

Part Two:

NĀGĀRJUNA'S STORIES ON MORAL VIRTUE

The Man with the Marvelous Vase

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: The Good Fortune from Observing Precepts

Although one may be poor and of low social station, still, if one is able to uphold the precepts, this is superior to being wealthy or of noble status while yet being a breaker of the precepts.

The fragrance of flowers and the fragrance of the trees is such that one is unable to smell them from afar. The fragrance from upholding the precepts universally pervades throughout the ten directions. The person who upholds the precepts perfects peacefulness and bliss. His name is heard in faraway quarters and he is revered and cherished by both men and gods. In the present life he always achieves all manner of happiness. If he desires wealth, nobility, and long life in the heavens or among people, it is not difficult for him to obtain it. If one is pure in upholding the precepts, he gains whatever he wishes.

Moreover, a person who upholds the precepts observes the precept breaker's suffering and affliction through undergoing punishment, confinement, beating and flogging, knows with respect to himself that he has eternally transcended such vulnerabilities, and is overjoyed on that account.

If a person who upholds the precepts sees a good person gaining a good name, fame, and happiness, in his own mind, he thinks to himself, "In just the same fashion as he has come by a good reputation, I too am bound to gain a measure of that same circumstance." When the life of a person who upholds the precepts comes to an end, when the knife-like wind cuts loose the body, and when the sinews and blood vessels are severed, because he knows that he has upheld the precepts purely, his mind is free of fearfulness. This situation is as described in a verse:

Amidst the disease of great evil,
The precepts are a fine medicine.
In the midst of great fearfulness,
The precepts are a guardian protector.

Within the darkness of death,
The precepts are a bright lamp.
Amidst the wretched destinies,
The precepts serve as a bridge.

Within the waters of the sea of death,
The precepts are a great ship.

Furthermore, the person who upholds the precepts always succeeds in being revered and supported by people of the present era. His mind is blissful and does not experience regret. He has no shortage of either clothing or food. When he dies, he is born in the heavens and then, later, he gains the Buddha Path. For the person who upholds the precepts, there is no matter in which he is not successful. For a person who breaks the precepts, everything is lost.

Story: The Man with the Marvelous Vase

This situation is analogous to that of the man who constantly made offerings to a god. As this man was poverty-stricken, for twelve full years he single-mindedly made offerings seeking to gain wealth and nobility. The god felt pity for this man, manifest himself before him, and asked, "What is it that you seek?"

The man replied, "I'm seeking to gain wealth and nobility. I desire to have it occur that I may obtain everything I wish for."

The god then gave him a vessel known as "the vase of virtue" and told the man, "Everything you need will come forth from this vase."

After the man got it, there was nothing which he wished for that he did not gain. After he acquired the ability to get anything he wished for, he built himself a fine house complete with elephants, horses, and carriages and also came to possess an abundance of the seven kinds of jewels. He gave generously to all of his guests so that they were never wanting in any respect.

One of his guests inquired of him, "You used to be poverty-stricken. How is it that now you have come by such wealth as this?"

The man replied, "I received this celestial vase. The vase is able to put forth all of these different kinds of things. It's on account of this that I have gained such wealth."

The guest asked, "Would you show me the vase and something which it has put forth?"

He immediately brought out the vase. From within the vase, he drew forth all manner of objects. Then, in prideful carelessness, he began to dance about on the top of the vase. The vase was immediately shattered. At the very same time, all of the different sorts of things which it had produced all simultaneously disappeared.

Conclusion

One who upholds the precepts is just like this. He receives all manner of marvelous bliss and there is no wish which he does not realize. If, however, a person breaks the precepts—if he becomes pridefully careless and gives free reign to willfulness—he will become just like this man who broke the vase and lost everything.

Amplifying Discussion on the Good Fortune of the Morally Virtuous

Furthermore, the fragrance of the name of the person who upholds the precepts pervades both the heavens and the human realm in this and later lives. Additionally, the person who upholds the precepts is one to whom people enjoy making gifts, not stinting in giving even their valuable possessions. He does not cultivate worldly profit and yet there is nothing with which he is inadequately supplied. He succeeds in being born in the heavens. He enters the way of the Three Vehicles in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions and so achieves liberation. It is only in a case where all manner of erroneous views figure in one's upholding of precepts that there might be nothing gained later.

Then again, although a person may not have left the home life, if he is able only to cultivate and practice the dharma of the precepts, he too will succeed in being reborn in the heavens. If a person is pure in his upholding of the precepts while also cultivating dhyāna and wisdom, and if he seeks thereby to cross himself over to liberation from the suffering of aging, sickness, and death, this wish will certainly be realized. Although a person who upholds the precepts may not have the protection of military weapons, still, awful events will not befall him.

