

LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF NAGARJUNA

Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese traditions concur in holding that Nagarjuna flourished about four hundred years after the Nirvana. Nirvana according to Tibetan tradition took place in 433 B.C. The generally accepted date for the Nirvana is 486 B.C. Taranatha makes Nagarjuna a contemporary of Kanishka whose date is also not firmly known (58 B.C., 78 A.C. or 120 A.C.). Most of the modern scholars hold that Nagarjuna flourished in the second half of the second century of the Christian Era and that whether he was contemporary of Kanishka or not he was a contemporary and friend of the Satavahana King Gautamiputra Yajna Sri (166-196 A.C.). A recent finding is that this Gautamiputra ruled between 62 and 86 A.C.

Nagarjuna came of a wealthy Brahmin family of Vidarva. His father, according to Tibetan tradition, found astrologically that the son's span of life was short and to prolong his life made him a recluse. He was sent to Nalanda where he became disciple to the great sage Rahulabhadra and underwent a thorough training in all the faculties of studies open at Nalanda at the time. In Chinese tradition Nagarjuna received his first education in Vidarbha in all branches of Brahmanic learning but being not satisfied with that he went to Nalanda.

It is likely that after his ordination Nagarjuna was for quite some time a monk of the Sarvastivada and joined the Mahayana. He is known to have wandered as a pilgrim student from the Himalayas to the seas and in the course of these sojourns he came across the records of sermon on Transcendental Wisdom. For long he was the chief abbot of Nalanda and was renowned as a staunch disciplinarian. As a seat of knowledge (jnana) and a citadel of discipline (vinaya). Nalanda soon outshone Vajrasana.

Nagarjuna's second home was the land of the two rivers: Godavari and Krishna and seem to have spent the later year of his life there. While his chief residence was on the Sriparvata he was the leading figure in the nearby seat of learning in the township of Dhanyakataka. The archaeological remains of Amaravari and Nagarjunikonda contain traces indicating Nagarjuna's administrative and organizing abilities as well as his interest in architecture and sculpture. He harnessed the piety of the Satavahana king for his religious and academic projects.

Nagarjuna's last days are not clear in history. From the mass of legends preserved in Tibetan it appears that he gave away his own life to save the life of a friend's son. Stories of such dedications to save lives of others are not unknown in Asia.

Great as a scholar, great as a teacher, great as an exponent, great as an organizer, Nagarjuna was above all a sage who realized the illusion of mundane existence. It is not strange that myths and legends should have cropped over his memory. A second Nagarjuna, an alchemist and a Tantric saint, was in later days identified with the great Madhyamika exponent. Works of this alchemist Nagarjuna as well as some books on art and iconography came to be attributed to the great Nagarjuna.

Treaties and tracts which authentic compositions of Nagarjuna may be enumerated thus: (1) *Mula Madhyamika Karika* (2) *Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra*, (3) *Dvadasa Nikaya Sastra*, (4) *Dasabhumi*

Vibhava Sastra, (5) *Sunyata Saptati*, (6) *Yukti Sastika*, (7) *Vigraha Vyavartani*, (8) *Suhrillekha* and (9) *Ratnavali*.

Items 1 and 7 are available in original Sanskrit, items 2 and 3 are found only in Chinese translation and all except 2 and 3 are available in Tibetan translations. Many works attributed to Nagarjuna are considered doubtful but are perhaps authentic with later amendments and interpolations. Akutobhaya and Prajnadanda belong to this category. Works on medicine and chemistry are of the second Nagarjuna. Many tracts and extracts in Jamgon and other collections are attributed to Nagarjuna. Modern scholars have not yet investigated the Tibetan books outside Tanjur.

While the controversies due to paucity archaeological and chronological data and plenitude of legends and myths will perhaps never be solved to the satisfaction of all, Nagarjuna will ever remain a landmark in the history of man's morals. Discovery of Prajna Paramita and formulation of Sunyata had consequences flowing much beyond Nagarjuna's life or India's history.

To use modern language, we can say that Nagarjuna discovered the records of the Buddha's secret sermon called Prajna Paramita [Transcendental Wisdom] among an obscure tribe with serpent totem. The Prajna Paramita, as the name suggests, is not ordinary wisdom. It undoubtedly goes beyond the original teaching, that is, the Four truths and the law of causation. It, however, in no way; contradicts or rejects the original teachings; the Second Turning of the Wheel of Law, as the revelation of the Prajna Paramita is known, is a corollary to the First Turning of the Wheel.

