

PART TWO:

**A Selective Abridgement of
*THE BODHISAMBHĀRA ŚĀSTRA COMMENTARY***

**Composed by the Early Indian Bhikshu Vaṣitva
(circa 300–500 CE?)**

With Explanatory Notes by the Translator

113 – Act Straightaway in Conformity with Pronouncements, Thus Inspiring Faith

One should accord with the words he speaks,
Following them straightaway with concordant actions.
If one acts immediately in accordance with his words,
Others will be inclined then to develop faith.

AV The effect of immediately behaving in accordance with one’s words is that others will consequently be inclined to promptly believe and accept whichever teachings are offered.

114 – Be Protective of Dharma, Observant of Neglect, and Inclined to Adorn Stupas

One should support and protect the Dharma
And should discover any instances of neglect,
Even going so far as to build canopies graced by gold and jewels
Spreading over and covering the *caityas*.

AV “One should be supportive and protective of this Dharma. Where there may be neglectful beings who have turned their backs on the Dharma, one should adopt skillful means for them as well, means whereby one might be made aware of such cases and then influence them to turn back toward the Dharma.”

This support and protection should extends to sites occupied by *caityas* commemorating the Tathāgata where one may use all sorts of precious adornments to grace a net-like canopy spreading out over it. Such actions are causes for completeness and perfection in one’s future buddha body’s major and minor marks.

TN A *caitya* is a memorial monument, mound, or stupa commemorating a holy place or person. Sometimes they are located where the remains of a realized being were cremated (as with the cremation stupa close to Kusinigar) and sometimes they are located where the relics and ashes are currently preserved and made the focus of commemorative reverence.

When he mentions “neglectful beings who have turned their back on the Dharma,” Bhikshu Vaśitva is perhaps referring to monastics occupying temple or stupa facilities, but not seeing to their maintenance in a manner appropriately respectful to and protective of Dharma. Under such a circumstance, a follower of the Bodhisattva Path might look into the matter and see what if anything might be done to offer support in restoration of the facilities and perhaps

even, through the fourth of the four means of attraction (“joint endeavors”), he might simultaneously buoy renewed enthusiasm for more attentive cultivation of the Path.

115 – Facilitate Marriages, Present the Bride, Praise the Buddha, and Give Mālās

For those wishing to obtain a maiden mate,
See to her adornment and assist in her presentation.
Speak to the parties about the qualities of the Buddha
And then give prayer beads gleaming in varying hues.

AV Through the giving involved in formalizing a marriage, one produces the future effect of gaining whatever one dearly seeks.

Through praising the qualities of the Buddha with lovely and sublime phrasings pleasing to the minds of the couple and their guests, one gains in future lives a voice pure in all its aspects.

Through presenting gleaming prayer beads made from fine stones pleasing the mind’s eye, one contributes to the future effect of having a buddha body replete with all of the fine subsidiary physical characteristics.

116 – Create Buddha Images and Cultivate the Six Dharmas of Community Harmony

Create images of the Buddha
Sitting upright atop supremely fine lotus blossoms
And cultivate common delight and happiness
Through adherence to the six dharmas of community harmony.

AV Through making fine buddha images, one gains the future ability to generate transformation bodies and the future ability to gain the body of a buddha.

Through adherence to the six dharmas of harmony and respectfulness of monastics united through common observance of *brahmacarya* (strict celibacy), one enables future acquisition of a retinue invulnerable to ruin by non-Buddhist traditions.

TN “The six dharmas of harmony and respectfulness” pertain to six identities in the monastic community united through common observance of *brahmacarya*:

- 1) Kindness in physical karma.
- 2) Kindness in verbal karma.
- 3) Kindness in mental karma.

- 4) Common and equal sharing of offerings contributed to the monastic community by the laity.
- 5) Common and identical monastic moral-code adherence as defined by the Buddha.
- 6) Common and identical adherence to right view as defined by the Buddha.

Although the Buddha clearly formulated this set of bases for harmony and mutual respect with the monastic community in mind, there is no reason that an analogue version of the same six dhar-mas could not serve as a useful community-unity reference for lay Buddhists, this by simply stipulating the five lay precepts or the ten good karmic deeds as the operative standard for what is agreed to constitute basic moral excellence.

(The five precepts proscribe killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants, whereas the ten good karmic deeds involve abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, harsh speech, divisive speech, frivolous or lewd speech, covetousness, hatefulness, and wrong views.)

117 – Make Offerings to All and Never Slander the Buddha or Teachers of Dharma

Of those who may be given offerings, none are not given offerings.
 Even for the sake of preserving one's life, one still does not slander
 The Dharma spoken by the Buddha
 Or the person who expounds the Dharma.

AV There should be representatives able to act as stewards in looking after offerings, namely the *upādhyāyas* or the *ācāryas*, the parents, elder brothers, or others of this sort. As for “none not given offerings,” there are none to whom one does not show reverence. One scrupulously avoids slander, slighting, or deception directed toward the Dharma or those who expound it, this so as to preserve one's own requisites for bodhi.

TN The phrase “those who may be given offerings” may seem confusing if we assume that this option is open to anyone. However, in a community of monks observing the strictest traditions, none will personally even touch money or other valuables (such as gold or silver). In such a situation, an offering to the community at large might only properly be accepted on its behalf by the lay attendant of a senior monastic holding a position of responsibility in the

community (such as attendants of the *upādhyāyas* or *ācāryas* mentioned by Bhikshu Vaśitva).

In the case of an offering intended to benefit an individual monk not living in community, but rather living in a hermitage or other solitary situation, the offering might have to be made to a trusted lay attendant, or in the absence of same, might have to be made to close relatives such as parents or an elder brother who could be trusted to use it in benefiting the monastic recipient.

As for the extreme scrupulousness regarding avoiding slander of the Dharma or one who expounds Dharma (as recommended by Nāgārjuna), and regarding avoiding merely slighting or deceiving one who speaks Dharma (as warned against by Bhikshu Vaśitva), one should realize that such karma not only threatens the goodness imbuing one's own requisites for bodhi, it also establishes causes for future-life difficulty in ever being able to encounter the monastic community or the Dharma again.

118 – Donate to Teaching Masters and Their Stupas, See to Preservation of Scripture

Gold and jewels are distributed among teaching masters
 And also among the *caityas* of teaching masters.
 If there are those who forget what is to be recited,
 One assists their remembrance, enabling them to stay free of error.

AV Such assets are distributed to the teaching masters and to the *caityas* commemorating teaching masters.

The bodhisattva possesses a *samādhi* known as “manifesting in the direct presence of the Buddhas” which is cultivated for life-after-life hearing and retention of Dharma. These bodhisattvas refresh the memories of those preserving the teachings by recitation. Through this, they gain future endowment with the ability to never forget the mind resolved on bodhi and the ability to have powerful memory.

TN There is no inherent implication in either Nāgārjuna's *śloka* or Bhikshu Vaśitva's commentary that those specializing in teaching Dharma would have any personal interest or need to possess “gold and jewels.” On the contrary, they are most likely to be most well aware of the karmic dangers involved in their misuse and most likely to understand their correct use in serving the interests of the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Monastic Sangha.

As for the passage devoted to faithful remembrance of scriptures, it may be helpful to remember that important scriptures were traditionally committed to memory by monastics, especially by those who specialized in teaching the Dharma. This was done perhaps primarily because the teachings were most effectively internalized in this way, but also because palm-leaf copies were comparatively rare, fragile, and prone to rapid destruction by white ants.

Bhikshu Vaśitva is likely referring here to the samādhis of the sixth bodhisattva ground, the ground known as “the ground of present manifestation” (*abhimukha-bhūmi*).

119 – Let Reflection Precede Action; Have no Faith in Non-Buddhists, Gods, or Spirits

When one has not yet reflected on the right course of action,
 One must not be impulsive and must not simply emulate others.
 As for the non-Buddhists, gods, dragons, and spirits,
 One must not invest one's faith in any of them.

AV Physical, verbal, or mental actions not preceded by reflection and undertaken through impetuosity or imitation occasion later regret. Avoid developing any faith in non-Buddhist traditions, deities, dragons (*nāgas*), *yakṣas*, *gandharvas* and such.

TN Nāgārjuna is not insisting that one should fail to believe in the existence of “gods, dragons (*nāgas*), and spirits.” On the contrary, those classes of entities *do* exist and often enough *do* have enough in the way of low-grade powers to seriously interfere with a practitioner's mental clarity, especially in cases where one has voluntarily entered into some sort of psycho-spiritual relationship with them.

What all of these entities have in common is a complete inability to extricate their followers from the endless karma-bound sufferings of cyclic existence. Hence Nāgārjuna's admonition: “One must not invest one's faith in any of them.”

As regards Bhikshu Vaśitva's advice to avoid nominally “spiritual” activities not preceded by careful reflection and not clearly based directly on the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha admonished the monastic community to avoid not only those actions which he had specifically forbidden in the moral codes, but also to avoid those actions which were semblances of what was specifically forbidden. Where we find no clear basis in classic Southern Tradition or Mahāyāna teachings for certain practices which may have

become popular after the first one thousand years post-nirvāṇa, a certain amount of circumspection is well justified lest one fall into practices which are essentially non-Buddhist and hence not really conducive to liberation at all. An obvious example would be propitiation of ghosts, wrathful deities, and so forth. There are of course many other examples of which the serious Dharma student will already be well aware.

120 – Make the Mind Penetratingly Sharp Like Vajra and as Immovable as a Mountain

One's mind should be like vajra,
Able to penetrate all dharmas.
One's mind should also be like a mountain,
Remaining unmoved in any circumstance.

AV Through the power of wisdom, one's mind penetratingly understands all worldly and world-transcending dharmas in accordance with their nature and reality. Being like a mountain, it cannot be moved by any of the eight worldly dharmas.

TN The eight worldly dharmas are: gain and loss; disgrace and esteem; praise and blame; suffering and happiness.

121 – Delight in Transcendent Words, Abandon Worldly Talk, Inspire Merit in Others

Delight in world-transcending discourse
And do not take pleasure in worldly words.
Personally adopt all manner of meritorious qualities.
One should then influence others to adopt them as well.

