

**PART TWO:**

**THE BODHISAṂBHĀRA TREATISE  
COMMENTARY**

**The Early Indian Commentary On**

**Ārya Nāgārjuna's  
*Treatise on the Provisions for Enlightenment*  
(*Bodhisambhāra Śāstra*)**

**Composed by Bhikshu Vaṣitva  
(circa 300–500 CE)**



Why must one gain merit equal to a hundred Sumerus? Because only then does one become able to gain the realization of bodhi.

**Question:** Were this the case, because an accumulation of merit the measure of a hundred Sumerus could not exist, there would not be even one single person capable of realizing bodhi.

**Response:** (As below...)

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#### MEANS FOR ACCUMULATING AN IMMENSE STOCK OF MERIT

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##### 037 – Through Skillful Means, a Minor Deed Generates Great Merit

Although one may perform but a minor meritorious deed,  
Even in this, one possesses a skillful means:  
Taking the sphere of “all beings” as the object,  
One should generate a mental transformation of the conditions.

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#### COMMENTARY:

Although this bodhisattva may perform but a minor meritorious deed, by resorting to a skillful means, he becomes able thereby to produce a great collection of merit. For instance, he may give drink or food to beings or may offer up flowers, incense, garlands, and so forth to images of the Tathāgata. In doing so, he takes all of that merit he has thereby created and, taking all being in all worlds as the object of this reflection, he mentally transforms the objective conditions, reflecting thus: “I dedicate this merit to all beings to cause them to realize the unsurpassed, right enlightenment.”

He then, [through mental reflection], bestows this merit on all beings. It is the bestowing of such merit on all beings and dedicating it to bodhi as he does so which constitutes the bodhisattva’s skillful means herein. By performing this type of dedication of merit, his own merit becomes immeasurable, incalculable, and infinite in scope. Thus, even though [his goal of] omniscience-based wisdom is so infinite in scope, he is still able to gain it by availing himself of this merit which, generated in this manner, becomes correspondingly infinite in scope.

There are other concepts to be considered here: [As below...]

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##### 038 – How Could One Measure the Merit of Such Universally-Dedicated Deeds?

Where one reflects: “May whatever actions I undertake  
Always be done for the welfare of beings,”  
Who could measure the merit of he  
Whose mental actions are of this sort?

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**COMMENTARY:**

Both day and night, the bodhisattva constantly initiates mental actions of this sort, reflecting: “May all my good deeds arising through body, mouth, and mind be generated for the sake of taking all beings on across [the sea of suffering], for the sake of liberating all beings, for the sake of reviving all beings, and for the sake of establishing all beings in cessation. May they also be for the sake of instigating beings to fulfill [the requisites for] omniscience-based wisdom so that they may realize that omniscience-based wisdom.”

When he has thus perfected the great compassion and abides well-established in excellent implementation of skillful means, who aside from the Buddhas could gauge the amount of merit he accumulates? Therefore, one who equips himself with merit in this manner thereby becomes able to achieve realization of bodhi.

**Question:** How might this merit become even more incalculably vast?

**Response:** (As below...)

**039 – When Free of Attachments, When Not Coveting Even the Heavens—**

Where one isn’t constrained by fondness for relatives, retinue,  
Body, life, or wealth,  
Where one isn’t held back by desiring pleasure in Ívara’s heavens,  
Brahma-world heavens, or any other heavens,

**040 – Not Coveting Nirvāṇa, Yet Caring for Others, Who Could Gauge Such Merit?**

Where one isn’t constrained even by coveting nirvāṇa,  
Where one’s actions are done for the sake of other beings,  
And where in all this, one thinks only of the welfare of beings,  
Who then could measure the vastness of his merit?

**COMMENTARY:**

When this bodhisattva engages in the six-perfections practices, because he does so for the sake of beings, he indulges no cherishing even of his own sons, daughters, retinue, indulges no cherishing of his gold, silver, or other wealth, indulges no cherishing of his life, limbs, entire body, physical and mental pleasures, pleasures of the Ívara heavens, Brahma-kāyika Heavens, or formless-realm heavens, and indulges no cherishing even of nirvāṇa. It is only with respect to the welfare of other beings that he is sympathetically mindful and unforsaking.

He thinks, "How shall I be able to influence these beings, these child-like common people blinded by the cataracts of ignorance? How shall I be able to cause them to gain liberation from the prison of the three realms so that they become established in the constant bliss of nirvāṇa's city of fearlessness?"

When this bodhisattva thus carries out such endeavors bestowing benefit and happiness on others, and when, even without any particular instigating cause, he nonetheless still acts toward beings with such cherishing kindness—who could possibly measure the extent of his merit?

There are yet more such verses as follows:

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**041 – Rescuing and Protecting the Vulnerable, Who Could Measure Such Merit?**

When for those of the world without refuge or protection,  
He rescues and protects them from their bitter afflictions—  
When he raises forth such thoughts and actions as these,  
Who could possibly measure his merit?

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**COMMENTARY:**

This bodhisattva, constantly resorting to the great compassion, contemplates thus: "Those now abiding in the world have no one to rescue or protect them. They wander everywhere throughout the six rebirth destinies, plunging into the fires of the three types of suffering.<sup>64</sup> Having no place of refuge, they chase about hither and thither. In all of their physical and mental sicknesses, they are constantly beset by bitter afflictions. For those without refuge or protection I shall be a place of refuge, rescuing them from their physical and mental sufferings."

When he raises forth these thoughts and actions, who could possibly measure the extent of his merit?

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**042 – So It Is in a Moment Aligned with Wisdom. If Longer, Who Could Gauge It?**

It would be so even in according with the perfection of wisdom  
For only the moment of tugging forth a stream of cow's milk.  
If one acted thus for a month or for many more months,  
Who could possibly measure his merit?

