A Strand *of* Dharma Jewels

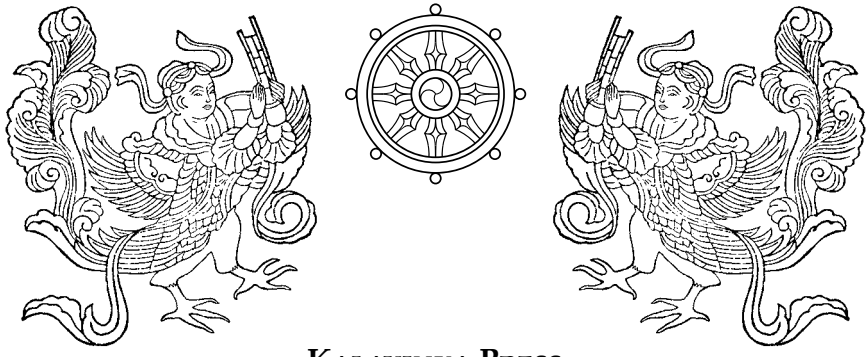
A Bodhisattva's Profound Teachings On Happiness, Liberation, and the Path

The Rāja Parikathā Ratnāvalī

Composed by Nāgārjuna for a South Indian Monarch

Tripiṭaka Master Paramārtha's Sixth-Century Edition

Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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(All outlining and section titles except main chapter titles originate with the translator.)

Introduction

Introductory Notes on This Text

A Strand of [*Dharma*] *Jewels as Advice for the King* (*Rāja-parikathā-ratnāvalī*) is a 500-stanza treatise on Mahāyāna right view, practice, and realization written by Ārya Nāgārjuna sometime in the late first quarter of the first millennium CE. Although it is presented in the form of a letter to a monarch setting forth advice on how best to achieve happiness and gain liberation while also governing for the highest good of both king and country, its intent extends far beyond that: It is a reasonably complete guide for those aspiring to bodhisattva practice on how to understand the mind and the world, how to think and act in the world, and how to achieve the highest realization of mind in transcending the world, even while working all the while for universal good in the world.

The edition from which this English translation is made is the Sanskrit-to-Chinese translation produced by the Indian Tripiṭaka Master Paramārtha (499–569 CE) during the early years of the Ch'en dynasty (557–589 CE). Paramārtha was an Indian monk of Brahman-caste origins from Ujjain, the famous and historic city in Madhya Pradesh. He is revered as one of the greatest translators in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

General Discussion of the Author and the Text

The author of this treatise, Ārya Nāgārjuna, is recognized by followers of all Northern School Buddhist traditions as one of the foremost advocates of the Mahāyāna path dedicated to universal spiritual liberation and realization of buddhahood. Nāgārjuna championed this path as of a higher order than the individual-liberation paths idealizing personal escape from suffering through the enlightenment of arhats or pratyekabuddhas.

We have biographies of Nāgārjuna in both Chinese and Tibetan traditions varying widely in the degree of hagiographic content. Of course there has also been much discussion about the life of Nāgārjuna in the academic literature as well as in the secondary literature emanating from Western Buddhist faith communities.[1] Still, when all is said and done, we don't actually know very much for

certain about any concrete details regarding Nāgārjuna's life either before or after he became a monk.

Obviously, much can be deduced about the character of Nāgārjuna's thought through studying the texts he is supposed to have authored. If we focus solely on those texts for which Nāgārjunian authorship is generally acknowledged, we notice right away several standard features: a) an emphasis on emptiness teachings so thorough-going that they dismiss inherent existence of any and all phenomena; b) a predilection for the use of *reductio ad absurdum* dialectics seizing on the Achilles heel of any proposition positing inherent existence; and c) extremely consistent promotion of universal-liberation doctrines along with all of their subsidiary practices such as Mahāyāna enlightenment resolve, the great compassion, and dedication to the Bodhisattva Path.

