

**Part Two:**

**THE PERFECTION OF MORAL VIRTUE**

**(Chapters 21–23)**



# THE PERFECTION OF MORAL VIRTUE

## By Ārya Nāgārjuna

### Chapter 21: Introductory Discussion of Moral Virtue<sup>1</sup>

#### I. INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION OF THE PERFECTION OF MORAL VIRTUE

##### A. THE SUTRA TEXT

**Sutra:** It is based on the unfindability of offense and non-offense that one should pursue the perfection of moral virtue (*śīla pāramitā*).

##### B. NĀGĀRJUNA'S COMMENTARY

#### Exegesis:

##### 1. GENERAL DEFINITION OF MORAL VIRTUE (*ŚĪLA*)

*Śīla* refers to being fond of coursing along in the way of goodness while not allowing oneself to be negligent (*pramāda*). This is what is meant by *śīla*. Perhaps one takes on the moral precepts and practices goodness or perhaps one refrains from taking on the moral precepts and yet still practices goodness. Both of these cases qualify as "*śīla*." (Chinese textual note: In our language, ["*śīla*"] means "to be good by nature.")<sup>2</sup>

##### 2. PROSCRIBED BEHAVIOR CATEGORIES

As for *śīla*, generally described, the regulation behaviors specific to the body and mouth are of eight kinds. They include refraining from taking life (*prāṇātīpāta*), refraining from taking what is not given (*adattādāna*), refraining from engaging in sexual misconduct (*kāma mithyācāra*), refraining from engaging in false speech (*mṛṣāvāda*), refraining from engaging in divisive speech (*paiśunyahavāda*),<sup>3</sup> refraining from engaging in harsh speech (*pāruṣyahavāda*), refraining from engaging in frivolous speech (*sambhinnapralāpa*),<sup>4</sup> and refraining from partaking of intoxicants (*madyapāna*). This includes pure livelihood (*parisuddhājīva*) as well. These are the specific characteristics of the moral precepts.

If one fails to guard them and so lets go of and relinquishes them, this amounts to "breaking" the moral precepts. One who breaks these moral precepts is bound to fall into the three wretched destinies.

##### 3. LEVELS OF PRECEPT OBSERVANCE AND THE CONSEQUENCES

If one upholds the moral precepts at an inferior level, then one is born among humans. If one upholds the precepts at a middling level, one is born among the six desire heavens. If one upholds the

precepts at a superior level and also cultivates the four dhyānas and the four emptiness absorptions, one is born in the pure heavens of the form or formless realms.

The superior observance of the moral precepts is of three types: If one adheres to the lesser level of pure observance of the precepts, one achieves arhatship. If one adheres to the middle level of pure observance of the precepts, one attains pratyekabuddhahood. If one adheres to the superior level of pure observance of the precepts, one gains the Buddha Path.

If one neither attaches to them nor leans upon them and if one neither breaks them nor has deficiencies with respect to them, he is one who is praised and cherished by the Āryas. Instances such as these illustrate what is meant by superior purity in the observance of the moral precepts.

If one acts out of kindness and sympathy for beings, if one is motivated by the intention to bring beings across to liberation, and if one knows in accordance with reality the true character of the moral precepts, then one's mind does not lean upon or attach to them. If one upholds the precepts in this way, in the future one will influence people to arrive at the Buddha Path. This is what is meant by gaining the moral precepts of the unsurpassed Buddha Path.

#### 4. THE NECESSITY OF SCRUPULOUS OBSERVANCE

If one wishes to obtain great wholesome benefit, then one should uphold the moral precepts solidly, just as if one were cherishing a valuable treasure and as if one were guarding one's own physical life. Why? Just as the myriad beings possessed of physical form all rely upon the earth and abide there, so too it is with the moral precepts. The moral precepts are the dwelling place of all wholesome dharmas.

Moreover, [dispensing with moral precepts] is like wishing to walk without legs, like wishing to fly without wings and like wishing to cross over a body of water without a boat. This cannot be done. If one is lacking in the moral precepts and yet one wishes to obtain a fine result, it is just the same. If a person casts off and relinquishes these moral precepts, although he may abide in the mountains, practicing ascetic practices and eating fruits and taking herbs, he is still no different from the birds or the animals.

#### 5. USELESSNESS OF UNPRECEPTED ASCETICISM

There may be people who take on the observance of ascetic practices and thus who adopt the discipline of drinking only water, of

drinking only milk, of consuming only vital energy, of shaving off the hair, of letting the hair grow long, of reserving a only a small patch of hair atop the head, of wearing a *kāṣāya* robe, of wearing a white robe, of wearing clothes made of grass, of wearing clothes made of tree bark, of plunging into water in winter, of burning themselves with fire in the summer, of throwing themselves off of a high cliff, of washing themselves in the Ganges River, of taking three baths each day, of repeatedly making offerings to fire, of carrying out all kinds of sacrificial offerings, or of resorting to all sorts of spells and prayers. However, insofar as they may not have taken on these moral precepts, those practices are useless and thus there is nothing to be gained through pursuing them.

