THE Hagiography of Nāgārjuna

translated by
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INTRODUCTION

The text used for this translation of the *rnam. thar.*¹ of Ācārya Nāgārjuna (sLob. dpun. kLu. sgrub) was published by E. Kalsang at Varanasi,² in an edited edition of the 'Phags. yul. grub. chen. brgyad. cu. rtsa. bzhi' i. byin. rlabs. skor. lus./la. rgyus. rnam. par. thar. pa. rnam. bzhugs. so.. This hagiography is found on pages 51 to 57 of Kalsang's edition.

The author of the text, dGe.slong.³ sMon. grub. shes. rab., tells us that it was based on the discourses of his teacher, bLa. ma. chen. po. Mi. 'jigs. pa. sByin. pa. dpal.⁴ One is also referred to a longer version ⁵ of these hagiographies, which may be found in the Tibetan cannon, bsTan. 'gyur., rgyud., Vol. lu., facs. la-34b.

*rNam. thar.* texts play an important role in Tibetan Buddhism. Combining elements from both the folk and monastic religions, they somewhat resemble Catholic texts of the lives of the saints, and they are an inspiration for the saṅgha⁶ and laity alike. The characters portrayed in the texts are the grub. thob., or mahāsiddhas, the saints of the Vajrayāna. Their role in the Diamond Vehicle is that of a symbol for human potentiality, and is thus similar to the roles of the bodhisattva in the Mahāyāna and the arahant in Theravāda and nikāya Buddhism.

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³ *dge. slong.* = *bhikshu* = ordained monk.

⁴ Kalsang, op. cit., p. 204.

⁵ *ibid.* , p. 207: *rgyas. pa*.

⁶ *dge. 'dun.*
གྲོང་གུ སྟེན་པའི་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་རིགས་ལུས་།

དེར་བཙལ་བོའི་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་རིགས་ཀྱི་འབྲེལ་སྤྱིས་

རྒྱུ་མཚན་བསྡུན་པོ་ཆོས་ཞིག་ཞིག་པ་ནི་བཟུས་

བོད་ཀྱིས་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་ལུས་ལུས་བོད་ཁོ་ལ་

གཉིས་པ་དང་བོད་ཀྱིས་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་ལུས་ལུས་

བོད་ཀྱིས་ལུས་བོད་པོ་དང་བོད་ཀྱིས་

སྤྱི་ཚོགས་རིགས་ཀྱི་འབྲེལ་སྤྱིས་

ནི་གཉིས་པ་དང་བོད་ཀྱིས་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་ལུས་ལུས་

ཆུས་པ་དང་བོད་ཀྱིས་ལུས་བོད་པོ་

སྤྱི་ཚོགས་རིགས་ཀྱི་འབྲེལ་སྤྱིས་

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The Hagiography of Nagarjuna | 271
ENGLISH TRANSLATION

As for the account of Guru Nāgarjuna, or ṛṣaya₁ kLu. sgrub.: He was from Kahora, in the eastern part of India (Kattsi), and of brāhmīn caste. He attained perfection² from Tārā.³

In Kahora there were twenty-five thousand cities. Because all the people were going to destroy and ravish all the brāhmīns, all the brāhmīns got together and said: “Because these people will harm all of us, it would be better to go and wander in some other country, rather than to stay and fight with them.”

Nāgarjuna heard this discussion, and then sent this message to all the brāhmīns: “Don’t go to another country! Suffering would only follow you there. so you take all of my things.” And he gave all his property as alms.

Nāgarjuna fled from Kahora to the other side of bSil.ba.tsal.⁴ and went to Nālanda. There he became a monk. By studying the five branches of learning,⁵ he became unsurpassed as a scholar. He renounced samsāra by his studies. By doing a retreat, Tārā appeared to him.

Then he left his home and vocation among the hundred monks, who were staying at Nālanda for Dharma studies. Then he thought like this: “Since all of this does not benefit sentient beings, I will gain knowledge and thereby benefit sentient beings.”

Then he went to Rajagriha.⁶ He recited the mantras of the twelve female demons of the supreme group of demons.⁷ On the first night the earth quaked. On the second night the waters flooded. On the third night the winds blew. On the fifth night there was a rain of weapons. On the sixth night there was a rain of vajras.⁸ On the seventh night he actually saw all the female demons. They were making obstacles. However

