

The Naga and Buddhism



Introduction: - This magical being got involved in many of Buddha's quest for his enlightenment. The *Nagas* live **at the bottom of deep rivers, seas and oceans and in the bowels of the earth and they also live in wells and lakes..** They can fly in the air however; they do not do so too often because they will become exposed to attacks from their eternal enemies, the *galon* (*garuda*) birds. They protect meditators and spend wisdom as well as strong magical powers (*theikdi*). They have many peaceful and wrathful forms. They also live in wells, lakes and rivers.

In the pre-Anawratha time native Burmese worshipped Naga; after the introduction of Buddhism, since King Anawratha' time the tradition has long been diminished. However, Burmese with Astrological knowledge still believe in the position of Naga and perform their important task to avoid disaster, even today...

Who are the Nagas?

Above the human plane, is the Realm of the four Deva Kings – known in Burmese as Lokapala Nat Min Gyi's. The Four Great Kings are powerful devas who have the duty of protecting the world. They live in the four directions. King Virupaka is the king over the Nagas.

- a. **King Dhataratha** is the Lord of the *gandhabbas* [gandharva, heavenly musicians]. He lives in the east.
- b. **King Virulhaka** is the Lord of the [earth] devas. He lives in the south.
- c. **King Virupaka** is the Lord of the *nagas* and lives in the west, and
- d. **King Kuvera** is the Lord of the *yakkhas* and lives in the north.

1, Boddhisatta the naga King

There were twenty four Buddhas from whom he received their definite prophecy, in person, that he would become a Buddha in some future time. Rightly so, after twenty four Buddhas in succession, he became the Gotama Buddha.

At the time of Sumana Buddha, our Buddhasatta was the Naga King named “Atula”..

1. Dipankara Buddha - The Bodhisatta was born as the ascetic Sumedha and received the definite proclamation

After a period of one asankheyya there appeared:

2. Kondanna Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a Cakkavatti King named Vijitavi

After a period of one asankheyya there appeared:

3. Mangala Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a Brahmin named Suruci

4. Sumana Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a Naga king named Atula

5. Revata Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a Brahmin named Atideva

6. Sobhita Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a Brahmin named Ajita

After a period of one asankheyya there appeared:

7. Anomadassi Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a leader of demons

8. Paduma Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a lion

9. Narada Buddha - The Bodhisatta was an ascetic

After a period of one asankheyya there appeared:

10. Padumuttara Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a man named Jatila (This period was 100,000 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

After a period of 70,000 Maha kappa there appeared:

11. Sumedha Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a young man named Uttara (This period was 30,000 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

After a period of 12,000 Maha kappa there appeared:

12. Sujata Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a chakkavatti king (This period was 18,000 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

13. Piyadassi Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a young Brahmin named Kassapa

14. Atthadassi Buddha - The Bodhisatta was an ascetic by the name of Susima

15. Dhammadassi Buddha - The Bodhisatta was the God Sakka

16. Siddhatta Buddha - The Bodhisatta was an ascetic by the name of Mangala

17. Tissa Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a king named Sujata who later became an ascetic (This period was 92 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

18. Phussa Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a king by the name of Vijitavi who later became a monk

19. Vipassi Buddha - The Bodhisatta was the Naga king, Atula (This period was 91 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

20. Sikhi Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a king named Arindama (This period was 31 Maha kappas before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

21. Vessabhu Buddha - The Bodhisatta was the king Sudassana who later became a monk (This period was one Maha kappa before the advent of the Gotama Buddha)

22. Kakusandha Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a king named Sema (This period was in the same Maha kappa as that of the Gotama Buddha)

23. Konagamana Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a king named Pabbata who later became a monk (This period was in the same Maha kappa as that of the Gotama Buddha)

24. Kassapa Buddha - The Bodhisatta was a Brahmin named Jotipala (This period was in the same Maha Kappa as that of the Gotama Buddha)

1, The Kala Naga King Story”

