

# THE LEGEND OF NAGARJUNA

Nguyen Thien Hau

Research Scholar, Department of Mahayana Buddhist Studies

Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, A.P., India.

**Abstract:** This paper is said about the life of Nagarjuna in different sources. Nagarjuna, the exponent of Madhyamika system refutes the opinion of the Sautrantika and vaibhasika. He establishes his Sunyavada refuting the opinion (about Pudgala, Bodhisattva etc.) of the Sarvastivadina (Sautrantika, Vaibhasika).

**Index Terms - Nagarjuna, Sanskrit Source, Chinese Source, Tibetan Source.**

## Introduction

Traditional accounts of Nagarjuna's life are available from the

### 1. Sanskrit sources:

- Arya Manjusrimulakalpa,
- Harsacarita ,
- Kathasaritasagara Vol. II
- Lankavatara
- Rajtarangini;

### 2. Tibetan Sources:

- Chos'-byun of Bu-ston,
- dpag-bsam ljonbzhan of ye-ses dpal – 'byon' and sum-pama kham-po,
- Rgya-gar chos-hbyn of Taranathi
- Deb-'lher dmar-po,
- Mystic tales of Taranatha by Bhupendra Datta,
- Taranatha's Bkah-babs-bdun-ldan,
- Sgnippa bogyad-beu'I rnamthar,
- Biography of Mahasiddhas by Abhya Dutta and translated by Somongrub-ses-rab in Tibetan (Ro-Sgrung),
- Sgrub-pa'i-rnam-thar translated by Taranatha and j) grub-thob-brgyad-cu-rtsa-bshihi-rnam-thar rendered into German by A. Grub wedel under the title "Die-Ge Schichte der 84 zauberer";

### 3. Chinese sources:

- Kumarijiva's Biography of Nagarjuna (Trans. by Max Walleser)
- Asia Major 1923, P42uff,
- Hsuan Tsang. Hsi-yu-chi (Watters: on Yuan Chuang II, pp. 200 – 258),
- Samual Beal Buddhist records of the Western World pp. 415 - 418,
- I-Tsing (Takakusu: A Buddhist record of the Buddhist religion as preserved in India and Malaya Archipelage pp. 156 - 159, Reprinted edition 1966),
- Wibternitz: History of Indian Literature (C.U. 1933) Vol. II, pp. 341 - 351 and the versions of Guna Bhadra.

In the Sanskrit texts, however legends are not always available except Nagarjuna's name and his acknowledgement as a Madhyamika Philosopher. It is difficult to trace out Nagarjuna as a person from the jungle of many legends. However, an attempt has been made to describe the life of Nagarjuna as far as practicable from the above sources.

## Legends of Nagarjuna

A large number of legends have been floating in the Indian literature as well in the Tibetan and the Chinese. According to the Dpag-bsan-l jon-bzan, in Tibetan an astrologer is said to have prophesied that the

new born child (here Nagarjuna) would die on the seventh day and his parents were advised to entertain one hundred brahmins and Bhikshus with feasts so that the life time of the new - born child would be prolonged from seven days to seven months and, even, to seven years, when the boy was about seven years old his parents became disheartened and allowed their son to go out of their house.<sup>1</sup>

According to Dpag-bsan-1 jon-bzan, Nagarjuna learnt the practical technique of changing colors of alchemy from a wine - seller woman (Chan - tson-ma).

Many of the wine - seller women were great alchemists. Nagarjuna became a great alchemist at that time.

At Sri-Parvata<sup>2</sup> Nagarjuna showed his excellence in Tantra as well as is possible on alchemy. The wine-seller woman only knew this Srividya before,

All the sources available to us state that Nagarjuna had gone to Nagaloka<sup>3</sup> where-from he obtained various texts of the Tripitaka including the prajnaparamita sutras, which are referred by Kumarajiva as Vaipulyasutras. The Chinese sources speaks that a Mahanaga took Nagarjuna inside the sea and opened the “treasury of seven jewels” which contained the Vaipulyasutras, Nagarjuna is said to have read the Vaipulyasutras from Mahanaga.