But, as one might expect, the question of precisely which texts were actually composed by Ārya Nāgārjuna is a matter of ongoing debate. In this debate, there seem to be two equally incredible extremes framing a moderately reasonable middle ground. At the one extreme, we have a tiny minority of modern authors who will admit Nāgārjuna wrote the *Treatise on the Middle* while refusing to believe any Mahāyāna writings ever issued from his hand. At the other extreme, we have from among the Tibetan faith community a substantial number of individuals convinced that, above and beyond his authorship of the *Treatise on the Middle* and numerous Mahāyāna texts, Nāgārjuna lived over 500 years in a single human body and was a practitioner of tantra as well.

Setting aside the extremes for a moment, there does seem to be general middle-ground agreement on Nāgārjuna's authorship of *The Treatise on the Middle*, *The Twelve-Gate Treatise*, *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*, *Sixty Verses on Reasoning*, *Letter from a Friend*, *Provisions for Enlightenment*, *Analytic Treatise on the Ten Grounds*, *Strand of Jewels*, and a number of other texts.

Opinions vary considerably on other works such as *Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* towards which doubts have been raised, but only on the basis of merely external circumstantial evidence. (The few negative internal-evidence arguments are easily refuted, for which see my essay on the matter.)

The *Sūtrasamuccaya* may be another "grey-area" text in the eyes of some observers As much as I loved reading the *Sūtrasamuccaya*, I find its tenor markedly different from anything else I've read from

Nāgārjuna and hence, absent further evidence, I am forced into agnosticism on questions regarding its authorship.

Mainstream secular buddhology has also found some difficulty in concurring with the Tibetan historical tradition's ascribing to the original *Middle Treatise* Nāgārjuna authorship of texts referencing consciousness-only schools (as with the *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*) or tantra (as with the *Pañcakrama*). David Seyfort Ruegg, for example, suggests these two works were composed by a seventh-century eminence, a "Nāgārjuna II," who happened to carry the same name. (*The Literature of the Madhyamaka School*, p. 104-5.)

Although there does not seem to be any particular controversy about the validity of attributing authorship of this *Strand of Jewels* text to Nāgārjuna, interpretations vary as to precisely which king was the intended recipient of its teachings. Nāgārjuna makes clear in the text itself that he wrote it not just for the benefit of the king, but rather for the benefit of all beings in the future who would take up cultivation of the Mahāyāna path of liberation.

Students of Nāgārjuna will of course already be familiar with a similar text generally acknowledged as authored by the same eminence, namely *Letter from a Friend* (*Suhṛllekha*). The two texts differ markedly in the depth of content, perhaps largely from the fact that this *Strand of Jewels* text is roughly five times greater in length. From internal evidence, though, one might well suppose that *Letter from a Friend* was written for an entirely different monarch (or the same monarch at an earlier age), one with a seemingly less sophisticated level of intellectual development or present-life spiritual aptitude. (The Chinese edition translated by Tripiṭaka Master Guṇavarman states that the *Suhṛllekha* was written by Ārya Nāgārjuna for the benefit of a King Śatakarṇī, one of a number of identically-named Sātavāhana rulers who occupied the throne in Amaravati.)

Those wishing to explore these two distinctly different "royal advisory" texts may choose to explore my translation of the three earliest editions of *Letter from a Friend* (translated by Tripiṭaka Masters Guṇavarman, Saṅghavarman, and Yijing) which I am publishing under a single separate cover. (Alternatively, there are widely-available translations from the much-later Tibetan edition.)

On the Title

There are minor variations in the recorded Sanskrit title of this work. Apparently the single partial surviving Sanskrit copy datable to the

nineteenth century refers to it as the *Ratnāvalī*, whereas the Tibetan translation edition "rewritten" in roughly 1100 CE transliterates the title as *Rāja-parikathā-ratnamālā*.