Extract from **The Chronicle of Gotama Buddha** – by Mingun Sayadaw

“ After he had partaken of the alms food of Ghana milk-rice offered by *Sujata*, the Bodhisatta made the resolution while holding the gold cup, "If I would attain Buddhahood today, may this gold cup float away upstream; if I would not attain Buddhahood today, let it float downstream with the current'. He then let the gold cup float in the channel of the *Neranjara*. The gold cup cut across the current and went straight to the mid-river and then floated upstream from there with the speed of a fast running horse for about eighty cubits and sank in a whirlpool. On reaching the mansion of *Naga king, Kala*, it hit all the three gold cups used by the three previous Buddhas, namely, *Kakusanda, Konagamana* and *Kassapa* on the day they were to attain Buddhahood, producing the (metallic) sound of 'kili, kili' and came to rest under the said three gold cups.

On hearing the sound, Naga King Kala said: It was only yesterday that a Buddha appeared; today, another Buddha appears." and then he rose uttering words of praise in many verses, (The period of time intervening the appearance of Kassapa Buddha and our Buddha was so long that in the meantime the Great Earth had risen by one *yojana* and three *gavutas*, But as for Kala Naga. it was so very short that he could say of these appearances as happening yesterday and today.

2. Buddha in his Sixth Week

In the sixth week He was meditating under the *Mucalinda* tree when there was a heavy rain. *Mucalinda*, the king of serpents, coiled round the body of the Buddha seven times and held his large hood over the Buddha's head so that He would not get wet.



2. The Story of the Naga King – extract from the The – Maha Vamsa:

“ Now the most compassionate Teacher, the Conqueror, rejoicing in the salvation of the whole world, when dwelling at Jetavana in the fifth year of his buddhahood, saw that a war, caused by a gem-set throne, was like to come to pass between the niigas Mahodara and Cūlodara, uncle and nephew, and their followers; and he, the Sambuddha, on the uposathaday of the dark half of the month Citta, in the early morning, took his sacred alms-bowl and his robes, and, from compassion for the nagas, sought the [Nagadipa](#).

That same naga [Mahodara](#) was then a king, gifted with miraculous power, in a naga-kingdom in the ocean that covered half a thousand yojanas. His younger sister had been given (in marriage) to the naga-king on the [Kannavaddhamana](#) mountain; her son was [Culodara](#). His mother's father had given to his mother a splendid throne of jewels, then the naga had died and therefore this war of nephew with uncle was threatening; and also the nagas of the mountains were armed with miraculous power.

The deva named [Samiddhisumana](#) took a rajayatana-tree standing in Jetavana, his own fair habitation, and, holding it like a parasol over the Conqueror, he, with the Teacher's leave, attended him to that spot where he had formerly dwelt. That very deva had been, in his latest birth, a man in Nagadipa. On the spot where thereafter the rajayatana-tree stood, he saw paccakabuddhas taking their meal. And at the sight his heart was glad and he offered branches to cleanse the almsbowl. Therefore he was reborn in that tree in the pleasant Jetavana-garden, and it (the tree) stood afterwards outside at the side of the gate-rampart. The God of all gods saw (in this) an advantage for that deva, and, for the sake of the good which should spring (there from) for our land, he brought him hither (to Lafika) together with his tree.

Hovering there in mid-air above the battlefield the Master, who drives away (spiritual) darkness, called forth dread darkness over the nagas. Then comforting those who were distressed by terror he once again spread light abroad. When they saw the Blessed One they joyfully did reverence to the Master's feet. Then readied the Vanquisher to them the doctrine that begets concord, and both [nagas] gladly gave up the throne to the Sage.' When the Master, having alighted on the earth, had taken his place on a seat there, and had been refreshed with celestial food and drink by the naga-kings, he, the Lord, established in the (three) refuges and in the moral precepts eighty kotis of snake-spirits, dwellers in the ocean and on the mainland.

