

Part Six:

NĀGĀRJUNA'S STORIES ON WISDOM

The King Enlightened by Damaged Gardens

Nāgārjuna's Introduction

Question: If it is the case that the path of a pratyekabuddha is the same [as that of an arhat], how then is one able to distinguish between the Hearers and the Pratyekabuddhas?

Response: Although their paths are of a single type, still, their uses of wisdom have their differences. In a case where buddhas have not come forth [into the world] or the Dharma of any given buddha has already become extinct, this person, on account of causal factors associated with previous lifetimes, brings forth wisdom on his own and does not do so based on hearing it [directly, in this life], from anyone else. On his own, he employs wisdom to realize the Path.

Story: The King Enlightened by Damaged Gardens

This is illustrated by an instance in which the king of a country had gone out into his gardens to wander about and enjoy himself. In the very early morning he observed the trees in the grove, the flowers, and the fruit. They were extremely lovely and pleasurable. After the King had eaten, he then lay down to take a nap. Meanwhile, the wives and female entertainers of the King all went about picking flowers and, in the process, damaged the trees by breaking off branches.

After the King awoke, he observed the destruction in the grove and became spontaneously enlightened to the fact that all worlds are impermanent and bound to destruction in just this same way. After he had contemplated this, the mind of the path of no outflows arose in him, he cut off the fetters, gained the way of the pratyekabuddha, perfected the six superknowledges, and flew off into an unoccupied and quiet area of the forest.

Concluding Exegesis Passage

On account of causal circumstances such as these which arise as retribution for previous-life meritorious deeds, vows, and practices, one may need in this life only to observe a minor cause or condition and then be able to perfect the path of the pratyekabuddha as a result. It is factors such as these which constitute the difference [between the paths of a pratyekabuddha and an arhat].

King Mahānāman's Worries About Rebirth

Nāgārjuna's Introduction

Question: In place after place, the Buddha instructed one to contemplate conditioned dharmas as impermanent, suffering, empty, and devoid of self, thus causing people to gain the Path. How then can you state that, when one posits the reality of "impermanence," that constitutes an erroneous view?

Response: In place after place, the Buddha spoke of impermanence and in place after place, he spoke of [certain factors] "not being destroyed."

Story: King Mahānāman's Worries about Rebirth

Take for instance when the Shākyan King, Mahānāman, came to where the Buddha dwelt and addressed the Buddha, saying, "The population of Kapilavastu is huge. Sometimes when I encounter a speeding chariot, a runaway horse, a crazed elephant or battling people, I lose the thought focused on mindfulness of the Buddha. At these times, I think to myself, "If I died now, where would I be reborn?"

The Buddha told Mahānāman, "You should not be frightened. Do not fear. At such a time, you would not be reborn in one of the wretched destinies. You would certainly proceed to a good place. This is analogous to a tree which has always leaned well to the east. If there is someone who cuts it down, it will certainly fall toward the east.

"The situation is identical in the case of a person who is good. When the body deteriorates and one then dies, because throughout the long night [of time], the mental consciousness of the wholesome mind has imbued the mind with faith, moral virtue, learning, giving, and wisdom, one will certainly gain the benefit of it and thus achieve rebirth in the heavens."

Concluding Exegesis Discussion

If it was the case that all dharmas are impermanent by virtue of being produced and destroyed in every thought moment, why did the Buddha say that, because all of the meritorious qualities permeate the mind, one will certainly gain a superior rebirth? On account of this, one should realize that [dharmas] are not impermanent by nature.

Question: If impermanence is not actually the case, why did the Buddha speak of impermanence?

Response: The Buddha accorded with what was appropriate for [particular] beings and so spoke that dharma for their sakes. It was in order to refute the inverted view [which imagines] permanence that he spoke of impermanence.

[In the opposite case], because people were unaware of or did not believe in later existences, he spoke of the mind going on into a later existence and being reborn in the heavens, [explaining that] the karmic causes and conditions of offenses and merit are not lost even in a million kalpas.