The Chinese edition is datable at the latest from 569 CE. This corresponds to the end of the life of the translator Tripiṭaka Master Paramārtha. One may justify from the meaning of the translated Chinese title (寶行王正論) the fairly obvious reconstruction as *Rāja-parikathā-ratnāvalī* (*bao-3 hang-2* / 寶行 = *ratnāvalī*; *wang-2 zheng-4 lun-4* / 王正論 = *rāja-parikathā*).

Given that a *rāja-parikathā* is "a discourse advising the king," and "*ratnāvalī*" is "a strand of jewels," it is clear that we are dealing with a discourse consisting of Dharma truths presented to a king, likened by analogy to a strand or necklace of jewels, or (in the case of the Tibetan edition's transliteration as "*ratnamālā*") likened by analogy to prayer beads made of jewels. The obvious intent of the title is to liken the teachings contained in the discourse advising the king to an artfully arranged strand of jewels.

The most common English translation chosen so far for the Tibetan edition ("Precious Garland of Advice for the King") apparently involves either an artifact of the Tibetan words used to translate the Sanskrit title or simply a matter of the translator's creative choice in translating "*ratna* / jewel" in an adjectival sense and translating "*mālā* / necklace" in its alternative sense as a "wreath or garland," i.e. as "a wreath or festoon of flowers worn as decorative or honorific ornamentation."

On the Three Extant Editions

We have three source texts from which to derive an understanding of Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Strand of Jewels*, as follows:

a) The earliest datable text is preserved in the Taisho edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon (T32.1656.593b-505b). It is the edition translated by Tripiṭaka Master Paramārtha (500–569 CE) during the Ch'en Dynasty (557–589 CE), datable at the latest from 569 CE, the end of the life of the translator.[2]

b) The Tibetan originates with a translation made by Jñānagarbha and Klu'i rgyal mtshan, probably at the beginning of the ninth century. Due to perceived doctrinal errors in the original translation, it was revised two hundred years later by Kanakavarman and Pa tshab ñi ma grags who consulted several distinctly different Sanskrit editions in making their changes.[3]

c) The very late (nineteenth century?) fragments of the Sanskrit comprise roughly three and a half of the original five chapters. They are the only known surviving fragments of any original transmitted through a long line of Sanskrit oral transmittals and palm-leaf transcription.

There are any number of difficulties in preferring readings from any of these texts over the others. For instance, as readily as we might otherwise be inclined to favor readings from the very substantial and valuable extant Sanskrit fragments, we are given cause for pause once we stop and wonder how many merely oral transmittals were involved, how many times the written version of the text was recopied, and how many errors and corruptions in recopying the text occurred across the course of the previous 1600 years. As illustrated by our knowledge of the process involved in revising the original error-ridden Tibetan translation wherein the revisers were faced with deciding between readings in three different versions of the Sanskrit in the early eleventh century, many changes must have already been affecting the Sanskrit versions by that midway point between the texts original composition and the current partial palm-leaf copy which survives today (at least on mostly very readable microfiche).

Although the Tibetan edition originates in part from a relatively early initial translation (early ninth century?) whereby it emerged into Tibetan after perhaps six hundred years of Sanskrit transmittal, it was revised two hundred years later (i.e. not retranslated) by consulting several editions available to the revisers at the beginning of the eleventh century. The very fact that there were three distinctly different editions of the Sanskrit from which the revisionists were forced to choose in recasting what they deemed to be an unsatisfactory original translation leads one to wonder how many corruptions had already entered the text at that point and, additionally, how many new corruptions then entered the Tibetan translation as a result of consulting three differing editions while rewriting it.

Although the Chinese is the earliest edition, Hahn (in *Nāgārjuna's Ratnāvalī*) claims to have identified a number of minor corruptions in the text, most of which I feel comfortable in endorsing as factual. Additionally, it is not always so easy to deduce with precision the particular very important antecedent Sanskrit technical terms that lie behind Paramārtha's Chinese renderings. This latter problem is assisted somewhat by referencing the seventy-percent

complete, but highly evolved Sanskrit fragments together with recently-available Sanskrit-Chinese concordances to other works translated by the very prolific translator of this *Ratnāvalī*, Tripiṭaka Master Paramārtha. (The reader will notice I have restored several very brief passages from Tucci's Sanskrit as emendations producing a truly complete English translation. These emendations are clearly marked in both text and notes.)