Ro-dung (ho sgruns) Ustala Story in Tibetan refers to a legend about Nagarjuna, the Tantrika teacher as given below:

Once upon a time a prince had friends, One was a beggar boy and the other was a rich man’s son. One fine morning they went out for strolling outside. They found out one nest on a tree top. One after another they started to throw stones upon the next. The prince tried but could not put the nest down. He became tired and left the place. The rich man’s son tried again and again; but he failed. He became tired and left the poor boy alone. Now the turn came for the last one. He tried and tried untiringly till the tusk appeared.

Suddenly the nest fell down a tall figure having long beards appeared from the said nest. The poor boy was amazed and did not know what to do in his presence. The man put his questions in a harsh voice.

“It’s now the time for retirement when the sun sets. Birds have entered in their nests, men are also in search a shelter now. But you have broken a shelter of a being.

What’s your motive? Can you compensate for such a conduct?” -

- The poor fellow had no words to return. He stood there being frightened and ashamed of his performance.

After a short while, the boy replied, “I am ready to do whatsoever you ask me for compensation. I’m poor. The prince and the rich man’s son being tired left and their endeavors therefore could not succeed. I tried enthusiastically to put the nest down. Please excuse me. Sir “. On hearing that, the man was pleased and asked his whereabouts. The boy said, “My name is Chandrakirti. My father is a poor man who possesses no money to compensate for my conduct.”

The man said that he was Nagarjuna by name. He was in meditation. He preferred to choose the poor boy as his disciple after being pleased with his keenness and perseverance. He asked the boy to take bath in the nearby pond. He made the rituals for Tantrika initiation with a vow of rendering service to the beings who were in quest of joy and relief from the state of suffering. After the initiation the boy was renamed as “Candrakirti”,

It is to note that Candrakirti, the commentator of Madhyamika work, “Mulamadhyamaka Karika”, appeared in the 7th Century A.D. Again, the satkotivyakhya commentary of the Guhyasamaja has been ascribed to Candrakirti. It suggests that Candrakirti was associated with the name of Nagarjuna traditionally.

However, the story further continues as follows, Nagarjuna taught Candrakirti, his newly initiated disciple, how to change a dead human body into gold. He explained that he had required a profuse amount of gold for doing welfare activities of the suffered ones, Candrakirti with his sincere endeavor should shoulder the responsibility in the venture of preparing gold by Tantra-alchemy process.

The story narrates in detail the conditions of converting dead body into gold by dint of certain Tantra- alchemy ritualistic practices. Candrakirti could achieve success in doing such hard task after a long practice with patience and tactics.

#### The death of Nagarjuna or the legend of Nagarjuna’s murder

The dramatic end of Nagarjuna’s life is stated in the Katha-Saritsagara. One day the kind Cirayus is said to have chosen his son Jivahara as the crown price. But his mother Queen Dhanapahara provoked her son by pointing out that the king would not die as he had long life by the application of a life prepared by Nagarjuna. She further advised her son how to manage the killing of Nagarjuna.

The elected crown price, therefore, went to Nagarjuna when he used to offer gifts before he took his day – meal. Jivahara prayed for Nagarjuna’s head, and the latter agreed to offer after examining the requirement. It is further said that the prince attempted to cut off Nagarjuna’s neck, but he failed.

<sup>1</sup> Taranatha’s History of Buddhism in India, p. 127

<sup>2</sup> Wallaser, Max, The life of Nagarjuna from Tibetan and Chinese Sources, p. 12

<sup>3</sup> Indian Historical quarterly, p. 93

### Early life (Birth, education and childhood)

According to the legend mentioned in the Dpag-bsan-djoo-bzan and Chinese texts Nagarjuna was born in a Brahmin family in a place of videbha<sup>4</sup>. The annals of eighty four Mahasi-ddhis (Die Geschichte der Su Zauberer) states that Nagarjuna was born in Kanchi to be specified at Kahore. The child is said to have been allowed to go out of his house and to move around at the age of seven years.

