

Part Four:
NĀGĀRJUNA'S STORIES ON VIGOR

The Buddha's Proclamation on the Power of Vigor

Then again, for example, when Ānanda was discoursing on the seven limbs of enlightenment (*bodhyaṅga*) for the sake of the Bhikshus, he came to the "vigor" limb of enlightenment whereupon the Buddha then asked Ānanda, "Are you explaining the vigor limb of enlightenment?"

Ānanda replied, "I *am* explaining the vigor limb of enlightenment."

And so this continued with three such inquiries and three such responses, whereupon the Buddha got up from where he had been sitting and spoke to Ānanda, saying, "If a person is able to cherish and take pleasure in cultivating vigor, there is no endeavor in which he will not be successful. He will succeed in arriving at the Buddha Path and in the end, his efforts will not have been in vain."

Based on all sorts of causes and conditions such as these, one contemplates the benefits of vigor and succeeds in making it increase.

Concluding Discussion on the Nature and Aspects of Vigor

Vigor of this sort was referred to by the Buddha at some times as being "zeal" (*chanda*), at some times as being "vigor" (*vīrya*), and at some times as being "non-negligence" (*apramāda*). This may be exemplified by the case of man who is about to travel far. At the beginning when he is desirous of leaving, this is referred to as "zeal." When, having begun his journey, he does not stop, this constitutes "vigor." When he is able to exhort himself and so not allow his journey's endeavors to be delayed, this constitutes "non-negligence."

From this, one can know that zeal generates vigor. Because vigor has been brought forth, one remains non-negligent. Because one is non-negligent, one is able to bring forth all dharmas up to and including the Buddha Path.

Furthermore, the bodhisattva who wishes to gain liberation from birth, aging, sickness, and death while also desiring to cross over beings to liberation should constantly be vigorous and should be single-minded in his non-negligence. He should be like the man who was able to carry a bowl of oil through a great crowd [without spilling a drop]. Because he was able to manifest single-mindedness and non-negligence, he gained great fame and benefit.

This is also just like when traveling on an extremely precipitous and difficult route: Whether one uses suspended ropes or rides on a mountain goat, on all such bad pathways as these, it is on account

of being single-minded and non-negligent that one succeeds in preserving one's physical safety while also being able in this very life to gain great fame and benefit.

The vigor employed in seeking the Path is just the same. If one is single-minded and non-negligent, he gains everything he seeks.

A Lazy Monk Discovers the Value of Vigor

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: On the Value of Vigor

Then again, just as flowing water is able to cut through a huge boulder, so to it is with the non-negligent mind. If one engages in focused cultivation of skillful means which one constantly carries forward and does not desist from, then one will be able to smash the mountain of the afflictions and fetters.

Moreover, the bodhisattva engages in three sorts of analyses: "If I do not do this, then I will not gain the resultant reward. If I don't do it myself, then it shall not come from someone else. If I do accomplish this, then it will never be lost." When one contemplates in this way, then he will certainly become vigorous and, for the sake of the Buddha Path, shall diligently cultivate, shall remain focused and attentive to detail, and shall avoid falling into negligence.

Story: A Lazy Monk Discovers the Value of Vigor

This is exemplified by the case of a minor *aranya* (hermitage) dweller who sat alone in dhyāna meditation in the forest and became lazy. There was a spirit in the forest who was a disciple of the Buddha who entered the skeleton of a corpse and came forth singing and dancing and then uttered this verse:

Little bhikshu in the forest,
Why have you become lazy and neglectful?
If when I come in the daytime, you do not fear me,
I will come again like this at night.

This bhikshu was shocked and frightened, took up his sitting again, and then carried on with his internal contemplation. In the middle of the evening he fell back to sleep. This spirit manifested again with ten heads each spewing fire from its mouth, each with fangs like swords, and each with eyes as red as flames. He spoke gravely, followed after, and then seized this lazy bhikshu, saying, "You should not be lazy in this place! Why are you being this way?"

This bhikshu was filled with great terror and immediately resumed his contemplations. He became focused and precise in his mindfulness of the Dharma and consequently gained the path of arhatship.

Concluding Discussion on the Nature and Value of Vigor

This is what is meant by forcing oneself to become vigorous. Through the power of being non-negligent one is able to gain the

fruition of the Path.

