

**Part Four:**  
**THE PERFECTION OF VIGOR**  
**(Chapters 26–27)**



# THE PERFECTION OF VIGOR

By Ārya Nāgārjuna

## Chapter 26: The Meaning of the Perfection of Vigor

**Sutra text:** It is through being vigorous in body and mind and refraining from indolence or resting that one perfects *vīrya pāramitā* (the perfection of vigor).

### Exegesis:

#### I. INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION OF THE PERFECTION OF VIGOR

*Vīrya* (Chinese textual note: In our language, one says “vigor”)<sup>1</sup> ....

##### A. WHY VIGOR IS FOURTH AMONG THE SIX PERFECTIONS

**Question:** Something like vigor, the basis of all good dharmas, should be listed as foremost among the perfections. Why is it now only placed as the fourth among them?

##### 1. WHY VIGOR IS NOT REQUIRED FOR THE FIRST THREE PERFECTIONS

**Response:** Giving, moral virtue, and patience are eternally-existing ideas in the world. For instance, the standard of propriety between guests and hosts calls for the presenting of gifts. Even animals know to engage in giving.

There may be all sorts of reasons why a person is able to engage in giving. Perhaps it is for the sake of the present life. Perhaps it is for the sake of future lives. Or perhaps one gives for the sake of the Path. One does not require vigor in such cases.

As for the upholding of the moral precepts, because one observes that those who commit evil deeds meet with punishment through royal law, one becomes fearful [of such consequences] and thus doesn't dare do what is wrong. In other cases, there are those who are good by their very nature and so refrain from all evil deeds. There are also those people who hear that if one does evil in the present life, one will undergo punishment in future lives. Because they are frightened by such a prospect, they are able to abide by the moral precepts.

There are still others who hear that one may transcend birth, aging, sickness, and death through the causal circumstances associated with observing the moral precepts. Then, on account of this, they resolve with their minds and declare with their words: “From this very day on, I will never again kill any beings.”

These sorts of instances are synonymous with observance of the moral precepts. How then would one have any particular need of the *pāramitā* of vigor to practice them?

As for the sphere of patience, even when subjected to scolding, striking, or even murder, one may still remain silent and refrain from retaliating, doing so on account of fearfulness, lesser strength, dread of punishment, because one cultivates the dharmas of a good person, or because one seeks realization of the Path. None of these circumstances require the *pāramitā* of vigor as an essential condition for being able to practice patience.

#### 2. WHY VIGOR IS ESSENTIAL TO DHYĀNA AND PRAJÑĀ

One now desires to succeed in accordance with reality the true character of dharmas (*dharmatā*). In order to course in *prajñāpāramitā* (the perfection of wisdom), one cultivates dhyāna absorption. Dhyāna absorption is the gateway to genuine wisdom. It is herein that one should diligently cultivate vigor, thereby becoming single-minded in the practice of dhyāna meditation.

#### 3. TWO ANALOGIES: WELL DRILLING AND FIRE STARTING

Moreover, giving, moral virtue, and patience produce the peace, security, and happiness associated with great merit. One thereby enjoys a fine reputation and obtains whatever one desires. Having gained these, one then knows the flavor of the benefits of merit.

Now, however, one wishes to advance beyond this so that one might develop marvelously supreme dhyāna absorption and wisdom. This is analogous to digging a well. When one has already discovered wet mud, one then adds increased effort, for one has just then experienced a definite hope that water will be found. This is also comparable to “drilling” to ignite a fire once has already seen smoke beginning to come forth. One then redoubles his efforts and enthusiasm based on a definite hope that a fire will soon start.

#### 4. TWO GATES TO BUDDHAHOOD: MERIT AND WISDOM

When one desires to achieve buddhahood, there are generally two gateways involved in gaining entry: The first of them is merit and the second is wisdom. Practicing giving, observing the moral precepts, and implementing patience collectively serve as the gateway to the acquisition of merit. The *mahāprajñāpāramitā* which knows in accordance with reality the true character of dharmas—this is the gateway to the acquisition of wisdom.

When the bodhisattva passes through the gateway of merit, he gets rid of all karmic offenses and succeeds in gaining whatever he

wishes. If he does not realize his wishes, it is because the defilement of offenses continues to block further progress.

Once he passes on through the gateway of wisdom, he no longer harbors any particular abhorrence for cyclic birth and death, nor does he take any particular delight in nirvāṇa. This is because he realizes that these two matters are actually one.