Fortunately, the Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan editions track each other fairly closely and, where there are variances, they need not be interpreted as representing any genuinely contradictory pronouncements on either doctrine or practice. Where there is some minor cause for confusion in contemplating the phrasing of one edition, reflecting on the renderings found in the other editions is often very helpful in sorting out the difficulty.

One example of how one edition's statements can assist understanding another tradition's text lies in probably the most technically demanding section of the *Ratnāvalī*, the "fifty-seven faults to be abandoned" listed by Nāgārjuna in the beginning of the fifth chapter. Apparent ambiguity in the Sanskrit and Tibetan is to a certain degree clarified by referencing the Chinese text wherein Paramārtha was kind enough to use a sentence structure clearly designating and distinguishing the names of each of those faults. This artifact in Paramārtha's translation methodology helps prevent a vulnerability in reading the Sanskrit whereby definitional text may be confused with the names of the fifty-seven terms themselves.

Another example: Where problems in understanding the Chinese were made more difficult by Paramārtha's (or his editors') choosing to render very technically complex stanzas with only five characters per *śloka* foot, referencing the Sanskrit or the Tibetan has often been quite helpful in clarifying subtleties.

On the Internal Structure of the Text

The five chapters of the *Ratnāvalī* deal primarily with five main topics and secondarily with many important subtopics crucial to understanding right Mahāyāna view, practice, and realization. I outline them below only briefly:

1) The first chapter, entitled "On Gaining Happiness and Liberation" explains how to achieve realization of these two priorities in the well-lived and deeply reflective life.

As regards "happiness," noting that the preoccupation with happiness tends to be universal and foremost in the minds of worldly beings, Nāgārjuna clarifies the causes to be cultivated or avoided in bringing about realization of happiness in both present and future lives, focusing on the most pivotal of all, right ethics as embodied in the abstention from the ten types of unwholesome karma. He also points out the uselessness of non-beneficial forms of asceticism while describing as well the negative karmic fruits of indulgence in unwholesome physical, verbal, or mental karma.

In his long section discussing "liberation" which forms the deepest metaphysical core of this entire work, Nāgārjuna first speaks of right understanding of "non-self," the origin of the world in imagining a self and appurtenances of a self, and then explains how reality-based perception defeats self-grasping view. He empowers these teachings through resort to the traditional "reflection in the mirror," "twirling firebrand," and "mirage" analogies.

In the course of explaining the causes of liberation, Nāgārjuna treats a wide array of important subtopics too numerous to enumerate here, but which I have detailed extensively in the Table of Contents. They include:

Refutation of charges that denying inherent existence is somehow nihilist;
Definitions of right and wrong view and the negative consequence of non-adherence to right view;
Wisdom's role in generating liberation;
The need to relinquish clinging to views positing either existence or non-existence;
The unreality of production, prior cause, and concurrent cause;
The inherent fallaciousness of polarity-based and interdependency-based designations;
How understanding of conditioned-arising counters nihilism;
How realism is in fact rooted in delusion;
The importance of realizing true suchness, non-attachment, and non-dual liberation;
Deconstruction of the world, self, aggregates, and dharmas;
The unreality of time and the three marks of arising, abiding, and destruction;
Refutation of the reality of the four and six elements.

Suffice it to say that this discussion focusing on wisdom and liberation is key to everything else presented in this entire five-

chapter presentation of right Mahāyāna view, practice, and realization. Failure to spend some deeply reflective time on these topics will prevent right understanding of the path of liberation to which Nāgārjuna has dedicated this *Strand of Jewels* discourse.

