

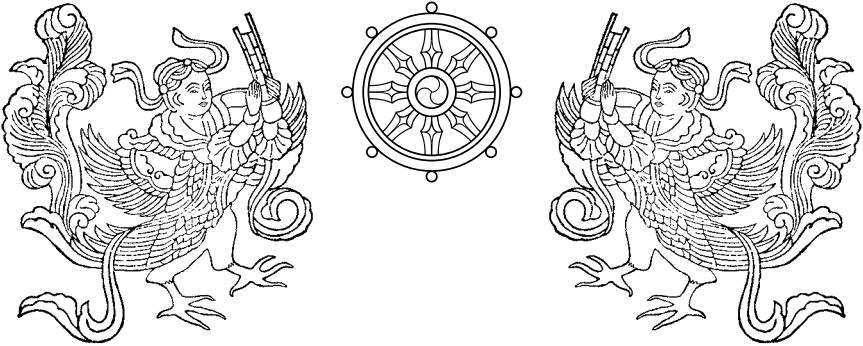
THE BODHISAṂBHĀRA TREATISE COMMENTARY

The Early Indian Exegesis on Ārya Nāgārjuna's

TREATISE ON THE PROVISIONS FOR ENLIGHTENMENT *(The Bodhisambhāra Śāstra)*

Commentary by Bhikshu Vaśitva
(circa 300–500 CE)

Translation and Notes by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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INTRODUCTION

General Introductory Notes on This Text

Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Provisions for Enlightenment (Bodhisambhāra Śāstra)* together with its commentary by the Indian Bhikshu Vaśitva was translated into Chinese by the South Indian Tripiṭaka Master Dharmagupta in or around 609 CE in China's Sui Dynasty Capital. The two works are presented in interwoven format in the six-fascicle edition preserved in the Taisho edition of the Chinese Tripiṭaka (T32.1660,517b-41b). It is this sole surviving edition with its commentary that I have translated here in its entirety.

On the Distinctive Nature of the *Bodhisambhāra Treatise*

The contents of this treatise are devoted to illuminating the most important motivations, principles, and practices essential to both lay and monastic practitioners of the Bodhisattva Path. Although these topics are treated elsewhere in Nāgārjuna's works, most notably in the *Ratnāvalī*, the *Daśabhūmika Vibhāṣā*, and the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa*, they are nowhere given such a closely-focused, potent, and essentially complete treatment as we find in this short treatise comprised of only 168 ślokas.

Although the special qualities of this work are numerous, I find that the most salient distinguishing features of the *Bodhisambhāra Treatise* are Ārya Nāgārjuna's relatively brief but vividly clear depiction of the long-term multi-lifetime vision of the Bodhisattva Path, his delineation of the teaching stances and strategies essential to successful bodhisattva instruction of the various types of people, and his making of such powerful distinctions between the mind states cultivated by bodhisattvas as distinct from those considered most important in pursuing individual-liberation paths.

On the Commentary

The commentary by the early Indian Bhikshu Vaśitva (about whom nothing is known) is invaluable in unfolding the meaning of the treatise, this partly because the treatise verses are extremely terse, and partly because the ideas in the treatise require in-depth discussion to make their full meaning adequately apparent even

to learned students of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Bhikshu Vaśitva's commentary is particularly skillful in demonstrating the deeper meaning of the more abstruse concepts and phrasings in Nāgārjuna's treatise. An especially fine contribution provided by the commentary is the extensive discussion of the ten pāramitās.

On Authorship

Ārya Nāgārjuna's authorship of the *Bodhisambhāra Treatise* is generally well-acknowledged. We find it cited directly and indirectly in other works by Nāgārjuna. (The *Daśabhūmika Vibhāṣā* quotes from it extensively.) To our knowledge, neither the text nor the commentary are extant in either Sanskrit or Tibetan. Thus, as far as we know, the only surviving edition is the Chinese text preserved in the Taisho Tripiṭaka.

I should note here the basis for my choice of the Sanskrit reconstruction for the name of the Indian commentary author as "Bhikshu Vaśitva." This reconstruction was largely driven by the Chinese terminology choices made by Dharmagupta, the translator of the original Sanskrit edition. In the Indian commentary, there is a standard Mahāyāna list of ten types of "sovereign mastery" (*vaśitā*) translated by Dharmagupta as *zizai* (自在). The same two-character compound is used in translating the name of the commentary author, "Bhikshu Zizai" (比丘自在).

Additionally, the commentary author refers to himself by name in the body of the commentary itself (i.e., not just in a colophon). In this instance as well, we have Dharmagupta selecting the same Chinese characters to translate the commentary author's name as he used to translate the ten types of sovereign mastery (*vaśitā*). This more or less eliminates the possibility that the colophon's attribution to this Indian bhikshu might have simply been added later by individuals having no genuine basis for making that attribution.

Of course, it could go without saying that early translators often rendered multiple Sanskrit antecedents with a single Chinese term. I doubt, however, that the current circumstance involves multiple Sanskrit antecedents. In any case, the conjecture of "Īśvara" proposed by at least one academic, given its obvious Hindu connotation, seems to me to be extremely implausible as a name choice for a Buddhist monk. The provisional reconstruction as "Vaśitva" at least has the advantage of multiple evidentiary bases contained within the subject text itself.