#### 5. WISDOM'S BASIS IN DHYĀNA MEDITATION

One wishes now to give birth to the *mahāprajñāpāramitā*. The *prajñāpāramitā*'s essential cause is the gateway of dhyāna absorption. Entry into gateway of dhyāna absorption definitely requires the power of great vigor. Why [are they essential]? It is because the scattered and chaotic mind is unable to succeed in perceiving the true character of dharmas in accordance with reality.

##### a. ANALOGY: A LAMP'S ILLUMINATION

This circumstance is analogous to that of a lamp which, when burning in the wind, is unable to illuminate things. When the lamp abides in a closed room, its brightness becomes definitely able to produce illumination.

##### b. THE IRRELEVANCE OF MERIT TO DHYĀNA AND WISDOM

This dhyāna absorption and wisdom cannot be hoped for or sought out through merit. Nor is it the case that they can be gained through coarse contemplations. It is an essential that one be intensely diligent in body and mind, urgently adhering to such practice without becoming lax. It is only through such efforts that success will be realized. This is as described by the Buddha when he said, "Even though my blood, flesh, fat, and marrow were completely wasted away to the point where there remained only skin, bone, and sinews, I still did not relinquish the practice of vigor."

#### 6. SUMMATION: VIGOR IS ESSENTIAL TO DHYĀNA AND WISDOM.

It is only in this manner that one will be able to gain dhyāna absorption and wisdom. Once one has succeeded in these two matters, all of the many endeavors will have reached their completion. It is for these reasons that vigor is placed fourth among the perfections. It is the very root of dhyāna absorption and wisdom. Although the previous three perfections do involve a measure of vigor, because less is required therein, we have not yet discussed it.

#### 7. CHALLENGE: MERIT ALONE IS ADEQUATE FOR DHYĀNA AND WISDOM

**Question:** There are those who claim: "One need only practice giving, upholding of precepts, and patience. Based on that, one gains

great merit. Through the power of merit, everything one wishes for will be achieved. Hence dhyāna absorption and wisdom will naturally develop.” If this is so, what further use might there be for the *pāramitā* of vigor?

8. REFUTATION: NO SUCH RESULT WITHOUT VIGOR

**Response:** The Buddha Path is extremely profound and difficult to bring to realization. Even though one may possess the power of giving, moral virtue, and patience, still, as an essential condition, one must nonetheless incorporate vigor in order to obtain the extremely deep dhyāna absorptions, genuine wisdom, and the incalculable number of dharmas associated with buddhahood. If one fails to practice vigor, then one will not succeed in bringing forth dhyāna absorption. If one does not bring forth dhyāna absorption, then one cannot even succeed in being reborn in the domain of a Brahma Heaven king. How much the less might one hope to gain realization of the path to buddhahood?

a. EVIDENCE CITED AGAINST ADEQUACY OF MERIT ALONE

Moreover, there are persons such as the layman Meṇḍaka who [possessed so much merit that], whenever he wished to acquire countless precious things, could obtain them as a spontaneous result of merely thinking about them. For others such as King “Born From the Crown,” ruler over the four continents, the heavens rained down the seven precious things as well as anything else he wanted. He was a man with whom Śakra Devānām Indra divided his throne so that they both sat together on it. Although these men possessed such great karmic blessings as this, they still could not succeed in gaining [the fruits of] the Path.

b. EVIDENCE FOR VIGOR: LOSAKA-TIṢYA

[On the other hand], there are examples such as the Bhikshu Losaka-tiṣya. Although he was able even to achieve the path of arhatship, [his merit had become so deficient that] he went on the alms round for seven days in a row, received nothing, and was forced in each case to return with an empty bowl. Later, however, he was able to use the fire of dhyāna absorption to incinerate his own body and then enter nirvāṇa. On account of this, one knows that it is not solely on the basis of the power of blessings that one gains the Path. If one wishes to perfect the Buddha Path, as an essential condition one must be diligent in the application of great vigor.

## B. QUESTION: WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF VIGOR?

**Question:** When the bodhisattva contemplates vigor, what benefits does he perceive it to possess that he then diligently cultivates it without becoming lax?