The wealth of upholding precepts is such that none can steal it away. The upholding of precepts is the most intimate of intimates. Although one dies, one is still not separated from it. The adornment furnished by the upholding of precepts is superior to that of the seven precious things. For these reasons one should be protective of the precepts just as one is protective of one's own body and life and just as one cherishes precious things.

The Merchant Who Lost All but the Most Precious Jewel

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: Contemplations to Restrain Killing

Then again, even if one were able to cause there to be no karmic retributions in later lives, no denunciation by good people, and no detestation by enemies, still, one should not deliberately take another's life. Why? This is a thing which should not be done by those who are good. How much the more is this the case where, in both this life and the next, one encounters the resulting retribution arising from the baseness and evil of one's own offenses.

Furthermore, killing constitutes the most serious of offenses. Why? When a person encounters a life-threatening situation, he will not be sparing of even the most valuable treasures. He takes simply being able to survive as what is primary.

Story: The Merchant Who Lost All but the Most Precious of Jewels

This is exemplified by the case of the merchant who went to sea to gather jewels. When he had just about gotten back from the great sea, his boat suddenly broke apart and the precious jewels were all lost. And yet, he was overjoyed and exultant, throwing up his hands and exclaiming, "I almost lost a great jewel!"

Everyone thought this strange and said, "You lost all your valuable possessions and escaped without even any clothes on your back. How can you joyfully exclaim, "I almost lost a great jewel"?"

He replied by saying, "Among all the jewels, a person's life is foremost. It is for the sake of their lives that people seek wealth. It is not that they seek to live for the sake of wealth."

Conclusion: How Killing is the Worst and Not Killing is Finest

It is for this reason that the Buddha said that among the ten bad karmic actions, the offense of killing is listed first. It is also the first among the five precepts. Even if a person cultivates all sorts of merit, if he still fails to uphold the precept against taking life, there is nothing to be gained from it. Why? Although one may be born into a place of blessings and nobility while also being possessed of strength and the power of an aristocratic background, if, [as retribution for killing], his future lives are not long, who would be able to experience this bliss?

For these reasons, one knows that, among all of the offenses, the offense of killing is the most serious and, among all of the meritorious practices, refraining from killing is foremost. In the world, it

is the preserving of one's own life which is the primary concern. How do we know this? Every person in the world would agree to undergo the physical cruelty of corporeal punishment, including even beating and flogging, in order to spare his own life.

Story: The Butcher's Son Refuses to Kill

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: The Primacy of the Precepts

Question: If it is not a case of my being attacked, then the thought of killing may be put to rest. If, however, one has been attacked, overcome by force, and is then being coerced by imminent peril, what should one do then?

Reply: One should weigh the relative gravity of the alternatives. If someone is about to take one's life, one should first consider whether the benefit from preserving the precept is more important or whether the benefit from preserving one's physical life is more important and whether breaking the precept constitutes a loss or whether physical demise constitutes a loss.

After having reflected in this manner, one realizes that maintaining the precept is momentous and that preserving one's physical life is a minor matter. If, in avoiding peril, one is able only to succeed in preserving one's body, then what advantage is gained with the body? This body is the swamp of senescence, disease and death. It will inevitably deteriorate and decay. If, however, it is for the sake of upholding the precept that one loses one's body, the benefit of it is extremely consequential.

Furthermore, one should consider thus: "From the past on up to the present, I have lost my life an innumerable number of times. At times, I have incarnated as a malevolent brigand, as a bird, or as a beast where I have lived merely for the sake of wealth or profit, or else have engaged in all manner of unworthy pursuits.

"Now I have encountered a situation where it might be for the sake of preserving the precepts of purity. To not be stinting of this body and to sacrifice my life to uphold the precepts would be a billion times better than—and in fact incomparable to—merely safeguarding my body at the expense of violating the prohibitions." In this manner, one decides that one should forsake the body in order to protect the integrity of the pure precepts.

Story: The Butcher's Son Refuses to Kill

For example, there once was a man, a *srota-āpanna*,² who had been reborn into the family of a butcher. He had grown to the threshold of adulthood. Although he was expected to pursue his household occupation, he was unwilling to kill animals. His father and mother gave him a knife and shut him up in a room with a sheep, telling him, "If you do not kill the sheep, we will not allow you to come

out and see the sun or the moon, or to have the food and drink to survive.”

