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THE BODHISATTVA'S PRACTICE  
*of*  
MORAL VIRTUE



*THE BRAHMĀ'S NET SUTRA BODHISATTVA PRECEPTS*

&

*NĀGĀRJUNA ON THE PERFECTION OF MORAL VIRTUE*



As Translated into Chinese by Tripiṭaka Master Kumārajīva  
Annotated English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



A Bilingual Edition with Facing-Page Chinese Texts  
In Both Traditional Chinese (Taisho)  
And Simplified Chinese (Qianlong Zang)

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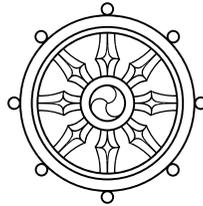
**THE BODHISATTVA'S PRACTICE  
OF  
MORAL VIRTUE**

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To refrain from doing any manner of evil,  
to respectfully perform all varieties of good,  
and to purify one's own mind—  
This is the teaching of all buddhas.

The Ekottara Āgama Sūtra (T02 n.125 p.551a 13–14)



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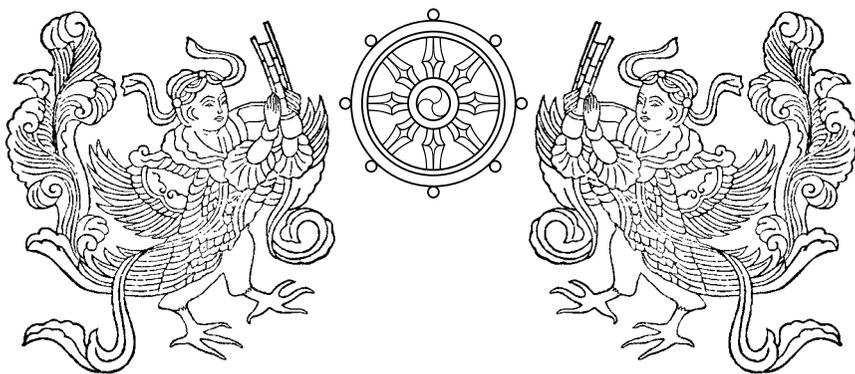
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# THE BODHISATTVA'S PRACTICE OF MORAL VIRTUE

The Brahmā's Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts  
&  
Nāgārjuna on the Perfection of Moral Virtue

As Translated into Chinese by Tripiṭaka Master Kumārajīva  
Annotated English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to the memory of the selfless and marvelous life of the Venerable Dhyāna Master Hsuan Hua, the Guiyang Ch'an Patriarch and the very personification of the bodhisattva's six perfections.

**DHYĀNA MASTER HSUAN HUA**

宣化禪師

**1918-1995**

### ABOUT THE CHINESE TEXT

This translation is supplemented by inclusion of Chinese source text on verso pages in both traditional (above) and simplified (below) scripts. For the traditional character version variant readings from other canonical editions are found as an appendix in the back of each section of the book and, where I have incorporated those variants into the translation, they are usually signaled with an endnote along with my rationale for making the emendation.

For Part One, “The Brahmā’s Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts,” the traditional-character Chinese text and its variant readings are from the 2004 version of the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association’s digital edition of the Taisho Buddhist canon whereas the simplified-character Chinese text is from an online edition of the Qianlong Chinese Buddhist Canon, the URL for which is specified on the first page of that text.

For the Part One Supplement, “The Semimonthly Bodhisattva Precepts Recitation Ceremony,” the traditional-character Chinese text is from the April, 2009 version of CBETA whereas the simplified-character Chinese text is from an online edition the URL for which is specified on the first page of that text.

For Part Two, “Nāgārjuna on the Perfection of Moral Virtue,” the traditional-character Chinese text is from the 2004 version of the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association’s digital edition of the Taisho Buddhist canon whereas the simplified-character Chinese text is from an online edition of the Qianlong Chinese Buddhist Canon, the URL for which is specified on the first page of that text.

Those following the translation in either the traditional Chinese version or the simplified Chinese version should be aware that the punctuation originates with anonymous editors, is not traceable to original editions, and is not necessarily especially reliable, hence it is best treated as merely advisory. (In any case, accurate reading of Classical Chinese should never depend too strongly on a previous editor’s punctuation.)