AV One should find delight in discourse devoted to the Three Jewels, to the six perfections, or to the grounds of the bodhisattvas, *śrāvakas*, and pratyekabuddhas, this while finding no pleasure in discourse devoted to worldly topics or tending to increase worldliness, discourse such as relates to desire, hatred, and delusion.

One should adopt qualities such as inhere in the moral precepts, the *dhūta* (ascetic) practices, or other praiseworthy dharmas, this while influencing others to adopt them as well.

TN Bhikshu Vaśitva mentions the *dhūta* practices. These are relatively ascetic forms of Dharma practice requiring intense dedication to uphold. Examples include: abiding in a charnel field; living

in solitude in a hermitage; living out in the open; living beneath a tree, usually only for a fixed amount of time after one must move to another tree; eating but one meal each day, consuming it before noon; eating that one meal at a single sitting; eating a fixed amount in that one meal; having eaten the single meal before noon, not drinking beverages other than water after noon; wearing only robes made of cast-off rags; only wearing the three robes; only consuming alms-round food; and only sitting, never lying down.

The difference between the Buddhist set of twelve *dhūta* practices and the asceticism of the non-Buddhists is that the *dhūta* practices all actually benefit some aspect or another of one's spiritual practice, bringing about more rapid progress in the development of essential spiritual qualities. This sets them apart from useless forms of asceticism found in non-Buddhist traditions, practices such as: abiding on a bed of nails; wandering around naked, covered with ashes; standing on one leg; never cutting one's hair; and attempting to wash away one's evil karma simply by washing in the Ganges River.

122 – Cultivate Five Liberation Bases, Ten Impurity Reflections, Eight Realizations

Cultivate the five bases of liberation.

Cultivate the ten reflections on impurity.

The eight realizations of great men

Should also be the focus of analytic contemplation and cultivation.

AV The “five bases of liberation” are: listening to Dharma explained by others; explaining Dharma for others; reciting the Dharma from memory; analytic contemplation of Dharma; grasping specific aspects of any given meditative absorption.

The “ten reflections on impurity” counteract lust and involve reflection on: the distended corpse; the corpse blue from stagnant blood; the purulent, rotting corpse; the oozing corpse; the gnawed corpse; the dismembered corpse; the scattered corpse; the blood-smearred corpse; the mangled corpse; the skeletal corpse.

The “eight realizations of great men” stipulate that the following are genuine Dharma and their opposites are not: but little desire; being easily satisfied; abiding at a distance from the hustle-and-bustle; vigor; mindfulness of Dharma; entering meditative absorption; wisdom; not finding enjoyment in frivolous discourse. Of these one adopts the salutary and does away with their opposites.

IN Bhikshu Vaśitva's list of the ten reflections on the impure records an only slightly different list from the commonly-encountered list of nine reflections deriving from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. His list does not include the burned corpse of the list of nine, and adds the "oozing" corpse and "dismembered" corpse not in the list of nine. For more on this from Nāgārjuna himself, see my translation of his discussion of this practice entitled *Nāgārjuna on the Nine Reflections*.

Bhikshu Vaśitva's list of the eight realizations of great men is standard, but differs slightly from the Mahāyāna sutra of that name translated in the middle of the Second Century by Tripiṭaka Master An Shigao (T17.0779.715b). Bhikshu Vaśitva's list accords with the version recorded by Nāgārjuna in his treatise on the ten bodhisattva grounds (T26.1521.92c) and with the *Āgamas* (T01.0001.55c).

The scripture translated by An Shigao describing eight realizations of great men is more profound in terms of the breadth and depth of topics mentioned and in its descriptiveness of the Path. Topics it mentions upon which the *Āgama* list is silent are: impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and non-self; the practice of giving; equal regard for friends and adversaries; absence of grudge-bearing thought; non-hatred of evil-doers; renunciation of cyclic existence; and generation of the altruistic Mahāyāna mind to realize buddhahood, relieve the sufferings of beings, take on the sufferings of beings, and establish beings in happiness. This sutra is so extremely short, I simply translate it here as the easiest way to illustrate the ways in which it is different:

The Sutra on the Eight Realizations of Great Men

(T17.0779.715b)

Translated by the Parthian Tripiṭaka Master An Shigao (100?–170 CE)

This was spoken for the sake of the disciples of the Buddha. They were constant in their ultimately sincere recitation and remembrance, both day and night, of the eight realizations of great men.

First, one realizes:

That the world is impermanent;

That one's country is a fragile entity;

That the four great elements are freighted with suffering and are themselves empty;

That the five aggregates are devoid of self, that they are subject to change and transformation through production and destruction, and that they are empty, false, and devoid of any [inherently-existent subjective] agent.

That the mind is a source of evil and that one's physical form is like a thicket in which karmic offenses are created.

One carries on analytic contemplation in accordance with these factors and gradually abandons cyclic births and deaths.

Second, one realizes that an abundance of desire is the basis of suffering, that the laboriousness and weariness arising in the sphere of cyclic births and deaths arises from desire, and that it is in less desire and realization of the unconditioned that the body and mind experience sovereign independence.

Third, one realizes that the mind is insatiable and prone to ever greater seeking and to the proliferation of the evils associated with karmic offenses. The bodhisattva is not this way. He is constantly mindful in knowing when enough is enough. He establishes himself in circumstances akin to poverty, and guards [the practices which accord with] the Path, realizing that it is wisdom alone which constitutes the Path.

Fourth, one realizes that indolence is associated with falling [into unfortunate circumstances]. Thus one is constant in the practice of vigor and the destruction of the evils associated with the afflictions. One conquers the four demons [of the four great elements] and escapes from the prison of the aggregates and sense realms.

Fifth, one realizes the nature of delusion and cyclic births and deaths. The bodhisattva remains constantly mindful of this and, being broad-ranging in his studies, possesses much learning. He increases his wisdom, perfects eloquence, provides transformative teaching to everyone, and thereby brings great happiness to all.

Sixth, one realizes that poverty, suffering, and an abundance of adversaries makes for the sudden and tragic development of conditions associated with evil. Thus the bodhisattva practices giving and is equally mindful of both adversaries and close relations. He does not hold in mind evils from long ago, and does not detest people who are evil.

Seventh, one realizes the faults and disastrousness associated with the five desires. Even though one may still be a layperson, he does not allow himself to become defiled by worldly pleasures. He bears in mind those "vessels of Dharma" possessing the three

robes and the bowl. He becomes determined to leave behind the home life and to guard [the practice of] the Path in pristine purity. Thus he becomes lofty and far-reaching in the brahman conduct (celibacy, etc.) and acts out of kindness and compassion for everyone.

Eighth, one realizes that cyclic births and deaths are as if ablaze and are connected with countless sufferings and afflictions. Thus one generates the mind associated with the Mahāyāna resolved to rescue everyone. He vows to substitute for beings in the taking on of their incalculably many sufferings and vows to cause all beings to develop the most ultimate form of great happiness.

Eight matters such as these are realized by all buddhas and bodhisattvas, those who are great men. They are vigorous in the practice of the Path and are imbued with kindness and compassion as they cultivate wisdom. They go aboard the ship of the Dharma body and thereby arrive at the shore of nirvāṇa. They then repeatedly return to the sphere of cyclic birth and death to bring about the liberation of beings.

They resort to the above eight matters in their instruction and guidance of everyone. Thus they influence beings to awaken to the sufferings of cyclic birth and death, influence them to abandon the five desires, and influence them to cultivate the mind's path of the Āryas.

If a disciple of the Buddha recites these eight topics, he thereby extinguishes countless karmic transgressions and advances along toward bodhi. He will swiftly ascend to the right enlightenment, thus eternally cutting off cyclic births and deaths and abiding forever in happiness.

End of The Sutra on the Eight Realizations of Great Men

123 – Cultivate Purification in the Five Types of Spiritual Abilities

The heavenly ear, the heavenly eye,
The bases of spiritual powers, the cognition of others' thoughts,
And the cognition of past lives and abodes—
One should cultivate purification of these five spiritual abilities.

AV (Bhikshu Vaśitva simply restates the *śloka*'s obvious surface meaning and then introduces the ensuing text with the question: "How does one go about cultivating them?")

IN These powers may be realized as a consequence of past-life spiritual cultivation or as a consequence of present-life path practices such as *dhyāna* meditation. Such “powers” are not, in and of themselves, particularly desirable or useful unless counterbalanced by wisdom, this because of the inherent karmic hazards to both self and others in their misuse.

These dangers make cultivation and realization of Mahāyāna altruistic motivation (*bodhicitta*) and the four immeasurables more urgent. Why? They help insure the constant presence of that correct motivation which always bears in mind the spiritual welfare of others. If one *does* gain adequately counter-balancing wisdom together with well-developed integration of the four immeasurables, one may then skillfully use such powers in teaching. This is why Nāgārjuna makes the four immeasurables a primary topic in the very next *śloka*.

The cognition of another’s thoughts, and the cognition of another’s past lives are probably the two most useful of these spiritual “skills” in teaching others. This is because the knowledge which they allow one to access is especially helpful in the clear diagnosis of another’s karmic circumstances. With the ability to clearly observe past lives and present thought-streams, one becomes better able to select the precisely appropriate teachings well tailored to the karmic needs of any given Dharma student.

124 – The Four Bases Are Their Root; the Four Immeasurables Govern Them

The four bases of spiritual powers comprise their root.

They are zeal, vigor, mental focus, and contemplative reflection.

The four immeasurables govern them.

They are kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

AV As cultivation of the four immeasurables deepens, the four *dhyānas* are realized in sequence along with physical and mental pliancy (*praśrabhi*), thus enabling access to the path of the super-knowledges (*abhijñā*). One then generates the bases of the spiritual powers (*rddhi pāda*), namely: “zeal” (*chanda*); “vigor” (*vīrya*); “[focused] thought” (*citta*); and contemplative reflection (*mīmāṃsā*).

The minds of those bodhisattvas abide in such sovereign mastery of these matters that, in all situations, they pursue their activities just as readily as wind is able to blows along freely through open space.

After those bodhisattvas have realized the four immeasurable minds and the four dhyānas, they develop the heavenly eye to an extent that its power becomes uniquely superior to that possessed by gods, dragons, *yakṣas*, *śrāvakas* or pratyekabuddhas. As they develop it, it becomes superior in terms of purity, illumination, primacy, and distinctiveness. It is unimpeded in its ability to observe all aspects of the world, whether coarse or subtle, far or near.