The son thought to himself, “If I kill this sheep, then I will be compelled to pursue this occupation my entire life. How could I commit this great crime simply for the sake of this body?” Then he took up the knife and killed himself. The father and mother opened the door to look. The sheep was standing to one side whereas the son was laying there, already deceased.²

At that time, when he killed himself, he was reborn in the heavens. If one is like this, then this amounts to not sparing [even one’s own] life in safeguarding the integrity of the pure precepts.

Notes

1. A *srota-āpanna* is a “stream-enterer,” or “first-stage arhat.”
2. One should understand that taking one’s own life is a matter not to be taken lightly. For most of us, it would involve psychically depressed circumstances attended by deeply-afflicted and intensely emotional influences. These are conditions which tend to conduce to less fortunate rebirth circumstances. The situation of the *srota-āpanna* was quite different: Because he was a “stream-enterer,” he had already gained the Path at a level where his liberation was guaranteed. He had already moved beyond being affected significantly by the afflictions and he was no longer subject to falling into lower states of rebirth. Because most of us do not enjoy such spiritually-advanced circumstances, it would be better for us to forego taking our own lives while also refusing to kill the sheep.

Kokālika's Slanderous Offense

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: The Inherent Faults in False Speech

Question: What faults are there in false speech?

Response: The person who commits false speech first deceives himself and later deceives others. He takes that which is real as false and that which is false as real. He turns false and real upside down and does not accept good dharmas. He is comparable to an inverted vase into which water cannot flow.

The mind of a person who commits false speech is devoid of a sense of shame or a sense of blame. He blocks off the way to the heavens and the gate to nirvāṇa. One contemplates and realizes the existence of these disadvantages and therefore refrains from engaging in it.

Additionally, one contemplates and realizes that the benefits of true speech are extremely vast. The benefits of true speech naturally come forth from one's self and are extremely easily gained. This is the power of all who have left the home life. Both householders and those who have left the home life possess the benefits of this sort of merit. It is the mark of a good person.

Moreover, the mind of a person whose words are true is correct and straight. Because his mind is correct and straight, it is easy for him to succeed in avoiding suffering. It is just as when pulling forth logs from a dense forest. The straight ones come forth easily.

Question: If false speech entails disadvantages such as these, why then do people engage in false speech?

Response: There are those who are foolish and deficient in wisdom who, when they encounter anguishing difficulties, tell lies as a stratagem to escape them. They do not recognize the manner in which matters unfold. When they commit a transgression in this present life, they do not realize that in a later life there will be an immense retribution resulting from that transgression.

Then again, there are people who, although they are aware of the fact that false speech entails a transgression, nonetheless engage in the telling of lies due to an abundance of greed, hatred or delusion.

Story: Kokālika's Slanderous Offense

Additionally, there are people who, although they are not afflicted with greed or hatred, nonetheless falsely testify to another man's transgression because, in their own minds, they are of the opinion that this is truly the case. When they die, they fall into the hells in

the same manner as did Kokālika, a disciple of Devadatta. He constantly sought to find fault with Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana. At that time, those two men had just come to the end of the summer retreat and so they proceeded to travel about and journey to the various states. Having encountered a great rain storm, they arrived at the home of a potter where they spent the night in a building full of pots.

Before they arrived, unbeknownst to these two, a woman had already gone in and fallen asleep in a darkened part of the building. That night, this woman had an orgasm in her dreams. In the early morning, she went to get water with which to bathe. At this time Kokālika happened to be walking by and took notice of her. Kokālika possessed the ability to know about a person's sex life by observing the countenance. However, he couldn't deduce whether the activity had taken place in a dream state or while awake.

At this time, Kokālika told a disciple, "This woman had sex with someone last night." Then he asked the woman, "Where did you spend the night?"

She replied, "I spent the night in the pottery building."

Next, he asked, "Together with whom?"

She replied, "With a couple of bhikshus." At this time, the two men happened to come out from within the building. After Kokālika had noticed them, he examined their countenances and became convinced in his own mind that the two men were definitely not pure. He had formerly nurtured jealousy toward them. Having now observed this situation, he then proceeded to spread it all about in all of the cities, villages and hamlets. Next, he went to the Jeta Grove where he loudly proclaimed this evil news.

At this time, Brahmā, the King of the Gods, had come wishing to have an audience with the Buddha. The Buddha had entered into a silent room where he was very still, immersed in samādhi. All of the bhikshus, too, had each closed their doors and entered into samādhi. None of them could be roused. Then he thought to himself, "I originally came to see the Buddha. The Buddha has entered samādhi."