These are instances of the counteractive *siddhānta* (doctrinal perspective). They do not reflect [the ultimate truth of] the supreme meaning *siddhānta*. The true character of dharmas does not involve either the concept of permanence or the concept of impermanence. Then, too, the Buddha spoke in place after place of the emptiness of dharmas. In the emptiness of dharmas, impermanence is nonexistent. It is for these reasons that it is stated here that to claim that the world is impermanent is an erroneous view. Hence one refers to the emptiness of dharmas.

Vivādabala Attempts to Debate the Buddha

Additionally, [there is the case of] the brahmacārin from Vaiśali known as “Power of Debate” (Vivādabala) The Liccavis had given him many precious things to obtain his services so that he was caused to go and debate with the Buddha. After he had entered their employ, that night he thought over and selected five hundred challenging questions [as debate topics] and early the next morning went with the Liccavis to the place where the Buddha dwelt. He asked the Buddha, “Is there one ultimate path or are there many ultimate paths?”

The Buddha replied, “There is one ultimate path. There are not many.”

The Brahmacārin said, “The Buddha claims that there is one path, yet all of the non-Buddhist masters each have an ultimate path. These constitute ‘many,’ not just ‘one.’”

The Buddha said, “Although each has his own and there are many of them, in every case they are not the actual path. Why? It is because all of them are attached to erroneous views that they do not qualify as the ultimate path.”

The Buddha then asked the Brahmacarin, “Has Deer Head (Mṛgaśiras) Brahmacārin realized the Path or not?”

He replied, “That individual is the one foremost among all who have realized the path.”

It just so happened that the elder Deer Head Brahmacārin was standing as a bhikshu behind the Buddha at that very time, fanning the Buddha. The Buddha then asked the Brahmacārin, “Do you recognize this bhikshu here or not?” The Brahmacārin then recognized him and, struck with shame, lowered his head. The Buddha then uttered this verse found in the *Categories of Meaning* (the *Arthavarga*):

Everyone is of the opinion that he [possesses] the ultimate,
And so each is affectionately self-attached.
Each sees himself as right and attributes fault to others.
These in every case are not the ultimate.

These people enter into the debate assembly.
As they then engage in making clear distinctions among meanings
and principles,
Each [speaks of] the rights and wrongs of the other.
The victor and the defeated cherish distress and delight.

The victor falls into the pit of arrogance.
 The loser falls into the hell of distress.
 Therefore, in a case where there is one who is wise,
 He does not go along with either of these two dharmas.

“Power of Debate,” you ought to know that,
 Among my disciples and my Dharma,
 There is nothing “false” nor is there anything “real.”
 What then is it that you are now seeking?

If you are wishing to destroy my discourse [on doctrine],
 This is ultimately impossible endeavor.
 It is difficult to succeed in vanquishing the knowledge of all modes,
 And, in any case, it would be tantamount to destroying even your
 very own [doctrine].

Concluding Exegesis Discussion

In place after place within the sutras of the Hearers there are discussions such as this about the emptiness of all dharmas. As for the Mahāyāna entryway to emptiness, all dharmas, by their very nature, are eternally inherently empty. It is not on account of a contemplation based on expedient means associated with wisdom that they are found to be empty.

This is illustrated by the Buddha’s explanation to Subhūti about form: “Form is inherently empty. Feeling, perception, karmic formative factors, and each of the consciousnesses are inherently empty. The twelve sense bases, the eighteen sense realms, the twelve causes and conditions, the thirty seven wings of enlightenment, the ten powers, the four fearlessnesses, the eighteen exclusive dharmas, the great loving-kindness, the great compassion, *sarvajñāna* (omniscience), and so forth until we come to *anuttarasamyakṣaṃbodhi* (perfect enlightenment)—they are all entirely inherently empty.”

The Uncultured Rustic Discovers Salt

Nāgārjuna's Preamble

Furthermore, a person who contemplates true emptiness has first gone through an incalculable amount of giving, upholding of precepts, and dhyāna absorption. His mind is soft and pliant and his fetters are but scant. Afterwards, he gains [the realization of] true emptiness. In the case of [one who clings to] erroneous views, there have been none of these endeavors. He simply wishes to seize upon emptiness by resort to erroneous thoughts associated with speculations and discriminations.

