**NAGARJUNA**

## Acharya Nagarjuna Buddhist Monk, Philosopher and Life

**Nāgārjuna** (c. 150 – c. 250 CE) was an Indian [Mahāyāna Buddhist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahayana" \o "Mahayana) thinker, scholar-saint and philosopher. He is widely considered as one of the most important Buddhist philosophers. Furthermore, according to [Jan Westerhoff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Westerhoff), he is also "one of the greatest thinkers in the history of [Asian philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_philosophy)."

Nāgārjuna is widely considered to be the founder of the [madhyamaka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhyamaka" \o "Madhyamaka) (centrism, middle-way) school of [Buddhist philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_philosophy) and a defender of the Mahāyāna movement. His [Mūlamadhyamakakārikā](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C5%ABlamadhyamakak%C4%81rik%C4%81" \o "Mūlamadhyamakakārikā) (Root Verses on Madhyamaka, MMK) is the most important text on the madhyamaka philosophy of [emptiness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9A%C5%ABnyat%C4%81). The MMK inspired a large number of commentaries in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean and Japanese and continues to be studied today.

### **Background**

[India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India) in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE was divided into various states, including the [Kushan Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kushan_Empire) and the [Satavahana Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satavahana_dynasty" \o "Satavahana dynasty). At this point in [Buddhist history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Buddhism), the Buddhist community was already divided into various [Buddhist schools](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schools_of_Buddhism) and had spread throughout India.

At this time, there was already a small and nascent Mahāyāna movement. Mahāyāna ideas were held by a minority of Buddhists in India at the time. As Joseph Walser writes, "Mahāyāna before the fifth century was largely invisible and probably existed only as a minority and largely unrecognized movement within the fold of nikāya Buddhism." By the second century, early [Mahāyāna Sūtras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahayana_sutras" \o "Mahayana sutras) such as the [Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A%E1%B9%A3%E1%B9%ADas%C4%81hasrik%C4%81_Praj%C3%B1%C4%81p%C4%81ramit%C4%81_S%C5%ABtra" \o "Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra) were already circulating among certain Mahāyāna circles.

### **Life**

Very little is reliably known of the life of Nāgārjuna and modern historians do not agree on a specific date (1st to 3rd century CE) or place (multiple places in India suggested) for him. The earliest surviving accounts were written in Chinese and Tibetan centuries after his death and are mostly [hagiographical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagiography) accounts that are historically unverifiable.

Some scholars such as Joseph Walser argue that Nāgārjuna was an advisor to a king of the [Sātavāhana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satavahana_dynasty" \o "Satavahana dynasty) dynasty which ruled the [Deccan Plateau](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deccan_Plateau) in the second century. This is supported by most of the traditional hagiographical sources as well.[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagarjuna#cite_note-11) Archaeological evidence at [Amarāvatī](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amaravati_Stupa" \o "Amaravati Stupa) indicates that if this is true, the king may have been [Yajña Śrī Śātakarṇi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yajna_Sri_Satakarni" \o "Yajna Sri Satakarni) (c. second half of the 2nd century). On the basis of this association, Nāgārjuna is conventionally placed at around 150–250 CE.

Walser thinks that it is most likely that when Nāgārjuna wrote the Ratnavali, he lived in a mixed monastery (with Mahāyānists and non-Mahāyānists) in which Mahāyānists were the minority. The most likely sectarian affiliation of the monastery according to Walser was Purvasailya, Aparasailya, or [Caityaka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caitika) (which were [Mahāsāṃghika](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mah%C4%81s%C4%81%E1%B9%83ghika" \o "Mahāsāṃghika) sub-schools).

He also argues that "it is plausible that he wrote the Ratnavali within a thirty-year period at the end of the second century in the [Andhra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andhra_Pradesh) region around Dhanyakataka (modern-day [Amaravati](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amaravati))."

### **Traditional hagiography**

According to Walser, "the earliest extant legends about Nāgārjuna are compiled into [Kumārajīva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kum%C4%81raj%C4%ABva" \o "Kumārajīva)’s biography of Nāgārjuna, which he translated into Chinese in about 405 c.e." According to this biography, Nāgārjuna was born into a [Brahmin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahmin) family in [Vidarbha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vidarbha) (a region of [Maharashtra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maharashtra)) and later became a Buddhist. The traditional religious hagiographies place Nāgārjuna in various regions of India (Kumārajīva and Candrakirti place him in South India, [Xuanzang](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuanzang" \o "Xuanzang) in south [Kosala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kosala_Kingdom)).

