

NAMO BUDDHA AND ITS ENVIRONS: A Legacy of Great Compassion

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I. INTRODUCTION

On a mountain 30 kilometers east of Kathmandu lies the most sacred site of Namobuddha stūpa. Namo Buddha Stūpa is considered to be one of the three holiest stūpas in Nepal. The other two are Svayambhū Stūpa and the Bodhnath stūpa. This stūpa commemorates the Buddha Śākyamuni's sacrifice of his body to a starving tigress in a previous life. For this reason it is also known as the Tagmo Lūjin (lit. "the place where the future Buddha sacrificed his body to a tigress). Newar Buddhists call it Namobuddha or Namurā.

It is a very sacred place where our teacher, the perfect and supreme Buddha – at that time still on the path of learning – without hesitation offered his own body to a tigress suffering from great hunger. What follows is a history of this distinguished sacred site, whose location is unmistakable based on the clear identification given in the *Vyāghrīparivarta* of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

At Namobuddha mountain, one nowadays sees a traditional Newar-style caitya together with number of other smaller votive caityas. We can not at present give a date for its foundation. There are no inscriptions to corroborate the very old date suggested in the legends and chronicles.

In addition, there is a railing embedded with prayer wheels, installed around the caityas to facilitate the devotions of visitors.

A stone sculpture dedicated to Prince Mahāsattva's mother is installed on the bottom level of the caitya in the main shrine. She is flanked by

her two sons Prince Mahādeva and Mahāpraṇāda. A caretaker performs daily ritual worship to this small shrine.

If you go further up the hill from the left side, you will approach a small shrine dedicated to Prince Mahāsattva who, out of great compassion, sacrificed his own flesh and blood to a hungry tigress. Near this shrine lies a small cave where one can find stone sculptures of a hungry tigress and her five cubs in front of Prince Mahāsattva.

On the top of the hill, a series of eight caityas are installed. It appears that Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche, a great Kagyu Master, took the initiative to build these eight caityas on top of the hill together with a tall Buddha image richly decorated with ornamental designs and motifs. In front of this image are the images of the Buddha's first five disciples making the gesture of folded hands ready to listen to his first sermon. Incidentally, from here one has a majestic view of the nearby village and a range of hills in the distance.

A few distance down the hill one can find Namobuddha Retreat Center founded by Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche himself, who is also constructing magnificent monastic buildings in the area.

In brief, one may find this to be an inspiring and thrilling place. The religious edifices there alert us to the significance of Prince Mahāsattva's sacrifice of his own body, demonstrating his perfection of generosity.

III. LEGENDS

According to 'Wright's chronicle', Śākyamuni Buddha, having visited Svayambhū Caitya and Mañjuśrī Caitya, set up his abode at Pucchāgra

Caitya. He then visited Guhyeśvarī, and after that Namobuddha mountain, about twelve miles east of Bhaktapur.

There he discovered, buried under a caitya, certain ornaments belonging to himself, which he showed to his disciples. In his former existence as a prince named Mahāsattva, the son of Mahāratha of Pānavatī, formerly called Pāñcāla, these ornaments had been buried after he offered his flesh to the tigress. He put them back where he found them, and repaired the caitya.

According to a local legend¹, Śākyamuni Buddha, in the course of his visit to various places, came to Lumbini, and from there went to Kathmandu with his 1350 disciples including Ānanda and Śāriputra. He went to pay homage to Glorious Svayambhū Mahācaitya, and gave a teaching on the origin of this stūpa at the request of Bodhisattva Maitreya on Gopucchāgra hill. From there he moved to Pāñcāla city via Nālā village and arrived at Gandhamādana mountain just before the full moon, namely Kojāgrat Pūrṇimā. Lord Buddha arrived there in the year 587 B.C. at this place, seven kilometers east of Pāñcāla city. He stayed in the forest called Kusumavana with his entourage, enjoying the bliss of the natural surroundings.