So too, they develop the heavenly ear's ability to hear the sounds of the gods, the humans, and the animals. So too, they develop the ability to have unbounded recall of [both their own and others'] previous existences. So too, they develop the ability to know the thoughts and motivations of others with a refinement capable of distinguishing countless variations. So too, they develop spiritual power so consummately that they are able to subdue whomever must be subdued.

TN Although Bhikshu Vaśitva implicitly describes how the generation of powers through cultivation of the four bases of spiritual powers flows forth from the four immeasurables, he does not really comment directly on Nāgārjuna's declaration that the four immeasurables (*apramāṇacitta*) "govern" the practices and spiritual powers mentioned immediately above. Nāgārjuna's intent in making the statement is worthy of our curiosity and warrants exploration.

The rationale for Nāgārjuna's statement regarding the "governance" function of the four immeasurables may be in large measure deduced simply through recalling the uses of the four immeasurables (For more on this, see my translation of *Nāgārjuna on the Four Immeasurable Minds*):

Kindness (*maitrī*) nurtures an affectionate mindfulness of beings, counters the development of hatred toward particularly unsavory classes of beings, and has as its motivation the desire to provide beings with happiness and security.

Compassion (*karuṇā*) causes one to bear in mind the physical and mental sufferings of beings, counters the development of any tendency to want to harm beings coursing in evil, and has as its motivation the wish to relieve suffering.

Sympathetic joy (*muditā*) nurtures a concordant celebration in the successes of beings, counters any tendency toward petty jealousies, and has as its motivation to cause beings to graduate from the mere experience of happiness to the ability to experience joyfulness.

Equanimity (*upekṣā*) allows one to relinquish any attachment to the goals involved in the first three of the four immeasurables even as one refuses to forsake the welfare of beings. The consequence of cultivating equanimity is an ability to abide in a state devoid of either aversion or affection. This is to a certain degree essential to a bodhisattva's ability to course on in the infinitely long practice of the Bodhisattva Path without succumbing to disappointment over the seeming futility of wishing to bestow happiness on all beings, to relieve the suffering of all beings, and to bring them all to a state of abundant joyfulness.

Finally, given the above, it should be obvious how the four immeasurables would counter any tendency toward arrogant misapplication of powers. It is in these senses then that one can understand Nāgārjuna's statement that the four immeasurables "govern" the spiritual powers.

125 – Regard Elements as Snakes, Senses as Empty Village, Aggregates as Assassins

The four elements are like poisonous serpents.

The six sense faculties are like an empty village.

The five aggregates are like assassins.

One should contemplate them in this way.

AV In spite of being guarded and carefully raised, the four elements of "earth" and such nonetheless move along precipitously [through disease, aging, and death]. Because they show no gratitude, can't be relied upon, and can't be trusted, they should be contemplated as like poisonous snakes.

Because they are devoid of any subjective agent and are unrelated to any self or possessions of a self, the sense faculties of the eye and so forth should be contemplated as like an empty village frequented by a band of six [sense-object] insurgents.

Because the five aggregates manifest as unitary phenomena through which one suffers destruction and punishment, one should contemplate them as like assassins.

TN Ārya Nāgārjuna narrates this scripture-based analogy more completely in his *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa* (T25.1509.145b9–26). I quote it below from my translation of *Nāgārjuna on the Six Perfections*:

In the *Buddha Speaks the Analogy of the Poisonous Snakes Sutra*, there once was a man who had offended the King. The King ordered that he be required to carry around a basket and look after it. Inside the basket there were four poisonous snakes. The King ordered the criminal to look after them and raise them.

This man thought to himself, "It's a difficult thing to have to draw close to four snakes. If one grows close to them, they bring harm to a person. I could not raise even one of them, how much the less could I do that for four of them." And so he cast aside the basket and ran away.

The King ordered five men carrying knives to chase after him. There was yet another man who tried to persuade him to obey. [This other man] had it in mind to bring him harm and so said to him, "Just raise them in a sensible fashion. There will be no suffering in that." But the man became wise to this and so ran off, fleeing for his life. When he came to an empty village there was a good man who assisted him by telling him, "Although this village is empty, it is a place that is frequented by thieves. If you now take up residence here you will certainly be harmed by the thieves. Be careful. Don't dwell here."

At this point he took off again and next arrived at a great river. On the other side of the river there was a different country. That country was a peaceful, blissful, and easeful place. It was a pure place devoid of any form of calamity or adversity. Then he gathered together a mass of reeds and branches and bound them into the form of a raft. He moved it along with his hands and feet. He exerted all of his strength in seeking to make a crossing. When he had reached the other shore, he was at peace, happy, and free of distress.

The King represents the demon king. The basket represents the human body. The four poisonous snakes represent the four great elements. The five knife-wielding assassins represent the five aggregates. The man of fine speech but evil mind represents defiled attachment. The empty village represents the six sense faculties. The thieves represent the six sense objects. The one man who took pity on him and instructed him represents the good [spiritual] teacher. The great river represents love. The raft represents the eightfold right path. The hands and feet earnestly applied to making a crossing represent vigor. This shore represents this world. The far shore represents nirvāṇa. The man who crossed over represents the arhat who has put an end to outflows. This is the same in the Dharma of the bodhisattva.

Those unfamiliar with the idea of “the four elements” of earth, water, fire, and air may find them conceptually confusing when they are stood alongside the western scientific “elements” most of us know from studying chemistry and physics. In fact, the concept is quite simple and easy to understand in scientific terms, as follows: The “four elements” of Indian Buddhist thought simply refer to the four elemental phases within which all manifest phenomena may be subsumed.

The four elements are not actually inherently-existent “fixed” categories reflecting an irreducible chemical nature as per the western scientific concept of “elements.” In fact, it is common for the elements of western science to manifest, depending upon their temperature, as any of these four elemental phases referred to by Buddhists: as “earth” (i.e. “solidity,” when at lower relative temperatures), as “water” (i.e. “liquidity,” when heated to a relatively higher temperature), as “fire” (during combustion), and as “air” (i.e. “vaporosity,” when forced by heat to enter a gaseous state).

Understanding this relationship between the two concepts of “elements” should make the nature of the Buddha’s “four elements” obvious and conceptually agreeable, both as valid categories of epistemological observation and as important didactic concepts assisting understanding of the Path.

Now, having explored the concept of the four primary elements, it is worth noting that Nāgārjuna makes a point of utterly demolishing the idea that they might enjoy any degree of ultimate reality. An exemplary case may be found in the first chapter (*ślokas* 83–90) of the *Ratnāvalī*. See under separate cover my complete translation of that treatise’s earliest extant version (approximately 550 CE, via Tripiṭaka Master Paramārtha).

It is precisely the mutability of the four elemental phases described by the Buddha which make them every bit as dangerous as carrying around a basket of venomous snakes which may bite and kill one at any time.

126 – Esteem Dharma and Its Teachers, Eschew Stinginess, Listen Closely to Dharma

Esteem the Dharma and the masters of Dharma

And also relinquish any stinginess with the Dharma.

The instructing masters must not be tight-fisted or secretive

And those listening must not be mentally scattered or confused.

AV There are four dharmas here capable of generating great wisdom. They are stating in essence that one must not entertain incorrect motivations.

127 – Speak Dharma, Free of Arrogance or Hopes, Motivated Solely by Compassion

Free of arrogance and free of hopes,
 Motivated solely by thoughts of compassion and pity,
 With reverent and respectful mind,
 Expound the Dharma for the community.

AV There are four additional signs here of great wisdom which the bodhisattva should adopt:

- 1) Abandonment of self-elevation and slighting of others through freedom from arrogance.
- 2) Renunciation of any concern for offerings, reverence, or reputation through being free of any hopes.
- 3) Feeling only compassion and pity due to being in the midst of beings hindered by the darkness of ignorance.
- 4) Maintenance of a reverential and respectful frame of mind when explaining Dharma for the benefit of such beings.

128 – Be Insatiable in Learning, Don't Deceive the Venerables, Please Instructors

Be insatiable in learning
 And always recite and retain what has been learned.
 Do not deceive any among the venerable fields of merit.
 Moreover, cause one's instructors to be delighted.

AV These are karmic causes for never forgetting the mind resolved on bodhi.

TN "Field of merit," is a specific reference to recipients of generosity which, through that act of giving, produce karmic merit for the benefactor. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Ārya Sangha are the most obvious examples. In this context, the reference is specifically to monastic sangha members serving as teachers of Dharma.

The Buddha sought to illustrate this concept by ordering that the robes of monks and nuns be sewn in a patchwork pattern resembling the patch-work appearance of plots of cultivated farmland, this to illustrate that deeds done in support of monastics are karmically meritorious and are bound to bring definite karmic rewards.

When done, such deeds plant karmic “seeds” which sprout forth as positive karmic circumstances in the benefactor’s future.

129 – Don’t Pay Visits for Gifts or Respect, Don’t Study Worldly Texts for Debate

One should not pay visits to the houses of others
 With a mind cherishing reverence or offerings.
 One must not take up study and recitation of worldly texts
 For the sake of debating challenging topics.

AV One should not pay such visits except where that may facilitate someone’s resolve to realize bodhi. One should not study such texts except where they facilitate broad-based learning.

130 – Don’t Defame Bodhisattvas or Slander Dharmas Not Yet Understood

One must not be provoked by hatefulness or anger
 Into defaming any bodhisattva.
 As for dharmas not yet received or learned,
 One must not initiate slanders in those cases either.

AV Why not? In order to preserve the continuous production of good dharmas.

131 – Sever Arrogance, Abide in the Lineage Bases, Avoid Disapproving, Halt Conceit

In order to cut off arrogance and pride,
 One should abide in the four lineage bases of the ārya.
 One must not course in disapproval of others
 And must not allow oneself to become conceited.

AV Abide among beings with the mind “lowered” as one might were one but a dog, this to cut off self pride. Through the “four lineage bases of the ārya” one looks lightly on and tends toward frugality in matters having to do with robes, food, bedding and medicines, this because, in the lineage bases of the ārya, one is easily satisfied.

