

A BIOGRAPHY OF ĀCĀRYA NĀGĀRJUNA

Ācārya Nāgārjuna, as is widely known, founded the Mādhyamika tradition of Buddhism. His appearance was prophesied in numerous *sūtras*, among them the *Lankāvatāra*, *Mañjusrīmūlakalpa*, *Mahāmegha*, and *Mahābherī*.

Four hundred years after the Nirvana of the Buddha Śakyamuni, there was living in Southern India —in a land called Vidarbha (literally, the "Land of Palms") — a prosperous Brahman who had no sons. A sign appeared to him in a dream, indicating that he would receive a son if he paid homage to a hundred Brahmans. He did so, praying earnestly that his deeply-held wish might be fulfilled, and ten months later a son was born.

The newly-born child was taken to a soothsayer, who said that although the infant did indeed have the signs of an exceptional person, he would live only seven days. The anxious parents asked whether something couldn't be done to avert the fate. The soothsayer replied that if they gave food to a hundred persons, the boy would live for seven days and that—if they made offerings to a hundred monks—he would live for seven years. Nothing beyond that could be done. The parents completed the second of the suggested offerings. As the end of the seven years approached they sent the young boy, in the company of several attendants, on an excursion—for they would not have been able to bear the sight of their son's corpse.

While travelling, the boy experienced a vision of the god Khasarpaṇa (a particular manifestation of Ārya Lokeśvara). Soon afterwards, the party reached the great monastery of Nālanda. While they were standing near the dwelling of one Brahman Sāraha, the boy uttered several verses of poetry. The Brahman heard the lines and invited the party inside. He asked them about their journey and of how they had come to reach Nālanda. One of the attendants related the boy's history and told of his imminent death. Sāraha replied to this that, if the boy were to abandon the worldly life by taking a vow of renunciation, there was a way to avoid the plight. The boy agreed to do so and was first initiated into the "Mandala of Amitābha which Conquers the Lord of Death". Afterwards he was instructed to recite *dhārani mantras*. On the eve of his seventh birthday in particular he recited mantras through the night and thus overcame this encounter with the Lord of Death.

Upon reaching the age of eight, the boy took the vow of renunciation and began studies of the traditional sciences. He studied as well scriptural texts of each of the major schools of Buddhist thought. Some time afterwards he again met his parents, and later requested the very same Brahman Sāraha to instruct him in the esoteric teachings of Śrī Guhya Samāja. He was taught the appropriate *tantras*, together with their complete oral instruction. Next, after submitting a formal request to the monastery's abbot, he took the full ordination of a monk and became known as Bhikṣu Śrīmanta.

Being one of those who are watched over by Mañjuśrī in all their lives, the monk found opportunities for hearing, in its entirety, the Dharma of both *sūtras* and *tantras* from the

bodhisattva teacher Ratna Mati—who was a manifestation of Mañjuśrī in his "divine youth" aspect. In this way Śrīmanta came to be a consummate master of the Dharma.

At a later time a great famine arose, leaving the *saṅgha* of Nālanda with no means of subsistence. The abbot, Sthavira Rāhula Bhadra, appointed Bhikṣu Śrīmanta the *saṅgha*'s steward. Although the famine lasted twelve years and greatly reduced the population of the surrounding land of Magadha, the *bhikṣu* was able to sustain the *saṅgha* by utilizing his knowledge of the alchemical science. He had acquired this knowledge from a Brahman versed in alchemy, in the following way. The *bhikṣu* first prepared two sandalwood leaves as charms for the Siddhi of Swiftfootedness. Carrying one leaf in his hand and the other concealed in the sole of his shoe, he then proceeded to the distant island where the Brahman lived and asked to be given the instruction of the "elixir which transforms common metals to gold".

The Brahman thought to himself that the stranger must have had some special charm allowing him to come to the isle. Desirous of acquiring it, he said to the *bhikṣu*: "Knowledge must be exchanged for knowledge, or compensated in gold." "Well then," replied Bhikṣu Śrīmanta, "we must exchange knowledge," and he gave the Brahman the charm he had been carrying in his hand. Thinking that the visitor could no longer leave the island, the Brahman gave him the instruction. Using the leaf he had kept in the sole of his shoe, the *bhikṣu* then returned to Magadha. He was thus able to provide Nālanda's *saṅgha* amply with all their essential needs, through transmuting great quantities of iron to gold with the alchemical elixir.