## a. ALL PATH BENEFITS FLOW FORTH FROM VIGOR

**Response:** All of the virtues associated with the Path and all of the benefits in present and future existences are gained on account of vigor. Moreover, if one wished only to succeed in bringing himself across to liberation, he should still be diligently and urgently vigorous. How much the more so is this the case with the bodhisattva who has made vows with the desire of bringing all beings across to liberation. This is as described in a verse in praise of vigor:

## b. VERSE IN PRAISE OF VIGOR

There are persons who don't indulge cherishing of the body  
And whose mind of wisdom is resolute and fixed.

Practicing vigor in accordance with Dharma,  
They find no difficulty in gaining whatever is sought.

They are like the farmer<sup>2</sup> who diligently cultivates his fields.  
His harvest will definitely be abundantly substantial.

They are also like one who travels the road to a distant place.  
If diligent, they certainly succeed in reaching the destination.

Whether it be the achievement of rebirth in the heavens  
Or whether it be gaining the bliss of nirvāṇa,  
Such causes and conditions as these  
All arise on account of the power of vigor.

Such results aren't bestowed by a god nor devoid of cause.  
Because one's created them himself, he himself is the beneficiary.  
Whosoever is a person possessed of wisdom,  
And yet fails to urge himself on with exhortations—

Should realize the fire of the three realms is burning  
Like a great blazing conflagration.

Only a person possessed of wisdom and decisiveness  
Is able to avoid it and make good his escape.

It is for this reason that the Buddha proclaimed  
Right vigor for the sake of Ānanda.

If in this manner one refrains from being lax or idle,  
One will arrive directly at realization of the Buddha Path.

If one exhorts oneself intensely and labors at it diligently,  
He may burrow into the ground and be able to reach a spring.

The case with vigor is just the same as this.  
There is nothing sought which will not then be gained.

If one is able to accord with Dharma in practicing the Path,  
Whoever then is vigorous and thus refrains from indolence  
Will definitely succeed in garnering innumerable fruits  
And such rewards as these will then never be lost.

### C. VIGOR'S ASPECTS DISCUSSED

#### 1. VIGOR AS THE ROOT OF ALL GOOD DHARMAS

Moreover, the dharma of vigor is the root and foundation for all of the good dharmas. It is able to produce all of the dharmas of the Path even up to *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, how much the more is this the case with minor benefits. This is as described in the Vinaya: "All good dharmas including even *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* are born from being vigorous and from not being neglectful."

#### 2. VIGOR AS THE ACTIVATOR OF KARMIC BLESSINGS FROM THE PAST

Moreover, vigor is able to activate the blessings from previous existences just as rain moistening seeds surely causes them to grow. This is just the same. Although one may possess the causes and conditions of merit from previous existences, if one is not vigorous, then it will not be able to come forth. Thus one will be unable to gain any benefit even in the present life, how much the less will one succeed in realizing the path to buddhahood.

#### 3. BODHISATTVA VIGOR DOES NOT FEAR HELLS

Furthermore, the great bodhisattvas take on the burdens of beings, undergoing all of the sufferings including even the sufferings in the *avīci niraya* (the uninterrupted hells). Nor do their minds become lax. This constitutes vigor.

#### 4. VIGOR'S IMPORTANCE IN COMPLETING ENDEAVORS

Moreover, in all of the manifold endeavors, if one has no vigor, then they will not be able to be completed. This is analogous to purgative medicines taking *Croton tiglium* as what is primary. If one leaves out the *Croton tiglium*, then they have no purgative power. In this same manner, the foundations of mindfulness, the bases of spiritual power, the roots, the powers, the wings of enlightenment and the Path are all dependent upon vigor. If one has no vigor, then the manifold endeavors are not completed.

#### 5. VIGOR'S PRESENCE IN ALL PATH-PRACTICE CATEGORIES

As a point of comparison, the moral precepts are only found in the eightfold Path and are not found in other places. Faith is found in the

roots and the powers, but if one looks in the other places, then they are not to be found. But, as for vigor, there is no place where it does not exist. Not only does it generally subsume the many dharmas, but it also constitutes an entryway [to Dharma] in its own right.

6. ANALOGY: THE PRESENCE OF IGNORANCE IN ALL DEFILEMENTS

This is analogous to the defilement (*anuśaya*) of ignorance. It is universally present in all of the other defilements and still, aside from all such instances there exists yet another specific category of “exclusively abiding” ignorance (*āveṇikī avidyā*).