He was about to return when he had another thought, "It won't be long before the Buddha arises from meditative absorption. I'll wait here for a little while longer." He then went to the entrance to Kokālika's room, knocked on the door, and then called out, "Kokālika! Kokālika! The minds of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana

are pure and pliant. Do not slander them or you will spend the long night [of your future lifetimes] undergoing suffering.”

Kokālika asked, “Who are you?”

He replied, “I am Brahmā, the King of the Gods.”

He asked, “The Buddha has said that you have realized the path of the *anāgāmin* (third-stage arhat, lit. “never-returner”). Why then have you returned here?”

Brahmā, the King of the Gods, thought for a moment and then uttered a verse, saying:

In wishing to fathom immeasurable dharmas,
One shouldn't then seize on what is mere appearance.
In wishing to fathom immeasurable dharmas,
A boor such as this then will capsize and drown.

After he had spoken this verse, he went to where the Buddha was and set forth the entire matter. The Buddha said, “Good indeed. Good indeed. This verse should be proclaimed straightaway.” At that time, the Bhagavān himself repeated the verse:

In wishing to fathom immeasurable dharmas,
One shouldn't then seize on what is mere appearance.
In wishing to fathom immeasurable dharmas,
A boor such as this then will capsize and drown.

After Brahmā, the King of the Gods, had heard the Buddha proclaim this, he suddenly disappeared and immediately returned to the heavens.

At that time, Kokālika went to where the Buddha was, prostrated in reverence before the Buddha, and then stood off to one side. The Buddha told Kokālika, “The minds of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana are pure and pliant. Do not slander them or you will spend the long night [of future lifetimes] undergoing suffering.”

Kokālika addressed the Buddha, saying, “I don't dare disbelieve the words of the Buddha. However, I saw this clearly with my own eyes. I know definitely that these two men have actually committed impure acts.”

The Buddha rebuked him in this way three times and Kokālika three times refused to accept it. He then got up from his place, left, and then returned to his room. His entire body then broke out in sores. At first they were the size of sesame seeds. Gradually then, they became as big as beans, as big as dates, as big as mangoes, and finally, as big as melons. Then, they all simultaneously broke open,

leaving him looking as if he had been burned by a great fire. He wailed and wept. Then, that night, he died and entered the Great Lotus Blossom Hell. A Brahma Heaven god came and informed the Buddha, "Kokālika has already died."

Another Brahma Heaven god said, "He has fallen into the Great Lotus Blossom Hell." After that night had passed, the Buddha ordered the Sangha to assemble, and then asked, "Do you all wish to know the length of the life in that hell into which Kokālika has fallen?"

The Bhikshus replied, "Pray, please tell us. We wish to hear it."

The Buddha said, "It is as if there were sixty bushels of sesame seeds and then a man came along only once every hundred years and took away but a single sesame seed. If this went on until all of the sesame seeds were gone, the lifespan endured in the Arbuda Hells would still not have come to an end. Twenty Arbuda Hell lifespans equal the lifespan in the Nirarbuda Hells. Twenty Nirarbuda Hell lifespans equal the lifespan in the Aṭaṭa Hells. Twenty Aṭaṭa Hell lifespans equal the lifespan in the Hahava Hells. Twenty Hahava Hell lifespans equal the lifespan in the Huhuva Hells. Twenty Huhuva Hell lifespans equal the lifespan in the Utpala Hells. Twenty Utpala Hell lifespans equal the lifespan in the Puṇḍarīka Hells. Twenty Puṇḍarīka Hell lifespans equal the lifespan in the Mahāpadma Hells. Kokālika has fallen into these Mahāpadma Hells. His tongue is drawn forth and nailed down with a hundred nails where it is plowed by five hundred plows." At that time the Bhagavān set forth this verse, saying:

When a person takes rebirth here,
Hatchets are plunged into his mouth.
The reason for the body's being hacked
Is found in his utterance of evil words.

What should be criticized, he nonetheless has praised.
What should be praised, he nonetheless has criticized.
The mouth thus piles up all manner of evil deeds,
With the result that one is never able to experience any bliss.

The actions of mind and mouth generate evil.
One plummets then into the Nirarbuda Hells.
For a term of fully a hundred thousand lifetimes,
He endures there all manner of excruciating pain.

When one takes rebirth into the Arbuda Hells,
He is bound to endure it for a full thirty-six lives,

And then suffer for yet another additional five lives,
Where in all of them he suffers all manner of suffering anguish.