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**COMMENTARY:**

This prajñāpāramitā is able to give birth to all buddhas and bodhisattvas and perfect all dharmas of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

If a bodhisattva were to reflect upon it or put it into practice even only for that brief moment in which one might tug forth a stream of milk from a cow, just the accumulation of merit produced by that mental reflection or action would be beyond measure. How much the more would this be so where he continued on for one, two, or three days and nights, or perhaps for seven days and nights, a half month, or a month?

If he continued on for even more months in cultivating the corresponding practices, who could possibly measure his accumulation of merit?

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**043 – Recitation and Teaching of Profound Sutras Creates Massive Merit**

Where one recites to himself or teaches to others  
 Those profound sutras praised by the Buddhas—  
 Also, where one interprets and explains them for others—  
 These are the bases of an accumulation of merit.

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**COMMENTARY:**

As for what is extremely “profound,” this is a reference to extremely profound sutras devoted to emptiness and transcendence of the world. Those qualify as extremely profound.

Then again, it refers to those providing analytic explanations of conditioned arising. Conditioned arising itself is synonymous with Dharma. As for the Dharma, that itself is identical with the very body of the Tathāgata. Whatsoever may be identified with the very body of the Tathāgata—it is these which are the extremely profound sutras, and it is these which are praised by all of the Buddhas, the Bhagavāns.

Where one recites them to himself, teaches others to recite them, explains them for others with a mind seeking nothing in return, where one does so wishing solely to prevent the Tathāgata’s body from disappearing, this because the body of the Tathāgata is just the Dharma body itself, and if one does this hoping to cause it to long abide, who could possibly measure his merit?

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**044 – Through Inspiring Bodhi Resolve, Superior Merit and Eighth Stage Are Assured**

Through influencing countless beings  
 To generate the bodhi resolve,  
 One’s treasury of merit increases yet more  
 And one becomes bound to gain “the ground of immovability.”

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**COMMENTARY:**

Here we have a bodhisattva possessed of excellent skillful means who first draws in beings through resorting to the four means of attraction. Then, once he knows, "Those beings will now accept my words," he afterwards teaches them in a manner causing them to generate the resolve to gain bodhi.

As for this sort of bodhisattva who, entirely equipped with excellent skillful means, instigates beings to generate the mind resolved on bodhi—his merit becomes so extensive that no one could possibly measure it. Because it has become immeasurable and because he then instigates yet more beings to generate the mind resolved on bodhi, his treasury of merit becomes yet more surpassingly extensive.

When one refers here to a "treasury of merit," it is because one's [reserves of] merit have become inexhaustible. It is because [it is in the nature of such actions that] they are able to cause [one's merit] to become so endless that it does indeed become "inexhaustible."

As for "the ground of immovability," it is termed "ground of immovability" because, once one reaches it, [his mind and its resolve] can no longer be moved. Because the bodhisattva herein has caused others to generate the mind resolved on bodhi, in life after life, his own resolve to gain bodhi remains unshakable and is never lost. It is on account of instigating others to generate the mind resolved on bodhi that [these actions of] his own mind become the cause for reaching "the ground of immovability," [the eighth of the ten bodhisattva grounds].

**045 – Turning the Dharma Wheel and Stilling Heterodoxies Makes a Merit Treasury**

Where one follows in turning what the Buddha turned,  
The wheel of the supreme Dharma,  
Thus clearing away all of the "noxious thorns,"  
This creates the bodhisattva's treasury of merit.

**COMMENTARY:**

When one follows along in turning the wheel of the supreme Dharma, following the example of the Buddha, the Bhagavān, in the Deer Park at Varanasi where the rishis dwelt—this too creates a treasury of merit.

This "following along in turning [the wheel of Dharma]" corresponds to three circumstances involving preservation, explanation,

and cultivation in accordance with the Dharma in the profound sutras brought into the world by the Tathāgata to set forth the emptiness teachings:

1) Where one preserves such sutras so as to prevent their disappearance, this is the first type of “following along in turning the wheel of Dharma.”

2) Where, for the sake of beings capable of retaining them, one provides analytic explanations as one expounds [the Dharma taught in these sutras], this is the second type of “following along in turning the wheel of Dharma.”

3) Where one cultivates [the Path] in accordance with the Dharma as set forth in those sutras, this is the third type of “following along in turning the wheel of Dharma.”

As for “clearing away all those ‘noxious thorns,’” the Buddha taught that “noxious thorns” refers specifically to the erroneous views of non-Buddhists and also to the actions of evil demons and denizens of the desire realm’s sovereign independence heavens who abhor the prospect of beings gaining liberation.

It could be as well that, in the midst of the four-fold assembly, there are unorthodox persons proclaiming non-Dharma to be Dharma, proclaiming what doesn’t conform to the moral codes to be in conformity with the moral codes, and proclaiming that not taught by the Guru to have been taught by the Guru. These are what make up the “noxious thorns” within the Buddhist domain.

In a manner consistent with Dharma, one should vanquish individuals of this sort [in doctrinal debate], shattering their arrogance and demolishing their views, thus causing [the torch of] Dharma to blaze brightly on. This is what is meant by “clearing away the noxious thorns.” Through doing away with such “noxious thorns,” one establishes the bodhisattva’s treasury of merit.

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**046 – Where One Is Willing to Suffer the Hells for Beings, Bodhi Is at Hand**

Where, to benefit beings and make them happy,  
 One would endure even the sufferings of the great hells,  
 How much the more the other lesser sufferings,  
 It is as if bodhi lay in the palm of one’s own right hand.

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**COMMENTARY:**

This refers to instances where the bodhisattva dons the durable armor [of patience], works constantly to promote the benefit and

happiness of beings, generates intensely diligent resolve, and, in order to bring about the liberation of all beings, is able to endure unflinchingly even the ordeal of passing through kalpas of bitter suffering in the great *avīci* hells, how much the more the other lesser sufferings.

When a bodhisattva is able to endure even such sufferings as these, one should realize that is as if bodhi already lay in the palm of his own right hand.