2) The second chapter, entitled "Advice on Various Topics," begins with declarations on absence of inherent existence in both persons and dharmas and continues to statements on the non-ultimacy of existence-affirming views, non-existence-affirming views, and duality-based designations.

Nāgārjuna makes the point that misunderstanding Dharma teachings can lead to one's own karmic downfall and unnecessary perpetuation of uncontrolled cyclic existence. He also counsels against slandering right Dharma teachings and coursing in erroneous attachments.

The second chapter then moves to a series of instructions on doctrine and practical action which, although not the least bit exclusively applicable to monarchs, are none the less formally addressed to the King. These include instructions on the four means of attraction used to draw people into deeper understanding of Dharma, instructions on the four foundations of meritorious qualities, and a long series of instructions on the advisability of developing wisdom, swiftly changing to what is good, contemplating impermanence, avoiding intoxicants, gambling, and frivolous entertainments, on countering any tendency to over-indulge lust, on refraining from the hunting of animals, and on relinquishing evil and cultivating good for the sake of gaining enlightenment.

Nāgārjuna then concludes the second chapter with instructions on the role of compassion and wisdom in gaining enlightenment and instructions on the causes for gaining the body of a buddha in a future life.

3) The third chapter, entitled "The Provisions for Gaining Enlightenment," as the title would suggest, is nominally dedicated to the prerequisites which the bodhisattva practitioner must complete across the course of countless lifetimes in order to ascend through all the bodhisattva stages to the ultimate realization of buddhahood.

Nāgārjuna begins the chapter with a description of the immense amount of merit required for the realization of buddhahood, notes that merit is the cause for gaining the form body of a buddha whereas wisdom is the cause for gaining the Dharma body of a

buddha, and then insists that one should not be discouraged by the amount of merit required for buddhahood. He points out that the beings beset by suffering are boundlessly many, that the bodhisattva vows to liberate these countless beings, and that the very fact of making that vow itself generates boundless merit.

Next, after noting that the bodhisattva's sufferings are melted away by the causal-ground practices, Nāgārjuna emphasizes that the wise are not discouraged by the length of the endeavor and that one must pay close attention to the effects of either indulging or abandoning the three poisons. He then proceeds through an extensive catalogue of important causal-ground bodhisattva practices and their positive effects, finishing with a list of the causes generating the six superknowledges, buddhahood, the liberation of beings, and purification of the buddhaland.

Those wishing to explore the main topic of this chapter more thoroughly may care to read my complete translation of Nāgārjuna's *Bodhisaṃbhāra Śāstra* and its early Indian commentary for they are devoted exclusively to this all-important topic and discuss it in exhaustive detail.

4) The fourth chapter, entitled "Guidance Especially for Rulers," is addressed primarily to those engaged in governance even though the principles contained therein are generally useful to anyone, whether a dedicated practitioner of the Path or merely a citizen of the country. The final third of the chapter is by no means exclusive in its utility to those in positions of power.

Important topics from the latter part of the chapter certainly interesting and relevant to all Dharma practitioners include:

The limited scope and illusory nature of pleasures;

Wisdom-instilling contemplations refuting the reality of all aspects of pleasurable experiences;

The grave karmic error of those who slander the Mahāyāna;

The nature of the Mahāyāna and the unjustifiability of disparaging it in any way;

Factors unique to the Mahāyāna;

The Buddha's rationale in setting forth different teachings.

Nāgārjuna's concluding discussion on the practice of the Mahāyāna suggests to the king that matters could evolve to where practicing right Dharma and continuing to occupy the throne might become incompatible, in which case the right course of action could be to renounce the throne and become a monk.

5) The fifth and final chapter carries the mildly misleading title "On Right Practice for Monastics." (There is nothing in the entire chapter not perfectly appropriate for any practitioner of the Bodhisattva Path, whether lay or monastic.)

