

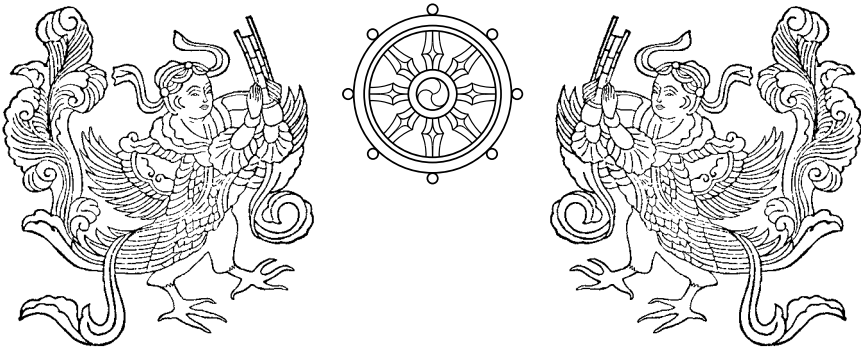
NĀGĀRJUNA
on
THE SIX PERFECTIONS

**An Ārya Bodhisattva Explains
The Heart of the Bodhisattva Path**

Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra
Chapters 17-30

By the Great Indian Buddhist Patriarch, Ārya Nāgārjuna

Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



KALAVINKA PRESS
Seattle, Washington

WWW.KALAVINKAPRESS.ORG

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THE TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The Text

The “six perfections” refers to the perfectly realized practice of giving, moral virtue, patience, vigor, meditative discipline, and world-transcending wisdom. The treatment of the six perfections constituting this text is a fourteen-chapter section from Ārya Nāgārjuna’s long and detailed commentary on the 25,000-line *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sutra*, the title of which I translate as *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa* / T25, No. 1509).

The fact that Ārya Nāgārjuna chose to present his explanation of the six perfections as a contiguous and highly-detailed discussion within his commentary has allowed us to easily draw forth the entire discussion as an independent title. It is my belief that Nāgārjuna’s treatment of the six perfections herein is so subtle and expansive that, at least in breadth and depth of analysis, it likely has no peer anywhere in the extant Buddhist canonical literature.

Although there are other extensive Indian Buddhist treatments of the six perfections in the immense Chinese Buddhist canon (for instance, Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatara*, known in the West as *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*), they did not seem to gain a similar level of acclaim in Chinese Buddhist circles. This may be due to the fact that these other admirable Indian six-perfections expositions were translated later than Nāgārjuna’s or in less accessible translations. Alternatively, this could be due to the fact that Nāgārjuna’s text had already revealed such a highly refined treatment of the six perfections, one which is both metaphysically deep and immensely pleasing in its power to inspire heart-felt and dedicated bodhisattva practice. Yet another factor figuring in the popularity of the *Exegesis* text doubtless lies in Nāgārjuna’s rich interweaving of fascinating moral tales and compelling analogies to illustrate these primary practices fundamental to the bodhisattva’s life.

On Kumārajīva’s Sanskrit-to-Chinese Edition of the *Exegesis*

We owe our opportunity to explore Nāgārjuna’s exposition of the six perfections to the translation efforts of Tripiṭaka Master Kumārajīva, that brilliant and prolific fourth-century Serindian bhikṣu born to an Indian noble and a princess from Kuchā. Kumārajīva left the home life at the age of seven when his mother

became a nun and, with the assistance of monastic tutors, immediately immersed himself in the study of sutras and treatises. At the age of nine, Kumārajīva was taken for continued study to Northern India by his mother and, even at that very young age, began vanquishing learned opponents in debate.

Kumārajīva had apparently already converted to Mahāyāna well before receiving the higher ordination at the age of twenty. He later converted his original guru to the Mahāyāna and then himself became a leader in spreading Mahāyāna teachings in the predominantly Small-Vehicle domain of Serindian Buddhist culture.

When Kumārajīva came to China's Chang'an in 401 CE, it was as a monk whose earlier monastic career was still in close proximity—probably within about 200 years—to the life of Ārya Nāgārjuna. Arriving along with him, perhaps as part of the spoils of the Chinese army's invasion of his native Kuchā, was a copy of Nāgārjuna's *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-upadeśa*). Thanks to Kumārajīva's translation efforts, this expansive and beautiful commentary served as a beacon of Mādhyamika wisdom for ensuing generations of Chinese Buddhists.