### OUTLINING IN THIS WORK

With the exception of the chapter titles for Chapters 21 through 23 in Part Two, “Nagarjuna on the Perfection of Moral Virtue,” all outline headings in Part Two originate with the translator. Buddhist canonical texts are often so structurally dense that they are best navigated with the aid of at least a simple outline structure such as I have supplied here.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe many thanks to those who collaborated with me in producing this translation, first of all my good Dharma friend, Craig Neyman, who retyped my 1973 typescript draft into a digital document suitable for revision. Also, the accuracy and readability of this translation have been greatly enhanced by many corrections, review comments, and editorial suggestions generously contributed by Feng Ling, Nicholas Weeks, and Shuyu Yang, each of whom reviewed the manuscript and made very useful suggestions that I found invaluable in improving the quality of this final translation.

Were it not for the ongoing material support provided by my late guru's Dharma Realm Buddhist Association and the serene translation studio provided by Seattle's Bodhi Dhamma Center, creation of this translation would have been much more difficult.

Additionally, it would have been impossible for me to produce this translation without the Dharma teachings and personal inspiration provided to me by my late great spiritual guide, the awesomely wise and compassionate Dhyāna Master Hsuan Hua, the Guiyang Ch'an Patriarch, Dharma teacher, and exegete.

### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FZ – Fazang (法藏) – 梵網經菩薩戒本疏 (T40n1813)

PDB – Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism

ZH – Zhuhong, a.k.a. Yunqi Zhuhong (雲棲株宏) – 梵網經心地品菩薩戒義疏發隱 (X38n0679)

ZY – Zhiyi (智顓) – 菩薩戒義疏 (T40n1811)

ZX – Zhixu, a.k.a. Ouyi Zhixu (藕益智旭) – 佛說梵網經菩薩心地品合註 (X38n0694)

**THE BODHISATTVA'S PRACTICE OF MORAL VIRTUE**  
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## Translator's Introduction

In this most recent volume of Buddhist scripture translations published by Kalavinka Press, I present two of my translations of moral virtue texts first translated into Chinese by Tripiṭaka Master Kumārajīva in Chang'an in approximately 410 CE.

The first of the two translations comprising this volume, "The Brahmā's Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts," is the bodhisattva moral code that eventually came to serve to a greater or lesser degree as the common standard for bodhisattva moral virtue practice for both monastics and laity throughout the ensuing history of East Asian Buddhism in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. Along with this bodhisattva precept text, I include my translation of the standard *upoṣadha* recitation ceremony that came to be used together with these bodhisattva precepts in the ceremonial setting of the monastic saṃgha's group recitations occurring on full-moon and half-moon days throughout the year.

The second of this volume's two translations, "Nāgārjuna on the Perfection of Moral Virtue," although unrelated in origin, by the nature of its content, happens to serve as a beautiful and very appropriate commentary on the principles, prescriptions, and injunctions set forth in the preceding "Brahmā's Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts" text in which, using lovely verses, startling analogies, and traditional Buddhist moral tales, Ārya Nāgārjuna eloquently describes the essence, principles, and details of the bodhisattva's highest practice of moral goodness, the perfection of moral virtue (*śīla pāramitā*). This latter translation consists of Chapter 1, Subchapters 21–24 of Nāgārjuna's *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, Nāgārjuna's immense commentary on the 25,000-line *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, (*The Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa* [大智度論] / T25, No. 1509).

### Part One: The Brahmā's Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts

Of the two moral virtue texts I present in this volume, the first of them, "The Brahmā's Net Sutra Bodhisattva Mind Ground Precepts Chapter" is of cardinal importance as it eventually came to be one of the most influential scriptures in the history of East Asian Buddhism, for it served to portray in great detail a model of

behavior in every aspect of life for all cultivators of the bodhisattva path, whether they be monks, nuns, laymen, or laywomen. Thus, for the Chinese bodhisattva path practitioner, this text became a simple, readily understandable, and easily accessible moral virtue model to be used together with the monastics' non-Mahāyāna Four-Part Dharmaguptaka Vinaya that was translated into Chinese at about the same time in the early fifth century CE.