The mind comes to rely upon erroneous views,
And speaks then in a way destroying the Worthies and Āryas.
In this, it is like that bamboo which, in putting forth its fruit,
Thereby brings on the destruction of its very own physical form.

Conclusion

In just such a manner, the mind generates doubts and slanders. Once they have become rigidly established, they also become manifest in false speech. Thus a person who courses in false speech refuses to believe in or accept even the words of the Buddha. He becomes bound then to undergo punishments just such as these. It is for these reasons that one must refrain from engaging in false speech.

Rāhula's Lesson About False Speech

Then again, a case in point is that of the Buddha's son Rāhula who, being in years but a child, had still not yet understood the importance of taking care with his words. When people would come and ask him, "Is the Bhagavān here, or not?" he would deceive them by saying, "He's not here."

If in fact he was not present, when others would ask Rāhula, "Is the Bhagavān here or not?" he would deceive them by saying, "The Buddha is here."

Someone informed the Buddha about this. The Buddha then told Rāhula, "Get a wash basin, fill it with water, and wash my feet for me." After his feet had been washed, he instructed Rāhula, "Cover this wash basin."

Then, obeying the command, he immediately covered it. The Buddha then said, "Take water and pour it in." After it had been poured, he asked, "Did the water go in or not?"

Rāhula replied, "It did not go in."

The Buddha told Rāhula, "The lies of a person who has no sense of shame or blame cover over his mind so that, in just the same manner, the Dharma of the Path does not enter into it."

Conclusion: Ten Karmic Effects of False Speech

As stated by the Buddha, false speech has ten karmic retributions. What are the ten?

The first is that the breath always smells bad.

The second is that the good spirits depart far from him, whereas the non-humans get their way with him.

The third is that, although he may have instances in which he speaks the truth, people nonetheless do not believe or accept it.

The fourth is that he can never take part in discussions with those who are wise.

The fifth is that he is always slandered and his ugly and foul reputation is heard throughout the land.

The sixth is that he is not respected by others. Although he may issue instructions and orders, people do not accept or follow them.

The seventh is that he is always afflicted with much worry.

The eighth is that he plants the karmic causes and conditions for being slandered.

The ninth is that when his body deteriorates and his life comes to an end, he will then fall into the hells.

The tenth is that if he emerges and becomes a person, he is always slandered.

Three Stories on Lay Versus Monastic Life

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: Lay Life Versus Monasticism

If one neither seizes upon anything nor relinquishes anything, it is then and only then that one acts in correspondence with the practice of Dharma. This is renowned for its difficulty. However, if one leaves the home life, separates from the world of the layperson, cuts off all of the complexity and chaos, and then, with singular purpose, focuses the mind, then cultivating the Path becomes easy.

Moreover, the befuddlement and boisterousness of the householder's life involves many endeavors and much responsibility. It is the root of the fetters and the repository of the manifold ills. This is an extremely difficult situation.

If, however, one leaves the home life, it is analogous to a person being able to go forth into the unpopulated empty wilderness to unify his mind. He is then able to become free of immersion in ideation and mental discursion. Once the inward thoughts have been gotten rid of, the outward matters depart as well. This is as described in a verse:

Leisurely sitting within the forest,
In a state of stillness, one extinguishes the manifold ills.
Calmly and contentedly, one gains unity of mind.
This sort of bliss is not the bliss of the heavens.

People seek after the benefit of wealth and noble status,
For fame, robes, and for fine furnishings.
This sort of pleasure is not peaceful or secure.
One seeks after benefit, but finds no satiation.

The one of patchwork robes travels about seeking alms,
Whether moving or still, his mind is always unified.
He spontaneously employs the eye of wisdom
To contemplate and know the reality of all dharmas.

Among all the different types of Dharma methods,
All are entered through equanimitous contemplation.
With understanding and wisdom, the mind abides in stillness.
Throughout the three realms, nothing is able to equal this.

For these reasons, one should know that, having left the home life, cultivating the precepts and practicing the Path become easy.

Additionally, if one leaves the home life and cultivates the precepts, one achieves the complete perfection of an incalculable number of aspects of good moral conduct. For these reasons, members of the lay community should leave the home life and take the complete precepts.

Story: Jambukhādaka's Questions to Śāriputra on Monasticism

Then again, within the Dharma of the Buddha, the particular dharma of leaving the home life is the one which is the most difficult to cultivate. This is as alluded to in the questions of the brahmacārin Jambukhādaka to Śāriputra, wherein he asked, "What is most difficult within the Buddha's Dharma?"

Śāriputra replied, "Leaving behind the home life is difficult."