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1 ṛṣaya = slob.dpon.
2 “perfection” = dngos. grub. = siddhi. This technical term is problematic for translators. Sarat Chandra Das (A Tibetan-English Dictionary, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, repr. 1970 [Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1902], p. 359) offers “the accomplishment of the real thing sought for,” be it material or spiritual. He lists (pp. 359-360) eight types of dngos. grub., In this context, the translators have selected its more general usage as “perfection,” a step on the path of mchog.gi.dngos. grub. ‘the supreme attainment’ of Buddhahood.
3 Tārā = sGrol. ma.
4 bSil. ba. tsal = literally “cool garden place”.
5 The five branches of learning (rig. pa’i. gnas. lnga.) are: (1) gso. ba. rig. pa, medicine; (2) sgra. rig. pa, language and poetics; (3) gstan. tshig. rig. pa, logic; (4) bzo. rig. pa, technologies; and (5) chos. rig. pa, religion.
6 Rajagriha = rGyal. po’ i. khams.
7 “the twelve female demons of the supreme group of demons” = ‘byung.po. khyu. mchog. gi. ‘byung. mo. bcu. gnys. Probably the twelve bstan. ma., which A. K. Gordon (The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism, New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., revised edition, 1967, p. 76) renders as “the twelve She devils...under control of Ekajatā” [Ral. gcig. ma.], as “furies” (idem.), which Das (op. cit., p. 560) calls “sprites,” and which in India would be called bhūtani (ibid., p 925) or churail.
8 vajra = rdo. rje.
by doing meditation⁹ without distraction, the obstacles couldn’t affect him. Then all
the female demons came and asked, “What do you want? We will give it to you.”
Nāgārjuna said, “I don’t need anything. Merely prepare a livelihood for
me.” Thereafter they always gave him four measures of rice and the five vegetables,
which he ate during twelve years in retreat. Then Nāgārjuna thought about putting
all 108 female demons under his power, thereby benefiting sentient beings.
Nāgārjuna thought, “I should go to Mt. Ghandashila and do benefit for sen-
tient beings by changing the mountain into gold.” After that he changed the mountain
into iron. Then he changed it into copper. Then the Noble Maṇjuśrī¹⁰ said, “Sentient
beings will have great arguments about this mountain, thereby accumulating sin.”
So Nāgārjuna stopped and left. Even today Mt. Ghandashila has the brown color
of copper.

On the road to Mt. Lho phogs dpal gi ri, Nāgārjuna came to a big river. He
met with many cowherders and asked about crossing the river. They showed him
a bad road. It was uncomfortable with crocodiles and ravines. Another cowherder
came. “This road is not good. Come away from here,” he said. Then he picked
Nāgārjuna up and carried him away.

In the middle of the water, Nāgārjuna conjured up miraculous crocodiles and
various terrifying things. The cowherder said, “As long as I don’t die, you have nothing
to fear.” Nāgārjuna dissipated the conjurations and went to dry ground. He said, “I
am the Noble Nāgārjuna. Don’t you recognize me?”

“I’ve heard about you, but I don’t recognize you,” the cowherder replied.
Nāgārjuna said, “You carried me across the water. Whatever you want I will
give to you.”

The cowherder asked for a way to become a king.

Then Nāgārjuna caused water to pour forth from a big sāla tree. By Nāgārjuna’s
powerful blessings,¹¹ the tree then became an elephant, which immediately became a
kingly vehicle. The cowherder asked for troops of soldiers, and Nāgārjuna said,
“When the elephant trumpets, soldiers will appear.” And so it was.

The king was called Sāla Bhantha, and his queen was called Sinidhi. They
took up dwelling in a city called Bhahitna in a splendid country. Eighty-four lakhs of

⁹ meditation = thugs nam.
¹⁰ Noble Maṇjuśrī = ’Phags pa jam dpal.
¹¹ “By Nāgārjuna’s powerful blessings” is a rather free translation of a most
interesting Tibetan grammatical device. Rather than say that the elephant, troops
of soldiers, and the splendid city “exist” (pod pa), the text says that they grub.
ste. In footnote 1 we discussed this technical term for which there are no
European-language equivalents, which comes from the Sanskrit siddha/siddhi,
and which is often translated as ‘accomplishment’ (Das, op.cit., p. 359). Since
grub ste. (grub + the terminative particle ste.) is in the verb’s position in this
phrase, it is suggestive of the modality of existence for Nāgārjuna’s conjurations.
The text indicates this modality not only for the elephant, but for the kingly life
of the cowherder.
King Śāla Bhantha thought, "All of these omens of harm refer only to my lama, not to anyone else." He gave his kingdom to his son, Shindnya Kurmāra and, with a few of his retinue, went to Nāgārjuna.

The lama asked, "Son, why have you come here?"

The king said:  
All of our fortunes have been consumed,  
All Buddha’s teachings have decreased.  
The Black Ones have become victorious.  
Your great compassion, white like the sun,  
Is obscured, as by a rain cloud, by a devil.  
All of these terrible omens are signs of the death  
Of the holy, vajra-like lama.  
Since all of this has happened, I came here.  
Think of your great compassion!  
Give us your blessings!

Nāgārjuna said:  
All living things die,  
All compounded things separate.  
Whatever is accumulated, it ends.  
All phenomena are impermanent, it’s true.  
Why then, do you grieve?  
Take your elixir and go.

The king said, "If I could take the elixir while staying with my lama, then I would. But if you die, then of what need is any elixir?" So the king stayed with Nāgārjuna.