Some time after this, Bhikṣu Śrīmanta served as the abbot of Nālanda. He paid great tribute to those members of the *saṅgha* who observed the Three Trainings properly and expelled those *bhikṣus* and *śramaṇas* who were morally corrupt. He is reputed to have banished as many as eight thousand monks.

It was during this period as well that one Bhikṣu Śamkara composed a scripture entitled *The Ornament of Knowledge*. It was written in twelve thousand verses and represented an attempt to discredit the Mahāyāna Doctrine. By means of logic, the Bhikṣu Śrīmanta was able to refute the argument completely. He also disproved many other scriptures denying the validity of the Mahāyāna. On one occasion, in a place called Jaṭasamghāta, he defeated 500 non-Buddhist scholars in debate and converted them to the Buddhist religion by overcoming their false views.

During that time when the Ācārya was teaching the Dharma of the Tripiṭaka widely to many followers, two youths who were actually emanations from *nāgas* came to him seeking the Dharma. With their presence the entire area became filled with the fragrance of sandalwood. Upon their departure it disappeared and when they returned the fragrance reappeared as well. The Ācārya asked them the reason for this, and the youths replied that they were sons of the *nāga* king Takṣaka. They had anointed themselves with essence of sandalwood as immunization against human impurities.

The Ācārya then asked them to give him some of the sandalwood for an image of Tāra and to assist him in constructing temples as well. The two youths answered that they would have to ask their father, and then left. They returned after two days to tell the Ācārya that only if he himself came to the Land of the Nāgas could they do as he bade. Aware of the benefit to all

beings that would result from his going, the Ācārya journeyed to the Land of the Nāgas, where King Takṣaka and other righteous-minded *nāgas* presented him with innumerable offerings. The *mahātma* preached the Dharma to the *nāgas* in compliance with their every supplication, bringing them so much satisfaction that they entreated him to remain among them permanently. He answered: "Because I have come here for the purpose of securing the *sūtra* of the *Prajñā pāramita* in 100,000 verses and 'nāga clay'—which is needed for the construction of temples and stupas—I have no opportunity now to stay. I shall perhaps be able to return in the future."

When he had acquired the expanded version of the *Mother of the Jinas*, several shorter texts of the *Prajñā paramita*, and great quantities of nāga clay, the Ācārya prepared to return to our world of the Jambūdvīpa. It is said that in order to ensure the Ācārya's return to their land, the *nāgas* kept from him a small portion at the end of the 100,000 verses. The missing portion — the last two chapters of the unabridged *sūtra* on the *Prajñā pāramitā*—was therefore replaced by the corresponding chapters of the *Prajñā pāramitā sūtra* in eight thousand verses. This is why the final two chapters of each *sūtra* are identical.

After securing the *Prajñā pāramitā sūtras*, the Ācārya greatly advanced the influence of the Mahāyāna tradition. When he preached the Dharma in the monastery park, the *nāgas* performed acts of reverence such as six of the serpents forming a parasol to shade him from the sun. Having thus become the Lord of the Nāgas, the Ācārya was named "The Nāga". Because his skill at spreading the Mahāyāna Dharma resembled the shooting speed and mastery of the famed archer Arjuna, he became known as well as "The Arjuna." It is otherwise explained that he was called "Nāgārjuna" because, by practising the *sādhanas* of the goddess Kurukullā, he gained authority over such *nāgas* as King Takṣaka and others.

Nāgārjuna later travelled to the area of Puṇḍravardhana where, utilizing the practice of alchemy, he performed many acts of great generosity. In particular, he bestowed great quantities of gold upon an elderly Brahman couple and thus instilled them with great faith. The Brahman elder served Nāgārjuna and listened to the Dharma from him, after his death he was reborn as the Master Bodbināga.

Nāgārjuna also constructed many temples. Once, when he was preparing to transform a large, bell-shaped boulder into gold, an emanation of Tāra with the form of an old woman appeared and said to him: "Instead of doing this, you should go to the Mountain of Splendour and practise the Dharma." Later he did go there to practise the *sādhanas* of Tāra.

