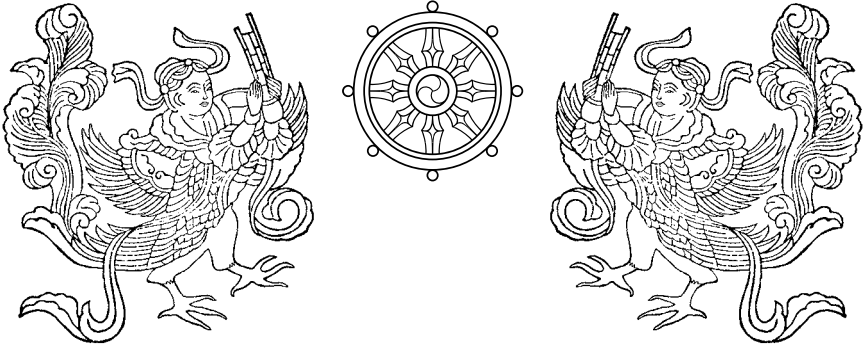


NĀGĀRJUNA'S GUIDE
to
THE BODHISATTVA PATH

Ārya Nāgārjuna's
Treatise on the Provisions for Enlightenment
(*Bodhisam̐bhāra Śāstra*)

With a Selective Abridgement of Bhikshu Vas̐tva's Early Indian
Bodhisam̐bhāra Śāstra Commentary

Translation, Abridgement & Explanatory Notes
By Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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INTRODUCTION

The Text and the Origins of This Translation

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 Tripitaka 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 compilation of the Chinese Buddhist canon (T32.1660.517b-41b). Neither the treatise nor the commentary are extant in either Sanskrit or Tibetan. As an important work by Ārya Nāgārjuna, it is a Dharma jewel well worth bringing forth for the benefit of Western Buddhists.

There have been no previous attempts to produce a literal English translation of Nāgārjuna's *Bodhisambhāra Treatise* of which I am aware. In December, 2004, during a getaway to my retreat cabin on the Oregon coast, I finally found time to closely study this text. I remember being deeply pleased by the way in which this work gathered together all of the beautiful essentials of bodhisattva resolve, multi-lifetime vision, and altruistic practice into a relatively short, accessible, and comprehensive guide to the Bodhisattva Path.

I was doubly pleased to find that the very terse *ślokas* of this treatise were interwoven with a detailed, line-by-line explanatory commentary by an Indian monk who apparently lived not long after Ārya Nāgārjuna's life in the first quarter of the first millennium. The availability of such a fine commentary was especially fortuitous because it so nicely resolved the ambiguities encountered when contemplating the meaning of the treatise text proper.

Given the nature of this work's contents, I felt that the text deserved a clear and accurate English edition and so proceeded straightaway to produce a first-draft translation of the entire six-fascicle treatise and commentary.

Relying on multiple instances of internal evidence in the commentary, I have provisionally reconstructed the author's name as "Bhikshu Vaśitva." The nature of that evidence is detailed in the introduction to my complete translation of this commentary published under separate cover.

Special Features of the *Bodhisam̃bhāra Śāstra*

The especially attractive and useful features of this treatise lie in its clear description of the essentials of the path to buddhahood, including specific details about prerequisites to be fulfilled, frames of mind and behaviors to be adopted or relinquished, the means for accumulation of the two primary provisions consisting of merit and wisdom, the means for overcoming karmic obstacles, the means to be used in attracting beings to the Path, and the means to be used in teaching Dharma to beings at every level of faith, intelligence, and affinity, all in a relatively short treatise easily read, easily reviewed, and amenable through its brevity to memorization.

The Relationship of this Treatise to Other Works of Nāgārjuna

This treatise is closely related in content to much longer works by Nāgārjuna such as the *Strand of Jewels (Ratnāvalī)* and the *Ten Grounds Vibhāṣā (Daśabhūmika Vibhāṣā)*. Its relationship with the latter is particularly close as evidenced by the fact that the work on the ten bodhisattva grounds repeatedly quotes both directly and indirectly from this *Bodhisam̃bhāra Treatise*.

Unlike some other works attributed to the author of the *Middle Treatise*, there seems to be no particular controversy about the "original" Nāgārjuna's authorship of this work, this due to a relative abundance of internal and external evidence supporting the relationship. The nature of the internal evidence lies primarily in identity of doctrine discussed, identity of interpretive stance, identity of tone and aspirational tenor, and direct citation of classically Nāgārjunian interpretive formulae.

On the Decision to Create an "Abridged" Edition of the Commentary

The extremely terse *ślokas* comprising this text are so metaphysically rich and replete with hidden meanings that anyone wishing to absorb Ārya Nāgārjuna's intent in writing the treatise will require some sort of authoritative explanatory apparatus. To this end, I translated the entire early Indian commentary by Bhikshu Vaṣitva at the same time that I first translated the treatise text.