Of the two fascicles comprising this Bodhisattva Mind Ground Precepts Chapter, the first fascicle presents an abstruse discussion of the rarified stages of bodhisattva practice encountered by the highly advanced practitioner in progressing toward the realization of buddhahood, whereas the second fascicle is devoted to a fairly detailed description of the ten major and forty-eight minor precepts that comprise the bodhisattva moral code known throughout the history of Chinese Buddhism as "The Brahmā's Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts." Probably not least because the first fascicle is both nearly impossibly difficult to read and nearly impenetrably hard to fathom, the first fascicle of this text was mostly ignored in nearly all of the many commentaries written on these bodhisattva precepts by Chinese exegetes, including those written by such exegetical luminaries as Zhiyi and Fazang. Their interests in this scripture lay primarily in its bodhisattva moral code, for they could easily find more extensive and clearer articulations of the stages of the bodhisattva path in other Mahāyāna scriptures such as the Avataṃsaka Sutra or the Ten Grounds Sutra.

In this second fascicle which contains the bodhisattva precepts, the precepts are portrayed as being initially proclaimed in the Lotus Flower Dais World by Rocana Buddha, the Buddha's reward body (*saṃbhoga-kāya*) to an audience of countless transformation-body Śākyamuni buddhas from innumerable many worlds, all of whom were then charged with going back and teaching these precepts to those in their own lands who dedicate themselves to cultivating and progressing along the bodhisattva path to buddhahood.

These precepts consist of untitled but often rather long and detailed descriptions of ten major and forty-eight minor precepts. Because the scripture text does not provide titles for any of these many different sorts of precepts, it fell to commentators such as Zhiyi and Fazang to compose them for greater ease of reference in their commentarial discussions. For this translation I have chosen to insert Zhiyi's precept titles into the text in bold-face type while

also providing Fazang's usually very similar titles in the endnotes for ease of comparison.

The ten major precepts which deal with major issues like killing, stealing, sexual relations, and false speech are listed first. These are inviolable, for if one were to deliberately break any of them, this would constitute a *pārājika* offense for which the penalty is expulsion from the bodhisattva *saṃgha*. Breaking any of the forty-eight minor precepts is much less serious, for if one breaks any of them, one's transgression can be easily forgiven through confession.

In his preface to Tripiṭaka Master Kumārajīva's translation of Chapter Ten of *The Brahmā's Net Sutra*, Śramaṇa Sengzhao states that this "Rocana Buddha Speaks the Bodhisattva Mind Ground Precepts Chapter" was one of more than fifty scriptures translated by Kumārajīva at Caotang Monastery in Chang'an in the first decade or so of the fifth century CE. He notes that, at that time: "Daorong and Daoying together with more than three hundred others then took the bodhisattva precepts at which time each of them recited this chapter and made it foremost in their minds. Thus the Masters and their followers then became devoted to the same meaning. They then respectfully transcribed eighty-one copies of this one chapter and circulated them throughout the realm, wishing thereby to influence the people to aspire to the realization of bodhi. Having followed the example of others in awakening to the principle, they wished that later generations would all be able to hear of this in the same way."<sup>1</sup>

So it was that the long history of this text's powerful influence on the history of East Asian Buddhism began. It was not long before this scripture's moral code consisting of ten major and forty-eight minor precepts was adopted as the Mahāyāna moral code for both monastics and laity<sup>2</sup> not only in China, but also in Korea and Japan. In China and Korea, it was adopted alongside the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, whereas in Japan it eventually replaced the traditional monastic vinaya altogether.

As for the origin of these precepts, for the most part, faithful Buddhists believe that they were set forth by the Buddha approximately 2,500 years ago, preserved in India, and finally transmitted to China by the Indian Tripiṭaka Master Kumārajīva in approximately 406 CE in Chang'an, modern Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province.

Scholars are often skeptical of this point of view and tend to be divided between those who assert that these precepts were composed in central Asia some time after the life of the Buddha, those who suggest that Kumārajīva may have composed them himself, and those who believe that they were composed by Chinese in China a few decades after Kumārajīva finished his other translation work.

Those holding the view that this text was composed in China tend to take as the strongest evidence for their opinion the references in this precept text to “filial piety,” apparently supposing that filial piety was somehow an exclusively Chinese invention and concern. This stance fails to recognize the fact that even the very early Pali scriptures are full of references by the Buddha himself to the need for good Buddhist practitioners to maintain filial respect and concern for the welfare of their parents. This fact alone should make it clear that concerns about filial piety in these precepts do not constitute proof of Chinese authorship.