While exploring this forest he arrived at the mound resembling a caitya surrounded by flowers of many colors, a place where the fragrance of sweat permeated the forest. When Buddha saw this mound shining brilliantly, he paid homage to it and gazed at it for a long time. Since Buddha himself paid homage to this caitya, it was later widely known as Namobuddha caitya.

At that time venerable Ānanda was watching this event very carefully and was surprised to see this. He circumambulated the Buddha three times and prostrated to him respectfully with folded hands, and asked:

“O Bhagavān, O my teacher, why did you pay homage to this earthly mound gazing at it for so long? What mysteries are hidden inside this mound? We, your disciples, could not understand

it. Would you please explain the underlying cause out of compassion for us?”

Hearing Ānanda’s request, Buddha looked at his disciples including Śāriputra, Ānanda and others. Lord Buddha asked his disciples to prepare a seat for giving a discourse and said: “O my disciples, please listen to me carefully. The earthly mound to which I paid homage is nothing but the remains of an ancient caitya. It was built with the bone relics of a Prince Mahāsattva, born to benefit sentient beings, who sacrificed himself by offering his own flesh and blood to a hungry tigress and her five cubs. This Bodhisattva saved the lives of the tigress and her cubs. This caitya contains the relics of this Bodhisattva, so I paid homage to this caitya. That is why it is called ‘Namobuddha’. O my disciples, this caitya is worthy of veneration, so please prostrate to this caitya.” (Picture 1)

After prostrating to the caitya, all the monks led by Ven. Ānanda asked Buddha about the history of this caitya. At this Buddha stamped three times on the ground with his golden hands. The earth trembled six times and was divided and from it emerged a jewelled caitya emitting dazzling light. Then Lord Buddha asked Ānanda to bring golden vase from jewelled caitya. Ven. Ānanda went to fetch a golden vase from the jewelled caitya and presented it to the Buddha. Buddha then placed this golden vase amidst the saṅgha and he himself prostrated to it once again, and asked the saṅgha also to do the same.

Lord Buddha said that this golden vase with relics of Prince Mahāsattva was installed in the 974th year of the Kali Era on the twelfth day of the waning half of Bhādra. About 7 kilometers in the west lies the city of Pāñcāla – the place where Prince Mahāsattva reigned in the past. Lord Buddha related the story of Prince Mahāsattva.

Sources for the legends:

There are several sources which give the story of the Tigress and her five cubs. They are narrated in the

¹ Satyanarayan Manandhar, *History of Namobuddha* (Nepali), Panauti: 1996.



Picture 1 : Lord Buddha narrates the story of his past life as Mahāsattva whose skeleton is seen lying on the ground.

DIGITAL PICTURES OF NAMOBUDDHA STŪPA AND ITS ENVIRONS



Entrance gate of Namobuddha Stūpa



Shrine dedicated to Prince Mahāsattva's mother



Stone relief depicting Prince Mahāsattva sacrificing his flesh to a hungry tigress and her five cubs



Namobuddha Stūpa



The cave with sculptures of Prince Mahāsattva sacrificing his flesh to hungry tigress and her cubs



Buddha Śākyamuni delivering his first sermon to his five disciples



Eight Mahācaityas



A bird's eye view of the Namobuddha hill ranges

Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra (19th chapter), *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra (first chapter), *The Sūtra of the wise and the foolish*, and the *Avadānakalpalatā*.

a. *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* (SPS):

This text was translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa (412-426 CE) and the first Devanāgarī edition was published in 1931 CE by Bunyiu Nanjio from Japan.

A second edition was published by Hokei Idzumi from the Eastern Buddhist Society, Kyoto, Japan.

A third (incomplete) edition was published by S.C. Das and S.C. Vidyabhusan in 1900 at Darjeeling, India.

A fourth edition was published by Johannes Nobel in Leipzig, Germany, based on I-tsing's Chinese translation and Tibetan sources.