TN In fascicle twenty-seven of his commentary on the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa*), Nāgārjuna lists the four lineage bases of the ārya (*āryavaṃśā*) as: “refraining from selective discrimination regarding robes, food, bedding and medicines, while delighting in cutting off suffering and cultivating meditative absorption.” (T25.1509.258a19)

132 – Don't Expose Others' Offenses or Find Fault, Be Aware of One's Own Errors

Whether or not someone has actually committed a transgression, One must not reveal his situation to others.
Do not seek out the errors and faults of anyone else.
Rather one should become aware of one's own errors.

AV Where someone committed to brahman conduct might have committed a karmic offense, no matter whether or not an offense was actually committed, one must never expose such situations.

TN "Brahman conduct" (*brahmacarya*) refers primarily to the absolute celibacy vow of a monk, nun, novice, or female monastic probationer, but also refers less directly to the other major monastic vows.

It may be worth noting here that neither Ārya Nāgārjuna nor Bhikshu Vaśitva are recommending either tolerating or covering up ethics violations in the Buddhist community. The Buddha laid down very clear methods for dealing with all such problems. Traditional Buddhist communities adhering to those protocols deal with these sorts of issues very efficiently and effectively.

133 – Avoid Criticism or Doubt Toward Buddha or Dharma, Keep Faith in the Abstruse

One should refrain from biased judgments and doubting
In fathoming the Buddha and the Dharma of the Buddhas.
Even though a dharma may be extremely difficult to believe,
One should nonetheless maintain faith in it.

AV Do not resort to discriminating thought or doubt-derived delusions as means to fathom either Buddha or Dharma, for these are matters beyond the ken of the common man and are dharmas not held in common with any other beings. Even for the most incredibly recondite dharmas, one should maintain pure faith arising from profound thought.

TN When Bhikshu Vaśitva mentions "dharmas not held in common with any other beings," he is directly referencing "the eighteen dharmas exclusive to the Buddhas" and indirectly referencing the ten powers, the four fearlessnesses, and the four unimpeded knowledges which, although shared to a greater or lesser degree by exalted beings such as arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and bodhisattvas,

are unfamiliar territory for the common man. I list these thirty-six dharmas below as short selections I've drawn from my translations of the much longer discussions found in Ārya Nāgārjuna's commentary on the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, this to make it obvious why Nāgārjuna would warn us: "One should refrain from using the discriminating mind and doubt in fathoming the Buddha and the Dharma of the Buddhas."

The Eighteen Dharmas Exclusive to Buddhas:

- 1) They are free of physical errors.
- 2) They are free of verbal errors.
- 3) They are free of errors in mindfulness.
- 4) They are free of discriminating thoughts.
- 5) They are free of unconcentrated thoughts.
- 6) They are free of equanimity deriving from incomplete awareness.
- 7) Their zeal is unailing.
- 8) Their vigor is unailing.
- 9) Their mindfulness is unailing.
- 10) Their wisdom is unailing.
- 11) Their liberations are unailing.
- 12) Their knowledge and vision associated with the liberations are unailing.
- 13) All of their physical actions accord with their prior cognition.
- 14) All of their verbal actions accord with their prior cognition.
- 15) All of their mental actions accord with their prior cognition.
- 16) They are unimpeded in their knowledge of the past.
- 17) They are unimpeded in their knowledge of the future.
- 18) They are unimpeded in their knowledge of the present.

The Ten Powers:

The first power is that he knows in accordance with actual truth what can be as what can be and what cannot be as what cannot be.

The second power is that he knows all of the karmic activity and all of the experiences of beings throughout past time, throughout future time, and in the present time, knows the location at which they created the karmic action, knows its associated causes and conditions, and knows the associated retribution.

The third power is that he knows all of the dhyānas,

liberations, samādhis, and absorptions and knows in accordance with actual truth the distinctive characteristics defining their relative defilement and purity.

The fourth power is that he knows all of the faculties possessed by other beings and knows in accordance with actual truth the characteristics by which they (the faculties) qualify as superior or inferior.

The fifth power is that he knows all of the different sorts of desires possessed by other beings.

The sixth power is that he knows all of the world's countless categories of different natures.

The seventh power is that he knows the characteristic features of the end point of all paths.

The eighth power is that he knows the various sorts of previous lifetimes together with their commonly-held characteristics and their commonly-held causes and conditions, knows them for a single lifetime, for two lifetimes, and so forth until we come to a hundred thousand lifetimes, knows them from the very beginning of the kalpa on through to the very end of the kalpa, and knows, "I possessed this surname and this given name as I abided among those particular beings, consumed such-and-such drink and food, and experienced such-and-such sufferings and happinesses, and possessed a lifespan of such-and-such a length. Having died among those beings, I was then reborn in this place. Having died in this place, I returned to birth in this place. And when I was born in this place, precisely this was my surname, given name, the sorts of drink and food consumed, the sufferings and happinesses experienced, and the length of lifespan lived out."

The ninth power is that the Buddha's heavenly eye is purified beyond that of the heavenly eye possessed by the gods. He sees with that eye the time of beings' death, the time of their births, the fineness and ugliness of their physical features, whether they are great or small, whether they fall into the wretched destinies, and whether they fall in among the wholesome destinies.

He sees that they undergo karmic retribution on account of the causes and conditions associated with such-and-such karmic activity, sees that the evil physical karmic activity of these beings ripens completely, sees that their evil verbal karmic activity ripens completely, and sees that their evil mental karmic activity ripens completely.

He sees the erroneous views leading them to slander the

Āryas, sees that the karmic activity associated with those erroneous views ripens completely, and sees that, on account of these causes and conditions, when their physical body comes to ruin and dies, they then enter the wretched destinies wherein they are reborn in the hells.

He sees that the wholesome physical karmic activity of these beings ripens completely, sees that their wholesome verbal karmic activity ripens completely, sees that their wholesome mental karmic activity ripens completely, and sees that their refraining from slandering the Āryas, their correct views, and their karmic actions arising from correct views—these all ripen completely as well. He sees that, on account of these causes and conditions, when their physical body comes to ruin and dies, they then enter into the wholesome destinies and are reborn in the heavens.

The tenth power is that, because the Buddha has brought all outflow-impurities to an end, he has achieved the liberation associated with the mind free of outflow-impurities, has achieved the wisdom associated with the mind free of outflow-impurities, and knows and recognizes for himself, in accordance with actual truth, that, with respect to the dharmas of the present, “My births are already ended, my observance of the prohibitions has already been accomplished, and all subsequent existence has been brought to an end.”

The Four Fearlessnesses

(a.k.a. “The Four Grounds of Self-Confidence”):

The first fearlessness: The Buddha set forth the honest statement in which he claimed, “I am a person possessing right knowledge of all things. I do not see even the slightest sign that I should fear that any śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group could rightfully state that I do not know these dharmas. Based on this, I have realized the security and fearlessness of one established in the position of the leader among the Āryas [and abide there] like the king of bulls. In the midst of the Great Assembly, I roar the lion’s roar and set rolling the brahman wheel which no śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group can rightfully set rolling. This is the first of the fearlessnesses.

The second fearlessness: The Buddha set forth the honest statement in which he claimed, “I have put an end to all outflow-

impurities. I do not see even the slightest sign that I should fear that any śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group could rightfully state that I have not brought these outflow-impurities to an end. Based on this, I have realized the security and fearlessness of one established in the position of the leader among the Āryas [and abide there] like the king of bulls. In the midst of the Great Assembly, I roar the lion's roar and set rolling the brahman wheel which no śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group can rightfully set rolling. This is the second of the fearlessnesses.

The third fearlessness: The Buddha set forth the honest statement in which he claimed, "I have described the dharmas which constitute obstacles. I do not see even the slightest sign that I should fear that any śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group could rightfully state that one may take on these obstructive dharmas and yet not find that they obstruct the Path. Based on this, I have realized the security and fearlessness of one established in the position of the leader among the Āryas [and abide there] like the king of bulls. In the midst of the Great Assembly, I roar the lion's roar and set rolling the brahman wheel which no śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group can rightfully set rolling. This is the third of the fearlessnesses.

The fourth fearlessness: The Buddha set forth the honest statement in which he claimed, "The path of the Ārya which I have proclaimed is able to take one beyond the world. If one follows this path, one becomes able to put an end to all suffering. I do not see even the slightest sign that I should fear that any śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group could rightfully state that, coursing in this path, one remains unable to go beyond the world and unable to put an end to suffering. Based on this, I have realized the security and fearlessness of one established in the position of the leader among the Āryas [and abide there] like the king of bulls. In the midst of the Great Assembly, I roar the lion's roar and set rolling the brahman wheel which no śramaṇa, brahman, god, *māra*, Brahmā, or member of any other group can rightfully set rolling. This is the fourth of the fearlessnesses.

The Four Unimpeded Knowledges:

The "four unimpeded knowledges" refer to unlimited ability to bring forth meanings, dharmas, language, and eloquence.

134 – Even Though One May Be Put to Death, One Should Still Speak Only the Truth

Even though one might be put to death for speaking the truth,
Or might be forced to abdicate the throne of a universal monarch,
Or even that of a king among the gods,
One should still utter only truthful speech.

AV How much the less might he fail to speak the truth in other circumstances.

135 – Even if Beaten, Cursed, or Terrorized, Don't Hate or Condemn; See It as Karma

Even if beaten, cursed, or terrorized with death threats or captivity,
One must not hate or condemn others, but should instead reflect:
“This is all the product of my own karmic offenses.
This has happened as a result of karmic retribution.”

AV These events are a result of previous karmic offenses. Hence it is only fitting that such events now occur. Rather than nourishing hatred for the assailant, one should reflect: “This is just my karma. I already took part in such things in previous lifetimes. So now I undergo the identically undesirable karmic result. As a matter of fact, these assailants are actually free of any karmic offense in this.”

136 – Support Parents Generously, Serve the Needs of Monastic Instructors as Well

One should, with the most ultimate respect and affection,
Provide offerings in support of one's father and mother.
Also supply the needs of and serve the *upādhyāyas*,
While extending reverence to the *ācāryas* as well.