The Prajna Paramita literature consisting of numerous treatises and tracts -elaborations and abridgements- repeats and re-iterates one basic idea that in Absolute Reality, there is no change or that there is no origination or cessation, no coming or going out or that the real is neither atman nor anatman. In other words all phenomena are unreal; that is, all dharmas or objects of thought or elements of existence are endowed with only a conditional or relative existence. The vedana [feeling], samjna [concept] and sanskara [conformation] are all illusions. The truth is neither sasvata [eternal] nor asasvata [non-eternal] but pure sunya [voidness]. The Transcendental Wisdom is realization of the absolute cessation of all appearance. The Perfect Bodhisattva, that is, the saint who is determined to help an infinite numbers of beings to attain Nirvana, is aware that there are no beings not even the being Bodhisattva and that there is no bondage or no salvation.

All this is an antidote to ego in any form and is designed to wean the believer from any attachment to any sense of merit, spiritual attainment or final victory. Even if the end [Nirvana] is unreal in the sense that it is incomprehensible, endeavor for the end, that is, liberation from sorrow, is inevitable. The reward is not in the goal but in the striving for it. The Prajna Paramita literature with all its prolificity and repetition develops the concepts of Impermanence [anitya], Sorrow [duhkha] and Non-self [anatman] that is, the concepts which the Buddha enunciated at Sarnath.

Nagarjuna's task was to expound the negativist doctrine of Prajna Paramita and to establish that it was the efflorescence of original. He forged a dialectic which avoided the extremes of affirmation and rejection and which thus came to be called Madhyamika [the central position].

Nagarjuna denied the scope for any categorical description in the pursuit of ultimate reality [*paramartha satya*]. Existence and non-existence [asti-nasti], soul and non-soul [atma-anatma] none of the opposites are unconditionally valid. Even the opposed notions of actor [karaka] and acting [karma] are valid. If we accept the reality of actor [karaka:atma] we cannot deny the reality of action [karma]: if we accept the reality of action we cannot deny its author. So all our concepts are relative or conditional. This is true of our scheme of values, good and evil, papa and punya or even sansara and nirvana. The ultimate reality

thus consists of sunyata [voidness] which exists as space [akasa] exists. Are we then to reject the reality or validity of the Four Truths or the Law of Causation Nagarjuna's answer is a categorical "No".

If any object exists by itself it is absurd to speak of its origin, end and all that; it is redundant to describe that object as real or not. The open sky [akasa] is there and no body disputes its existence. The same is true of Law of Causation. The interdependence between the different points of the chain is beyond the dispute. The points exist only with reference to one another, that is, they are conditional or relative; yet the whole process is inexorable. That is why one who realizes the Pratityasamutpada realizes the Four Truths. This realization is attained in the second stage of sadhana [endeavour for liberation] where wisdom [prajna] is the means. In the first stage the means are ethics and meditation, that is the Eight Fold Way.

The stage of wisdom can be reached only after the stage of ethics and meditation has been covered. Nagarjuna's negativism was not all of Epicureanism. In practice as in theory Nagarjuna firmly adhered to the validity of conduct. His renown as the chief abbot at Nalanda was as much due to his leaned exposition as to his rigid observance of discipline [vinaya]. Nagarjuna's Friendly Epistle [Suhriklekhya] intended to enlighten the Satavahana king that no doctrinal matter is confined to the first stage of sadhana and even as that it is largely a moral exhortation of non-denominational character. The stanzas culled below indicated Nagarjuna's dharma [religion].

"Knowing the riches to be unstable and void, give according to the moral precept to Bhikshus, Brahmanas, the poor and friends for there are no better friends than charity.

"Exhibit morality faultless and sublime, unmixed and spotless, for morality is the supporting ground of all eminence, as the earth is of the moving and immovable".

"Exercise the imponderable transcendental virtues of charity, morality, patience, energy, meditation, and likewise wisdom, in order that, having reached the farther shore of the existence, you may become a Jine prince".

"View as enemies: avarice, deceit, duplicity, lust, indolence, pride, greed, hatred and pride concerning family, figure, glory, youth, or power".

"Do not look after another's wife; but if you see her, regard her, according to her age like your mother, daughter, or sister; if you love her then purify your thought about her".

The Sceptre of Wisdom [Prajnadanda], attributed to Nagarjuna in Tibetan tradition, is a scepter of niti [morality] for householders.

History has no parallel to such amoral cultivation of morality. Morality in Sunyavada [ideology of voidness] is a categorical imperative in the most imperative form.

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