A fifth edition was published from the Mithilā Institute, Darbhāṅgā by S. Bagchi.

Since the contents of the *SPS* and the *Sūtra of the wise and the foolish* are similar we shall here give only the account from the latter. At the end of sūtra, Buddha disclosed that the five cubs were reborn as his first five disciples; the tigress was reborn as Prajāpatī and Queen Satyavatī as Māyādevī.

b. *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish*²

The sūtra gives the story parallel to that in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*. There are many more details in the version of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*, so only the differences are noted here.

A long time ago, innumerable aeons in the past, there was a king in this world with the name of 'Great Chariot (Skt: Mahāratha)'. He ruled over nearly five thousand vassals and had three sons, the eldest of whom was called 'Great Sound (Mahāpranāda)'; the middle, 'Great Deity (Mahādeva)'; and the youngest, 'Great Sentient Being (Mahāsattva)'.

From childhood the youngest son was of a loving and compassionate nature. To everyone he was like a beloved son. One time, the king went outside for a walk together with his ministers, his queen and his sons. Then, while they rested a little while, the three sons strolled in the woods³. They saw a tigress who had given birth to cubs and was so exhausted by days of hunger and thirst that she was on the verge of eating her young. The youngest prince said to his two elder brothers, "This weak and meager tigress is at the edge of death, and suffering so much that she would even eat her own offspring." When the younger brother asked his two elder brothers: "What does the tigress eat?" the two elder brothers replied, "She eats freshly killed meat and drinks blood." Then he said: "Does anybody have such strength as to save her life by giving her these things?" The two brothers replied: "Nobody, because that would be extremely difficult."

The younger brother thought: "For a long time I have been wandering in saṃsāra wasting innumerable bodies and lives. I have given up my body sometimes to desire, sometimes to anger and sometimes to ignorance. What is the use of this body which for the sake of Dharma has not even once engaged in merit?" Once he had made up his mind in this way, the three had not walked very long together on their way back, when he said to his two elder brothers, "You two brothers go on ahead. I have something to do and shall come later."

Retracing his steps along the path, he quickly returned to the lair of the tigress and lay down in front of her, but the tigress was too famished to bite. So the prince took a sharp branch⁴ and scraped his body to make it bleed, and let the tigress lick the blood. She was then able to fully open her mouth and completely devoured the flesh on his body.

His two brothers had waited for a long time and still their younger brother had not come back,

² Source: <http://www.rinpoche.com/tagmo.html>

³ The name of the forest is given as Dvādaśavanagulma forest

⁴ *SPS* says that a stick of bamboo was used

so they returned to look for him. When they considered the way he had talked, they thought that he had most certainly fed himself to the tigress. When they arrived at the den, they saw that he had been eaten by the tigress, who was lying in the remains of the body, and they fell to the ground in a faint. Regaining consciousness after a while, they cried and fainted again.

At that moment the queen dreamed that three pigeons had been flying and playing, and that a falcon had caught the youngest. She woke up immediately and in terror told the king, "I have been told that a pigeon is the soul of a son. I dreamed that a falcon caught the youngest of three pigeons, so some misfortune has certainly befallen the most beloved of my sons." Immediately he ordered a thorough search and not much later, the two elder brothers returned.

The queen asked them, "Is there not something wrong with the most beloved of my sons? What is it?" The two brothers' speech faltered, and for a long while they could barely breathe, and remained speechless. Finally they gasped, "He was eaten by a tiger." When the queen heard this she fainted, falling to the ground. When she regained consciousness much later, the two sons, the queen and their entire entourage rushed to the place where the prince had died. They saw nothing but bones and blood as the tigress had completely consumed the flesh of the prince. The queen held her head in her hands and the king, embracing her, wept and cried. He, too, fainted, and it was a long time till he regained consciousness.

c. *Jātakamālā of Āryaśūra:*

Another source for the legend is the "Vyāghrī Jātaka" of the first chapter of the *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra. Tārānātha identifies Āryaśūra with Aśvaghoṣa and Mātṛceta. He may be assigned to the sixth century. An earlier date has been suggested (fourth century) on the grounds that one of his treatises was translated into Chinese in A.D. 434 (Nanjio No. 1349); but this small pamphlet was almost certainly not written by Āryaśūra, and the

Jātakamālā was not translated into Chinese. Some verses from this book were quoted in inscriptions describing the paintings in the Ajantā caves in India.