Moreover, in this practice of vigor, one does not cherish his own body but rather cherishes the resultant retribution. One is constantly diligent and vigorous in the four physical postures of sitting, lying down, walking, and standing. One would rather lose his own body than diminish the quality of his path-associated karma.

This is analogous to when a fire has gotten out of control and one throws a vase full of water at it. One only bears in mind the idea of putting out the fire and so does not continue to cherish the vase. This principle is also exemplified in the verse spoken by a rishi in instructing his disciple:

The mind which is resolute experiences pleasure.
It's just as when garnering great rewards
Or when something wished for is finally gained.
It is then that one realizes this is the most marvelous thing.

Focusing on all sorts of reasons such as these, one contemplates the benefits of vigor and is able thereby to cause one's vigor to increase and become enhanced.

The Buddha's Past Life as a Fiercely Vigorous Guide

Nāgārjuna's Preamble: On the Five Characteristics of Vigor

Question: What are the characteristics of vigor?

Response: With regard to endeavors, one has the attitude that he is certainly able to succeed. In taking them up, one finds no difficulty. One's determination and intentions are solid and strong. One's mind is free of weariness. Whatever is engaged in is carried through to the end. These five factors constitute the characteristics of vigor.

Then again, according to what the Buddha said, the marks of vigor consist in the body and mind not resting.

Story: The Buddha's Past Life as a Fiercely Vigorous Guide

This is as exemplified by Shakyamuni Buddha in a previous life when he was the leader of a group of merchants. He led the merchants into a precipitous and difficult place. There was a *rākṣasa* ghost there who blocked their way with his hands, saying, "You must stop. Don't move. I will not permit you to go."

The leader of the merchants then hit him with his right fist. The fist immediately stuck to the ghost such that he was unable to pull it away. Next, he hit it with his left fist and was also unable to pull it away. He kicked him with his right foot and it, too, became stuck. Next he kicked it with his left foot and then the same thing happened. He used his head to butt it, whereupon it immediately became stuck in just the same way.

The ghost asked, "Now that you are in this fix, what do you propose to do now? Has your mind given up or not?"

He replied, "Although I continue to be bound up in these five ways, my mind will never be forced to cease by you. I will use the power of vigor to carry on the fight with you. I'm determined not to retreat."

At that point the ghost felt delighted and thought, "This man's really got guts." He then told the man, "Your power of vigor is immense. You definitely won't give up. I'll turn you loose and allow you to leave."

Concluding Discussion on the Characteristics of Vigor

The practitioner is just like this. With respect to good dharmas, in the beginning, middle, and end of the night he recites scriptures, sits in dhyāna meditation, and seeks [realization of] the true character

of dharmas. He is not covered over by the fetters and he does not become lazy in either body or mind. These are the characteristics of vigor.

The Buddha's Past Life as King of a Deer Herd

Nāgārjuna's Introduction

Then again, when with respect to all dharmas, one is able to succeed in bringing them to completion while not stinting one's body or life, this constitutes vigor on the part of the body. While seeking to develop all of the types of dhyāna absorptions and wisdom, one's mind refrains from indulging any laziness or weariness, this constitutes vigor on the part of the mind.

Story: The Buddha's Past Life as King of a Deer Herd

Moreover, as for vigor on the part of the body, one takes on all manner of hardship through diligence yet never succumbs to laziness or diminishment of one's endeavors. This is as told [in the *jātaka* tale of] Brahmadata, the king of the state of Vārāṇasī. He was roaming and hunting in the wilderness forests where he saw two deer herds. The herds each had a ruler and each herd had five hundred deer.

One of the rulers [of the deer] was in color like the seven jewels. This was Shakyamuni as a bodhisattva. One ruler [of the deer] was Devadatta. The bodhisattva deer king observed a great mass of followers of the human king killing his clan, brought forth the mind of great compassion, and went directly before the King.

The King's men sought to shoot it [as it drew closer]. The flying arrows fell like rain. After the King saw that this deer was advancing fearlessly straight toward him he ordered all of his followers, "Halt your bows and arrows. Don't interfere with his intentions in coming forth."

When the king of the deer had arrived, he knelt and addressed the king of the humans, saying, "On account of what for your Lordship is but a minor matter of unrestrained pleasure in the enjoyment of sport, the [entire] herd of deer at once becomes vulnerable to the suffering of death. How would it be if instead we regularly offered for his meals, in accord with our own sequence, one deer each day as an offering to the kitchen of the King?" The King approved of his words and permitted it to be as he intended.