AV No matter where they live, with the utmost affection and respect, provide offerings to support parents. Look upon them as deities, adapt to their wishes to cause them to be pleased, and abandon any flattery or deceptiveness in relations with them.

Also revere and supply the needs of the *upādhyāyas* and *ācāryas*, while also according with their instructions to remain free of inward secrecy and devote oneself instead to instructing others.

TN *Upādhyāyas* are monastic preceptors and instructors of slightly lesser station, whereas the *ācāryas* are those who discharge the highest monastic teaching and precept-transmittal responsibilities.

137 – Discursing on Profound Dharmas for Two-Vehicles Practitioners Is an Error

When, for those who place their faith in the Śrāvaka Vehicle
 Or those dedicated to the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle,
 One discourses on the most profound of dharmas,
 This, for a bodhisattva, is an error.

AV Starting here, we have four types of bodhisattva practice errors which should be abandoned by the bodhisattva.

TN By “the most profound of dharmas,” Nāgārjuna would likely include any of the Great Vehicle teachings which would not be readily understood and believed by an audience dedicated to rapid acquisition of the individual-liberation paths culminating in arhatship or pratyekabuddhahood. For example, we have:

- 1) Not just the emptiness of persons which is already available in those traditions (but potentially problematic for a lay audience), but rather also: “the emptiness of dharmas” (and its implications for understanding and practice).
- 2) The identity of nirvāṇa and saṃsāra (cyclic existence).
- 3) The identity of afflictions (*kleśas*) and bodhi (the danger being here that a shocked audience might misconstrue this to imply endorsement of affliction-ridden karma).
- 4) The great kindness and compassion of the bodhisattva (as distinct from the mere mind-conditioning contemplation of kindness and compassion as affliction-countering stances, this latter being what is typical in Two-Vehicles’ *brahma-vihāra* practice).
- 5) The three great asaṃkhyeya eons of practice required to perfect the causes of buddhahood, including the willingness to enter even the hells to pursue the Bodhisattva Path.

Teaching such dharmas to a Two-Vehicles audience poses two obvious dangers:

- 1) They might well be moved to slander Great-Vehicle teachings, thus doing themselves unnecessary but very serious karmic harm.
- 2) They could well find that their faith in the Śrāvaka Vehicle is undermined while they are as yet unable to develop deep faith in the Great Vehicle. This then could result in their falling away from all Buddhist paths to liberation.

For an audience of this sort, it is probably best to focus primarily on concepts and practices associated with the four truths of the

Ārya, the eight-fold path, the thirty-seven wings of enlightenment, the twelve links of conditioned arising, or correct practice of calming-and-contemplation (*śamatha-vipaśyanā*) meditation.

138 – Discoursing on Two-Vehicles Tenets to the Great-Vehicle Faithful is an Error

When, for believers in the profound Great Vehicle teachings,
 One discourses to those beings
 On the Śrāvaka or Pratyekabuddha vehicles,
 This too is an error for him.

AV (Simply restates very briefly the *śloka's* surface meaning.)

TN The problem with discoursing on Śrāvaka-Vehicle doctrine to a Mahāyāna audience is that those who have nominally dedicated themselves to the Bodhisattva Path but have not yet gained irreversible advancement in it may be moved to turn back to the individual-liberation path of the Śrāvaka Vehicle. In effect, they could thereby cheat themselves out of buddhahood while also cheating countless beings out of liberation whom they would otherwise have been able to bring across to liberation as they coursed along on the Bodhisattva Path.

139 – The Two Other Errors: Failing to Teach the Worthy, Trusting Wrongdoers

So too where some superior person comes seeking the Dharma,
 But one delays and fails to provide him with teachings.
 So too where, on the contrary, one takes in wrongdoers
 Or delegates responsibilities to those who are untrustworthy.

AV When an upstanding superior person comes requesting instruction, one should immediately discourse on good dharmas for his benefit. In this case, one fails to do so and, beyond that, delays.

When a person comes who is a transgressor against the moral precepts and one takes just the opposite course of action by taking them in and trusting them even though they as yet have no faith or understanding of the Great Vehicle, this is a bodhisattva practice error.

TN This same list of “four bodhisattva errors” is also found in Nāgārjuna’s *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā*. There, briefly commenting on his *śloka* line, “The bodhisattva should abandon the four types of

bodhisattva errors," Nāgārjuna explains them as follows:

"What are 'the four types of [bodhisattva] errors'?:

1) Where one discourses on extremely recondite dharmas for beings who are not vessels [appropriate for such teaching], this is an error.

2) Where one discourses on the Small Vehicle for those who delight in recondite, vast-scope dharmas, this is an error.

3) Where one is slightly arrogant and disrespectful toward someone who engages in correct practice of the Path, is a holder of precepts, and who has a wholesome mind, this is an error.

4) Where we have someone who has not yet developed and has not yet become trustworthy, and yet one places trust in him—where one takes in an evil man who is a breaker of precepts, taking him to be a friend and someone who is good, this is an error." (十住毘婆沙論 / T26.1521.66b–c)

140 – Abandon These Errors While Also Studying and Adopting the *Dhūta* Practices

One must abandon the errors mentioned above.

As for such herein-described meritorious practices as the *dhūtas*,

One ought to become knowledgeable about them

And then incorporate them into one's own practice.

AV The four earlier-described errors must be abandoned as they stray far from bodhi. As for the previously-mentioned Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha vehicles practices, including the *dhūta* (ascetic) practices, learn about them and adopt them in practice.

TN So long as one maintains strong resolve focused on highest bodhi, those fundamental doctrines and practice methods often more directly associated with the arhat or pratyekabuddha path may be viewed and *should* be viewed as essential foundational training for the bodhisattva practitioner. This is why Nāgārjuna makes a point of bringing up this matter repeatedly in this and other treatises.

141 – Maintain Four Types of Uniformly Equal Bodhisattva Path Practices

Regard all equally in one's thoughts, speak equally for all,

Be uniformly equal in establishing all others in goodness,

And influence them all equally to accord with what is right.

Thus one refrains from making distinctions between any beings.

AV These are four types of bodhisattva path practices to be adopted:

- 1) Uniform equality in thought raised toward all other beings.
- 2) Uniform equality in discoursing on Dharma for all beings.
- 3) Uniform equality in establishing all beings in goodness.
- 4) [Uniform equality] in influencing all beings to act in accordance with what is right.

In all such endeavors, one avoids making discriminating distinctions between beings.

TN Although the order of presentation differs in the commentary (numbers two and three are switched), this same list of four bodhisattva path practices is also found in Nāgārjuna's *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā*. Because Dharmagupta's rendering is ambiguous, I present a translation of Nāgārjuna himself to corroborate the validity of this English rendering of Dharmagupta. Briefly commenting on his *śloka* line, "The bodhisattva should cultivate the four types of bodhisattva path practices," Nāgārjuna explains as follows:

What are "the four types of bodhisattva path practices"?

- 1) One courses in uniformly equal thought toward all beings.
- 2) One instructs them all in the dharmas of goodness.
- 3) One discourses on Dharma equally for all beings.
- 4) One adopts the practice of right conduct [as a teaching] for all beings." (十住毘婆沙論 / T26.1521.66b–c)

For those who might find it useful, I briefly discuss and distinguish these ideas below:

1) "Uniform equality of thought" would require, for instance, that one consider a being coursing in evil no less worthy of kindness and compassionate concern than a person coursing in goodness.

2) "Uniform equality in discoursing on Dharma for all beings" would require, for instance, that, though the dharmas chosen in teaching would necessarily differ for the morally dissolute and those with refined spiritual sensibilities, they would both be deemed equally worthy of instruction in Dharma.

3) As for "establishing all beings in goodness," what comprises "goodness" in this context is defined by the path of the ten good karmic deeds (restraint from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct,

lying, harsh speech, divisive speech, frivolous or lewd speech, covetousness, hatefulness, wrong views).

4) As for "influencing all beings to act in accordance with what is right," what is right in this context is defined by the degree to which any given act of body, mouth, or mind aligns itself with wisdom.

142 – One Works for Dharma Over Benefit, Good Over Fame, Beings Over Happiness

One works for the sake of Dharma and not for self-benefit.

One works to develop meritorious qualities, not for renown.

One wishes to liberate beings from suffering

And does not wish merely to ensure his own happiness.

AV This *śloka* and the next deal with the four types of genuine bodhisattvas:

- 1) Those who work only for Dharma and not material benefit.
- 2) Those who work only to develop qualities, not fame.
- 3) Those who aspire only to liberate beings from suffering, not simply to ensure their own personal happiness.

(See next *śloka* for the fourth type of genuine bodhisattva.)

143 – One Works in Secret for the Many and so Relinquishes Personal Concerns

With purposes kept secret, one seeks fruition in one's works.

When the results of one's merit-generating endeavors come forth,

Even then, one applies them to the ripening of the many

While abandoning preoccupation with one's own concerns.

AV The fourth of the genuine bodhisattvas:

4) He keeps his intentions secret as he works to bring his karmic works to fruition, aided by practices which generate merit. When that merit manifests, he dedicates it to bodhi along with its abilities to benefit other beings and the many. Because his devotion is to the many, he relinquishes preoccupation with his own concerns.

TN This is another case where Nāgārjuna is directly referencing a section from his *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā*, this time speaking of "four kinds of genuine bodhisattvas" which are the opposite of "the four kinds of counterfeit bodhisattvas" also discussed in that other treatise. I quote below the passage where he comments on his *śloka* line which says, "In the Dharma of the Bodhisattvas, there are four kinds of counterfeit bodhisattvas":

“What are ‘the four [kinds of counterfeit bodhisattvas]’? They are:

- 1) He covets offerings and does not esteem the Dharma.
- 2) He devotes his efforts solely to gaining a reputation and does not seek to develop meritorious qualities.
- 3) He seeks to ensure his own happiness and so pays no mind to the plight of other beings.
- 4) He covets and finds pleasure in a personal retinue and so finds no happiness in renunciative solitude.” (十住毘婆沙論 / T26.1521.66c)

It is easy to see how this list of “four types of genuine bodhisattvas” is simply the opposite of Nāgārjuna’s “four types of counterfeit bodhisattvas” also described in the *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā*. Perhaps the least obvious case is the fourth wherein the genuine bodhisattva, rather than cultivating a retinue, renounces all of that in favor of working secretly at perfecting the karma of the Bodhisattva Path, dedicating all of that merit to the welfare of other beings.