Traditional religious hagiographies credit Nāgārjuna with being associated with the teaching of the [Prajñāpāramitā](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prajnaparamita" \o "Prajnaparamita) sūtras as well as with having revealed these scriptures to the world after they had remained hidden for some time. The sources differ on where this happened and how Nāgārjuna retrieved the sutras. Some sources say he retrieved the sutras from the land of the [nāgas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C4%81ga).

Indeed, Nāgārjuna is often depicted in composite form comprising human and [nāga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C4%81ga" \o "Nāga) characteristics. Nāgas are snake-like supernatural beings of great magical power that feature in [Hindu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_mythology), [Buddhist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_mythology) and [Jain mythology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jainism). Nāgas are found throughout Indian religious culture, and typically signifies an intelligent serpent or dragon, who is responsible for the rains, lakes and other bodies of water. In Buddhism, it is a synonym for a realised [arhat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arhat), or wise person in general.

Traditional sources also claim that Nāgārjuna practiced [aryuvedic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayurveda" \o "Ayurveda) alchemy ([rasayāna](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rasayana" \o "Rasayana)). Kumārajīva's biography for example, has Nāgārjuna making an elixir of invisibility, and Bus-ton, [Taranatha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taranatha" \o "Taranatha) and [Xuanzang](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xuanzang" \o "Xuanzang) all state that he could turn rocks into gold.

Tibetan hagiographies also state that Nāgārjuna studied at Nālanda University. However, according to Walser, this university was not a strong monastic center until about 425. Also, as Walser notes, "Xuanzang and Yijing both spent considerable time at Nālanda and studied Nāgārjuna’s texts there. It is strange that they would have spent so much time there and yet chose not to report any local tales of a man whose works played such an important part in the curriculum."

Some sources ([Bu-ston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buton_Rinchen_Drub) and the other Tibetan historians) claim that in his later years, Nāgārjuna lived on the mountain of Śrīparvata near the city that would later be called [Nāgārjunakoṇḍa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagarjunakonda) ("Hill of Nāgārjuna"). The ruins of Nāgārjunakoṇḍa are located in [Guntur district](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guntur_district), [Andhra Pradesh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andhra_Pradesh). The [Caitika](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caitika" \o "Caitika) and [Bahuśrutīya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bahu%C5%9Brut%C4%ABya" \o "Bahuśrutīya) nikāyas are known to have had [monasteries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vihara) in Nāgārjunakoṇḍa. The archaeological finds at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa have not resulted in any evidence that the site was associated with Nagarjuna. The name "Nāgārjunakoṇḍa" dates from the medieval period, and the 3rd-4th century inscriptions found at the site make it clear that it was known as "Vijayapuri" in the ancient period.

## Works

There exist a number of influential texts attributed to Nāgārjuna though, as there are many [pseudepigrapha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudepigrapha) attributed to him, lively controversy exists over which are his authentic works.

### **Mūlamadhyamakakārikā**

The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā is Nāgārjuna's best-known work. It is "not only a grand commentary on the Buddha's discourse to [Kaccayana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katyayana_(Buddhist)" \o "Katyayana (Buddhist)),[[28]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nagarjuna#cite_note-28) the only discourse cited by name, but also a detailed and careful analysis of most of the important discourses included in the [Nikayas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nik%C4%81ya" \o "Nikāya) and the [Agamas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%80gama_(Buddhism)), especially those of the Atthakavagga of the Sutta-nipata.

Utilizing the Buddha's theory of ["dependent arising" (pratitya-samutpada)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prat%C4%ABtyasamutp%C4%81da), Nagarjuna demonstrated the futility of [...] metaphysical speculations. His method of dealing with such metaphysics is referred to as "middle way" (madhyama pratipad). It is the middle way that avoided the substantialism of the [Sarvastivadins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarvastivada" \o "Sarvastivada) as well as the nominalism of the [Sautrantikas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sautr%C4%81ntika).

In the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, "[A]ll experienced phenomena are [empty (sunya)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9A%C5%ABnyat%C4%81). This did not mean that they are not experienced and, therefore, non-existent; only that they are devoid of [a permanent and eternal substance (svabhava)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svabhava) because, like a dream, they are mere projections of human consciousness. Since these imaginary fictions are experienced, they are not [mere names (prajnapti)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Praj%C3%B1aptiv%C4%81da)."