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047 – Where Actions Are Selfless, Altruistic, and Compassionate, Bodhi Is at Hand

Where whatever one does, it is not for one's self,  
But solely to benefit beings and make them happy—  
Because this all arises from the great compassion,  
It is as if bodhi lay in the palm of one's own right hand.

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COMMENTARY:

When the bodhisattva initiates any endeavor such as giving, because it arises from the great compassion, it is solely for the sake of benefiting and bringing happiness to beings while also being aimed at instigating those beings to gain nirvāṇa. It is never for the sake of creating even the slightest sort of pleasure for himself.

Thus such people are also possessed of the great compassion. One should realize then that, for a person of such greatness, it is as if bodhi has already arrived in the palm of his own right hand.

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THE BODHI-GENERATING POWER OF THE FULLY-DEVELOPED SIX PERFECTIONS

048 – Where Wisdom, Vigor, and Giving Are Transcendent, Bodhi Is at Hand

Where wisdom is such that one abandons frivolous discourse,  
Where vigor is such that one abandons indolence,  
And where giving is such that one abandons miserliness,  
It is as if bodhi lay in the palm of one's own right hand.

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COMMENTARY:

**Question:** *Dāna* (giving) and the other pāramitās were already explained earlier. Why are they now explained yet again?

**Response:** The earlier explanation was primarily for the benefit of those taking up the cultivation of these practices. Now, however, they are described in reference to those possessing the light of wisdom associated with that patience in which no phenomenon's [intrinsic existence] is deemed apprehensible.<sup>65</sup>

It is because they have realized the singular character of the Path that their wisdom demonstrates abandonment of all frivolous disputation. It is because they do not set aside the yoke [of the bodhisattva practices] that their vigor demonstrates abandonment of all indolence. It is because they have gotten rid of covetousness that their giving demonstrates abandonment of all miserliness.

One should realize that, for a bodhisattva of this sort, it is as if bodhi has come to rest in the palm of his own right hand.

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**049 – Where Meditation, Moral Virtue, and Patience Are Perfected, Bodhi Is at Hand**

Where meditation is such that one is free of reliances or ideation,  
Where morality is such that its practice is perfect and unmixed,  
And where patience is such that one realizes non-production,  
It is as if bodhi lay in the palm of one's own right hand.

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**COMMENTARY:**

In a case where a bodhisattva has perfected dhyāna pāramitā, this meditative absorption does not rely upon anything in the three realms. It is quiescently still in character and is devoid of any contemplative ideation.

Also, one's observance of *śīla* is perfect, so much so that one's practice involves no adulteration [by the defilements] and no turbidity. [The merit of such practice] is dedicated to bodhi and [the precept practice itself] becomes invulnerable to any diminishment in quality.

Moreover, once one has well perfected prajñāpāramitā, one abides in the unproduced-dharmas patience even in the midst of dharmas produced through conditioned arising.

Due to the supremacy of the foundations, [such bodhisattvas] become unretreating [in their practice]. One should realize that, [for a practitioner of this sort], it is as if bodhi has come to rest in the palm of his own right hand.

**Question:** It has already been explained how those bodhisattvas established in cultivation or possessed of the unproduced-dharmas patience have collected their merit fields, that accumulation of merit through which they become able to realize bodhi. How then is it that the bodhisattvas who have only just brought forth the initial resolve are able to accumulate the merit field, this aggregation of merit by which they become able to realize bodhi?

**Response:** (As below...)

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**HOW A BODHISATTVA CREATES THE MERIT ESSENTIAL TO BUDDHAHOOD  
THROUGH PURIFICATION OF BAD KARMA**

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**050 – One Confesses All Bad Deeds in the Presence of All Buddhas**

In the abodes of all who have gained the right enlightenment,  
Now abiding throughout the ten directions,  
I appear there in the presence of them all,  
And completely lay forth all my unwholesome deeds.

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**COMMENTARY:**

One reflects: “I go before all of the Buddhas of the present era throughout the interconnected worlds of the ten directions, going to where, through the power of their original vows, they now abide for the benefit of beings.

“In the presence of all those exemplars of genuine realization, I lay forth all of my karmic offenses: including throughout beginningless cyclic existence on up to the present all transgressions committed in previous lives and the present life; including all transgressions committed myself as well those undertaken by others at my behest; including all transgressions committed by others, but nonetheless joyfully approved of by me; including all transgressions arising through desire, hatefulness, or delusion; and including all transgressions committed through body, mouth, or mind.

“I completely confess and describe all those transgressions I have committed, not daring to conceal any of them. I now vow to cease all such bad deeds forever, and vow to refrain from ever committing them again.”

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**THROUGH ENTREATING THE BUDDHAS TO TURN THE DHARMA WHEEL**

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**051 – One Entreats the Buddhas to Turn the Dharma Wheel**

Where there are buddhas who have realized bodhi  
In those realms throughout the ten directions,  
But they have not yet proclaimed the Dharma,  
I entreat them to turn the Dharma wheel.

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**COMMENTARY:**

One reflects: “Wherever there may be a buddha, a *bhagavān*, who has fulfilled the great vow, who dwells beneath a bodhi tree, who has realized the unsurpassed enlightenment, who abides in stillness with few needs, and who has not yet turned the Dharma wheel for the sake of the world, I shall go there to entreat that buddha, that

*bhagavān*, to set turning the Buddha's Dharma wheel to benefit and bring happiness to the multitude."

This is done out of pity for beings in the world, is done for the members of the Great Assembly, and is done with the wish that benefit and happiness will be bestowed on both gods and men.

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**THROUGH BESEECHING THE BUDDHAS TO REMAIN IN THE WORLD**

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**052 – One Beseeches the Buddhas to Remain in the World**

Wherever there are those possessing the right enlightenment  
Abiding in the present era in the ten directions' realms,  
But now on the verge of relinquishing their lives and actions,  
I bow down my head in reverence, beseeching them to remain.