144 – Grow Close to the Four Types of Good Spiritual Friends

Grow close to good spiritual friends,
Specifically, to the masters of Dharma, to the Buddhas,
To those who encourage one to leave the home life,
And to those who are seekers of alms.

AV These are four categories of individuals serving as “good spiritual friends” (*kalyāṇamitra*) for the bodhisattva. One should grow close to them. What are the four categories? This refers to:

- 1) The Dharma masters are good spiritual friends by assisting in developing wisdom arising from learning.
- 2) The Buddhas, the Bhagavāns, serve as good spiritual friends by assisting in preserving the Dharma of all Buddhas.
- 3) Those encouraging abandonment of home life serve as good spiritual friends by assisting in maintaining roots of goodness.
- 4) Those who seek alms serve as good spiritual friends by assisting in maintaining the [altruistic] mind resolved on bodhi.

IN In the traditional context “masters of Dharma” is a specific reference to learned monks discoursing on Buddhist teachings.

In his *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā*, Nāgārjuna, commenting on this very list, adds:

“The bodhisattva who cherishes *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi* (the utmost, right, and perfect enlightenment) should draw close to, revere, and make offerings to four kinds of good spiritual friends and should withdraw far from four kinds of bad spiritual friends.” (十住毘婆沙論 / T26.1521.66c)

145 – Lokāyatas, Wealth Obsessives, Pratyekabuddha and Śrāvaka Vehicles Advocates

Those who ground themselves in worldly treatises,
 Those who exclusively seek worldly wealth,
 Those with Pratyekabuddha Vehicle faith and understanding,
 And those devoted to the Śrāvaka Vehicle—

AV These four would be bad spiritual friends for bodhisattvas:

- 1) Those grounded in worldly treatises, this because they are devoted to clever rhetoric on various worldly topics.
- 2) Those focusing on accumulating wealth, this because they do not focus on Dharma.
- 3) Those advocating the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle, this because they are deficient in meaning-based benefit and good works.
- 4) Those advocating the Śrāvaka Vehicle, this because their practice is devoted primarily to self-benefit.

TN There is no intention on the part of either Nāgārjuna or Bhikṣu Vaśitva to cast aspersions on the refined moral qualities of these last two profiles. Although they advocate valid Buddhist individual-liberation paths taught by the Buddha himself, they would still be unsuitable as companions for a bodhisattva because the inadequately-altruistic nature of their practice could exert a corrosive effect upon the determination of the bodhisattva practitioner.

Nāgārjuna's treatment of this list in his *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā* specifically refers to “the non-Buddhist Lokāyatas,” whereas Dharmagupta translated it more generically as “those grounded in worldly treatises.” (十住毘婆沙論 / T26.1521.67a)

146 – Be Aware of Them As Unfit Spiritual Friends, Seek Out the Four Vast Treasuries

As for these four types of bad spiritual friends,
 The bodhisattva should be aware of them as such.
 There are, however, other circumstances one should seek out.
 This refers specifically to the four vast treasuries:

AV These four would function as bad spiritual friends [for the bodhisattva practitioner]. One should withdraw [from taking them on as spiritual companions].

TN Nāgārjuna states in his *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā*:

“Therefore the bodhisattva should draw near to the four kinds of good spiritual friends and withdraw from the four kinds of bad spiritual friends. If the bodhisattva is able to withdraw from the four kinds of bad spiritual friends and draw near to the four kinds of good spiritual friends, then he will be able to gain four vast treasures and will be able to step beyond all dharmas linked to demon-related matters. He will be able to generate an immeasurable amount of merit and will be able to exhaustively accumulate all good dharmas.” (十住毘婆沙論 / T26.1521.67a)

See the next *śloka* for the listing of these “four vast treasures.”

147 – Meeting Buddhas, Perfections Teachings, Dharma Masters, Solitary Practice

The emergence of buddhas; hearing the perfections explained;
 Being able in the presence of a master of Dharma
 To behold him with unobstructed mind;
 And happily pursuing cultivation in a place of solitude.

AV Strive to obtain these four vast bodhisattva treasures:

- 1) Serving the Buddhas when they come forth into the world.
- 2) Listening to explanations of the six pāramitās.
- 3) Beholding a master of the Dharma with unobstructed mind.
- 4) Practicing happily in solitude, free of neglectfulness.

TN In Nāgārjuna’s comments on this list in his *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā*, one discovers a few clarifying details:

“Bodhisattvas have four vast treasures of sublime Dharma....

The third is that one’s mind remains free of the obstacle of anger felt toward one who teaches the Dharma.

The fourth is that one’s mind does not become neglectful as one happily abides in an *araṇya* (i.e. in an isolated meditation hermitage).” (十住毘婆沙論 / T26.1521.67a)

148 – Abide Like the Elements, Uniformly Equal in Benefiting All

Abide in a manner comparable to
 Earth, water, fire, wind, and space,
 Remaining thus uniformly equal under all circumstances
 In providing benefit to all beings.

AV The element-like qualities which the bodhisattva should integrate are uniformly equal availability and beneficence.

For example, these elements don't manifest differently for different sentient or insentient things in which they are found useful. Thus all beings always remain able to put them to use without the elements changing in character or availability and without their seeking some reward in return for that.

One reflects, "I should emulate that even up till buddhahood."

149 – Reflect on Meanings, Progress in Uses of *Dhāraṇīs*, Don't Block Dharma Study

One should skillfully reflect upon the meanings
 And diligently progress in the uses of the *dhāraṇīs*.
 One must never create any sort of obstruction
 To those seeking to hear the Dharma.

AV Skillfully reflect on the meanings of Buddha's teachings through discussion or contemplation.

Abide in mental purity through moral precepts. Stay diligent and immaculate in this while developing one's use of *dhāraṇīs*, in particular those such as the "Silver Lord" and "Ocean Lord."

Also, never create the slightest interference to anyone's intent to listen to Dharma teachings, this to avoid disastrous future karma.

TN The deep quietude of mind required for meditation practice or *dhāraṇī* practice is impossible to develop or maintain in the absence of the mental purity instilled by observance of moral precepts, hence Bhikshu Vaśitva's emphasis on the issue here.

The "Silver Lord" *dhāraṇī* mentioned by Bhikshu Vaśitva is still extant approximately 1500 years after its Sui Dynasty translation as the main topic of Chapter Eleven of the "Composite Edition" *Golden Light Sutra* (T16.664.386b05-11). I've so far been unable to locate the "Ocean Lord" *dhāraṇī*. Because *dhāraṇīs* often have several alternate names, it too could still be extant, just unrecognized for the time being.

Nāgārjuna discourses at length on *dhāraṇīs* in his commentary on the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, most specifically in fascicle six and fascicle eight. Although I have translated all of that material, it is too long for inclusion here. Hence I simply present a detailed synopsis of the nature and uses of *dhāraṇīs* immediately below:

Dhāraṇīs are dharmas developed through spiritual cultivation by which one: a) retains good dharmas; b) blocks the arising of bad dharmas, and c) protects oneself from interference from negative spiritual forces which would otherwise destroy progress on the path of liberation.

In the popular imagination, *dhāraṇīs* are most usually associated with mantras (spiritually potent incantatory formulae), but that is not an entirely accurate perception, this because *dhāraṇīs* may in many instances be more closely identified with samādhis (deep meditative absorption states having very specific qualities and uses) or in some cases may not be particularly strongly associated with either mantras or samādhis.

I cite here a few examples of the “preservation,” “suppression,” and “protection” functions of *dhāraṇīs*:

a) Examples of good dharmas preserved by *dhāraṇīs* not just across the course of years, but also across the course of many lifetimes: karmic merit; moral precepts; specific well-developed meditation abilities; vows to continually pursue particular bodhisattva deeds.

b) Examples of bad dharmas, the arising of which may be spontaneously suppressed through well-matured practice of *dhāraṇīs*: negative karmic propensities originating with patterned negativity in the past; the arising of lust, hatred, delusion, or arrogance in response to objective circumstances in the present; the ability to formulate and carry through misguided or evil ideas such as hunting, drug-use, hate-speech, elective office for fame-and-profit, and so forth.

c) Examples of “negative spiritual forces” which may be countered through well-matured practice of *dhāraṇīs*: organized crime; charismatic cult leaders motivated by avarice for power, money or sex; powerfully negative mantras used by others for evil purposes; ghosts; demons; thieves; physical attackers.

Finally, a note of caution: Use of *dhāraṇīs* for other than the highest spiritual purposes is bound to be karmically disastrous. It is to be avoided at all costs.

150 – Overcome Major Afflictions, Banish Subsidiary Afflictions, Cast off Indolence

When embroiled in the afflictions, be able to overcome them.
 Relinquish the lesser instances, retaining not a trace.
 Regarding the eight cases involving indolence,
 One should cut all of those off as well.

AV Through exercising self-control, overcome the [six primary] afflictions (covetousness, hatred, delusion, arrogance, doubtfulness, wrong views) arising in nine circumstances:

[1–3] Past, present, or future cases “not beneficial to me.”

[4–6] Past, present, or future cases “not beneficial to dear ones.”

[7–9] Past, present, or future cases “beneficial to those I detest.”

Utterly relinquish the twenty subsidiary afflictions, namely: absence of faith; absence of a sense of shame, flattery, deceptiveness, agitation, mental scatteredness, negligence, harming, absence of a dread of blame, indolence, worry, drowsiness, enmity, concealment, jealousy, miserliness, elevating oneself, anger, regretfulness, and depression.

Martial vigor to cut off indolence in eight typical cases:

[1] One thinks, “I’m about to take up a task,” abandons vigor, and immediately lies down for a preparatory nap.

[2] One thinks, “I’ve now finished that task,” or [3] “I’ve been walking along,” or [4] “I’m all through with my walking,” or [5] “My body is weary,” and decides he can’t do his cultivation work.

[6] Or else one thinks, “My body feels so heavy” [from eating too much] and then concludes he cannot do his cultivation work.

Or else one thinks, [7] “I’ve fallen ill,” or [8] “My sickness has not yet subsided for very long,” and then one immediately lies down peacefully, failing to generate any vigor.