7. QUESTION: HOW DOES ONE INCREASE VIGOR?

**Question:** The bodhisattva wishes to gain all of the buddha dharmas, desires to bring all beings across to liberation, desires to extinguish all of the afflictions, and wishes to have everything manifest in accordance with his aspirations. How does one go about increasing and enhancing vigor so as to be able to gain buddhahood? This would be comparable to a small fire being unable to burn down a great forest, but when the intensity of the fire increases and becomes augmented it is able to burn everything.

a. THROUGH THE ALTRUISTIC VOW

**Response:** From the time of his first bringing forth the resolve to attain bodhi, the bodhisattva makes the vow that he will cause all beings to gain happiness and that for the sake of everyone, he will not indulge any cherishing regard for his own body. If one indulges a cherishing regard for his own body, then one will be unable to be successful in bringing all good dharmas to completion. It is on account of this that one is able to increase one’s vigor.

b. THROUGH RENOUNCING INDOLENCE

Additionally, for all manner of reasons the bodhisattva renounces the mind of indolence (*kausīdya*) and causes himself to become blissfully adherent to vigor. The black clouds of indolence cover over brilliant wisdom, swallow up and destroy meritorious qualities, and increase that which is not good.

1) INDOLENCE ANALOGIES: POISONED FOOD AND FIRE

Although the person who is indolent initially enjoys a minor measure of happiness, he later undergoes great suffering. This is analogous to poisoned food. Although it may initially be fragrant and exquisite, after a time, it kills a person.

The mind of indolence burns up all meritorious qualities just like a great fire burns up an entire forest wilderness. A person who

is indolent loses all meritorious qualities just as there is nothing which remains when a person has been attacked by thieves. This is as set forth in a verse:

2) VERSE IN WARNING AGAINST INDOLENCE

One ought to gain it, and yet one does not gain it.  
One has already gained it, but then one loses it again.  
Having already taken himself lightly,  
Everyone else also fails to respect him.

One constantly dwells in the great darkness.  
One has none of the awesome virtues.  
As for the venerable and noble dharma of wisdom,  
This matter is eternally lost thereby.

Though one has heard the marvelous Dharma of the Path,  
One is unable to use it to benefit himself.  
Transgressions and mistakes of this sort,  
All come forth from the indolent mind.

Although one has heard the Dharma which leads to increase,  
One is unable to succeed in ascending to reach it.  
Transgressions and offenses of this sort  
All come forth from the indolent mind.

The work of this life is not cultivated or regulated,  
One does not enter into the Dharma of the Path.  
Transgressions and mistakes of this sort  
All come forth from the indolent mind.

It is cast off and distanced by those of superior wisdom.  
Middling persons at times draw close to it again.  
The inferior and stupid are submerged by it  
And are like pigs taking pleasure in the sty.

If one is a person of the world,  
Three things waste away and are lost:  
Desired pleasures, the benefits of wealth—  
One's karmic blessings sink away as well.

If one is a person who has left the home life,  
Then one fails to gain two matters:  
Birth in the heavens as well as nirvāṇa.  
For both of these persons, one's reputation is entirely lost.

Matters of this sort are all wasted and lost.  
If one wishes to know their origin,

Among all of the thieves,  
None surpass the thief of indolence.

On account of these manifold defects,  
One should not develop a mind of indolence.

The two bhikshus, Aśvaka and Punarvasuka,  
Were indolent and so fell into the wretched destinies.  
Although they had seen the Buddha and heard the Dharma,  
Still, they were unable themselves to avoid such a fate.

There are all sorts of bases such as these whereby one contemplates the faults inherent in laziness and whereby one's vigor increases.

#### C. THROUGH CONTEMPLATING THE BENEFITS

Additionally, one contemplates the increase accruing from vigor. All of the benefits of the Buddha Path and nirvāṇa in present and future lifetimes all come forth from vigor. Moreover, the bodhisattva knows all dharmas as empty, knows that there is nothing whatsoever therein which exists, and so does not opt for the realization of nirvāṇa. His acting out of pity for beings and his accumulation of good dharmas is on account of the power of the *pāramitā* of vigor.