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**COMMENTARY:**

One reflects: "Wherever there are buddhas, *bhagavāns*, dwelling in the interconnected worlds throughout the ten directions—where they have already gained realization of bodhi, have already turned the Dharma wheel, have already established right Dharma, and have already finished instructing and liberating all of those beings whom they should instruct and bring across to liberation—when they are on the verge of relinquishing their lives and their activities, I shall go there and bow down my head in reverence before those buddhas, those *bhagavāns*, beseeching them to remain for a long time, benefiting and bringing happiness to the multitudes."

This too is done out of pity for beings in the world, is done for the members of the Great Assembly, and is done with the wish that benefit and happiness will be bestowed on both gods and men.

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**THROUGH ACCORDANT REJOICING IN MERIT CREATED BY OTHERS**

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**053 – All Merit Created by Beings Through Giving on Through to Meditation—**

Wherever there may be any beings  
Who, by acts of body, mouth, or mind,  
Have created any merit through giving, moral virtue,  
And so forth, including through cultivation of meditation—<sup>66</sup>

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**054 – Whether Created by Āryas or Common People, I Rejoice in It All**

No matter whether they be āryas or common persons—  
And no matter whether its creation is past, present, or future—  
I am moved to rejoice<sup>67</sup>  
In all of that accumulated merit.

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**COMMENTARY:**

One reflects: "In whatever circumstance beings engage in merit-generating endeavors through giving, moral virtue, or other forms of cultivation, whether such merit arises from body, mouth, or mind, whether it be accumulated in the past, accumulated in the present, or accumulated in the future, whether it be created by the likes of the Śrāvaka disciples, the Pratyekabuddhas, the Buddhas, the Bodhisattvas, the Āryas, or the common people—I accord with and rejoice in all of that merit."

Accordant rejoicing of this sort [especially rejoices as well in that merit which is foremost, that which is paramount, that which is especially distinctive, that which is most superior, that which is supreme in what it subsumes, that which is lovely in its sublimity, that which has no other which stands above it, that which has no equal, and that which is equal even to the unequalled. It is just such accordant rejoicing as this which, then and only then, qualifies as [genuine] accordant rejoicing.

**THROUGH TRANSFERENCE OF MERIT**

055 – I Dedicate All Merit to All Beings That They Might Realize Bodhi

If all of the merit I have created  
 Could be formed into a single ball,  
 I would bestow it on all beings through dedicating it  
 To causing them to gain the right enlightenment.

**COMMENTARY:**

One reflects: "I dedicate all of that merit I have ever accumulated in my interactions with the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, and other persons across the course of my cyclic existence from the beginningless past on forward to the present, including even any merit created through giving a morsel of food to an animal. I dedicate all of that merit, including all of that created through roots of goodness associated with taking the Refuges, roots of goodness based on repentance of transgressions, roots of goodness based on entreating [buddhas to turn the Dharma wheel and remain in the world], and roots of goodness based on accordant rejoicing [in the merit of others]. Were it possible to take all of that merit, measure it out and form it into a ball, I would take [the merit arising from] these roots of goodness and, dedicating it to bodhi, would give all of it to all beings, this with the intention of causing all beings to

realize the unsurpassed right enlightenment and gain the wisdom associated with all-knowledge.”

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**BUDDHA’S OWN ACTS: REPENT, ENTREAT, BESEECH, REJOICE, DEDICATE**

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**056 – To Repent, Entreat, Beseech, Rejoice, and Dedicate Accords with Buddhas’ Acts**

As for these actions I undertake in repenting transgressions,  
 In entreating and beseeching, in rejoicing in others’ merit,  
 And so on, including in dedicating all merit to realizing bodhi—  
 One should realize they accord with all buddhas’ own practices.

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**COMMENTARY:**

Whether it be roots of goodness based on my dedication of merit to bodhi on behalf of beings, roots of goodness based on repentance of transgressions, roots of goodness based on exhortation to turn the wheel of Dharma, roots of goodness based on requesting the Buddhas to extend their lifespans, or roots of goodness based on rejoicing in others’ merit—after measuring it all out and forming it into a single ball—then, just as all past, future, and present buddhas, those bhagavāns, have dedicated merit in the past while on the Bodhisattva Path and will dedicate merit in the future, so too do I now, in the very same way, take all those roots of goodness and dedicate them to bodhi, intending that the roots of goodness thus dedicated might cause myself and all beings to gain realization of the unsurpassed right enlightenment. (Adopting the voice of Nāgārjuna) “I shall now briefly summarize this”:

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**057 – To Repent, Entreat, Beseech, Rejoice, and Dedicate Accords with Their Teachings**

These acts of confession and repentance of my bad karmic deeds,  
 Of entreating the Buddhas, of rejoicing in others’ merit,  
 And so on, including dedicating all merit to realizing bodhi—  
 These all accord with teachings set forth by the Victorious One.

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**COMMENTARY:**

As for these acts such as confession and repentance of one’s bad karmic deeds, such as requesting buddhas to turn the Dharma wheel, such as requesting them to remain with extended lives for a long time, such as rejoicing in others’ merit, and such as the dedication of merit—because they are in accord with the past deeds [performed by the Buddhas] in their own dedication of merit to bodhi [and so forth], they conform to the teachings as they were presented

by the Victorious One (*jina*). Hence one carries out [just such actions and] just such dedication of merit oneself.

**Question:** How should one go about [carrying out such acts], including such dedication of merit?

**Response:** (As below...)

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**THE CORRECT CEREMONIAL PROCEDURE FOR PERFORMING THESE DEEDS**

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058 – Thrice Daily, Thrice Nightly, Kneeling with Shoulder Bared, Palms Together

Kneeling down with the right knee touching the ground  
 And the upper robe arranged to bare one shoulder,  
 Three times each day and three times each night,  
 Press the palms together and proceed in this manner.