### **Major attributed works**

According to David Seyfort Ruegg, the Madhyamakasastrastuti attributed to [Candrakirti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chandrakirti) (c. 600 – c. 650) refers to eight texts by Nagarjuna:

the (Madhyamaka)karikas, the Yuktisastika, the Sunyatasaptati, the Vigrahavyavartani, the Vidala (i.e. Vaidalyasutra/Vaidalyaprakarana), the Ratnavali, the Sutrasamuccaya, and Samstutis (Hymns). This list covers not only much less than the grand total of works ascribed to Nagarjuna in the Chinese and Tibetan collections, but it does not even include all such works that Candrakirti has himself cited in his writings.

According to one view, that of Christian Lindtner, the works definitely written by Nāgārjuna are:

* Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā (Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way), available in three [Sanskrit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit) manuscripts and numerous translations.
* Śūnyatāsaptati (Seventy Verses on Emptiness), accompanied by a prose commentary ascribed to Nagarjuna himself.
* Vigrahavyāvartanī (The End of Disputes)
* Vaidalyaprakaraṇa (Pulverizing the Categories), a prose work critiquing the [categories used by Indian Nyaya philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyaya#Sixteen_Pad%C4%81rthas_or_Categories).
* Vyavahārasiddhi (Proof of Convention)
* Yuktiṣāṣṭika (Sixty Verses on Reasoning)
* Catuḥstava (Four Hymns): Lokātīta-stava (Hymn to transcendence), Niraupamya-stava (to the Peerless), Acintya-stava (to the Inconceivable), and Paramārtha-stava (to Ultimate Truth).
* Ratnāvalī (Precious Garland), subtitled (rajaparikatha), a discourse addressed to an Indian king (possibly a [Satavahana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satavahana_dynasty" \o "Satavahana dynasty) monarch).
* Pratītyasamutpādahṝdayakārika (Verses on the heart of [Dependent Arising](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prat%C4%ABtyasamutp%C4%81da)), along with a short commentary (Vyākhyāna).
* [Sūtrasamuccaya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sutrasamuccaya), an anthology of various sutra passages.
* Bodhicittavivaraṇa (Exposition of the [awakening mind](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhicitta))
* Suhṛllekha (Letter to a Good Friend)
* Bodhisaṃbhāraśāstra (Requisites of [awakening](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment_in_Buddhism)), a work the path of the Bodhisattva and [paramitas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C4%81ramit%C4%81), it is quoted by Candrakirti in his commentary on [Aryadeva's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aryadeva) four hundred. Now only extant in Chinese translation ([Taisho](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taish%C5%8D_Tripi%E1%B9%ADaka) 1660).

The Tibetan historian [Buston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buton_Rinchen_Drub) considers the first six to be the main treatises of Nāgārjuna (this is called the "yukti corpus", rigs chogs), while according to [Tāranātha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taranatha" \o "Taranatha) only the first five are the works of Nāgārjuna. TRV Murti considers Ratnaavali, Pratitya Samutpaada Hridaya and Sutra Samuccaya to be works of Nāgārjuna as the first two are quoted profusely by Chandrakirti and the third by [Shantideva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shantideva).

### **Other attributed works**

In addition to works mentioned above, several others are attributed to Nāgārjuna. There is an ongoing, lively controversy over which of those works are authentic. Contemporary research suggest that some these works belong to a significantly later period, either to late 8th or early 9th century CE, and hence can not be authentic works of Nāgārjuna. Several works considered important in [esoteric Buddhism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana) are attributed to Nāgārjuna and his disciples by traditional historians like Tāranātha from 17th century Tibet. These historians try to account for chronological difficulties with various theories. For example, apropagation of later writings via mystical revelation. For a useful summary of this tradition, see Wedemeyer 2007.

According to Ruegg, "three collections of stanzas on the virtues of intelligence and moral conduct ascribed to Nagarjuna are extant in Tibetan translation": Prajñasatakaprakarana, Nitisastra-Jantuposanabindu and Niti-sastra-Prajñadanda.

Other works are extant only in Chinese, one of these is the Shih-erh-men-lun or 'Twelve-topic treatise' (\*Dvadasanikaya or \*Dvadasamukha-sastra); one of the three basic treatises of the Sanlun school ([East Asian Madhyamaka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East_Asian_M%C4%81dhyamaka)).