The naga-king Maniakkhika of Kalyani, mother's brother to the naga Mahodara, who had come thither to take part in the battle, and who, aforetime, at the Buddha's first coming, having heard the true doctrine preached, had become established in the refuges and in the moral duties, prayed now to the Tathagata: `Great is the compassion that thou hast shown us here, O Master! Hadst thou not appeared we had all been consumed to ashes. May thy compassion yet light also especially on me, O thou who art rich in loving-kindness, in that thou shalt come yet again hither to my dwelling-country, O thou peerless one.' When the Lord had consented by his silence to come thither, he planted the rajayatana-tree on that very spot as a sacred

memorial, and the Lord of the Worlds gave over the rajayatana-tree and the precious throne-seat to the naga-kings to do homage thereto. `In remembrance that I have used these do homage to them, ye naga-kings!

This, well beloved, will bring to pass blessing and happiness for you.' When the Blessed One had uttered this and other exhortation to the nāgas, he, the compassionate savior of the entire world, returned to Jetavana.

The Nags in Burma

This is an excerpt from 'Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism', by Dr. Htin Aung

The Cult of the *Naga* was the pre-Buddhist cult which did not recover from Anawrahta's suppression. At the present day the *Naga* is not worshipped at all, and there remain only faint traces.

The belief still remains to this day, especially when you look at the Burmese Calendar. If one goes into the *Naga's* mouth, disaster will result, and if one goes against the direction of the *Naga's* scales, ill-luck will follow; for example, during the months in which the *Naga's* head is turned towards the east, one must absolutely avoid journeys from due east to due west, and avoid as much as possible journeys from due west to due east.



As has been stated above, the worship of the *Naga* was prevalent in the kingdom of Tagaung. The Burmese *Naga* is similar in many ways to the Indian *Naga* and the Chinese Dragon, but it is difficult to say whether the worship of the *Naga* was originally a native cult or borrowed from the neighboring regions of Manipur and Yunnan.

The Burmese *Naga* is dangerous when angered, and its mere frown turns the human being into ashes. Even when not angry its breath can blind a human being as it is so hot. It can assume human form and, on the whole, it is a benevolent being. The Burmese believe that *Nagas* live **at the bottom of deep rivers, seas and oceans and in the bowels of the earth**. Although they can fly in the air they do not do so too often because they will become exposed to attacks from their eternal enemies, the *galon* (*garuda*) birds.

Naga goddesses and gods are mystical serpent beings. They are always associated with having strong magical powers, a vast esoteric knowledge and a capricious character, which can quickly change from friendly and helpful to angry and malicious. **As the keepers of the treasures of the water element (magical gems and precious stones)** they are often portrayed holding a gem in their hands, being

adorned with jewels or wearing a gem in their crown. Those precious stones not just grant them immortality but also the ability to magically emanate themselves into all kind of forms bodies. Possessing those magical gems (crystallized wisdom-power) exposes them to many enemies, who like to steal this huge source of power. The archetypal arch-fiends are the mythological birds, called Garuda's. It is this fight between **Nagas** and **Garuda**'s which, according to many mythologies, is the essential force or polarity which creates the world of existence.

Summary

Buddha being the teacher of the three Realms, Human, Devas and Brahmas, many of the Dhammapada stories describe several involvement of Nagas. The popular depiction of the Nagas in Burma is the deity named Naga Devi, Nag Mae Daw. Many worship her for mundane accrue mundane benefit. In the Mahayana tradition, this Goddess is portraying in Many Mahayana Chinese temple as – Goddess Mat Tsu. In fact she is the patron Saint of the Island of Taiwan. Most of the temples dedicated to her are located with the temple front facing the sea.

Both the Burmese and Chinese in Burma do worship the *Naga Mae Daw* or *Mat Tsu* for different reasons. Many believe that for those who make their wishes to the Goddess for mundane reasons are being well rewarded. It must be noted that every act must be done with Faith (*Sadha*) to get reward.



Goddess Mat Tsu photo taken from Singapore Chinese Temple.

The Naga Mae Daw Photo taken at Bo Min Gaung Cetiya at Bawdigone Aung Min Gaung Cedi.