According to Bu-ston<sup>5</sup> “the Tibetan author, “Nagarjuna was born in a rich Brahmin family who had no other children. It had been professed to him in a dream that, a child would be born to him if he told his prayers. He did accordingly, and ten months later, a child was born. When he showed him to the sooth-sayers, the latter said that, although the marks (of the boy) were lucky, he could not live longer than ten days. (The father) asked how one could help in this case. It was said that if he would invite 100 Brahmanas to a religious feast, the child could be made to live for seven years. The father did as he was told.

When the end of the seven years drew near, the parents were unable to bear the sight of the dead body of their son and sent him to travel with a servant. So, he gradually went and went and finally came to the gates of Nalanda. There he began to recite the hymns of the Samaveda.

He reached Nalendra (Nalanda).<sup>6</sup> According to the instruction of Saraha Bhadra the high priest of Nalendra (Nalanda), he became a monk, and he succeeded in escaping death at the fateful moment by special veneration of the Buddha Aparitmitayur. In tide eighth year he began to read the sarvastivada doctrine from Bhadanta Rahulabhadrha. He was initiated by Rahula. It is said that he also learned the secular subjects like astronomy, technical science etc. Thereafter he went far away. Further details are also to be found in Taranatha’s historical works that Nagahvaya was his famous pupil. According to him, Nagarjuna, a pupil of Rahula obtained all sorts of Siddhi. Nagarjuna is said to have been overpowered by lust and passion in his early days as mentioned by Kunarajiva in the biography of Nagarjuna.

### Propitiation of deities and attainment

That Tibetan sources discuss in detail about the texts which Nagarjuna studied (at Nalendra) from different teachers. Associated with Saraha he took instructions on the Guhyadiksetra and others. He Was ordered by Upadhyaya Saraha and was called Sriprajnadhara ( Dpal-Idan-blo’ -chad- du blags). Nagarjuna learnt the tantras of the goddess Tara from Hayaghosa, a disciple of Hayapala, who was a scholar of the tripitakas. Hayapala was Guhyasris disciple. At Rajagrha he learnt mantras about twelve saktis (Yogini) for twelve years.

At Dhanyakataka, he obtained the Mahakala – tantra and Kurukulla tantra from the goddess Tara. Thus, he entered the holy order and learned the pitakas of the great Sravak- ayana and all sciences, and was name Vajrakaya Siddha (rdo - rje-lus-grub). He practiced various sadh-nas of Mahamayuri and Ku-ru-Kulla and attained siddhis in chemical (i.e. medical) sciences and others. In monastery he picked up from Bhalaba (bha-la-ba) the knowledge of alchemy for changing colors; but he was unable. Non-human beings such as Yaksas and Nagas were subdued by him.

When a famine broke out in Nalanda, he, as an attendant of the monastery, saved the people by the alchemy of changing the metals into gold by the propitiation of candika and maintained the people for twelve years. He reconverted the sankpra by explaining the religion rightly.

On seeing Nagarjuna’s magic power and religious conduct, Acarya Rahula bhadrha imposed upon hits as penance the establishment of 108 monasteries (Vihara), 1000 temples and 10,000 caityas. As Nagarjuna thought this was impossible for a single Bhiksu, he sent for gold as building material yaks as from Jambhala. Being obliged to get Nagas as workmen, he thought it was necessary to put confidence into the magas. So, he called by the mantra of the Ku-ru-kulla with her maiden. When two women with their large maiden appeared to listen to the sermon of the law (Dharma) at the sangha, the place became filled by a scent of sandal wood, and when they left again that scent also vanished. Nagarjuna knew the cause, then he wanted to make a statue of the Tara from such sandal wood. He also required this wood for making the building of his vihara and Caitya. Thereafter, he propagated the knowledge of alchemy in ancient Pun dra - vardhana (li-Kh\_ra-‘sin-‘phel). He knew that the daughters of the Naga Taksaka ( Klu-jag -po ) were covered by dust of the best sandal wood in order to protect themselves from pollution by men.