On another occasion, when he had accomplished the *sādhanas* for invoking the goddess Caṇḍikā, the goddess herself carried the Ācārya into the sky and attempted to take him to the celestial realms. "I have not exerted myself in order to travel to the celestial realms," he said to her. "I have invoked you in order to provide support for the Mahāyāna *saṅgha*, for as long as the Buddha's Teaching remains." They returned, and the goddess established herself to the near west of Nālanda, manifesting herself in the form of a noblewoman of the royal caste. Nāgārjuna instructed her, saying: "A great stake of *khadira* wood, so large that a man can barely lift it has been driven into the wall of a stone temple dedicated to Mañjuśrī. Until that stake turns to ashes, you must provide subsistence for the temple's *saṅgha*."

With articles of every sort, the noblewoman made offerings to the *saṅgha* for twelve years. During this time the steward of the monastery, a *śramaṇera* of evil nature, made continual promiscuous advances to her. The noblewoman made no replies, until one day she finally said: "If the *khadira*-wood stake ever turned to ashes, we could be united." The wicked *śramaṇera* therefore set the stake afire. When it had become ashes, the goddess herself vanished.

There was another time when a number of elephants were threatening to damage the Bodhi tree at Vajrāsana (present-day Bodhgayā). Nāgārjuna erected two stone columns behind the sacred tree which provided protection for many years. When the elephants later returned, the Ācārya erected two images of Mahākāla astride a lion, wielding a club. This was also effective but the danger nonetheless reappeared and a stone fence was built around the tree. Outside the enclosure, the Ācārya constructed 108 *stūpas*. The *stūpas* were huge and each one was crowned by a smaller *stūpa* containing sacred bone-relics of the Buddha.

The Ācārya further constructed many temples and *stūpas* in the six major cities of Magadha— Srāvastā, Śāketa, Campaka, Vārāṇasī, Rajāgrha and Vaiśālī—and provided preachers of the Dharma with adequate subsistence.

Above all, Nāgārjuna knew that virtually no one understood the true meaning of the *Prajñā pāramitā* basket of *sūtra*. He also knew that without having realized this unerringly there was no means for achieving Liberation. He thus widely proclaimed the Middle Path, which asserts that *śūnyatā* (the essential meaning of Dependent Origination, that all things are totally void of a self-existent nature) is totally consistent with principles expressing an infallible relation between "black" and "white" karma and its consequences. By means of his five-part collection of works on logic the Ācārya clearly expounded the ultimate meaning of the Buddha's Wisdom. This collection consists of the major treatise, the *Mūlamadhyamika Kārikā*, and its four limbs: the *Yutik Ṣaṣṭikā*, *Śūnyatā Saptati*, *Vaidalya Sūtra*, and *Viṅgraha Vyāvarttanī*.

After this period, Ācārya Nāgārjuna stayed for six months on Mount Uśīra, to the north. He was accompanied by a thousand disciples and sustained each one with a daily tablet of a quicksilver *rasāyana* he had prepared. One day a disciple, Siddha Singkhi, respectfully touched the pill to his head but did not eat it. The Ācārya asked why, and his follower answered: "I have no need of the pill. If it pleases you, Ācārya, please prepare a number of vessels by filling them with water." Thus a thousand large containers were filled with water and placed there, in the forest. The *siddha* then added a drop of urine to each of the vessels, which transformed all the liquid into "elixir of gold". The Ācārya took all the vessels and concealed them in a secluded, inaccessible cave, uttering a prayer that they might serve to benefit beings of the future.

This Siddha Singkhi had not always been so adept. When he first met the Ācārya, he was so dull-witted that he could not learn even a single verse over a period of many days. The Ācārya then told him, in a jesting tone, to meditate that a horn had grown on top of his head. The disciple did so, maintaining his object of meditation so sharply that he achieved the tangible and visible sign of having grown a horn. He was therefore unable to leave the cave in which he was meditating, for the horn got caught on the walls. The *siddha* was then instructed to meditate that the horn was no longer present, and it subsequently disappeared.