Due to such circumstances, one doesn’t achieve what should be achieved, doesn’t arrive where he should arrive, and doesn’t bring to realization what one should bring to realization.

151 – Don’t Covet What Is Not One’s Lot, Reconcile the Estranged

Do not covet what is not one’s lot,
 For unprincipled covetousness will not bring satisfaction.
 Influence all who have become estranged to reconcile,
 Whether or not they are one’s own relations.

AV Where one observes others gaining abundant offerings, fame, happiness, esteem, and bounteous merit, refrain from thoughts covetous of what is not one's own lot. If one covets what is not one's own lot, one will fail to develop a satisfied mind.

Additionally, ignoring the question of whether or not they are one's own relatives, facilitate the reconciliation of all who have become involved in disputes, estrangement, and destructiveness. Influence the parties to restore that harmonious unity wherein they are agreeable and inclined to treat each other with kindness.

152 – Seeking to Get at Emptiness Itself Is Worse Than Viewing Body As Self

The wise must not base their practice

On getting at the "emptiness" in what is intrinsically empty.

In the case of one determined to get at that emptiness itself,

That wrong is even more extreme than viewing the body as a self.

AV Realization of emptiness is used to eliminate the mass of false conceptions arising from deficient wisdom. The wise must not take getting at emptiness itself as a practice goal, for that error [which attempts to make emptiness itself into some searchable entity] is even more extreme than that difficult-to-cure misconception which seizes on the body as constituting a self.

Attempting to seize on emptiness itself is an incurable metaphysical disease, for there is nothing above and beyond that to which one might resort to bring about a cure.

TN "Emptiness" is not a thing in itself. It is simply an absence of something. And of precisely what is it an absence? It is an absence of any inherent existence of some supposedly real entity over and above the mere assemblage of conditions composing any given phenomenon. That conception of some supposedly existent entity is really just an idea associated with a mere name, period.

For instance: A "car" doesn't have any inherent existence of its own above and beyond being just a simple temporary collection of metal, rubber, glass, paint, and so forth upon which we have psychically stamped the label "car" in an act of deluded imputation. Realizing the emptiness of inherent existence of some supposedly real entity we associate with the name "car" is simply recognizing this fact. There isn't actually any "emptiness" above and beyond that.

Hence there is no “entity” called “emptiness” which one might somehow be able to lay hold of through some yet more refined act of enlightened perception. The inference of the text is that to imagine such a thing and then tenaciously cling to such a concept is really a type of metaphysical pathology worse even than thinking of the body as constituting a “self.”

153 – Maintain Stupas, Provide Adornments, and Make Offerings at the Stupas

By sweeping and finishing floors, by providing adornments,
By furnishing many varieties of drums and music,
And by offering fragrances, flower garlands, and other gifts,
Contribute offerings to the *caityas*.

AV Keep the *caitya* floors swept and coated while also providing fragrant garlands, burnable and powdered incenses, floral canopies, banners, and other articles of adornment and offering. Make such offerings to gain [in future rebirths] a fine and upright physical form, the fragrance of moral virtue, and sovereign freedoms.

Offerings of all different sorts of drums and music—wind instruments made from shells, stringed instruments, the waist-mounted drums, the large drums, the thundering drums, the clapping of hands [along with the rhythm], and so forth—this is done for the sake of gaining the heavenly ear.

154 – Provide Lantern Wheels, Stupa Canopies, Sandals, Carriages, Sedan Chairs

Create all sorts of lantern wheels
As offerings to the *caityas* and their buildings.
Provide canopies as well as sandals,
Horse-drawn carriages, sedan chairs, and the like.

AV In the *caitya* buildings, create fragrant-oil and ghee lanterns with garlands as offerings creating causes for the buddha eye.

Give parasols, canopies, sandals, carriages, sedan chairs, and so forth as causes for the bodhisattva's spiritual powers and path.

TN One might well wonder what is meant by a “lantern wheel,” a type of offering seemingly not much present in modern Buddhist practice. Apparently it is a circular arrangement of lanterns set up and lit as an offering. There is a description in the Tripitaka of an offering of a “lantern wheel” inspired by a monk from India, this

occurring in China during the Tang Dynasty and witnessed by the emperor from atop a city gate.

The lamp reached to a height of some two hundred feet (lit. “twenty *zhang*”) and involved the lighting of five hundred lanterns made from gold and silver. Its appearance is described as having been “like a flowering tree.”

This occurred at the very dawn of the eighth century, during the height of Buddhism’s flourishing in China, by coincidence in the year Bodhiruci completed the new translation of the *Accumulation of Jewels Sutra* and in the same year that the famous *Avatamsaka Sutra* patriarch, Fazang, passed away (712 CE).

Although the precise shape is not described, the name suggests that the pattern of lantern arrangement may well have been in the design of the eight-spoked wheel of Dharma emblematic of the eight-fold Path. (佛祖統紀 / T49.2035.373a)

155 – Find Happiness in Listening to Dharma, in Faith in Buddha, in Serving Sangha

One should especially find delight in the Dharma
 And be happy knowing what is gained through faith in Buddha.
 Delight in providing for and serving the monastic Sangha,
 While also finding happiness through listening to right Dharma.

AV Delight in the Dharma and not solely in the karmic blessings and pleasures of the five sorts of desire.

One should realize the benefits gained through faith in the Buddha and not anchor trust and happiness solely in seeing his form body.

Delight in providing for and serving the Sangha order, while not delighting only in audiences and the protocols of greeting.

One should experience delight in listening to their teaching of Dharma and never become self-satisfied that one has had enough of that. One must not settle for the happiness arising from listening to a few of their passing words.

156 – Dharmas Don’t Arise in the Past, Abide in the Present, or Extend into the Future

They do not arise in the past.
 They do not abide in the present.
 They do not go forward into the future.
 Contemplate all dharmas in this manner.

AV Phenomena aren't produced in the past because: a) their existence is solely a function of the coinciding of subsidiary causes and conditions, and b) they have no place from whence they come.

Phenomena do not dwell in the present because: a) they are undergoing continuous [and complete] destruction in each successive micro-moment (*kṣaṇa*), and b) they consequently never abide at all.

Phenomena do not proceed on forward into the future because: a) they are undergoing such complete [and continuous micro-moment-to-micro-moment] destruction that no trace of them remains, and b) they have no place to which they go.

One should direct such analytic contemplation to all dharmas.

157 – Bestow What Is Best, Seek No Reward, Take on Sufferings, Do Not Covet Bliss

Give to beings whatsoever is fine
 And do not wish that they bestow anything fine in return.
 One should prefer it be solely oneself who endures suffering
 While not favoring oneself in the enjoyment of happiness.

AV Give what is best to provide happiness for beings without seeking any commensurate reward. Be willing to endure countless sufferings on others' behalf. Nourish the thought that one's own happiness-facilitating possessions should be bestowed on beings for their enjoyment.

158 – Don't Be Overjoyed at Karmic Rewards Nor Downcast at Karmic Misfortune

Although replete with karmic rewards from immense merit,
 The mind should not become lofty or overwhelmed with delight.
 Although one may be as poverty-stricken as a hungry ghost,
 One should still not become downcast or overcome with distress.

AV Even though one might have fallen into the extreme poverty, disastrous misfortune, and torment of a hungry ghost's extremely difficult life, one should still not become downcast or overcome with anguish. How much the less should one allow this to occur when, still abiding in the human realm, one falls into poverty and experiences disastrous misfortune.

159 – Esteem the Learned, Inspire the Untrained to Study Without Belittling Them

Accord the most ultimate degree of esteem
 To those already accomplished in learning.
 Inspire those as yet unlearned to devote themselves to study.
 One should not behave in a manner belittling them.

AV (Simply restates surface meaning.)

TN By “those already accomplished in learning,” Nāgārjuna would not be referring to those solely in command of a sea of Dharma “facts.” Rather he would intend to reference those whose wisdom and practice of the Path have become well developed through wide-ranging study and integration of Dharma teachings.

Slighting beginning students of Dharma tends to beget future-life negative karmic consequences such as: dull-wittedness, inability to encounter right Dharma, inability to find and recognize a genuinely good guru, low social station, and being constantly mocked by others.

160 – Revere Virtue, Inspire Purity, Draw Close to the Wise, Promote Wisdom in Fools

Revere those perfect in observance of the moral precepts
 And influence those who break precepts to take on the precepts.
 Draw close to those perfect in wisdom
 And influence those who act foolishly to abide in wisdom.

AV Press palms together and revere those perfect in observing the precepts, praising the karmic merit inhering in moral virtue.

On meeting those who break precepts, inspire them to take on the precepts, describing the retributions for breaking precepts.

Draw close to the wise, speaking in a manner describing the fine qualities accruing to those coursing in wisdom.

Influence the foolish to course in wisdom, discouraging for them on the faults inherent in foolish actions.

161 – Don't Be Terrorized by Saṃsāra, Rather Subdue Demons and Evil Knowledge

The sufferings of cyclic existence are of many kinds,
 Involving birth, aging, death, and the wretched destinies.
 One should not be frightened by the fearsomeness of these.
 One must instead subdue demons and knowledge rooted in evil.

AV Whilst coursing along in cyclic births and deaths, the bodhisattva undergoes many kinds of sufferings such as birth, aging, death, lamentation, suffering-inducing afflictions, and the wretched destinies of the hells, animals, hungry ghosts, and *asuras* (demi-gods). One should not fear those things, but rather should focus only on subduing evil demons and those types of knowledge which are rooted in evil.

TN “Demons” are of many sorts. They include:

- 1) The demons of one's own mind (path-eroding thought patterns, etc.).
- 2) The demons of afflictions (desire, hatred, delusion, arrogance, doubt, wrong views, etc.).
- 3) Mischievous ghosts.
- 4) Sixth desire heaven deities.
- 5) Also, figuratively speaking, unwholesome acquaintances devoid of ethics or spiritual interests who, intentionally or not, subtly undermine one's faith and practice.

“Knowledge rooted in evil” is a reference to whichever forms of either esoteric or mundane knowledge may influence one to deviate from right-Dharma Path practice in favor of pursuing objects of the desires (wealth, sex, fame, etc.).