The story as told in Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* is as follows:

Here the Bodhisattva is depicted as a prosperous, extremely virtuous, learned Brahmin who, while touring in different regions, came across a holy mountain with his disciples. The poet described the bodhisattva as highly compassionate and detached from his wealth and possessions, thus:

"The Bodhisattva's calmness full of friendliness seemed to spread about, and penetrated into the hearts of ferocious animals so that they stopped hurting each other and lived like ascetics.

Once he came down the mountain, now, below, in a cavern of the mountain, he beheld a young tigress that could scarcely move from the place, her strength being exhausted by the labour of whelping. Her sunken eyes and her emaciated belly betokened her hunger, and she was regarding her own offspring as food, who, thirsting for her milk, had come near her, trusting their mother and fearless; but she growled at them, as if they were strange to her, with long harsh roarings.

The Bodhisattva, being unable to bear the tigress suffering from hunger and starvation, decided to offer himself to save the tigress and her cubs.

The poet writes quoting the Bodhisattva: "I set an example to those who long for the good of the world; I encourage the feeble; I rejoice in those who understand the meaning of charity; I stimulate the virtuous; I cause disappointment to the great hosts of Māras, but gladness to those who love the Buddha's virtues; I confound the people who are absorbed in selfishness and subdued by egotism and lust; I give a token of faith to the adherents of the most excellent of vehicles, but I fill with astonishment those who sneer at deeds of charity; I clear the highway to heaven in a manner pleasing to the charitable among men; and finally, that wish I yearned for, 'When may I have the op-

portunity of benefitting others with the offering of my own limbs?’ – I shall accomplish it now, and so acquire complete wisdom.”

Before sacrificing himself, he asked his disciples to find some meat nearby to feed the hungry tigress, but because the situation was critical he could not wait any longer. He jumped from the precipice and lay dead in front of the tigress. As soon as she saw the lifeless body of the bodhisattva, she rushed upon it and started devouring it. Thus did the life of a great Bodhisattva end, demonstrating his matchless generosity and great compassion.

d. *Avadānakalpalatā of Kṣemendra*

In this version, the Bhagavān was staying at Rājagrha in the Bamboo Grove of Kalandaka when the wife of a sea captain named Arthadatta gave birth to twin sons. Her husband died soon afterward, and his wife, Śānā, had great difficulty supporting the boys, Śaṃku and Śanidatta, as they grew. When she had exhausted all their savings, she finally turned to the underworld and had her two sons trained as thieves.

Becoming thieves at a very young age, the two boys managed little by little to steal from everyone in their neighborhood. As they grew older, they extended their range of activities. Skilled in breaking and entering, they were able to rob households throughout the city of a great quantity of riches.

Finally, however, they were caught by a clever pair of watchmen who brought them before the king. King Ajātaśatru decided on their punishment: “Put the mother and her sons in chains and then cut off their hands and feet! Clearly they have done great wrong; they have broken the law and must be killed!” As the three were being led to their death, they were paraded first around the perimeter of the city so that all could see them. The Bhagavān saw them from afar, and, understanding their agony, in his mercy went to the place of ex-

ecution to give them refuge and to save their lives. The king undid their chains and freed them. They then followed the Victorious One and became renunciates. In the course of time, the three of them became Arhats.