He also asked, "What are the difficulties involved in leaving the home life?"

He replied, "To leave behind the home life and find bliss in Dharma is difficult."

"If one succeeds in finding bliss in Dharma, then what beyond this is difficult?"

"To cultivate all good dharmas is difficult."

For these reasons, one should leave behind the home life. Moreover, when one leaves behind the home life, the king of the demons becomes frightened and worried, saying, "The fetters of this man are about to become scant. He will certainly gain nirvāṇa and thus fall in among the members of the Sangha Jewel."

Story: The Bhikshuni Utpalavarnā's Promotion of Monasticism

Also, although among those persons who have left the home life in the Dharma of the Buddha there are those who may happen to break the precepts and fall into offenses, when those offenses are done away with, they will then succeed in gaining liberation. This is as discussed in *The Sutra on the Jātaka of Bhikshuni Utpalavarnā*.

When the Buddha was in the world, this bhikshuṇi gained the six superknowledges and arhatship. She made a practice of going into the households of the aristocracy where she constantly praised the tradition of leaving the home life. She spoke to the wives and daughters of the nobility, saying, "Sisters, you could leave behind the home life."

The aristocratic wives and daughters would reply, "We are young and strong. Our countenances and physical forms are full and beautiful. It would be difficult to uphold the precepts. It might happen that we would break the precepts."

The Bhikshuni replied, "Just go ahead and leave the home life, anyway. If it happens that you end up breaking the precepts, then so it is: You break them."

They responded, "If we break the precepts, we'll fall into the hells. How could it be conceivable that they might be broken?"

She replied, "If it happens that you end up falling into the hells, then you fall."

The wives and daughters of the nobility all laughed at this, saying, "When one falls into the hells, one undergoes punishments. How could one even contemplate a situation where one might fall?"

The Bhikshuni replied, "I recall that in a previous life I was an actress who put on all sorts of costumes and played traditional parts. There were times when I would put on the robes of a bhikshuni in order to amuse the audience. On account of this causal basis, at the time of Kāśyapa Buddha I was actually able to become a bhikshuni. However, on account of my aristocratic birth and beauty, I became arrogant and then broke the restrictive prohibitions. On account of the offenses of breaking the precepts, I fell into the hells wherein I underwent all manner of punishment as retribution.

"When I had finished undergoing retribution for those offenses, I was able to encounter Shakyamuni Buddha and leave the home life again, whereupon I gained the six superknowledges and the way of the arhat. For this reason, one should be aware that if one leaves home and takes the precepts, although one may happen to break the precepts, still, on account of the causal basis inhering in taking the precepts, one is bound to succeed in gaining the way of arhatship.

"However, if one merely does evil things, but yet does not have the causal basis of having taken the precepts, then one will not gain the Path. Thus, in the past, I have fallen into the hells in many lifetimes. Then, upon coming forth from the hells, I would become an evil person, and when this evil person died, I would go right back into the hells again. Thus, in every one of those instances, I gained nothing whatsoever as a result."

Now, on account of this, we can verify and thus realize that if one merely leaves home and takes the precepts, although one may eventually break the precepts, still, on account of this causal basis, one eventually becomes able to gain the fruits of the Path.

Story: An Inebriated Brahman Becomes a Monk

Then again, this is exemplified by that time when the Buddha dwelt in Jetavana and a drunken brahman came to the Buddha and

requested to become a bhikshu. The Buddha ordered Ānanda to administer tonsure and outfit the man in Dharma robes. When the brahman awoke from his inebriation, he was startled and amazed that he had suddenly turned into a bhikshu. He immediately ran off.

The other bhikshus then inquired of the Buddha, "Why did the Buddha permit this drunken brahman to become a bhikshu?"

The Buddha replied, "Even in innumerable eons, this brahman has never thought to leave the home life. Now, due to his inebriation, he briefly generated a feeble intention to do so. On account of this causal basis, he will later be able to leave behind the home life and succeed in gaining the Path."

Concluding Statement on Lay Life versus Monasticism

For causal reasons such as these, one can see that the benefits of leaving the home life involve incalculable merit. Hence, although the members of the lay community do possess the five precepts, they cannot be compared to leaving the home life.

Buddha's Dragon Life as the Perfection of Moral Virtue

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: *Śīla Pāramitā* Defined

Question: We are already aware of the characteristics of *śīla*. What is it that constitutes *śīla pāramitā*?

Response: There are those who say that when the bodhisattva upholds the precepts and would rather lose his physical life than damage minor precepts, it is this which constitutes *śīla pāramitā*. As described in the previously-cited Sutra of King Sutasoma, one does not spare even one's own physical life in order to preserve the integrity of the restrictive precepts.