In any case, regardless of the actual origin of this code of bodhisattva moral precepts, its powerful and lasting effect on the history of East Asian Buddhism is undeniable. “The Brahmā’s Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts” greatly influenced the way in which Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhists came to view what constitutes the correct mode of practice for all who aspire to cultivate the bodhisattva path to buddhahood. To this day, these precepts continue to be transmitted, not only to monks and nuns in their ordination sessions, but also, depending on the country,<sup>3</sup> to laymen and laywomen as well.

### **Part One Supplement: The Bodhisattva Precepts Recitation Ceremony**

As a supplement to Part One, I also include “The Semimonthly Bodhisattva Precepts Recitation Ceremony” as quoted in the commentary on this ceremony by Śramaṇa Hong Zan<sup>4</sup> (1611–1685) of Guangzhou’s Jeweled Elephant Monastery. At the end of his introductory paragraph to his commentary on this ceremony (X38\_n0696), Śramaṇa Hongzan attributes the origin of this ceremony to members of the Tiantai School at the end of the Tang Dynasty or the beginning of the Song Dynasty.<sup>5</sup>

This precept recitation ceremony provides a formal ritual structure for carrying out an *upoṣadha* ceremony for the bodhisattva precepts somewhat modeled on the classic *upoṣadha* ceremony prescribed for the recitation of monastic precepts such as the

non-Mahāyāna Four-Part Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. Ceremonies of these sorts establish a ritual procedure for confession of transgressions, declaration of purity, and renewal of the precept holder's commitment to following whichever code of precepts is the subject of the *upoṣadha* ceremony.

### Part Two: Nāgārjuna on the Perfection of Moral Virtue

The second part of this book, “Nāgārjuna on the Perfection of Moral Virtue” consists of a lengthy selection drawn from my 2009 Kalavinka Press translation entitled *Nāgārjuna on the Six Perfections* in which Nāgārjuna gives a wonderfully complete exposition of the meaning of the six *pāramitās* constituting the very core of the bodhisattva's practices leading to buddhahood. Of these six perfections consisting of giving, moral virtue, patience, vigor, *dhyāna* meditation, and world-transcending wisdom, moral virtue (also the first of the three trainings consisting of *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*), is arguably the most important, for success in all the other core bodhisattva metaphysical skills is entirely dependent upon it.

This treatment of the perfection of moral virtue is a three-subchapter section from Chapter One of Ārya Nāgārjuna's immense and marvelous commentary on the 25,000-line *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sutra*, the title of which I translate as *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra (The Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa / T25, No. 1509)*.

The first of these three chapters, Chapter 1, Subchapter 21, is titled “An Introductory Discussion of Moral Virtue” in which Nāgārjuna provides a general definition of “moral virtue” (*śīla*), lists eight proscribed categories of physical actions and speech, and then notes the consequences of failure to observe these precepts, after which he describes the consequences of inferior, middling, and superior observance of the precepts and then emphasizes the necessity of scrupulous precept observance, introducing similes to reinforce this point. Nāgārjuna next points out the uselessness of unprecepted ascetic practices and the irrelevance of social station to gaining the fruits of careful precept observance, after which, making use of similes, verses, and a story, he describes the character, karmic circumstances, and karmic consequences first of one who breaks the precepts and next of one who observes the precepts. He then concludes the chapter with thirty-two analogies describing the wretched state of the precept breaker.

The second of these three chapters in which Nāgārjuna presents his marvelous commentary on the perfection of moral virtue

is Chapter 1, Subchapter 22, "Details and Import of the Moral Precepts," where he first defines and discusses each of the five precepts and then explains the karmic effects of each of them while also treating a range of topics related to each precept, using verses, stories, analogies, and incisive argumentation to buttress the points he makes in his eloquent description of the importance of each precept. He then discusses the specific-term practice of the eight precepts, compares the five precepts and the eight precepts, and then concludes the chapter by describing four grades of lay precept observance and how these precepts constitute the initial entryway into the eightfold right path and the eventual realization of nirvana.

The third and final chapter of Nāgārjuna's commentary on the perfection of moral virtue, Chapter 1, Subchapter 23, "Aspects of *Śīla Pāramitā*," is divided into two major parts, Part One: "Additional Precept Specifics," and Part Two: "The Perfection of Moral Virtue." In Part One, Nāgārjuna explains how precepts are able to be foremost in the eightfold path, explains what is meant by the fourth of the four grades of lay precept observance, "the superior within the superior," and then discusses the monastic precepts, the special value of the monastic precepts, the four categories of monastic precepts, the origin of the *śikṣamāṇā* postulant nun category, and the bhikshuni and bhikshu ordinations.