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**COMMENTARY:**

Having bathed, one should don clean robes, wash one's hands and feet, and arrange the robe so that it hangs even all around. Then, having arranged the upper robe so that the [right] shoulder is bared, bring down the right knee so that it touches the floor, place the palms together, abandon all discriminating thought, and focus the mind so that one abides in a single-minded mental state.

This may be done before a stupa dedicated to the Tathāgata or may be done before his image. Alternatively, it may be done by visualizing in a manner whereby one lays hold of and arranges the objective conditions [in the visual field of the mind's eye] so that the Buddha appears as if abiding in empty space directly before one. Then, having engaged in this mental act, proceed as described above, performing these acts [of repentance and so forth until we come to dedication of merit] three times each day and three times each night.

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059 – Merit From But a Single Instance of This Would Be Incalculably Immense

The merit created in even a single instance of doing this,  
 If manifest in material form, would be so immense  
 That even a Ganges' sands of great chiliocosms  
 Would still be unable to contain it.

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**COMMENTARY:**

Regarding the above-described six-times-daily dedication of merit [along with its associated practices of repentance and so forth], were one to analyze the merit created through but a single instance

of performing this act, the Buddhas, the Bhagavāns, have described it as they themselves have observed its reality, explaining that, were one to give that merit a physical form whereby it became like a heap of grain kernels, that accumulation of merit would be boundlessly large in its volume. Thus, although one might attempt to place it within a number of great trichiliocosms equaling the sand grains of the Ganges River, it would so completely exhaust those bounds that they would be unable to contain it.

Because one performs this dedication of merit employing an amount of merit equal in scope to the entire realm of empty space, even in a single instance of such an act of dedication, there would still be a leftover accumulation of merit equal to what was just described. How much the more so would this be the case in multiple instances of performing such an act of merit dedication.

Thus, although one might be a bodhisattva who has only recently generated the initial resolve to gain bodhi, due to the power inherent in such an act of merit dedication, one still creates a huge measure of merit. Consequently, because one draws upon such an accumulation of merit, one gradually becomes able to achieve the realization of bodhi.

**Question:** Now that the skillful means used by bodhisattvas in the creation of a massive amount of merit have already been explained, if one wishes to guard this merit, what skillful means should one employ?

**Response:** (As below...)

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**RIGHT BODHISATTVA PRACTICES AND PERILOUS KARMIC ERRORS TO BE AVOIDED**

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**060 – Revere and Cherish Minor Bodhisattvas As One Respects Guru and Parents**

Having brought forth the initial resolve,  
 In relations with minor bodhisattvas,  
 One should bring forth for them veneration and cherishing  
 Comparable to that felt for the Guru and parents.

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**COMMENTARY:**

If initial-resolve bodhisattvas wish to preserve both their own roots of goodness and their own persons, they should raise forth thoughts of the most ultimate veneration and cherishing respectfulness in all relations with other initial-resolve bodhisattvas, bringing forth toward them an attitude comparable to that maintained toward the Bhagavān, the Master of All-knowledge, and toward

their own birth parents. Having thus taken those other initial-resolve bodhisattvas as the first object of concern, they should then also raise forth just such thoughts of ultimate veneration and cherishing respectfulness toward all other bodhisattvas as well.<sup>68</sup>

Were one to act in a manner varying from this, one's very own person could become destined for destruction along with all of one's previously-established roots of goodness. This is just as stated in the scriptures by the Bhagavān himself when he stated, "I see no other single dharma so effective in obstructing a bodhisattva and completely destroying all of his roots of goodness as the act of generating hateful thoughts toward other bodhisattvas." Thus, even though a bodhisattva might have already accumulated a hundred kalpas' worth of roots of goodness, because of this thought of hatefulness toward other bodhisattvas, all of that merit becomes utterly destroyed.

It is for this reason that one should bring forth thoughts of profound veneration for bodhisattvas, thoughts which are comparable to those reserved for the Guru.

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**061 – Don't Discuss a Bodhisattva's Faults; Utter Only Truth-Based Praise**

Although a bodhisattva may have committed transgressions,  
 One should still not speak about them,  
 How much the less so where there is no truth to the matter.  
 One should utter praises only where they are grounded in truth.

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**COMMENTARY:**

If a bodhisattva speaks disparagingly of persons who practice the Great Vehicle by describing their karmic transgressions, thus causing them to gain a bad reputation, all of his own good dharmas accumulated across the course of lifetimes become entirely destroyed. One then finds it impossible to bring about the growth of pristine dharmas.

Therefore, although there may be bodhisattvas or the likes of them who have committed various forms of karmic transgressions, one should not discuss those matters in a way that reveals them to others, this in order to protect the life of one's own roots of goodness. How much the less might one do so in instances where there is no actual truth to such matters. The care one adopts in these circumstances is comparable to that observed regarding the crimes of a king.

An example of this principle is described in a sutra: There once was a bodhisattva named “Pure Livelihood,” one whose conduct was beyond criticism. Even so, a bhikshu named “Dharma” claimed falsely<sup>69</sup> that he had committed evil deeds. As karmic retribution, the bhikshu suffered seventy kalpas of punishments in the hells and then underwent sixty thousand additional lifetimes of continually being reborn in poverty, blind, mute, and covered with loathsome leprosy sores.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, in one’s interactions with bodhisattvas, no matter whether or not they have fallen into karmic offenses, one must always refrain from spreading rumors about them. And only when such persons actually do possess meritorious qualities should one proclaim such matters to others. This behavior is observed for the sake of the growth of one’s own roots of goodness and also for the sake of allowing other people to develop faith.

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**062 – To Prevent Retreat from Bodhi, Show the Way, Promote Vigor, Inspire Delight**

Where someone has vowed to become a buddha  
 And one wishes to prevent his retreat from that resolve,  
 Reveal the way with such clarity he brims with intense vigor,  
 And cause him to be filled with delight.