##### 1) THE VIGOR OF SHAKYAMUNI

Additionally, on account of the power of vigor and merit, the Bodhisattva [Shakyamuni], single-handedly and without the aid of any comrades, was able to destroy the demon armies as well as the thieves of the fetters and so then succeeded in gaining the Buddha Path. Having gained the Buddha Path, though he perceived all dharmas as being of a singular characteristic, as being without characteristics and as being in reality entirely empty, nonetheless, for the sake of beings, he spoke of all sorts of names for the dharmas, and employed all sorts of skillful means to bring beings across to liberation from the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

When he was about to cross on over into cessation, he passed on his Dharma corpus to the likes of Maitreya Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, Kāśyapa, Ānanda, and others. Afterwards, he entered the *vajra samādhi*, crushed his own bones into fragments the size of mustard seeds which he employed to bring beings across to liberation, and so did not even then relinquish the power of vigor.

##### 2) STORY: BUDDHA PRAISES VIGOR TO ĀNANDA

Then again, for example, when Ānanda was discoursing on the seven limbs of enlightenment (*sambodhyaṅga*) for the sake of the

Bhikshus, he came to the “vigor” limb of enlightenment and the Buddha then asked Ānanda, “Are you explaining the vigor limb of enlightenment?”

Ānanda replied, “I am indeed explaining the vigor limb of enlightenment.”

And so this continued with three questions and three answers, after which the Buddha got up from his seat and told Ānanda, “If a person is able to love 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, it 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.

#### 8. DHARMAS LINKED TO VIGOR: ZEAL, VIGOR, NON-NEGLIGENCE

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*).

##### a. ANALOGY: LIKE GOING ON A TRIP

This may be well illustrated by the case of a man who is about to travel far. At the beginning, when he is desirous of leaving, this is what is referred to as “zeal.” When, having begun his journey, he refrains from stopping [at some point along the way], this is what constitutes “vigor.” When he is able to keep exhorting himself, thus preventing any interruptions in the tasks he must carry out on his journey, this is what is intended by “non-negligence.”

From this, one can know that zeal generates vigor. Because vigor has been brought forth one is non-negligent. Because one is non-negligent one is able to bring forth all dharmas on 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.

##### b. ANALOGY: LIKE NOT SPILLING A BOWL OF OIL

He should be like the man who was able to carry a bowl of oil through a great crowd [without spilling a drop, lest he be subjected to capital punishment by his king]. Because he was able to manifest single-mindedness and non-negligence, he gained great fame and benefit.

## c. ANALOGY: LIKE TRAVERSING PRECIPITOUS TERRAIN

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, one gains everything which one wishes for.

## d. ANALOGY: LIKE FLOWING WATER CUTTING THROUGH STONE

Then again, just as flowing water is able to cut through a huge boulder, so, too, 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.

## 9. THREE VIGOR-GENERATING REFLECTIONS

Moreover, the bodhisattva engages in three sorts of analyses: "If I do not accomplish this, then I will not be able to gain the resultant reward. If I don't go ahead and do it myself, then it won't be the case that it shall somehow manifest through the efforts of others. If I do accomplish this, then it can never be lost." When one contemplates in this way, then he will certainly become vigorous and, for the sake of the Buddha Path, he shall diligently cultivate, shall remain focused and attentive to detail, and shall avoid falling into negligence.

## 10. STORY: THE LAZY FOREST MONK

These ideas are illustrated by the case of a minor *āraṇyaka*<sup>3</sup> who sat alone in dhyāna in the forest and became lazy. There was a spirit in the forest who was a disciple of the Buddha who [noticed this and thus] 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 inward contemplations. In the middle of the evening, he fell back to sleep again. This spirit manifested yet

again, this time 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 became 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. 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.

#### 11. CHERISHING THE RESULT OVER PHYSICAL COMFORT

Moreover, in this practice of vigor one does not indulge any particular cherishing regard for his own body but rather cherishes a regard for the resultant retribution. Thus 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.

##### a. ANALOGY: SACRIFICING A VASE TO EXTINGUISH FIRE

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.

##### b. VERSE CITATION

This principle is also illustrated by the verse spoken by a rishi in instructing his disciple:

The mind which is resolute experiences pleasure.  
It's just as when garnering a great reward,  
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.

#### 12. THE ALTRUISTIC DETERMINATION TO BRING ABOUT LIBERATION

Additionally, the bodhisattva cultivates all manner of ascetic practices. If a person comes seeking his head, eyes, marrow or brains, he is able to give them all to him while thinking to himself, “Even though I have the power of patience, vigor, wisdom, and skillful means, enduring this still involves suffering, how much the more so would this be the case for deluded and foolish beings who inhabit

the three wretched destinies. For the sake of these beings I should diligently cultivate vigor, gain an early realization of the Buddha Path, and then cross them over to liberation.”