Story: Buddha's Past Life as a Dragon

For example, in a former life the Bodhisattva was a greatly powerful poisonous dragon. Whenever any being came to stand before him, in the case of those who were physically weak, if he so much as gazed upon them, they would die on the spot. As for those who were physically strong, if he breathed on them, they would die.

This dragon had taken the one-day precepts. He left his dwelling seeking quietude and had gone into the forest. He had been sitting in contemplation for a long time, became tired and lax, and then had fallen asleep. It is the way of dragons that when they fall asleep their bodies become in appearance like a snake. His body had patterns on it which were composed of the various colors of the seven precious things.

Hunters noticed him and, both startled and delighted, said, "Wouldn't it be appropriate to take this skin, so rare and difficult to come by, and then offer it up to the King of our country that he might use it as an adornment for his robes?" They then held its head down with a staff and used a knife to strip away its skin.

The dragon thought to himself, "My strength is such that, were I only to wish it, turning this entire country upside down would be as easy as turning over one's hand. These people are but little things. How could they be able to put me in difficult straits? Because I am now upholding the precepts, I shall relinquish all regard for this body. I should just follow along with the instructions of the Buddha."

And so he remained patient while this was going on, kept his eyes as if asleep, and refrained from gazing upon them. He held his breath and, out of pity for these men, kept himself from breathing. For the sake of upholding the precepts, he single-mindedly endured

the peeling away of his skin, and did not develop any thoughts of regret.

Then, having lost his skin, his bare flesh rested directly on the ground. It was in a season where the sun was very hot. He slithered along through the dirt desiring to make his way to a large body of water. He then observed all of the little insects which came to eat his body. At that point, for the sake of upholding the precepts, he did not dare to move any more.

He thought to himself, "Now I'll make a gift to the insects of this body. For the sake of the Buddha Path, I will now make a gift of this flesh so as to fill up their bodies. Later, when I have achieved buddhahood, I will employ the giving of Dharma to benefit their minds."

After he had made this vow, his body dried up and his life was cut off. He was then immediately reborn in the second of the Trāyastriṃśa heavens. At that time, the poisonous dragon was Shakyamuni Buddha. In the present era, those hunters manifest as Devadatta and the six [non-Buddhist] masters. The little insects were the eighty-thousand gods who gained the Path when Shakyamuni Buddha first turned the wheel of Dharma.

Conclusion: Extended Explanation of the Perfection of Moral Virtue

The bodhisattva guards the precepts and does not spare even his own physical life in doing so. He is decisive in this and has no regrets. When his endeavors are of this sort, this constitutes *śīla pāramitā*.

Then again, when the bodhisattva upholds the precepts, for the sake of the Buddha Path, he makes a great vow, "I will certainly cross over beings, will not seek the pleasures of this or later lives, will not do it for the sake of fame or the dharmas of an empty reputation, and will not do it for the sake of seeking an early nirvāṇa for myself. I will do it solely for the sake of beings who are submerged in the long-continuing flow [of the river of cyclic existence], who are cheated by affection, and who are deceived by their own delusion. I will cross them over and cause them to reach the other shore."

He single-mindedly upholds the precepts and so is reborn in a good place. Because he is reborn in a good place, he meets good people. Because he meets good people, he develops wisdom. Because he develops wisdom, he succeeds in practicing the six *pāramitās*. Because he succeeds in practicing the six *pāramitās*, he gains the

Buddha Path. When one upholds the precepts in this manner, it is this which constitutes *śīla pāramitā*.

Moreover, when the bodhisattva upholds the precepts, that mind which takes pleasure in goodness is pure. It is not motivated by fear of the wretched destinies nor by a desire to be reborn in the heavens. He seeks to achieve purity characterized by goodness. Through causing the precepts to permeate his mind, he influences his mind to find pleasure in goodness. It is this which constitutes *śīla pāramitā*.

Moreover, the bodhisattva employs the mind of great compassion in his upholding of the precepts and thus succeeds in arriving at the Buddha Path. It is this which constitutes *śīla pāramitā*.

A Coyote Makes His Escape

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: Śīla's Generation of Renunciation

How is it that if one upholds the precepts one then produces vigor? The person who upholds the precepts gets rid of negligence (*pramāda*). Through one's own power, one earnestly cultivates the unsurpassed dharma. One relinquishes the pleasures of the world and enters into the path of goodness. One resolves to seek nirvāṇa for the sake of all. One possesses a great mind and is not lazy and so takes seeking buddhahood as what is fundamental. This is how upholding the precepts is able to produce vigor.

