

**Part Six:**

**THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM**

**(Chapters 29-30)**



# THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM

By Ārya Nāgārjuna

## Chapter 29: On the Meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom

**Sutra text:** It is through refraining from attachment to any dharma that one should perfect *prajñāpāramitā* (the perfection of wisdom).<sup>1</sup>

### Exegesis text:

#### I. ON THE MEANING OF THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM

##### A. PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ DEFINED

##### 1. QUESTION: WHAT IS MEANT BY “PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ”?

**Question:** What is meant by “*prajñāpāramitā*”?

##### 2. RESPONSE: THE BODHISATTVA’S REALITY-COGNIZING WISDOM

**Response:** All bodhisattvas, from the time of first bringing forth the resolve to realize bodhi (enlightenment), seek to gain the “knowledge of all modes” (*sarva-ākāra-jñatā*).<sup>2</sup> In the interim period, that wisdom which knows in accordance with reality the true character of dharmas (*dharmatā*)<sup>3</sup> is what qualifies as “*prajñāpāramitā*.”

##### 3. CHALLENGE: BUT THAT IS NOT ULTIMATE AND SHOULD NOT QUALIFY

**Question:** If that is the case, then it ought not to be referred to as “*pāramitā*.” Why? Because they have not yet reached to the limits of wisdom.

##### 4. RESPONSE: THIS DESCRIBES THE CAUSE IN TERMS OF ITS EFFECT

**Response:** The wisdom realized by the Buddha is genuinely “*pāramitā*” (perfected). Because the cause itself is “*pāramitā*,” the practice of the bodhisattva also qualifies as “*pāramitā*.” This is because, in the sphere of the causes, one speaks in terms of the fruit [which they bring forth].

Within the mind of a Buddha, *prajñāpāramitā* changes in name and is referred to then as the “knowledge of all modes.” Because in the bodhisattva’s practice of wisdom he seeks to [perfect it by] “bringing it across to the other shore,” it is referred to as “*pāramitā*.”<sup>4</sup> Because the Buddha has already “brought it across to the other shore,” it is then referred to as “the knowledge of all modes.”

##### a. CHALLENGE: BODHISATTVAS HAVE IMPURITIES AND IMPERFECT WISDOM

**Question:** The Buddha has already cut off all afflictions (*kleśa*) and habitual propensities (*vāsanā*) and has purified the eye of wisdom (*prajñā-cakṣus*). He should therefore have already realized the true character of dharmas in accordance with reality. The true character

of dharmas is just [as perceived with] *prajñāpāramitā*. The bodhisattva has not yet exhausted all outflow-impurities (*āsrava*). His eye of wisdom has not yet been purified. How then could he succeed in realizing the true character of dharmas?

b. RESPONSE: THEY HAVE ALREADY ENTERED AND HENCE QUALIFY

1) ANALOGY: JUST AS WHEN ENTERING THE SEA TO VARYING DEPTHS

**Response:** This meaning will be extensively discussed in a later chapter. Now it shall only be discussed in brief. It is comparable to when a person enters the sea. There are those who have just begun to enter it. Then again, there are those who have gotten entirely to the bottom at its deepest point. Although there are differences in depth, they are both described as having “entered” it. It is just the same with Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In the case of the Buddha, he has reached to the very bottom of it. The bodhisattvas have not yet cut off all afflictions or habitual propensities. Because their strength is less, they are unable to enter deeply.

2) ANALOGY: JUST AS WITH LAMPS OF VARYING BRIGHTNESS

As stated in a later chapter, this is analogous to a case where one person lights a lamp in a dark room which illuminates all of the material objects such that one is entirely able to distinguish between them. Then yet another large lamp is introduced which increases even more the clarity of visible detail. When this happens, one realizes that the darkness dispersed by the latter lamp dwelt together in the company of the prior lamp. Although the prior lamp dwelt together with a measure of darkness, still, it was nonetheless also able to illuminate things. Then again, if there had been no darkness with the prior lamp, then the later lamp would have afforded no increased benefit.

The wisdom of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas is just the same as this. Although the wisdom of the bodhisattva does coexist with afflictions and habitual propensities, still, it is nonetheless able to achieve a realization of the true character of dharmas in just the same manner as the prior lamp was still able to illuminate things. The wisdom of the Buddhas has put an end to all afflictions and habitual propensities and so has also achieved realization of the true character of dharmas in just the same manner as the later lamp was doubly bright in the degree of its illumination.

c. QUESTION: WHAT IS MEANT BY THE “TRUE CHARACTER OF DHARMAS”?

**Question:** Just what is meant by “the true character of dharmas”?

d. RESPONSE: THE IRREFUTABLE, ETERNALLY-ABIDING, NONCOMPOSITE, ETC.