Story: The Uncultured Rustic Discovers Salt

This is comparable to the man of rural origins who had never before seen salt. He happened to observe a man of noble status flavoring various meat and vegetable dishes with salt before eating them. He asked, "Why is it that you do that?"

The other man replied, "It is because this salt is able to make everything taste delectable."

This man thought, "If salt is able to cause everything to taste delectable, its own flavor must be even more delicious." He then foolishly scooped up salt, filled his mouth, and swallowed it. The intensity of the saltiness injured his mouth whereupon he said, "Why did you claim that salt is able to make for delectability?"

The man of noble background said, "You fool. With something like this, you must carefully calculate how much to mix in to cause [the food] to be delectable. How could you even contemplate just eating salt by itself?"

Concluding Exegesis Discussion

One deficient in wisdom hears of the emptiness gateway to liberation but fails to also cultivate all manner of meritorious qualities. He wishes only to realize emptiness. This is tantamount to the cutting off one's roots of goodness by resorting to erroneous views.

Principles such as these illustrate what is meant by the gateway of emptiness. If one enters into these three gateways [of emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness], then he will realize that the principles contained in the Dharma of the Buddha are not mutually contradictory. The origin of one's ability to realize this concept is just the power of *prajñāpāramitā*. As a result, one has no hang-ups or obstructions with respect to any dharma.

Aniruddha and the Heavenly Maidens

Nāgārjuna's Introduction

Furthermore, "cutting off the fetters" is of two types. In the case of the first, one cuts off the three poisons. One's mind does not attach to the objects of the five desires among men and gods. In the case of the second, although one does not attach to the objects of the five desires among men and gods, one has still not yet been able to transcend the objects of the five desires which manifest as a consequence of the bodhisattva's merit. A bodhisattva of this sort should practice the *prajñāpāramitā*.

Story: Aniruddha and the Heavenly Maidens¹

This was exemplified by the venerable Aniruddha. When he was dwelling in the forest sitting in dhyāna meditation, the heavenly maiden "Pure Love" and others manifest in their pure and marvelous bodies and came to test Aniruddha. Aniruddha said, "Sisters, make yourselves blue when you come here. Don't appear in a variety of colors. I wish to contemplate impurity and am not otherwise able to carry out the contemplation." They then turned yellow, then red, and then white. At that time Aniruddha closed his eyes and would not look, saying, "Sisters, go away from here." At that time the heavenly maidens disappeared. If even the physical forms gained as meritorious reward by the gods are of this sort, then how much the more so are the objects of the five desires which manifest as a consequence of the bodhisattva's immeasurable merit.

Notes

1. This story and the next do not come from the Perfection of Wisdom section of the *Exegesis* proper, but rather from Nāgārjuna's six perfections introductory discussion in which he defines the perfection of wisdom.

Mahākāśyapa and the Kinnara King

This is also illustrated by the instance when the *kinnara* king came together with eighty-four thousand other *kinnaras* to where the Buddha dwelt. They strummed their lutes and sang verses as an offering to the Buddha. At that time, Sumeru, the king among mountains, as well as the trees on the mountains, the people, the birds, and the beasts all danced. The members of the great assembly which surrounded the Buddha, even including Mahākāśyapa, were all unable to make themselves remain still. At that time the Bodhisattva Heavenly Imperative asked the venerable Mahākāśyapa, “You are of senior years and have long abided as foremost in the cultivation of the dharma of twelve *dhūta* (ascetic) practices. How is it that you are unable to remain still in your seat?”

Mahākāśyapa replied, “The five desires within the sphere of the three realms are unable to move me. It is on account of the power of this bodhisattva’s superknowledges manifesting as a consequence of his merit that I am caused to be in this state. It is not that I have any thoughts whereby I can’t remain still.”

This is just as with Mount Sumeru which when the four directions’ winds arise cannot be shaken, but which, when the *vairambhaka* winds arise at the end of a great kalpa, is blown flat like a blade of dead grass. We can know from these cases that one of the two kinds of fetters has not yet been cut off. A bodhisattva of this sort should practice the *prajñāpāramitā*. The Abhidharma explains the matter in this fashion.