But even Bhikshu Vaṣitva's fine and detailed commentary has limitations in terms of its suitability for a readership comprised of individuals with such varying backgrounds as one encounters among Western students and practitioners of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Although the full-length commentary, graced with adequate

annotation, serves fairly well the needs of doctrine-obsessed monastics, scholars, and elite lay practitioners, the larger community of lay Buddhists would be bound to encounter difficulties with the length, complexity, and indirect style of Bhikshu Vaśitva's commentary.

This "variable-readership" reality suggested to me that, in releasing the treatise translation, I was facing a problem requiring a "middle-way" solution somewhere between simply publishing the easily misunderstood unadorned text and publishing the treatise in tandem with a long and sometimes rather abstruse commentary. The result of deliberating on this matter is the stratagem adopted in the current volume wherein the most crucially relevant passages from the long commentary are abridged, paraphrased, or summarized and then appended to each *śloka*. These are then each followed in turn, where helpful or necessary, by "optional reading" in the form of "translator's notes" contributing additional material useful to understanding the text.

On the Limitations of This Abridgement of the Indian Commentary

I hasten to point out the limitations of this abridgement of Bhikshu Vaśitva's fine early Indian commentary, as follows:

First, this condensation is both radical and selective and hence not at all rigorous in comprehensiveness of content. Although I attempted to refrain from excluding any primary doctrinal points, it might still be that crucially important ideas were left out.

Second, this abridgement of Bhikshu Vaśitva's commentary is recorded mostly in my words, not his. Thus any stylistic nuance attributable to the original author which might have survived the work's translation from Sanskrit to Chinese is erased in this condensation effort.

Due to the shortcomings of this radical abridgement, I encourage readers open to the detail of a comprehensive line-by-line explanation to prefer my translation of the unabridged commentary.

On the Translator's Explanatory Notes Included in This Volume

I feel that the translator's explanatory notes are required to explain important ideas and contribute doctrinal material not covered to any appreciable degree in either Ārya Nāgārjuna's text or Bhikshu Vaśitva's commentary. The need for the notes is occasioned by the fact that both the treatise text and commentary assume a solid

familiarity with often very specific details of Buddhist texts and doctrines. Unfortunately, most modern students of Dharma simply do not possess such a fully ripened background. To expect that they might is simply not reasonable, this because much of the foundational material is not so readily available in English.

Some “translator’s notes” contain directly-relevant supplemental information which I have translated from elsewhere in the Canon. Even though these “reference materials” are sometimes rather lengthy, I felt it best to include them in the notes rather than to exile them to appendices.

I hope the reader will forgive the inclusion of such broadly-ranging notes intended to clarify and amplify the meaning of the text. For those readers already familiar with the ideas covered in any particular “translator’s note,” there is certainly no reason not to simply skip right over to the next treatise *śloka*, focusing exclusively on the abridged commentary of Bhikshu Vaśitva.

On the Structure of This Volume

I have chosen to arrange the structure this volume’s content according to the following schema:

1) To facilitate ready reference to any given *śloka*, following upon the brief general table of contents, I have included an additional relatively detailed table of contents consisting of my single-line summary of each *śloka*’s subject matter. (These “single-line summaries” are by no means definitive. They are simply a provisional didactic stratagem intended to facilitate study of the treatise.)

2) Next, I have set out the entire English translation of Ārya Nāgārjuna’s treatise completely free of any potentially prejudicial outlining, *śloka* titling, or other interpretive apparatus. I have included both traditional and simplified Chinese text on the verso pages, this to assist more nuanced understanding of the text by those competent to read Sino-Buddhist classical Chinese.

3) Following on the presentation of the entire unadorned treatise text, each treatise *śloka* is set out yet again, preceded by a summarizing heading and followed by a paraphrasing abridgement of the relevant section of the Bhikshu Vaśitva commentary (signaled by “AV:”), and then by “translator’s notes” (signaled by “TN:”). Some of the *ślokas* are already so clear that no translator’s notes are included.

In Summation

As with nearly all translations of moderately technical classic Buddhist texts, there is certainly room for improvement in my efforts here on behalf of Ārya Nāgārjuna's treatise. Clergy, specialists, or Dharma students encountering errors, opacities, or infelicities are encouraged to send along any constructive suggestions for second-edition refinements via the Kalavinka Press website's email. I will be grateful for any such kindnesses bestowed and will give each suggestion close consideration for integration into subsequent editions.

I hope that this translation of Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Provisions for Enlightenment* together with the abridged Bhikshu Vaśitva commentary discussions and explanatory translator's notes will be useful to students and practitioners of the Bodhisattva Path.

Bhikshu Dharmamitra,
December, 2007