As for “subduing demons,” helpful prophylactic and counteractive stratagems in dealing with demons include:

- 1) Deeply sincere daily repentance purifications, even if only as brief reflections at the altar.
- 2) Daily refreshing of the three refuges and at least the four basic bodhisattva vows, even if only as brief reflections at the altar.
- 3) Prayers to buddhas and bodhisattvas for their assistance.
- 4) Mantras invoking the protective assistance of Dharma-protecting spirits.
- 5) Constant purity in upholding the moral precepts.
- 6) Intensely diligent dedication to meritorious works.
- 7) Avoidance of involvement in worldly entertainments and pastimes.

As noted earlier in these notes, Dhyāna Master Zhiyi devotes an entire chapter to the issue of demons, demonic karma, how they manifest, and how their influences may be countered in his *Essentials for Practicing Calming-and-Insight and Dhyāna Meditation*. I have translated that entire work and am publishing it separately

under the title *The Essentials of Buddhist Meditation*.

162 – Amass Merit in All Buddhalands, Make Vows That Others Will Reach Them Too

Amass every form of merit
 In the lands of all the Buddhas.
 Bring forth vows and proceed with vigor
 So that everyone may succeed in reaching them.

AV Amass superior forms of merit in the lands of all buddhas in the ten directions by assisting in the perfection and adornment of those lands, by hearing teachings from buddhas and bodhisattvas, and by developing the ability to see them directly.

All of this is dedicated to causing all beings to be able to arrive in their own buddhaland. Make vows according with this intent. Whatever one vows to do, one proceeds immediately to accomplish that. In this too, one should proceed accordingly, availing oneself of intense diligence as one proceeds in cultivation.

163 – Never Seize on Dharmas, Abide in Equanimity, Take Up the Burden for Beings

Even in the midst of all dharmas, one is constant
 In not seizing on them, thus coursing along in equanimity.
 One takes on the burden, wishing to bear it on forth,
 Proceeding in this manner for the sake of all beings.

AV It is through grasping that one suffers and through refraining from grasping that one enjoys happiness. On realizing this, one is constant in desisting from seizing on any phenomenon and so abides in equanimity.

Even so, having earlier made the vow to assist beings in reaching enlightenment, one is now willing to take up this burden for beings, wishing to carry it on forth.

164 – Contemplate Dharmas as Non-Self, Don't Relinquish Compassion or Kindness

Abide in the right contemplation of all dharmas
 As devoid of self and as devoid of anything belonging to a self.
 Even so, one must not relinquish the great compassion
 Or one's reliance on the great kindness.

AV It is because they are like a dream and like a magical conjuration that dharmas are said to be devoid of self.

As for their being devoid of anything belonging to a self, this is based on the contemplation of their signlessness. Such pronouncements reflect the dharma of the supreme meaning.

Even when perceiving signlessness [from the standpoint of the supreme meaning], one still refrains from relinquishing the great compassion or the great kindness employed in relation to beings. Rather one longs for that day when he will be able to instigate beings to become aware of the dharma of the supreme meaning?

165 – Making Offerings of Dharma Is Superior to Giving Every Gift to the Buddha

As for that which is superior even to using every sort of gift
 In making offerings to the Buddha, the Bhagavān,
 What sort of action might that be?
 This refers specifically to making offerings of Dharma.

AV What sort of gift would be superior to offering to all śrāvaka-disciples, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddhas all manner of flowers, fragrances, garlands, powdered incenses, lantern wheels, canopies, banners, pennants, music, medicines, fine foods and beverages, and other such things?

The reply indicates that this would be an offering of Dharma. Now what other aspect might such a Dharma offering possess?

166 – Upholding the Bodhisattva Canon Is the Foremost Dharma Offering

If one upholds the Bodhisattva Canon,
 Even to the point of gaining realization of the *dhāraṇīs*—
 If one enters into and reaches the bottom of Dharma's source—
 This is what constitutes the offering of Dharma.

AV If one is to conform in this to the Bodhisattva canon, [one should contemplate the following ideas from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*]:

“The sutras spoken by the Tathāgata and the other scriptures are extremely profound in their clarification of the characteristics of dharmas. They are diametrically opposed to the ways of the world. It is difficult to succeed in reaching to the very bottom of them. It is difficult to perceive the subtleties involved in the ultimate meaning of being free of attachment.

“[That which is included in the Bodhisattva canon] is such as receives the seal of certification of the seal described in the *King of Dhāraṇīs Sūtra*. It explains that the causes for realizing irreversibility

are born from the six perfections. [The Bodhisattva canon] skillfully subsumes what should be subsumed. It complies with and enters into the dharmas equipping one for bodhi. It brings one into unity with the nature of the right enlightenment. It enters into all forms of the great compassion and discourses on the great kindness.

“It abandons the many demonic views, skillfully explains conditioned arising, and enters into the sphere of the nonexistence of beings, the nonexistence of a life, the nonexistence of any developing entity, and the nonexistence of persons. It accords with emptiness, signlessness, wishlessness, and non-production.

“It leads one to sit at the site where bodhi is realized and set in motion the wheel of Dharma whereupon one is praised by the gods, dragons, *yakṣas*, and *gandharvas*. It delivers one from the mire of the householder’s life and draws one in among the Āryas. It expounds on all of the bodhisattva practices and enters into the eloquence consisting of [being unobstructed in understanding] dharmas, in realizing their meanings, in formulating articulate phrasing, and in speaking about them with delight.

“It shakes the world with the thunder of that sound which proclaims impermanence, suffering, absence of self, and other such dharmas. It strikes terror into all who subscribe to the attachments to views and attainments characteristic of the non-Buddhist treatises. It is praised by all buddhas. It counteracts one’s coursing in cyclic existence and reveals the bliss of nirvāṇa. If one explains, if one upholds, if one analytically investigates, and if one adopts sutras such as these, it is this which qualifies as the offering of Dharma.”

Additionally, those who give offerings of Dharma succeed in achieving irreversibility and thus do not fall, this on account of the *dhāraṇīs* which follow along with them [from life to life, guarding them] in their practice. In those profound dharmas which correspond to emptiness, signlessness, wishlessness, and non-production, one enters and reaches to their very bottom where one remains unmoving and free of doubts. It is this which qualifies as the offering of the dharma of the most supreme meaning.

TN Bhikshu Vaśitva’s long passage which I have enclosed in quotes (consisting of all but the last paragraph immediately above) is his paraphrase of Medicine King Buddha in the “Dharma Offerings” chapter of the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. (See T14.475.556b–c and T14.476.586b–c for the Kumārajīva and Xuanzang translations.)

167 – Rely on Meaning, Not Flavors; Enter the Profound Path, Avoiding Negligence

One should rely upon the meaning.

One must not cherish only the various flavors.

In the Path of the profound Dharma

One enters with skill and must not fall prey to negligence.

AV Additionally, as for this making of offerings of Dharma, whether it be in the meditative reflection on dharmas or in the implementation of dharmas in one's practice, whether it be in acting in accord with conditioned arising, whether it be in the abandonment of views seizing on extremes, whether it be in the realization whereby one never leaves the unproduced-dharmas patience, whether it be in gaining entry to the nonexistence of the self, whether it be in remaining free of any opposing, struggling, or disputation in the midst of the circumstances formed by causes and conditions, or whether it be in the abandonment of the self and anything belonging to a self—in all such circumstances, one should rely upon the meaning. One must not be motivated by an affection which chases after the flavor of the various forms of decorous phrasing.

One should rely upon wisdom and must not merely rely upon impressions gained through one's consciousnesses. One should rely upon ultimate-meaning scriptures and must not become attached to worldly and common discourses which do not reflect the ultimate meaning. One should rely upon Dharma and must not seize upon the views which people hold. In one's practice, one should accord with and follow those dharmas which correspond to reality, thus entering into that place wherein there is no abiding.

One should skillfully contemplate the cycle of ignorance, karmic compositional factors, consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense faculties, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering-laden afflictions, and the very extremes of difficulty—perceiving them all as abiding in a state of complete cessation. After one has contemplated the circumstances of conditioned arising in this manner, one may draw upon it endlessly and, on account of remaining sympathetically mindful of beings, one refrains from becoming attached to any views and refrains from falling into negligence.

If one is able to constantly act in this manner, then and only then does this qualify as an offering of the unsurpassed Dharma.

IN Bhikshu Vaśitva continues here his paraphrasing of ideas from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. One will note his encouragement to hew to the dictates of the four reliances with respect to Dharma together with his counsel on transcendence-based contemplation of the twelve-linked causal chain. It is through such an elevated perspective and perception that one is able to draw forth endless compassion as one works for the liberation of countless beings trapped in karma-bound suffering. It is through deep realization of this contemplation that one perceives the emptiness and intrinsically nirvāṇa-like nature of all that exists. It is by resort to contemplations of this sort that the Great Vehicle is able to proclaim the possibility of “sublime existence” even in the arena of cyclic births and deaths.

168 – Buddhahood is Gained by Cultivating the Provisions in Countless Future Lives

One cultivates these provisions in this manner
 For kalpas as numerous as the Ganges’ sands,
 Doing so sometimes as a monastic, sometimes as a householder.
 Thus one will succeed in perfecting the right enlightenment.

AV One cultivates the provisions in accordance with the preceding explanations, doing so for a Ganges’ sands number of great kalpas. One does so within the monastic communities and householder communities of the Bodhisattva Vehicle. It is over a long period of time that one fulfills one’s vows and then finally succeeds in realizing the right enlightenment.

I present this based on those stanzas about the provisions
 To stimulate contemplative reflections about bodhi.
 As their portrayal of the provisions’ meaning is already flawless.
 The aim here was merely to be able to accord with those verses.

My present analysis of those stanzas
 May have either enhanced or detracted from their meanings.
 Where the explanation has well matched the verses’ meanings,
 I pray the wisdom of the Worthies will acquiesce in it.

May any meritorious goodness I might have created
 Through explaining those verses devoted to the provisions
 Be dedicated to the beings coursing on in cyclic existence
 That they may gain the right and universal awakening.

The End of Ārya Nāgārjuna’s *Treatise on the Provisions for Enlightenment*.

The End of the Explanation Set Forth by Me, Bhikshu Vaśitva.