On the Translation of This Text

There have been no previous attempts to produce a genuinely literal English translation of Nāgārjuna's *Bodhisambhāra Treatise* of which I am aware.¹ As for previous translations of the commentary by Bhikshu Vaṣitva, I don't believe this work has ever been rendered into any Western or Asian language. This should not be too surprising given that Dharmagupta's 609 CE Chinese text is extraordinarily and deceptively challenging in places. The difficulty of this text is due to extreme terseness in the *ślokas* and due to a good deal of surface inscrutability in the Classical Chinese style adopted by this South Indian translator monk.

As regards stylistic issues in this translation, specialists may notice my tendency to sometimes prefer translating the sense of both component glyphs in the Chinese binomes used by Dharmagupta to render what were probably single Sanskrit antecedent terms. This is deliberate, arising out of a desire to produce a text reflecting the meaning of the work as it would have presented to a Chinese Buddhist reader of the translated Sanskrit. I find this approach preferable to basing the translation largely on merely conjectural reconstructions of Sanskrit antecedent terms. Where the Sanskrit antecedents for the binomes in question are already obvious and well-established, then I tend more often to translate according to the known Sanskrit term. It is hoped that this has allowed my "binomial proliferation" of concepts to be reduced to a tolerable level.

On the Structure and Contents of the English Edition

As regards the contents of this English edition I have produced, there are a few points requiring explanation. First, because even Vaṣitva's fine commentary seemed at points to be inadequate in laying out the intentions and implications of the work (this largely because it assumes a familiarity with the tradition not possessed by most Western readers), I felt compelled at some points to add a few additional explanatory paragraphs in endnotes which more usually would be reserved for notations recording emendations and other purely text-related issues.

To facilitate the reader's study of the text, I have inserted a table of contents, single-line synopses of each *śloka*, and also section headings flagging the main topics treated in the commentary. The reader should realize that the text as preserved in the Canon has no such outlining or subtitling. (Apparently such unadorned and

seamless “interweaving” of text and commentary was more-or-less standard with palm-leaf manuscripts.)

I don’t doubt that a closer and more reflective study of the text may suggest numerous refinements in my rough outline’s architecture and in its implicit doctrinal judgments. Still, given the complexity of Nāgārjuna’s text and Vaśitva’s commentary, I felt it was better to at least provide the reader some sort of “signpost” outlining, even if imperfect, rather than to simply present two hundred pages of unbroken and moderately abstruse translation.

Contents of Part One

Part One consists of a translation of all of Nāgārjuna’s *ślokas*, formatted with their Chinese source-text verses in both traditional and simplified scripts on the corresponding verso page. The inclusion of both versions of Chinese script is intended to facilitate study of Nāgārjuna’s text by both Western Dharma students and bi-lingual native readers of Chinese. In the case of the latter, the ready availability of both original text and English translation is often very helpful in comprehending the unfamiliar technical terminology, abstruse concepts, and refractory terseness typical of early sino-Buddhist Classical Chinese texts.

As for the rationale in presenting a separate compilation of the stanzas of the *Bodhisambhāra Treatise* text itself, this is done because no such edition is otherwise available in any language. To my mind, a clean commentary-free presentation of this sort is both convenient and necessary to facilitate easy access to the uninterrupted flow of Nāgārjuna’s work.

Contents of Part Two

Part Two consists of a repetition of each *śloka* followed by the appropriate section of Bhikshu Vaśitva’s commentary. Aside from the *śloka* numbering and my one-line synopsis headings and topic headings, this section reflects the translation of the Taisho text with nothing added, nothing removed, and no alterations in sequence. I emphasize this only because the closely interwoven format of the text and its commentary in its Chinese edition is by no means unequivocally straightforward in indicating which parts represent Nāgārjuna’s work and which parts represent Bhikshu Vaśitva’s commentary. Indeed, it does require a reasonably attentive study of the work to ascertain which is which. Even with a good deal of focus on

this problem, it is still possible that I may have mistakenly included a *śloka* or two merely quoted by Nāgārjuna from other texts (such as *The Ten Grounds Sutra*) as being integral to the *Bodhisambhāra Treatise* text. The unbroken serial format of *Part Two* allows the reader to make his own judgment on this matter without being unduly influenced by the editorial choices inherent in the stanzas-only version contained in *Part One*.

In Summary

In Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Bodhisambhāra Treatise*, we have a rare and beautiful Dharma jewel reflecting the essence of a bodhisattva's motivation, wisdom, skillful means, and practice. In Bhikshu Vaśitva's commentary, we have a fine setting for that jewel by which its facets are clearly displayed in their best light. I feel fortunate to have encountered these texts in personal circumstances conducive to comprehending at least their surface meanings and hope that this translation of the *Bodhisambhāra Treatise* text and commentary will be useful to those studying the works of Nāgārjuna as guides to correct practice of the Bodhisattva Path.

It would be unrealistic for me to suppose that this translation might not benefit from further revisions. Suggestions for improvements from clergy, scholars, or Dharma students may be forwarded via website email and will certainly be very much appreciated.

Bhikshu Dharmamitra,
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