At this point the two rulers of the deer herds convened a great meeting to determine the order by which they would be sent. Each took responsibility for insuring that one of their herd would be sent forth each day in accord with the proper order.

Within the deer herd of Devadatta there was at this time a doe pregnant with a fawn which came and addressed her ruler, saying,

“Today I personally should be sent forth to die. However I am pregnant with a fawn. It is not the case that it is the fawn’s turn to go. I beg that you will dispense your calculations in a way whereby whosoever dies does so in proper order while still preventing the unborn from becoming involved.”

The King of that herd of deer became angry at her and said, “Who does not cherish his own life? When the sequence comes up, one just goes. How could there be any withdrawing from it?”

The mother deer thought, “My king is not humane. He does not extend empathy in accord with principle. He will not countenance my withdrawal and so suddenly becomes enraged. He is not worthy of hearing my case.” She then immediately went to the bodhisattva [deer] king and laid out completely her sentiments.

The [deer] king asked this doe, “What did your lordship say?”

The doe said, “My lord is not humane. He has not seen fit to apply his imagination to managing this matter but rather has become enraged at me. Because the great king’s humanity extends to everyone, I came here to seek refuge. Although heaven and earth are vast, today those such as myself have no place to present our case.”

The bodhisattva [deer] thought, “This is extremely pitiable. If I do not bring order to this matter, there will be the unprincipled slaughter of her fawn. If it is not done according to sequence and through a change in order [death] were to fall upon one whose turn has not yet come, how could such a one be sent off? There is only myself who would be appropriate to take her place.” When his consideration of the matter had been decided, he immediately went along himself, dispatching the mother deer to return [to the herd], saying, “I am now going to substitute for you. You have nothing to worry about.”

The deer king went directly to the gate of the King. When the group of people there saw him they were amazed that he himself had come and so told the King of this matter. The King, too, was amazed at it and so ordered that he be brought forward. He then inquired, “Have the deer all come to an end? Why is it that you yourself have come?”

The deer king said, “The humanity of the great King has extended to the entire herd of deer. Among men there are none who have transgressed it. There is only flourishing. How could there be a time when they would come to an end?”

“I have come because there is a doe pregnant with fawn within

the other herd. As the fawn is due to be born soon, when this doe should be put to death, the fawn, too, would share the same fate. She took refuge in me, telling me of her plight. It is on account of this that I took pity on her.

“Nor could I allow a change in the sequence such that it would fall on one who should have no part in it. If she were to take refuge in me and I were to fail to rescue [her fawn], I would be no different from a tree or a stone. This body will not endure long [in any case]. It is certain that one cannot avoid death.

“To bring forth loving-kindness and rescue one from suffering and misery results in measureless merit. If a person has no loving-kindness, then he is no different from a tiger or a wolf.”

When the King heard these words he immediately arose from his throne and uttered a verse, saying:

In truth it is I who am the beast
 Who may be called a deer with the head of a man.
 Although you have the body of a deer,
 You may be called a man with the head of a deer.

To speak of it according to the principle,
 It is not by one's form that one is human.
 If one is able to possess loving-kindness and generosity,
 Although one may be a beast, in truth one is a human.

For my own part, beginning with this very day,
 I shall no longer eat any sort of flesh.
 I will make a gift of fearlessness,
 And so shall be able to put your mind at peace.

The deer gained a state of peacefulness and the King gained humanity and trustworthiness.

The Brahmācārin's Great Sacrifice from Love for Dharma

Then again, this is exemplified by the case of the *brahmācārin* known as "Lover of Dharma." For twelve years, he went everywhere in Jambudvīpa searching for knowledge of the Dharma of the Āryas but still was unable to find it. At that time there was no buddha in the world. The Dharma of the Buddha had disappeared as well. There was a brahman who said, "I possess one verse of the Dharma of the Āryas. If you are truly one who loves the Dharma, I will give it to you.

He replied, "I truly *do* love the Dharma."

The Brahman said, "If you truly do love the Dharma, then you ought to use your skin as paper and, using the bones of your body as a pen, you should use your blood to write it down. Then I will give it to you." He then acted in accord with this instruction, breaking his bones, stripping off his skin and writing this verse down in blood:

That which accords with Dharma, one should cultivate.
That which is non-Dharma, one should not accept.
In the present life and in the future life as well,
He who practices Dharma finds peaceful security.

