would pass away the same day if he does not ordain,<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

### 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-

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<sup>1</sup> Source: **Sabba Kamma Jaha S** (U 3.1/21)= SD 39.3 (1.4.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/39.3-Sabbakammajaha-S-u3.1-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> On laymen arhats, see **Nalaka,pāna S** (M 68) = SD 37.4 (4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/37.4-Nalakapana-S-m68-piya.pdf> & **Laymen saints** = SD 8.6 (13) Why no mention of lay arhats? + (19) Destiny of the lay arhat: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.6-Laymen-Saints-piya.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> “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 mahārāja upāsako sotāpanno arahattam sacchikaroti, dve va tassa gatiyo bhavanti, anaññā: tasmim y’eva divase parinibbāyeyya vā bhikkhu, bhāvam vā upagaccheyya*) (Miln 164,8-11). This view is also mentioned at MA 3:196.

<sup>5</sup> Miln 264-266; cf 242-244, 246-252.

<sup>6</sup> 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, Ugga,sena the treasurer's son, and the boy Vīta,soka as examples of layman arhats (MA 3:196). On laymen arhats, see **Nalaka,pāna S** (M 68) = SD 37.4 (4) & **Laymen saints** = SD 8.6 (13).

fit of other beings. The final confirmation that Nāgasena's view is wrong, then, would be accounts, 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 silentio*), 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 Buddha 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 layman 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 follower 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.<sup>8</sup> On a darker note, this unattested view of the layman arhat seems to be the start to the downgrading of the arhat ideal, which reached its nadir in later Mahāyāna (such as in the Lotus Sutra).

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<sup>7</sup> On the 7 weeks, see SD 26.1 (5): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/26.1-Dhamma-Abhidhamma-piya.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion on the layman arhat's destiny, see esp **Laymen saints** = SD 8.6 (13-20).