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**COMMENTARY:**

Suppose there is a being who has already generated the vow to seek bodhi and one wishes only to prevent him from retreating from his resolve, yet some other person affected by delusion, hatefulness, covetousness or partisanship has approached him, saying: “What is the use in cultivating for such a long time the difficult practices of the bodhisattva conduct? The bliss of their nirvāṇa is so similar as to be uniformly equal to what we promote. Practice the Śrāvaka-disciple practices to gain swift realization of nirvāṇa.”

After those promoting such positions have spoken, one should describe the karmic fruits of practice. If one uses all sorts of analogies to make manifest the meritorious qualities of one who gains buddhahood, causing these matters to penetrate his consciousness, it is this which serves to “reveal the way with clarity.”

If one causes him to become full of vigor in the bodhisattva practices, it is this which amounts to causing him to “brim with intense vigor.” Wishing to cause that vigor to enhance the swiftness of his progress, one describes to him the meritorious qualities of the right

enlightenment, including the matter of great spiritual powers. It is this which "causes him to be filled with delight."

It is via these means that one may influence someone to refrain from abandoning his resolve to gain bodhi.

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**063 – Don't Claim Buddhas Didn't Utter the Profound Sutras; Retribution is Severe**

Where one hasn't yet understood extremely profound scriptures,  
 One must not claim they were not spoken by a buddha.  
 If one makes statements of this sort,  
 One suffers the most bitter and horrible of karmic retributions.

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**COMMENTARY:**

"Extremely profound scriptures," refers to teachings spoken by the Buddha on emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness, teachings dispensing with countless extreme views such as annihilationism and eternalism, teachings demolishing the concept of any inherent nature in a self, others, beings, or a life, and those teachings revealing the Tathāgata's great spiritual powers and rare qualities.

Where one has not yet developed a realization-based knowledge of such scriptures and moral codes, one must not, relying on one's own delusions, claim, "These were not spoken by a buddha. Why would a buddha, a *bhagavān*, speak in this way?" If one does so and thus slanders scriptures spoken by the Tathāgatas, one reaps the most horribly bitter of karmic fruits.

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**064 – Not Even the "Non-intermittent Offenses" Can Compare to These Two Offenses**

If the karmic offenses generating "non-intermittent" retributions  
 Were all put together to form a single ball  
 And were compared to one formed from the above two offenses,<sup>71</sup>  
 They would not amount to even the smallest fraction thereof.

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**COMMENTARY:**

In the *Irreversible Wheel Sutra*, the Bhagavān described the offenses associated with the five types of non-intermittent karmic retributions,<sup>72</sup> taking as examples: the karmic offense of cutting short the lives of all beings in a great trichilocosm; the offense of demolishing or burning down all *caityas* erected after the passing into cessation of a Ganges sands number of buddhas, *bhagavāns*; and the offense of creating an obstruction to [the manifestation of] the Dharma eye of all buddhas of the past, future, and present.<sup>73</sup>

Suppose that one were to take all such karmic transgressions and collect them together [as a single entity]. Then suppose that one generated a fixed view regarding profound sutras one hadn't understood and claimed they weren't spoken by a buddha, while also [incurring the karmic offense of] causing one equipped with the bodhi vow to retreat from their resolve to realize bodhi.

If one were to take the karmic offenses associated with these latter two acts and make a comparison, the former mass of offenses which generate the five types of non-intermittent retribution would not amount to even a hundredth part, not to a thousandth part, and so forth, even to the point that it would not amount to a numerable fraction, a *kalā*-based fraction, a calculable fraction, a fraction describable only by analogy, or an *upaniṣad*-based fraction [of the karmic offenses associated with these latter acts].

Due to the character of these karmic offenses and the need to guard one's own person and one's own roots of karmic goodness, one must not commit either of these two types of karmic offenses.

**Question:** Now that the means by which a bodhisattva preserves his roots of goodness have already been explained, what is the ultimate truth to which cultivation of the Path is devoted?

**Response:** (As below...)

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#### THE THREE GATES TO LIBERATION

##### 065 – One Should Cultivate the Three Gates to Liberation

One should skillfully cultivate  
The three gates to liberation:  
The first is emptiness, the next is signlessness,  
And the third is wishlessness.

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#### COMMENTARY:

As the bodhisattva herein practices the *prajñāpāramitā*, he should cultivate the three gates to liberation. At the very beginning, he should cultivate the “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) gate to liberation, this for the sake of refuting all views. The second is the “signlessness” (*ānimitta*) gate to liberation which is undertaken to eliminate seizing upon discriminations or thoughts intent on manipulating objective conditions. The third is the “wishlessness” (*apraṇihita*) gate to liberation taken up to facilitate stepping completely beyond the desire realm, form realm, and formless realm.<sup>74</sup>

**Question:** Why are these referred to as “gates to liberation”?

**Response:** (As below...)

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**THE BASES FOR THE DESIGNATIONS: EMPTINESS, SIGNLESSNESS, WISHLESSNESS**

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066 – Dharmas Are “Empty” of Inherent Existence, Hence Signless, Hence Wishless

Because they have no self-existent nature, phenomena are empty. If already empty, how could one establish any characteristic signs? Since all characteristic signs are themselves in a state of cessation, What could there be in them that the wise might wish for?

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**COMMENTARY:**

Because dharmas are produced from [a mere conjunction of] conditions, they are devoid of any inherent nature of their own. This is what we refer to as “emptiness” [of inherent existence].

Because [dharmas] are empty [of inherent existence], the mind refrains from [imputation-based] seizing upon objective conditions. Hence [dharmas] are “signless.”

It is on account of having abandoned all [mental imputation of] characteristic signs that one finds there is nothing to provoke any wishes. [Hence dharmas are said to be “wishless.”]

Then again, given that dharmas are only “produced” from [subsidiary] conditions, then its [supposed] “inherently existing nature” is not produced [in the first place]. Because its “inherent nature” is not produced at all, that dharma is “empty” of inherent existence.

If a dharma is “empty,” there are no signs abiding in it. Because such signs are devoid of any existence, [that dharma] is “signless.”