The Bird Who Tried to Save a Burning Forest

Then again, in the past there was a wildfire which was burning the forest. Within that forest there was a pheasant which with intensely strenuous physical efforts used his own strength to fly into the water, soaked his feathers and then flew forth attempting to extinguish the great blaze. The fire was great and water was but little. It flew back and forth and though it became exhausted it did not find that to be suffering. At that time the celestial lord Śakradevendra came and asked it, "What is it that you are doing?"

It replied, "I am [attempting to] save this forest out of pity for the beings in it. The area nurtured by the shade of this forest is vast, refreshingly cool, and blissful. All of our species—all of our lineages and relatives as well as all of the other beings rely upon and look to this [forest]. As long as I have the physical strength, how could I be lazy and so fail to attempt to rescue it?"

The celestial lord then asked it, "As for your being so energetic and diligent, how much longer can you continue?"

The pheasant said, "I take death as the appointed time."

The celestial lord said, "Although your intentions may be so, who would be able to verify such a thing?"

It then immediately proclaimed a vow, "My mind is ultimately sincere. If its trustworthiness is not false, then the fire should immediately be extinguished." At this time the gods of the Pure Dwelling Heaven knew of the bodhisattva's vow and then immediately extinguished the fire for its sake.

From ancient times on up to the present, this forest alone has always been growing luxuriantly and remained unburned by fire.

Concluding Discussion

Numerous other cases of this sort illustrate that in past-life practices, [the Bodhisattva] has been able to do what is difficult to do. He has not stinted in sacrificing even his own body and life, his country, wealth, wives, sons, elephants, horses, the seven precious things, his head, eyes, bones, or his marrow. He has been diligent in giving without weariness.

As the saying goes, "For the sake of beings, the bodhisattva would undergo in a single day even a thousand deaths and a thousand births." Just as with *dāna*, the practices undertaken in perfecting the *pāramitās* of *śīla*, patience, *dhyāna* and *prajñā* are undertaken in this same way. The characteristic features of what is intended

by “physical vigor” are as illustrated by all sorts of causal circumstances described in the *Sutra on the Past Lives of the Bodhisattva*.

The carrying on of cultivation in all good dharmas while maintaining faith and happiness, while not generating doubts or regrets, while not falling into laziness, and while continuing to seek the Dharma insatiably from all of the Worthies, the Āryas, and everyone on down even to the common people, doing so in a manner comparable to the sea’s swallowing up of everything flowing into it—it is this which constitutes the bodisattva’s “mental vigor.”

The Buddha's Past Life as a Doubting Prince

Nāgārjuna's Preamble on Concurrent Practice of Perfections

Furthermore, the vigor of the bodhisattva is universally active throughout the other five *pāramitās*. It is this which constitutes the *pāramitā* of vigor.

Question: When one is practicing the *pāramitā* of moral virtue, if someone comes and begs one's three robes and bowl, were one to go ahead and give them to him, one would thereby break the precepts. Why? Because the Buddha did not permit that. But if one fails to give, one thereby destroys the *pāramitā* of giving. How then can vigor be universally active in the other five endeavors?

Response: If one is a bodhisattva who is new in his practice, he will be unable to make [vigor] universally and simultaneously active in the other five *pāramitās* throughout that one single lifetime. This is illustrated by that time when the Bodhisattva was practicing the *pāramitā* of vigor and observed a starving tigress whose hunger had become so urgent that she was about to eat her own cubs.

At that time, the Bodhisattva let flourish the mind of great compassion and immediately made a gift of his body. Because the Bodhisattva's father and mother had lost their son, their distress and grief were such that they lost the vision in both eyes. Also, it should be the case that the tigress would have incurred a karmic transgression in killing the Bodhisattva.

Still, he did not take into account the grief-induced suffering on the part of his parents nor did he reckon the tigress's incurring of the killing offense. He wished only to perfect *dāna* and gain the associated meritorious qualities associated with this act.

This is also exemplified by the bhikshu who upholds the precepts. No matter what the situation, whether it might involve a minor or a major regulation, he rejects anyone with whom a transgression might occur. Even though the person who is rejected might experience the anguish of distress and grief [at his refusal to accede to precept-threatening conduct], he strives only to uphold the precepts and does not take pity on the sufferings of others which might arise as a consequence.