**Response:** When each person speaks of “the true character of dharmas,” he takes his own position on the matter as constituting what is genuine. The “true character” of which we speak here is beyond refutation. It is eternally abiding, undifferentiated, and not such as anyone can create.

e. CITATION: BUDDHA’S STATEMENT TO ŚĀRIPUTRA

It is as described by the Buddha to Śāriputra in a later chapter [of the Sutra], “When the bodhisattva contemplates all dharmas, they are perceived as neither permanent nor impermanent, neither suffering nor blissful, neither self nor non-self, neither existent nor nonexistent, and so forth, and yet he still does not actually [intentionally have to] carry out such a contemplation.”

This is what is meant by the bodhisattva’s practice of *prajñāpāramitā*. The meaning of this is such that it involves the relinquishing of all [intentionally-initiated] contemplations, the extinguishing [of the utility] of any words or speech, and the transcendence of all actions undertaken by the mind. From its very origin on up until the present, it has been neither produced nor destroyed and has been characterized by being like nirvāṇa. The character of each and every dharma is precisely thus. This is what is meant by the “true character of dharmas.” This is as described in a verse in praise of *prajñāpāramitā*:

B. A VERSE IN PRAISE OF THE PERFECTION OF WISDOM

The *prajñāpāramitā*

Is a dharma conveying reality, not an inverted view.

Conceptual contemplations have been dispensed with.

The dharma of words and speech has been extinguished as well.

An incalculable number of offenses have been gotten rid of.

The pure mind is constantly unified.

If one is such a venerable and marvelous person,

Then one is able to perceive *prajñā*.

Like empty space, it is devoid of stains,

It is free of frivolousness and involves no words.

If one is able to contemplate in this manner,

This is identical to seeing the Buddha.

If, in accord with Dharma, one contemplates the Buddha,

And *prajñā*, and nirvāṇa,

These three are found to be singular in characteristic.

In their reality, there is no difference.

The Buddhas as well as the Bodhisattvas  
 Are able to bring benefit to all.  
 Prajñā serves as a mother to them.  
 It is able to give birth to and raise them.  
 The Buddha serves as the father of beings.  
 Prajñā is able to give birth to the Buddha.  
 This being so, it serves for all  
 As the grandmother of beings.  
 Prajñā is a singular dharma.  
 The Buddha speaks forth all sorts of names.  
 According with the strengths of beings,  
 He establishes for them different designations.  
 If a person realizes prajñā,  
 All thoughts of dialectical discourse are extinguished.  
 This is comparable to when the sun rises.  
 All at once, the morning dew is made to disappear.  
 The awesome qualities of prajñā  
 Are able to move two kinds of people.  
 The one who is devoid of wisdom is frightened.  
 The one possessed of wisdom is delighted.  
 If one realizes prajñā,  
 He then becomes a master of prajñā.  
 He is not attached to anything within prajñā,  
 How much the less to any other dharma.  
 Prajñā has no coming from anywhere,  
 Nor does it have any going to anywhere.  
 For one who is wise, in any place  
 He seeks for it, he is still unable to find it.  
 If one does not perceive prajñā,  
 This then is to be in bondage.  
 If one does perceive prajñā,  
 This, too, qualifies as bondage.  
 If a person perceives prajñā,  
 This then is the gaining of liberation.  
 If one does not perceive prajñā,  
 This, too, is the achievement of liberation.  
 This phenomenon is one which is rare,  
 It is extremely profound and greatly renowned.  
 Like something magically conjured,  
 It is perceived, yet imperceptible.

For the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas,  
 For the Śrāvakas and the Pratyekabuddhas,  
 The path of liberation and nirvāṇa,  
 In every case, is gained from prajñā.

The verbal discourse is for the common people of the World,  
 And is engaged in on account of pity for all.  
 Employing false names, he speaks about dharmas.  
 Although he speaks, he still does not speak.

The *prajñāpāramitā*  
 Is comparable to a great fiery blaze.  
 It cannot be grasped from any of four sides.  
 In it there is neither grasping nor non-grasping.

All grasping has already been relinquished.  
 This is what is meant by its being “ungraspable.”  
 It is ungraspable, and yet one grasps it.  
 It is just this that is meant by “grasping” it.

Prajñā is characterized by indestructibility.  
 It goes beyond all words and speech.  
 Fittingly, it has nothing upon which it depends.  
 Who then could be able to praise its qualities?

Although prajñā cannot become an object of praise,  
 I am able now to proceed with praising it.  
 Although not yet liberated from the mortal ground,  
 One succeeds thereby in moving beyond it.