Moreover, the person who upholds the precepts becomes weary and abhorrent of the sufferings of the world and the calamities of aging, sickness, and death. His mind generates vigor and the resolve that he will certainly seek his own liberation while also bringing about the deliverance of others.

Story: A Coyote Makes His Escape

This is analogous to the case of the coyote who lived in the forest and, as a means of surviving, relied on following along after the lions, tigers and leopards, seeking after the meat from their leftover carcasses. There was a period of time when there was a shortage of food for him and so in the middle of the night he slipped into the city and made his way deep into a man's household. He was seeking for meat but did not find any.

He fell asleep in a screened-off spot and, unaware that the night had already ended, awoke, startled, frightened, and at a loss for what to do. If he tried to run out, he figured he would be unable to save himself, but if he remained, he feared he would fall victim to the pain of death. He then fixed his mind on laying there on the ground, pretending to be dead.

Many people came to see. There was one man who said, "I have need of the ears of a coyote." He then cut them off and took them away.

The coyote thought to himself, "Although it hurts to have one's ears cut off, still, the body is allowed to survive."

Next, there was a man who said, "I have need of the tail of a coyote." He then cut that off as well and then departed.

The coyote next thought, "Although it hurts to have one's tail cut off, still, it's a minor matter."

Next, there was a man who said, "I have need of a coyote's teeth."

The coyote thought, "The scavengers are becoming more numerous. Suppose they were to take my head. If they did, I would have no way to survive." He then sprang up off the ground and, arousing his intelligence and strength, suddenly bolted for a narrow exit, thereby straightaway succeeding in saving himself.

Conclusion: The Practitioner's Self-Exhortation to Realize the Path

In seeking liberation from the trials of suffering, the mind of the practitioner is just like this. When old age arrives, he may still find reason to forgive himself and may still be unable to be diligent, earnest, and decisive in the application of vigor. It may be just the same when encountering sickness. Because there is still hope for a cure, he may still be unable to be resolute in carrying out his strategy.

But when death is about to arrive, he realizes that there is no further hope. He is able to dare to be decisive and diligent in devoting himself mightily to the cultivation of vigor. Then, escaping from the spot where death is upon him, he finally succeeds in reaching nirvāṇa.

A Deceased Guru Disguised

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: On the Nonexistence of Beings

Question: It is definitely the case that beings exist. Why do you say that they are nonexistent? It is based on the causes and conditions of the five aggregates that the dharma of a being exists. This is analogous to the case of the causes and conditions of the five fingers generating the dharma of a fist.

Response: This statement is wrong. If the dharma of a being exists in the causes and conditions of the five aggregates, then, aside from the five aggregates themselves, there exists some separate "being" dharma. However, no such thing can be found. The eye itself sees forms. The ear itself hears sounds. The nose smells fragrances. The tongue knows flavors. The body knows tangibles. The intellectual mind faculty knows dharmas as objects-of-mind. They are all empty and devoid of the dharma of a self. Apart from these six [sense-based] phenomena, there is no additional "being."

On account of inverted views, the non-Buddhists claim that when the eye is able to see forms, this involves a being and so forth until we come to when the mind is able to know dharmas, this involves a being. Additionally, they claim that when one remembers and when one is able to undergo suffering and pleasure, these circumstances involve a being. However, they simply create this view. They do not have any direct knowledge of anything genuine associated with this "being."

Story: A Deceased Guru Disguised

This is analogous to the case of an old, senior, and very venerable bhikshu. People were of the opinion that he was an arhat. They brought many offerings. Later on, he became ill and then died. Because the disciples were alarmed that they would lose the offerings, they surreptitiously removed him during the night and in that place where he had been laying down, they arranged blankets and pillows, causing it to appear as if their master was present, but merely lying down. People came and asked about his illness, inquiring "Where is the Master?"

The disciples replied, "Don't you see the blankets and pillows on the bed?" The gullible ones did not investigate into it. They believed that the master was lying down with illness, went ahead and presented large offerings, and then left. This happened more than once.

Next, there was a wise person who came and asked about him. The disciples replied in the same way. The wise person said, "I did not ask about blankets, pillows, beds, or cushions. As for myself, I'm looking for a person." He then threw back the covers, looking for the master. In the end, there was no person who could be found.

Conclusion

Apart from the characteristic features of the six [sense-based] phenomena, there is no additional self or person beyond that. This [absence of genuine reality] is equally true in the case of a "knower" or a "perceiver."