Story: The Buddha's Past Life as Doubting Prince

It may be then that one practices the common *prajñā* of the world and so puts to rest the mind of loving-kindness and compassion. This is exemplified by the past-life case of Shakyamuni as a bodhisattva

who was a prince, the son of a great country's king. His father, the King, had a spiritual guru, a *brahmacārin* who abstained from eating any of the five types of grains. The masses of people revered him, had faith in him, and took him to be marvelously special.

The Prince thought, "Men possess [a body with] four limbs. They must sustain it with the five types of grains, and yet this man [supposedly] does not eat. It must certainly be the case that he has seized the minds of the people through deviousness. He must not be one who is possessed of the genuine Dharma."

His father and mother told their son, "This man is intensely vigorous [in his spiritual practice]. He does not eat the five types of grains and thus is a person only rarely encountered in this world. How can you be so extremely foolish that you do not respect him?"

The Prince replied by saying, "I pray that you may withhold judgment for a little while. It will not be long before this man's verifying evidence will naturally emerge." At that time the Prince then sought out [the guru's] dwelling place, went into the forest there, and asked the cowherds of the woodland, "Just what does this fellow eat?"

The cowherds replied, "At night, this man eats a greater or lesser measure of curds, relying on this as the means to sustain his life."

When the Prince realized this, he returned to the palace with the desire to bring forth the evidence. He then put to use all sorts of purgative medicinal herbs, causing them to completely permeate some blue lotus blossoms.

In the early morning, the *Brahmacārin* entered the palace and sat at the side of the King. The Prince then took up these flowers in his hands and came forward to make an offering to him. After having bowed, he then presented them to him.

The *Brahmacārin* was delighted and thought to himself, "The King, his wife, those inside and outside [the palace], those of high and low rank—they all make obeisance to me and serve me. It was only from the Prince that I had not yet received reverence and faith. Today he presents me with an offering of beautiful flowers. This is extremely fine, immeasurably so."

Having received these beautiful flowers, out of respect for benefactor, he raised them to his nose and inhaled their fragrance. As he did so, the medicinal vapors within the blossoms entered his belly. In but an instant, the medicine began to have an effect in his belly, whereupon he sought to find a place to stoop down.

The Prince said, “But the Brahmācārīn does not even eat. Why then does he now move towards the toilet?” [The Prince] then held him tightly whereupon, in but another moment, he defecated and vomited at the side of the King. The vomit turned out to be composed entirely of curds.

When this evidence had been revealed, the King and his wife became aware of his deception. The Prince said, “This man is truly a thief. Out of a desire for fame, he has cheated an entire country.”

Concluding Discussion on the Bodhisattva’s Practice of Vigor

It was in this fashion that he practiced common worldly prajñā. Seeking only to perfect his wisdom, he put to rest the mind of sympathy and pity and thus did not fear incurring the hatred of others.

At other times, as the bodhisattva practices supramundane prajñā, in his upholding of the precepts and in his bestowing of gifts, his mind is not subject to defiling attachment. Why? Because the benefactor, the recipient, the valuable gift, offense, non-offense, hatred, non-hatred, vigor, laziness, the focused mind and the scattered mind—none of them can be gotten at.

Moreover, in his practice of the *pāramitā* of vigor, the bodhisattva takes all dharmas to be neither produced nor destroyed, neither eternal nor non-eternal, neither suffering nor blissful, neither empty nor real, neither self nor non-self, neither singular nor different, and neither existent nor nonexistent. He knows completely that all dharmas are a conjunction of causes and conditions. They possess only names. No reality can be found in them.

The bodhisattva carries on this sort of contemplation and realizes that everything which is conditioned is false and deceptive. He lets his mind rest in the unconditioned and desires to cause his thoughts to cease, [knowing that] it is only by resort to quiescent cessation that there is peacefulness and security. At that very time, he calls to mind his original vows and, on account of sympathy and pity for beings, returns to the practice of the dharmas of the bodhisattva and so accumulates every sort of meritorious quality.

The bodhisattva thinks to himself, “Although I realize that all dharmas are false and deceptive, beings still remain unaware of this matter. Throughout the five destinies, they endure all manner of suffering and pain. Thus I should now completely perfect the practice of the six *pāramitās*.”