Realizing that his disciple's mental faculties had now become sharply developed, the Ācārya taught him several profound meanings of the secret *mantras*. Nāgārjuna then instructed him to meditate once more, and the follower ultimately attained the Siddhi of the Mahāmudrā.

Later the Ācārya travelled to the northern continent of Kurava. Along the way, in a city named Salamana, he encountered several children playing in the road. Nagarjuna read the palm of one of them, a boy named Jetaka, and prophesied that he would become King. On the return journey, following the accomplishment of his goal in Kurava, the Ācārya met the former youth, who had since become King. For three years Nāgārjuna remained with the King, who bestowed upon the Ācārya many jewels. In return he composed for the King a jewel of the Dharma: namely, the *Ratnāvalī*.

It was then that he travelled south, as he had been advised by the emanation of Tāra, to practise meditation at the Mountain of Splendour. Here Nāgārjuna also turned the Wheel of the Dharma, that of both *sūtras* and *tantras*, extensively—and it was at this time that he composed, in particular, the scripture *Dharmadhātu Stava*. In general, the Ācārya's compositions are divided into three collections:

1. the Collection of Discourses—including such works as the *Ratnāvalī*, *Suḥṛllekha*, *Prajñā Śataka*, *Prajñā Daṇḍa*, and *Janapoṣaṇa Bindu*;
2. the Collection of Tributes—the *Dharmadhātu Stava*, *Lokātīta Stava*, *Acintya Stava*, and *Paramārtha Stava*; and
3. the Collection of Logic Writings—the afore-mentioned *Mūlamādhyamika Kārikā*, etc.

In addition to these, he wrote other important treatises explaining the meanings of both *sūtras* and *tantras* and—indeed—performed activities as though the Buddha had returned again.

It is said that Nagarjuna made three "great proclamations of the Dharma". The first was his upholding the *vinaya* discipline in Nālanda, as previously explained. This was like the first turning of the Wheel of the Dharma by the Bhagavān. The second was his clear exposition of the Pure Middle View, through the composition of the collection of logic treatises and others. This was similar to the Bhagavān's second turning of the Wheel. The third great proclamation constituted the Ācārya's activities upon the Mount of Splendour in the south, where he composed such works as the *Dharmadhātu Stava*. This was akin to the final turning of the Wheel of the Dharma by the Bhagavān.

Such extensive works on behalf of the Dharma and living beings aroused great displeasure in Māra and the forces of evil. A boy, Kamāra Śaktiman, had earlier been born to the queen of King Udāyibhadra. Years later, the mother was presenting her son with a rare, fine garment when the boy told her: "Put this away for me. I shall wear it when it is time for me to rule the kingdom." "You shall never rule," replied his mother, "for the Ācārya Nāgārjuna has brought it about that your father and he are of a single life. He will not die unless the Ācārya does." The boy was so overcome with grief that his mother continued: "Don't cry so! The Ācārya is a bodhisattva, and if you ask him for his head he will not refuse. With that, your father will also die—and you shall acquire the kingdom."

The child followed his mother's suggestion and Nāgārjuna did indeed agree to give his head. Yet however much effort the boy used, his sword could not cut Nāgārjuna's neck. The Ācārya told the boy: "Long ago, while cutting some grass, I happened to kill an insect. The force of that misdeed remains with me still, and you can thus sever my head by using a blade of *kuśa* grass." This the boy did, and so was able to cut off Nāgārjuna's head. The blood which flowed from the wound turned to milk, and the following words issued from the dismembered head: "From here I depart to Sukhāvātī heaven. In the future, I shall enter this body again."

The wicked prince cast the head away at several leagues' distance, fearing that it would once more join the body. Since the Ācārya had attained the practice of *rasāyana*, however, his head and body became stone-hard. The two are said to be coming nearer and nearer, one to the other, every year—in the end to be joined once more. Nāgārjuna will then again perform great works for the benefit of the Teaching and all living beings.

As it is written in the Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa, the Ācārya Nāgārjuna lived for a total of six hundred years:

"After I, the Tathagata, have passed away
And four hundred years have elapsed,
A *bhikṣu* "The Nāga" shall appear, of
Great faith and benefit to the Teaching.
He shall achieve the stage of Great Joy
And for six hundred years remain living."