If that dharma is devoid of any signs, then the mind finds nothing in it upon which it might rely. Because it has nothing upon which it might rely, the mind finds nothing anywhere in the three realms for which it might wish. [Hence we speak of “wishlessness.”]

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**BODHISATTVA USE OF EXPEDIENTS TO RESTRAIN NIRVĀṆA WHILE ON THE PATH**

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067 – As These Tend Toward Nirvāṇa, Focus on the Causes Leading to Buddhahood

When cultivating the mindful awareness of these,  
One draws close to those paths leading into nirvāṇa.  
Do not bear in mind anything not resulting in a buddha's body  
And, in that matter, one must not allow any negligence.<sup>75</sup>

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**COMMENTARY:**

When one cultivates these three gates to liberation, if one fails to exert restraining control through the use of skillful means, one

draws close to entering nirvāṇa. Although one should cultivate [these gates to liberation], one must not fall into a circumstance conducive to entering those other [paths to] nirvāṇa. One should strive to realize that patience wherein nothing whatsoever is apprehensible even as one continues to abide in the artful exercise of skillful means.

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**068 – Resolve to Abstain from Nirvāṇa; Rather Ripen the Perfection of Wisdom**

“In this matter of nirvāṇa,  
I must not immediately invoke its realization.”  
One should initiate this sort of resolve,  
For one must succeed in ripening the perfection of wisdom.

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**COMMENTARY:**

One generates just this sort of thought: “I shall bring about the benefit and liberation of all beings. Although I shall cultivate the three gates to liberation, I still must refrain from opting for the ultimate realization of nirvāṇa.

“Thus, as I strive to train in the prajñāpāramitā, my cultivation of these three gates to liberation should be done with the exclusive aim of ripening [my development of the prajñāpāramitā]. Consequently, although I should cultivate emptiness, I must still avoid opting for the ultimate realization of emptiness. I should cultivate signlessness, but still should avoid opting for the ultimate realization of signlessness. I should cultivate wishlessness, but still should avoid opting for the ultimate realization of wishlessness.”

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**069 – The Great Bodhisattva Is Like the Skillful Archer Keeping His Arrows Aloft**

Just as an archer might shoot his arrows upwards,  
Causing each in succession to strike the one before,  
Each holding up the other so none are allowed to fall—  
Just so it is with the great bodhisattva.

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**COMMENTARY:**

This is analogous to a hypothetical instance wherein a well-trained archer might release his arrows into the sky in succession, continuously releasing them so that each succeeding arrow supports the one before. As those arrows grow more numerous, they hold themselves up in the sky so that none are allowed to fall back down to the ground.

**070 – Even in Realizing Emptiness, the Mind's Arrows Never Fall to Nirvāṇa's Ground**

Into the emptiness of the gates to liberation,  
 He skillfully releases the arrows of the mind.  
 Through artful skillful means, arrows are continuously held aloft,  
 So none are allowed to fall back down into nirvāṇa.

**COMMENTARY:**

In this fashion, this bodhisattva, this great archer, through his training and cultivation in the use of the bow of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness—having released arrows of the mind into the emptiness of the three gates to liberation and having also used the artful skillful means arrows of compassionate pity for beings—continues on releasing them into the emptiness of the three realms. He thus causes his mind's arrows to be suspended [in that sky] and so does not allow them to fall back down into the city of nirvāṇa.

**Question:** Why does he continue to prevent his mind from falling down into nirvāṇa?

**Response:** (As below...)

**071 – One Makes the Altruistic Vow and Thenceforth Accords Therewith**

"I shall not forsake beings,  
 But rather shall continue on for the sake of benefiting beings."  
 One first initiates this very sort of intention,  
 And thenceforth ensures that his practice corresponds thereto.

**COMMENTARY:**

[The bodhisattva reflects]: "In an instance where I have already skillfully ripened my cultivation of the three gates to liberation, I might wish to just go ahead and seize nirvāṇa just as if it already lay here in the palm of my hand. However, because these child-like common people are [just as helpless] as if they were still being nursed, they are unable to make their way to the city of nirvāṇa on their own. Because they have not yet gained nirvāṇa, it is not right that I alone be able to enter nirvāṇa.

"Accordingly, I should draw upon the practice of vigor and thenceforth, in all that I do, my actions should be motivated solely by the intention to benefit all beings while also working to facilitate their eventual nirvāṇa."

First, one should initiate actions in this way. Next, even as the mind abides in the three gates to liberation, one acts accordingly,

acting in a manner directly corresponding [to that stated resolve]. “Proceeds accordingly” here simply refers to “thenceforth acting accordingly.”

If one fails to proceed in this fashion [wherein one resolves to act solely for the welfare of all beings], when one practices the three gates to liberation, the arrows of one’s mind will immediately fall back down into the liberation sought by the Śrāvaka-disciples or the Pratyekabuddhas, this because one’s mind is not controlled by such skillful means.

Now there are yet more skillful means approaches [to follow in Nāgārjuna’s ensuing text].

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**072 – Beings Abide in Attachment, Cherishing Inverted Views Caused by Delusion**

There are beings who have become inured to attachment  
 Throughout time’s long night and in present actions as well.  
 Their coursing in inverted views regarding characteristic signs  
 Is in every case due to confusion wrought by delusion.

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**COMMENTARY:**

Throughout the long night of beginningless cyclic existence the child-like common people and all beings have remained attached to the four inverted views, this on account of confusion wrought by delusion. Thus they take the impermanent to be permanent, the suffering to be pleasurable, the impure to be pure, and non-self to be self, even to the point that, in the sphere of the inward and outward aggregates, sense realms, and sense bases, they reckon the existence of a self, appurtenances of a self and hold the opinion that there exists something which might be gained. Having carried on in this way throughout time’s long night, they still carry on this way even on into the present.