Kumārajīva directed a highly-organized imperially-sponsored translation bureau consisting of five hundred monastic editors and scribes. The leading figures in the hands-on translation efforts included Sengrui, Kumārajīva's Sanskrit-literate amanuensis, and Yao Xing, the emperor. Kumārajīva's translation corpus quickly grew to dozens of major sutras and treatises and included the most important shastraic works of Nāgārjuna.

For the Chinese Buddhist literati, this massive exegesis devoted to explaining perfect wisdom was one of the most universally enjoyed of Kumārajīva's translation efforts, not least because it explores so deeply such a broad range of important doctrinal subjects in such a sublime fashion, offering a rich array of fine analogies and stories to buttress its doctrinal discussions. Thus it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that Nāgārjunā's *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* has been one of the most influential texts in all of Chinese Buddhist history in inspiring reverence for the Bodhisattva Path as presented in Mahāyāna emptiness teachings.

The Doctrinal Significance of the Six Perfections

The utter perfection of giving, moral virtue, patience, vigor, meditative discipline, and world-transcending wisdom is a goal exclusive

to practitioners coursing along the Bodhisattva Path and resolved on the realization of buddhahood. As such, it is a distinguishing factor defining Mahāyāna Buddhism and differentiating it from the individual-liberation path to arhatship celebrated in Southern Tradition Buddhism's Pali scriptures.

Although these six perfections are rightfully identified most closely with bodhisattvas and buddhas, Mahāyāna doctrine holds that they also collectively constitute the most crucially important set of spiritual practices for all paths to liberation taught by any buddha. How could this be so? This is because the preservation from one world-cycle to the next of all practice modes and paths of Buddhism is held to depend entirely upon an endless series of fully-realized buddhas making their appearance in the world to reveal anew the entire array of Buddhist teachings.

Realization of buddhahood is based on the six perfections. Hence, because all paths of liberation described in all schools of Buddhism depend on the appearance of fully-enlightened buddhas in successive world cycles, the very survival of Buddhism throughout the endless course of time relies totally on the six perfections. The teaching of all paths of Buddhist liberation originates in each successive world cycle with the appearance of a new Buddha. Without the periodic reappearance of buddhas, there could be no arhats, nor could there be any pratyekabuddhas. (Although pratyekabuddhas gain realizations in the absence of a buddha, it is only through instruction under previous buddhas that they are eventually able to realize enlightenment on their own.) Finally, the doctrine taught by arhats (pratyekabuddhas do not teach) is inadequate to educate bodhisattvas and can never serve as the basis for bringing about the development of bodhisattvas into fully-enlightened buddhas.

Other Canonical Formulations of the Perfections

Those familiar with the various schools of Buddhism will be aware that the "perfections" are discussed in lists of varying enumeration in different Buddhist traditions. For example, a list of "ten perfections" is mentioned in one of the texts of Southern Tradition Buddhism which describes the past-life practices of Shākyamuni Buddha when he was a bodhisattva progressing towards his eventual buddhahood in Northern India a half millennium before Christ. A different list of ten perfections is described in the texts of Northern School Buddhism.

In fact, one may encounter lists of perfections which number as few as four (when identified with the four stations of mindfulness), or two (when identified with compassion and wisdom), or as many as thirty (when the ten perfections are seen as being practiced on three levels). All of these various lists of perfections are simply different condensing or proliferating enumerations of the same six concepts contained within this most common six-fold formulation of the perfections. Hence those other lists of perfections should not be seen as genuinely different from these six perfections describing the primary practices of the bodhisattva coursing on toward the realization of buddhahood.

Nāgārjuna's *Exegesis* in Academic Buddhology

In contrast to the universal praise which it has enjoyed throughout Chinese Buddhist history, Nāgārjuna's *Exegesis* has drawn only a moderate amount of serious interest among western secular scholars. There is one exception to this: Étienne Lamotte's extensively-annotated French translation of the first third of the *Upadeśa*.

Lamotte proved conclusively that (contrary to the opinion of some other scholars) Kumārajīva could not possibly have authored the text. However, Lamotte did eventually convince himself that Nāgārjuna was not the author either. Exploring the matter more deeply, one finds that Lamotte based his doubts on Nāgārjunian authorship primarily on erroneous dating suppositions and fanciful theorizations about the degree to which Nāgārjuna would be familiar with Sarvastivadin doctrine and inclined to refute it. Additionally, Lamotte acceded to erroneous identifications of stanza lines in the text wrongly attributed to Middle Way School patriarchs who are traditionally thought to have lived after Nāgārjuna.