Lindtner considers that the [Mahāprajñāpāramitāupadeśa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mah%C4%81praj%C3%B1%C4%81p%C4%81ramit%C4%81upade%C5%9Ba" \o "Mahāprajñāpāramitāupadeśa) (Ta-chih-tu-lun, [Taisho](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taish%C5%8D_Tripi%E1%B9%ADaka) 1509, "Commentary on the great [prajñaparamita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prajnaparamita" \o "Prajnaparamita)") which has been influential in Chinese Buddhism, is not a genuine work of Nāgārjuna. This work is also only attested in a Chinese translation by [Kumārajīva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kum%C4%81raj%C4%ABva" \o "Kumārajīva) and is unknown in the Tibetan and Indian traditions. There is much discussion as to whether this is a work of Nāgārjuna, or someone else. [Étienne Lamotte](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89tienne_Lamotte), who translated one third of the work into French, felt that it was the work of a North Indian [bhikṣu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhikkhu" \o "Bhikkhu) of the [Sarvāstivāda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarvastivada" \o "Sarvastivada) school who later became a convert to the [Mahayana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahayana). The Chinese scholar-monk [Yin Shun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yin_Shun) felt that it was the work of a South Indian and that Nāgārjuna was quite possibly the author. These two views are not necessarily in opposition and a South Indian Nāgārjuna could well have studied the northern Sarvāstivāda. Neither of the two felt that it was composed by Kumārajīva, which others have suggested.

Other attributed works include:

* Bhavasamkranti
* Dharmadhatustava (Hymn to the [Dharmadhatu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dharmadhatu)), uncertain authorship, according to Ruegg, it shows traces of later Mahayana and Tantrik thought.
* Salistambakarikas
* A commentary on the [Dashabhumikasutra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Stages_Sutra" \o "Ten Stages Sutra).
* Mahayanavimsika (uncertain authorship as per Ruegg)
* \*Ekaslokasastra ([Taisho](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taish%C5%8D_Tripi%E1%B9%ADaka) 1573)
* \*Isvarakartrtvanirakrtih (A refutation of God/[Isvara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishvara))

## Philosophy

#### **Hinduism**

Nāgārjuna was fully acquainted with the classical Hindu philosophies of [Samkhya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samkhya) and even the [Vaiseshika](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaiseshika). Nāgārjuna assumes a knowledge of the definitions of the sixteen categories as given in the [Nyaya Sutras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyaya_Sutras), the chief text of the Hindu Nyaya school, and wrote a treatise on the pramanas where he reduced the syllogism of five members into one of three. In the Vigrahavyavartani Karika, Nāgārjuna criticises the Nyaya theory of pramanas (means of knowledge)

#### **Mahāyānaism**

Nāgārjuna was conversant with many of the [Śrāvaka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%9Ar%C4%81vaka" \o "Śrāvaka) philosophies and with the Mahāyāna tradition; however, determining Nāgārjuna's affiliation with a specific [nikāya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nik%C4%81ya" \o ") is difficult, considering much of this material has been lost. If the most commonly accepted attribution of texts (that of Christian Lindtner) holds, then he was clearly a Māhayānist, but his philosophy holds assiduously to the Śrāvaka [Tripiṭaka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tripi%E1%B9%ADaka" \o "Tripiṭaka), and while he does make explicit references to Mahāyāna texts, he is always careful to stay within the parameters set out by the Śrāvaka canon.

Nāgārjuna may have arrived at his positions from a desire to achieve a consistent exegesis of the Buddha's doctrine as recorded in the [āgamas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%80gama_(Buddhism)" \o "Āgama (Buddhism)). In the eyes of Nāgārjuna, the Buddha was not merely a forerunner, but the very founder of the Madhyamaka system. David Kalupahana sees Nāgārjuna as a successor to [Moggaliputta-Tissa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moggaliputta-Tissa" \o "Moggaliputta-Tissa) in being a champion of the middle-way and a reviver of the original philosophical ideals of the Buddha.

#### **Pyrrhonism**

Because of the high degree of similarity between Nāgārjuna's philosophy and [Pyrrhonism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyrrhonism), particularly the surviving works of [Sextus Empiricus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sextus_Empiricus), [Thomas McEvilley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_McEvilley) suspects that Nāgārjuna was influenced by Greek Pyrrhonist texts imported into India. [Pyrrho of Elis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyrrho_of_Elis) (c. 360-c. 270 BCE), the founder of this school of [sceptical philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_skepticism), was himself influenced by Indian philosophy. Pyrrho traveled to India with [Alexander the Great](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great)'s army and studied with the [gymnosophists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gymnosophist" \o "). According to [Christopher I. Beckwith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_I._Beckwith), Pyrrho's teachings are based on [Buddhism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism), because the Greek terms adiaphora, astathmēta and anepikrita in the Aristocles Passage resemble the Buddhist [three marks of existence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_marks_of_existence). According to him, the key innovative tenets of Pyrrho's scepticism were only found in Indian philosophy at the time and not in Greece.