Noble Nāgārjuna gave away all his wealth as alms. Seeing this, the god Brahma incarnated as a brahmin and begged for Nāgārjuna’s head. Nāgārjuna promised to give even his head.

King Śāla Bhantha could not endure to see Nāgārjune die, so he touched the crown of his head to Nāgārjuna’s food and he died.

All the people criticized the brahmin. At that time, nothing could be found which would cut Nāgārjuna’s head, so Nāgārjuna took one blade of Kusha grass and cut off his head and gave it to the brahmin.

Then all the trees dried up. Even people’s merit decreased. Even today, the eight female demons we mentioned before guard Nāgārjuna’s body. Nāgārjuna’s disciple, Nagabodhi, stays and is even now shining almost as brightly as the moon.

It is said that at the time when Maitreya’s teachings come, Nāgārjuna’s body will arise and benefit all sentient beings.

This account of Guru Nāgārjuna is complete.

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17 The following speeches by Nāgārjuna and the king are in śloka (verse).
18 “Black Ones” = nag. po., any person or demon who obstructs the spread of the Dharma.
19 “are signs of the death... of the lama” = dus. byas. (samāskṛta) rang. bshin. byung. dam. This is an interesting Tibetan idiom. Historically it reads: “compounded phenomena happened.” This is taken by Tibetans to indicate that that which comes to pass from all compounded phenomena, viz., death, is immanent.
20 Brahma = Lha. tshangs.
21 incarnated, manifested = sprul.
22 merit = bsod. nams.
23 Maitreya = rGyal. ba. Byams. pa.
cities offered taxes, and the king ruled them. Nāgarjuna went to Lho.phogs. and stayed in a meditational retreat of long duration.

The king missed the lama. He came to dPal.gi.ril, then circumambulated and did prostrations to Nāgarjuna. The king said to Nāgarjuna, “There is very little meaning in my temporal rule. It’s all a big mistake and I no longer want it. I beg to stay with Nāgarjuna.”

Nāgarjuna said, “Do not quit your temporal rule. Let the Precious Garland become your teacher to rule the kingdom. If you take this elixir which I will give you, then you needn’t fear an untimely death.”

The king said, “If there is enough time to stay with you, then I will accept both the kingdom and the elixir. But if there is no time to stay with you, then I don’t want any of it.” Since he didn’t want to go, he remained.

Nāgarjuna gave teachings to the king. The king then remained in his country for a hundred years and accomplished the techniques of the elixir. During that time, all sentient beings became wealthy. Even all the birds and wild animals lived comfortably. During those hundred years, Nāgarjuna spread the Buddha’s teachings far and wide.

All of this aroused the jealousy of dGa’. rab. dbang. phyog. Various unlucky omens happened. There was darkness without light from the sun or moon. All the fruits naturally dried up. The rains did not come on time, and all beings became dizzy with famine. An aeon of disease and fighting spread. All fruit trees and forests dried up. All these unlucky omens happened.

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13 The Precious Garland = Rin. po. che’i. phreng. pa. = Rājapurikathā-ratnamāla. This work is a prajñāparamitā text and not just a homoetic work of advice to the king, as this story might indicate. In some sections it reads as a Madhyamakā treatise, establishing sūnyatā (stong. pa. nyid.) by the refutation of all positions (dṛṣṭi), the prasaṅga-methodology. In other sections it transcends ethical injunctions addressed to the king, establishing the bodhisattva path in the genre of the prajñāparamitā. It has been translated into English by Jeffrey Hopkins, Ven. Lati Rinpoche and Anne Klein (Nāgarjuna and the Seventh Dalai Lama, The Precious Garland and The Song of the Four Mindfulnesses, London: George Allen & Unwin, The Wisdom of Tibet Series, No. 2, 1975).

14 elixir = bcud. len. = rāsa. This technical term means something like vital essence. By extracting the vital essence from a plant, a rock, etc., one is said to be able to consume its vitality, thus prolonging life. (See Das, op. cit., p. 394.)

14 teachings = gdam. This technical term refers to a series of stages on a given topic. For Tantric practices, the gdam.pas. would include: (1) lung., the spiritual authorization to begin the practices; (2) dbang.skur., the empowerment or initiation (abhīṣeka); and (3) sgom.sgrub., the completion or actualization of the teachings.

15 “the techniques of the elixir” = bcud. len. pa.sgrubs.

16 dGa’. rab. dbang. phyog. is a demon who becomes especially jealous when humans begin to progress in the Dharma practice. He is said to possess five arrows (mda’. lnga.) used to distract practitioners. They are: (1) smyo. byed.kyi.mda’, the arrow to make one crazy; (2) sred.byed.kyi.mda’, the arrow to burn one; (3) kun. tu. rmons. byed. kyi.mda’, the arrow to make one ignorant; (4) skem. byed. kyi. mda’, the arrow to make on desirous; and (5) ‘chi. byed. kyi.mda’, the arrow which kills.