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**073 – Speak Dharma to Eliminate Attachments to Marks and Inverted Views**

For those attached to marks and holding inverted views,  
 One explains the Dharma so such errors might be eliminated.  
 One first generates this very sort of resolve,  
 And thenceforth ensures that his practice corresponds thereto.

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**COMMENTARY:**

On account of the confusion wrought by delusion, all beings such as these generate the two types of reckoning attaching to the

existence of a self and appurtenances of a self. Additionally, in the midst of forms and other such phenomena wherein nothing whatsoever exists, they erroneously generate discriminations, seize upon their aspects, and develop the four types of inverted views.

[One resolves:] "I shall proclaim Dharma for their sakes, thus influencing them to eliminate [these errors]." Having first initiated this sort of resolve, one proceeds thereafter in cultivating the directly corresponding practices even as one courses in the three gates to liberation. If one strays from this approach in one's cultivation of the three gates to liberation, then one draws close to that path leading directly into nirvāṇa.

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**074 – Bodhisattvas Help Beings, yet Perceive No Beings, and in This Are Inconceivable**

The bodhisattva benefits beings  
 And yet does not perceive the existence of any being.  
 This in itself is the most difficult of all endeavors  
 And is such a rarity as to be inconceivable.

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**COMMENTARY:**

The bodhisattva's raising forth of the idea of a "being" is in itself the most difficult and inconceivable of phenomena. It is as unprecedented as being able to paint a mural in empty space. At the level of the ultimate truth (paramārtha), there are basically no "beings" at all. This bodhisattva does not course in any awareness of them and does not even apprehend them as existent entities. Nonetheless, for the sake of bringing benefit and happiness to beings, he proceeds with the diligent practice of vigor. With the sole exception of the great compassion, where could there be any other endeavor so difficult as this?

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**075 – Though Realizing Definite Stage and Gates to Liberation, One Avoids Nirvāṇa**

Although one may have entered "the right and definite position,"  
 And one's practice may accord with the gates to liberation,  
 Because one has not yet fulfilled one's original vows,  
 One refrains from proceeding to the realization of nirvāṇa.

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**COMMENTARY:**

We should reflect upon the situation of a bodhisattva who has reached "the right and definite position."<sup>76</sup> This right and definite position is reached through reliance on thirty-two dharmas.<sup>77</sup> One

might ask: “During that time when he has already reached the right and definite position, when his level of practice is entirely in accord with the gates to liberation, could it be that, before having fulfilled his original vows, he might go ahead and opt for the ultimate realization of nirvāṇa or not?”

The Bhagavān stated in the sutras, “Even supposing that the four great elements themselves might be changed into something completely different, there is still not the slightest possibility that a bodhisattva who has entered the right and definite position might take up the ultimate realization of nirvāṇa during that interim period prior to fulfillment of his original vows.” Therefore, so long as a bodhisattva who has reached the right and definite position has not yet fulfilled his original vows, he will not take up the ultimate realization of nirvāṇa.<sup>78</sup>

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**076 – Prior to Definite Stage, As One Fulfills Vows, Skillful Means Restrain Nirvāṇa**

Where one has not yet reached “the definite position,”  
One holds himself back through the power of skillful means.  
Because one has not yet fulfilled his original vows,  
In this case too, he refrains from realization of nirvāṇa.

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**COMMENTARY:**

As for the initial-resolve bodhisattva who hasn’t yet reached the right and definite position, because he holds himself back through artful use of skillful means as he cultivates the three gates to liberation and during the time he’s not yet fulfilled his original vows, he too refrains from realization of nirvāṇa.

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**077 – One Rejects Yet Faces Cyclic Existence, Has Faith in but Abstains From Nirvāṇa**

Though one abides in the ultimate renunciation for cyclic existence,  
He nonetheless confronts cyclic existence directly.  
Though one maintains faith and happiness in nirvāṇa,  
He nonetheless turns his back on realization of nirvāṇa.

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**COMMENTARY:**

Through the three types of blazing vigor, the bodhisattva should develop the most ultimate degree of renunciation for cyclic existence.<sup>79</sup> Still, one should not develop a state of mind inclined to run away from and avoid cyclic existence. Rather, one should instead develop a contemplation viewing beings as if they were one’s very

own children, thus enabling the capacity to face cyclic existence directly.

One should also develop that faith and happiness in nirvāṇa which looks on it like a home offering shelter and protection. Even so, one should turn one's back on the ultimate realization of nirvāṇa, this for the sake of perfecting the wisdom of all-knowledge.

If one has developed renunciation for cyclic existence, then one will also maintain faith and happiness in relation to nirvāṇa. If one fails to confront cyclic existence directly and fails also to turn one's back on the ultimate realization of nirvāṇa, then even before having fulfilled one's original vows, while cultivating the gates to liberation, one will proceed with realization of nirvāṇa.

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**078 – Dread But Don't End Afflictions; Block Them to Gather Good Karma**

One should dread the afflictions,  
But should not end the afflictions.  
To gather the manifold forms of goodness, one should  
Use blocking methods to fend off afflictions.

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**COMMENTARY:**

Because they are the cause of cyclic existence, one should indeed dread the [negative influence of] afflictions. However, one should not bring a complete and final end to afflictions. If one cuts off afflictions completely, one cannot succeed in accumulating the provisions essential to bodhi. Hence the bodhisattva uses blocking and controlling methods to fend off the afflictions.

It is through fending off the afflictions and thus rendering them powerless that one succeeds in accumulating the roots of goodness comprising the provisions essential for bodhi. It is through collecting such roots of goodness that one fulfills one's original vows and thence becomes able to reach realization of bodhi.

**Question:** Why does one not deliberately destroy the afflictions by cutting them off entirely?

**Response:** (As below...)

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**079 – A Bodhisattva Is Better Served by Afflictions than by Nirvāṇa**

For the bodhisattva, afflictions accord with his nature.  
He is not one who takes nirvāṇa as his very nature.  
It is not the case that the burning up of the afflictions  
Allows one to generate the seed of bodhi.

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