### Spread of Mahayana

Coming from Nagaloka it is said to have Nagarjuna hid some of the texts of Mahayana thought. He erected one hundred temples (at Nalendra or Nalanda) in the Madhyadesa for the spread and development of Mahayana and he placed an image of the God Mahakala. Other Travels took him to the land of Radha where he founded many Chapels and Caityas, to Uttarakuru into the town of Salama or Salamana , where he predicted a boy balled Jetaka that he would once become a King which after three months really took place.

At Vajrasana (sodhgaya) he placed railings made of stones to save the Bodhitree from the attack of an elephant.

He also placed seven big stones and excavated a drain on the east of the river Neranjana to save one hundred and eight caityas from the flood of the river. Many mountains like the Bell rock (Ghantasaila) he wanted to turn into gold. The images of Sakyamuni were engraved on each of the stones placed there.

<sup>4</sup> Now called Berar

<sup>5</sup> Bu-ston, History of Buddhism, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Nalendra in Magadha, was celebrated for many centuries as the seat of the most renowned Buddhist monastic university in India. The Variant name, Nalendra, occurs in Tibetan books.

In the south at Dhanyakataka monastery he erected walls around one hundred caityas. At gatasangraha he defeated about five hundred Tirthikas and earned a great distinction by preaching his doctrine. Then he spent his later life at Sriparvata.

### Last days of Nagarjuna

Nagarjuna's dramatic end of life is mysterious. The youngest son of king Satavahana named Susakti being instigated by his evil-minded mother wanted the head of Nagarjuna. It is said that, he offered his head as a gift, as a result of which he went to Sukhavati. The prince was afraid that the Acarya might having obtained the elixir of life, unite again (with the body) was carried the head many miles from the place of the cutting off. But here it was taken away by a yaksini. Having placed the head on a large rock, it fell to pieces and bodies of stone (Statues) of five Avalokitesvara gods became visible. For the head as well as the body of each a temple was erected by the yaksini as donor.

Bu-ston and Taranatha both refer to the legend of suicide made by Nagarjuna whereas the name is mentioned to be Antivahana or Udayana for the king and Saktiman respectively. In another tales we mark the story differently. Nagarjuna is said to have been engaged as a minister of a king named Cirayus. He spent the remaining part of his life in that king's court and he donated his head to the elected crown prince in accordance with the Bodhisattva ideal.

According to the Pag-sam-lon-zang it is said that Nagarjuna spent two hundred years in Madhyadesa, twelve years in the northern countries and in the countries where non-human beings were inhabitants (mi-min) and two hundred years in the southern countries and one hundred and twenty nine years, or one hundred and seventy one years in Sriparvata. Thus, he lived more than five hundred years.

### Conclusion

Like Buddha he attained the cittopada (thugs-bskyed-pa) in the presence of Dipa (Sgron-me) of Naga family. He propounded these religious development or preachings (chos-sgra) -thrice; firstly, regarding the method of the Vinaya practices he purified the doctrine that was corrupted by Sankara of Nalanda; secondly, by composing the chief texts of Madhyamika doctrine, he advocated the doctrine with reference to Prajnaparamita ; lastly, on his way from Uttarakuru to Jambudvipa he went to king Pujatskala (Pu-tza-ta-ka-la) and presented his text the Ratnavali (rin-chen-phren-pa) to the king whom he had met during his journey towards northern lands. He also composed many other texts, such as be Mahapataha Sutra (rna-bo-chei-mdo-songs).

It is thus recorded in the text Mahabherisutra - Nagarjuna will be Samyakasambuddha by the name of Buddha Jnanakaraprabha in the Psabha-lokadhatu. According to the Annals of eighty - four Mahasiddhas, he was born in Kanchi, to be specific, at Kahore. He came to Nalanda where he became a good scholar and met the goddess Tara. At Rajagrha he learnt mantras about the twelve female yoginis ('byun-mo) for twelve years. When he wanted to transform the hill (Gha-dha-si), into gold the god Manjusri blessed him. Then he went towards Sriparvata.

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