In fact, all arguments presented against Nāgārjunian authorship by Lamotte and by others are easily refuted. Unfortunately, detailed treatment of each of those issues would require more pages than are available here. Suffice it to say that arguments against Nāgārjunian authorship have relied primarily on the silence of documentation in the meagre surviving historical records of Indian Buddhism. This ignores the principle that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." More deeply reflective scholars have admitted that there really is no objective evidence at all which can conclusively disqualify Kumārajīva's attribution of the *Exegesis* to the same Nāgārjuna who authored the *Middle Treatise*.

In considering the issue of authorship, one really should give due consideration to the fact that Kumārajīva was certainly much more deeply familiar with the texts and traditions of Nāgārjuna's lineage than any modern secular or religious scholar, not least because he lived at a time so close to the life of Nāgārjuna himself, studied the Dharma in North India, and lived his early life in the same Central and South Asian religious cultural milieu through which Nāgārjuna's works were spreading. One should notice as well that there are no genuine contradictions in doctrinal content of the *Exegesis* when compared with other known writings of Nāgārjuna.

Translation-Related Issues

Those familiar with Sanskrit antecedents for terms originally rendered into Chinese as two-character compounds will notice that I often default to translating the literal sense of the two component characters in preference to attempting to reconstruct the sense of a putative antecedent Sanskrit term. This stems from a wish to render the text into English in a manner more-or-less accurately reflecting how a Tang Dynasty Chinese Buddhist literatus might have understood it. I believe this is justified in cases such as this where we have no antecedent Sanskrit text serving as an anchor for well-intended but nonetheless conjectural reconstructions of the Sanskrit.

I have made an exception to this translation approach when rendering standard technical terms. In such cases, I have attempted to anchor the translation to Indian Buddhist conceptions of the meaning of the original terms. In an attempt to assist the reader, I have deliberately included many parenthetically-enclosed Sanskrit equivalencies, sometimes from Hirakawa, sometimes from Lamotte, and sometimes from my own reconstruction. This approach has been taken in order to encourage readers to home in on Sanskrit as the *lingua franca* of the Mahāyāna Buddhist technical terminology.

I have generally avoided reading Lamotte's French translation at all so as to avoid accidentally duplicating his not-so-rare translation errors. A notable exception to this stratagem is with regard to a long, highly compressed, and cryptic technical passage in the latter part of Nāgārjuna's treatment of the perfection of dhyāna meditation wherein Lamotte's translation was crucially helpful in untangling text so condensed and so grammatically idiosyncratic as to be unintelligible unless one already knew full well what the author intended. Especially in the case of this important section, I readily

acknowledge a debt of gratitude for Étienne Lamotte's encyclopedic erudition and often superior interpretive skills.

On Outlining, Facing-Page Chinese Text, and Annotation

The outline headings do not originate with the Chinese text. I include in each major doctrinal unit an extensive outline consisting of my own outline headings. These same headings are interwoven into the translation as well. In creating this outline, I cannot pretend to have produced the most perfect reflection of Nāgārjuna's underlying doctrinal architecture. Nonetheless, I felt that it was necessary to add this imperfect interpretive apparatus to facilitate more rapid understanding of Nāgārjuna's immensely complex text.

I have included on *verso* page the *CBETA* Taisho text in traditional and short-form scripts to assist translation-quality assessment and to facilitate others' study of Buddhist Classical Chinese. Bilingual native readers unfamiliar with technical terms and Sanskrit transliterations may find this apparatus helpful to expeditious reading.

Taisho's variant readings from other Chinese editions are included at the end of each section, correlated with the bracketed endnote-numbering embedded in the *verso*-page Chinese text.

My apologies to those who rightfully would have expected more thorough annotation of this translation. I regret that the printer's single-volume page count limitations and my own failing health have limited annotation in this edition to the spur-of-the-moment endnotes composed in the earliest drafts of this translation. Fortunately, extensive helpful annotation is available in Lamotte's French edition: *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna*.

In Summation

Translations of these complex and abstruse texts are vulnerable to translation errors arising from misunderstanding or oversight. Where readers encounter mistakes, I would certainly be grateful for any corrective suggestions potentially improving the quality of later editions. (See the Kalavinka website for email contact address.)

In setting forth this translation, it is my hope that western students of Dharma may be deeply inspired by Nāgārjuna's expansive and lovely exposition of the very heart of the Bodhisattva Path.

Bhikshu Dharmamitra
Autumn, 2008

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