When the monks saw the mother and her sons attain such wisdom, they marveled and asked the Buddha about the circumstances behind these happenings. The Buddha replied, “Long ago, these three also took refuge in me. The mother was a fierce tigress who lived in the deep forest. One day, she was close to starvation and was about to eat her two cubs⁵. I was a prince, a Bodhisattva called Karuṇāraṇa⁶. I felt unbearable compassion for the tigress and her cubs and gave my body to the tigress to eat, thus saving them all. The tigress and her cubs are the thieves and their mother in this life. Finally, as a result of my having given my body to the tigress, they have seen the truth.”

IV. THE STORY OF PRINCE MAHĀSATTVA IN PAINTINGS:

Formerly there existed as a prince named Mahāsattva, the son of Mahāratha of Pānavatī, formerly called Pāñcāla. He had three sons. Once these three princes set out for hunting with his followers in a forest [Picture 2]. When they arrived



Picture 2

⁵ SPS gives the number of cubs as five

⁶ SPS mentions the name as Mahāsattva



Picture 3

in the forest they happened to witness a starved tigress about to devour her own cubs [Picture 3].

Prince Mahāsattva, out of his great compassion to the tigress, offered his flesh and blood to her without any hesitation. Thus the hungry tigress and her cubs was saved [Picture 4].



Picture 4



Picture 5

Since the tigress was too weak to eat the prince, Prince Mahāsattva himself cut up his body piece by piece and offered each piece to the tigress to eat [Picture 5]. When the two elder brothers came to know this event they lamented bitterly for the loss of their younger brother [Picture 6].

In the meantime the Queen of Pāñcāla had a bad dream . In the dream she saw her youngest son in the form of a pigeon being devoured by a hawk [Picture 7].



Picture 6



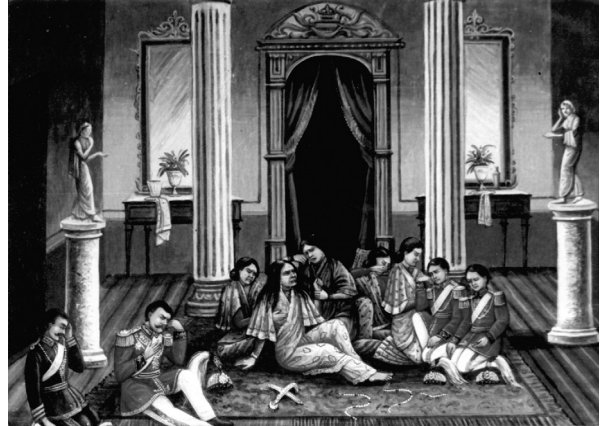
Picture 7

She reported her dream to the king and lamented bitterly. The king ordered his people to investigate if the queen’s dream is true [Picture 8].

The people searched for the three princes in every nook and corner of the city and the forest [Picture 9]. At last, they found the two princes in a forest, lamenting the loss of their youngest brother [Picture 10].



Picture 8



Picture 11



Picture 9



Picture 12



Picture 10

They came back to their palace and lamented bitterly when their family members came to know that Prince Mahāsattva really passed away [Picture 11]. Finally, the King together with his queen and family members performed his death rituals and erected a caitya with his bone relics. This was the end of the story [Picture 12].

VI. CONCLUSION

The Namo Buddha Mountain is considered a sacred and holy place because it was blessed by the Buddha Śākyamuni. The main stūpa on the mountain is a symbol of the great compassion of a Great Being (Skt: Mahāsattva) which can pacify the turmoil of the world and stirs the mind of whoever hears this story.

When Mahāsattva gave his body to the tigress he expressed this altruistic wish: “Through the merit of completely giving my body, may I, in future times for aeons utterly beyond thought, perform the deeds of Buddhas for sentient beings.” It is said that when this wish was made, countless beings, including gods and humans, generated the altruistic intention for supreme and perfect enlightenment. And this is the reason for revealing this stūpa here.