The chapter commences by noting that the beginning monastic pays close attention to study and practice of the monastic's moral code. It then continues with a presentation of fifty-seven faults to be abandoned. (See the Appendix for an easily perusable list.) Next we have an array of additional bodhisattva practices (the perfections, compassion, and related dharmas), and a brief listing and discussion of the Ten Bodhisattva Grounds. Nāgārjuna then concludes by setting forth twenty verses to assist generation of the causes and result of buddhahood, by pointing out that the merit of such cultivation is incalculably vast, and by summing up the treatise with final instructions.

On the Special Character and Utility of This Text

The most important feature of this text is its inclusion in a relatively short discourse all of the teachings necessary for genuinely understanding the practice of the bodhisattva as he courses along in this one life as well as in lifetime-after-lifetime of cyclic existence, assembling all the prerequisites necessary for the realization of buddhahood.

The *Strand of Jewels* is especially practical in the nature of its instructions. Thus it explains clearly how to generate merit and achieve happiness while also giving due weight to the pursuit of the wisdom which generates spiritual liberation. Great attention is given to the very specific details of personal spiritual cultivation and how to integrate them with the mundane details of worldly existence.

Finally, having provided detailed instructions on gaining happiness, pursuing liberation, assembling the causes for buddhahood, and carrying out the responsibilities of leadership, Nāgārjuna describes in brief monastic practice and long-term bodhisattva practice which in some lives will be as a layperson, and which in other lives will be as a monastic.

On Elements Added by the Translator

All headings aside from the five chapter headings are inserted by the translator to facilitate easier initial assessment and navigation

of the text. Although I did not obsess on appropriateness or precision in slicing and naming sections and subsections, the outline structure probably comes close to reflecting the implicit organization of Nāgārjuna's text. Still, the reader is counseled to treat my outline apparatus as merely preliminary and advisory.

On a related note, even against the advice of a few worthy English-language partisans, I've included on verso pages the source-language texts in both simplified-character and traditional-character scripts. There are three reasons for this:

First, I think it can be helpful to Dharma students and specialists who have taken the time to develop Chinese-language skills to have ready access to the source-language in contemplating abstruse or opaque passages.

Second, there are no small number of readers who can mostly read the Chinese fairly well, but who still need a little help interpreting the code-speak of Sino-Buddhist technical terms not found anywhere in the modern Chinese lexicon. Facing-page English allows them to mostly skip the English altogether, while still having the readily-available "crutch" of my recto-page English translation as a "ready-reference" for unfamiliar or difficult technical terms.

Third, I'm fishing for critical comments on translation quality and precision to facilitate improvements in subsequent editions. Placing the source language right next to the translation enhances the possibility of inspiring a few more recommendations from readers willing to mobilize their compassion toward that end.

Finally, I've added a list of the "Fifty-seven Faults to be Abandoned," Endnotes, and "Source Text Variant Readings" to encourage deeper study and contemplation of this text.

In Summary

Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Strand of Jewels* is a marvelous presentation of the Bodhisattva Path clearly articulating the ethical restraints, virtuous endeavors, contemplative practices, and liberation methods with which the bodhisattva practitioner must develop deep understanding and competency. I feel that this discourse is such a unique and valuable resource for the serious Mahāyāna practitioner that it really should be widely circulated and studied by modern-day students of the Path.

Given that the received editions of this text do in fact demonstrate significant variations in their degree of clarity, I believe that

this translation of the earliest extant edition of Nāgārjuna's *Strand of Jewels* may serve as a resource through which practitioners of the Bodhisattva Path may resolve points of ambiguity and thus better-understand Nāgārjuna's precise meaning.

I don't doubt, given the abstruseness of the text and the terseness of the Chinese source text, that there may be room for revision of this translation. Suggestions for improvements from clergy, scholars, or Dharma students may be forwarded via website email and will certainly be very much appreciated.

Bhikshu Dharmamitra.
Buddha's Birthday, 2008