

2. The 16th Lineage Holders of the Nagarjuna School

In the Nagarjuna school, particularly in the context of the Mahāmudrā and Madhyamaka traditions as preserved in the Karma Kamtshang lineage, the Sixteen Lineage Holders are those who successively transmitted the profound teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha through Nagarjuna and his successors.

These sixteen masters represent the unbroken transmission of the Mādhyamika and Mahāmudrā traditions, which united within the Karma Kamtshang lineage through Nagarjuna and, later, the Indian and Tibetan mahāsiddhas.

1. Buddha Śākyamuni

• The last historical Buddha, who first taught the Dharma, including the Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) teachings, which later became the foundation of the Mādhyamika view.

2. Gyalpo Nirbhadra

• A great royal patron and disciple of the Buddha. Some sources identify him with King Ajātaśatru, who later supported the lineage of Nāgārjuna.

3. Nāgārjuna

• Principal founder of the Mādhyamika school and author of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way).

• He also received esoteric transmissions and is connected to the tantric tradition, particularly the Guhyasamāja Tantra. • His distinction between ultimate truth (paramārtha-satya) and conventional truth (saṃvṛti-satya) remains the basis of the philosophy of Mahāmudrā.

4. Āryadeva

• Nāgārjuna's principal disciple, famous for the Catuḥśataka (The Four Hundred Verses), which expounds Mādhyamika philosophy and refutes non-Buddhist views.

• He played a crucial role in preserving Nāgārjuna's teachings and spreading Madhyamaka in India.

5. Rāhulabhadra

• Poet and scholar, famous for his Prajñāpāramitā Stotra, a hymn to the Perfection of Wisdom.

• He emphasized the inseparability of wisdom (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā).

6. Vajrasiddhi

• He emphasized the inseparability of prajñā and karuṇā.

• Tantric master who contributed to the integration of Madhyamaka thought into Vajrayāna practices.

7. Nāgabodhi

• Disciple of Nāgārjuna, known for his role in transmitting Mādhyamika and Vajrayāna to later generations.

8. Śāntideva

• Author of the Bodhicaryāvatāra (The March to Awakening), a central text of Tibetan Buddhism.

• He emphasized the union of emptiness and bodhicitta, profoundly influencing the practice of Mahāmudrā.

9. Śāntarakṣita

• A key figure in the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet under King Trisong Detsen.

• Established a Yogācāra–Mādhyamaka synthesis, combining Mādhyamika with aspects of Yogācāra philosophy.

10. Kamalaśīla

- A disciple of Śāntarakṣita and author of the *Bhāvanākrama* (Stages of Meditation), emphasizing gradual meditative development.
- He played a key role in the debate against the Chinese Heshang school at Samye, advocating a gradual path rather than sudden awakening.

11. Paṇḍita Smṛtijñāna

- Known for translating numerous Madhyamaka texts into Tibetan.

12. Jñānagarbha

- Refined the Yogācāra–Mādhyamaka synthesis.

13. Haribhadra

- Great commentator on the *Prajñāpāramitā* and advocate of the gradual path.

14. Ratnākaraśānti

- Integrated Madhyamaka into Vajrayāna, influencing later interpretations of Mahāmudrā.

15. Abhayākaragupta

- Scholar-practitioner who emphasized the union of study, meditation, and conduct.

16. Atīśa Dīpaṅkara

- The master who revived and refined Buddhism in Tibet.
- His Lamrim (Stages of the Path) teachings laid the foundation for a structured course of Dharma study in Tibet. Relevance to the Karma Kamtshang Lineage
- The Nāgārjuna school profoundly influenced the Mahāmudrā tradition through its emphasis on emptiness (*śūnyatā*).
- Mahāmudrā integrates Nāgārjuna's view of ultimate reality—beyond all conceptual elaboration (*prapañca*)—with direct yogic realization.
- Transmission through Atīśa also connected this tradition to the Kadampa teachings, which later influenced the Karma Kagyu approach, articulating gradual and direct meditation paths. This unbroken lineage has preserved both the philosophical rigor of Mādhyamaka and the experiential depth of Mahāmudrā, forming a unique synthesis within Tibetan Buddhism.