Chapter 1, Subchapter 23, Part Two: "The Perfection of Moral Virtue," the final and perhaps most metaphysically beautiful and profound section of Nāgārjuna's commentary on *śīla pāramitā*, is an extensive and expansive treatment of this spiritual perfection. He begins this section by defining "the perfection of moral virtue" in which one becomes indifferent even to sacrificing one's own life in order to uphold the precepts purely. Then, using analogies and stories, he holds forth at length on how moral virtue generates all six perfections including even the perfection of wisdom.

Nāgārjuna concludes his commentary on the perfection of moral virtue with a discussion of how it is that a bodhisattva's practice of moral virtue is truly perfected as *śīla pāramitā*. Here, he says: "The upholding of the moral precepts is carried out solely for the sake of all beings, for the sake of success in the Buddha Path, and for the sake of gaining all of the dharmas of buddhahood." He then states that: "Then again, if the bodhisattva's practice is based in the unfindability of either offense or non-offense, it is at this time that it qualifies as *śīla pāramitā*." Here, Nāgārjuna is referring to

bodhisattva practice that has achieved the realization of the emptiness of inherent existence in all things, even in karmic offense and non-offense which, due to their ultimate inapprehensibility, have no ultimately real existence of their own. (Of course, here, Nāgārjuna is in no way denying the importance of “offense” and “non-offense” in the realm of conventional existence where, even once one has realized their metaphysical emptiness, they continue to constitute the very basis of the correct practice of moral virtue.)

Finally, after an extended discussion of the meaning of the metaphysical emptiness of both beings and phenomena and after his reiteration of the importance of the realization of emptiness to right practice of moral virtue, Nāgārjuna concludes his commentary on the perfection of moral virtue by saying: “It is for this reason that [the *Sutra*] states, “It is based on the unfindability of offense and non-offense that one should engage in perfecting *śīla pāramitā*.”

### In Summation

It brings me great pleasure to finally bring to print this bodhisattva precepts translation project I began over fifty years ago. My interest in producing a book on the bodhisattva’s practice of moral virtue began in 1972 when, as a young monk at Gold Mountain Monastery in San Francisco, I began a first-draft translation of the Brahmā’s Net Sutra Bodhisattva Precepts that I finished about two years later at the Buddhist Lecture Hall in Hong Kong. Having then set the manuscript aside, I did not return to it until recently after having translated and published many other important Mahāyāna scriptures in the intervening decades. I finally returned to this manuscript about a year and half ago at which point I spent almost a year making extensive revisions nearly amounting to a complete retranslation of this scripture. Then, having circulated the revised manuscript for critical review and having then combined it with my translations of “The Semimonthly Bodhisattva Precept Recitation Ceremony” and Ārya Nāgārjuna’s wonderful commentary on *śīla pāramitā* from his *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa*, Kalavinka Press is now finally able to bring forth this volume, *The Bodhisattva’s Practice of Moral Virtue*. I hope that the reader will be able to find as much spiritual enjoyment in reading these translations as I have experienced in producing them.

Bhikshu Dharmamitra,  
Seattle, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024

## Introduction Endnotes

- 1 T24n1484\_p0997a27-b05.
- 2 In order for these precepts to be a practical option for laypeople, the fourth major precept, "The Precept against Sexual Relations," has traditionally been interpreted as forbidding sexual relations only for monks and nuns. For laypeople, it was not interpreted as forbidding sexual activity altogether, but rather as allowing only strictly monogamous relations between couples living in committed relationships.
- 3 Beginning a few decades ago, it became a not uncommon practice for laypeople in Taiwan to instead receive a code of six major and twenty-eight minor bodhisattva precepts from Chapter Fourteen of *The Sutra on the Upāsaka Precepts (Upāsakaśīla Sūtra)* translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in 426 CE (Taisho Volume 24, Number 1488).
- 4 "Commentary by the Great Bodhicitta Śramaṇa Hongzan." (胃地質多沙門弘贊注.)
- 5 X38n0696\_p0767a14.

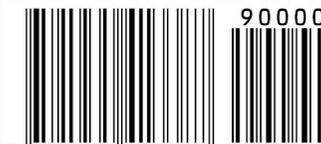
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