#### 6. THE IRRELEVANCE OF SOCIAL STATION

Although a person may abide in an exalted position, living in a grand palace, wearing fine clothes, and consuming exquisite cuisine, if he is nonetheless able to cultivate these moral precepts, he will be able to be reborn into a fine place and eventually will achieve the fruits of cultivating the Path. No matter whether one is of noble or humble social station and no matter whether one has little status or great status, if one is able to cultivate these precepts of purity, he will gain from it a great resulting benefit.

However, if one breaks these moral precepts, there are no considerations reserved for noble or humble class or greater or lesser status. In every case, one will remain unable to succeed in being born in a good place which accords with one's aspirations.

#### 7. THE BREAKER OF PRECEPTS

Moreover, the circumstance of a person who breaks the precepts is comparable to a clear and cool pool containing a poisonous snake. One refrains from bathing in such a place. It is also like a tree bearing fine flowers and fruit but an abundance of thorns. Although a person may abide in a family of the nobility, may possess a body which is handsome and fine, and may have accumulated an abundance of learning, if he finds no pleasure in upholding the moral precepts and his mind is devoid of kindness and pity, he is just like this. His situation is as described in this verse:

If one is of noble birth, but has no wisdom, this is ruination.  
 If one is intelligent, but is arrogant, this too is ruination.  
 If one is an upholder of precepts, but then violates the precepts,  
 In this life and in later lives, all is ruination.

## 8. THE OBSERVER OF THE PRECEPTS

Although one may be poor and of low social station, if one is able to uphold the moral precepts, this is superior to being wealthy or of noble birth while yet being a breaker of the precepts.

The fragrance of flowers and the fragrance of the trees is such that one is unable to smell them from afar. However, the fragrance from upholding the precepts universally pervades throughout the ten directions. The person who upholds the moral precepts perfects the realization of peacefulness and happiness. His name is heard in faraway quarters and he is revered and cherished by both men and gods. In this present life, he always achieves all manner of happiness. If he desires wealth, nobility, and long life in the heavens or among people, it is not difficult for him to obtain it. If one is pure in upholding the moral precepts, he gains whatever he wishes.

Moreover, a person who upholds the moral precepts observes the precept breaker's suffering and affliction encountered through punishments, confinements, beatings, and floggings, knows with respect to himself that he has eternally transcended such vulnerabilities, and is overjoyed on that account.

If a person who upholds the precepts sees a good person gaining a good name, fame, and happiness, and thinks to himself, "In just the same fashion as he has come by a good reputation, I too have a measure of that." When the life of a person who upholds the moral precepts comes to an end, when the knife-like wind cuts loose the body, and when the sinews and blood vessels are severed, he knows that he has upheld the precepts purely. His mind remains free of fearfulness. This situation is as described in a verse:

In an epidemic of great evil,  
 The moral precepts serve as fine medicine.  
 In a circumstance of great fearfulness,  
 The precepts are a guardian protector.  
 In the midst of the darkness of death,  
 The precepts serve as a bright lamp.  
 Where one might fall into the wretched destinies,  
 The precepts act as a bridge.  
 Within the waters of the sea of mortality,  
 The precepts are a great ship.

Furthermore, the person who upholds the precepts always finds that he is revered and supported by people of his time. His mind

remains blissful and free of regrets. He has no shortage of either clothing or food. When he dies, he is born in the heavens and then subsequently gains realization of the Buddha Path. For the person who upholds the precepts, there is no matter in which he is not successful. For a person who breaks the precepts, everything is lost.

9. THE MAN WITH THE MARVELOUS VASE (STORY)

This situation is analogous to that of the man who constantly devoted himself to making offerings to a particular deity. As this man was poverty-stricken, for twelve full years he single-mindedly made offerings out of a desire to gain wealth and nobility. The god was moved to feel pity for this man, manifest himself before him, and asked, "What is it that you seek?"

The man replied, "I'm seeking to gain wealth and nobility. I desire to have it occur that I may obtain everything I wish for."

The god then gave him a vessel known as "the vase of virtue" and told the man, "Everything you need will come forth from this vase."

After the man got it, there was nothing which he wished for that he did not succeed in obtaining. After he had acquired the ability to get anything he wished for, he built himself a fine house complete with elephants, horses, and carriages, and also came to possess an abundance of the seven kinds of jewels. He gave generously to all of his guests so that they were never wanting in any respect.

One of his guests inquired of him, "You used to be poverty-stricken. How is it that now you have come by such wealth?"

The man replied, "I received this celestial vase. The vase is able to put forth all of these different kinds of things. It's on account of this that I have gained such wealth."

The guest asked, "Would you show me the vase and something which it has put forth?"

He immediately brought out the vase. From within the vase, he drew forth all manner of objects. Then, in prideful carelessness, he began to dance about on the top rim of the vase, whereupon the vase was immediately shattered. At the very same time, all of the different sorts of things which it had produced all simultaneously disappeared.

One who upholds the moral precepts is just like this. He receives all manner of marvelous bliss and there is no wish which he does not realize. However, if a person breaks the precepts—if he becomes pridefully careless and gives free rein to willfulness—he will

become just like this man who broke his vase and consequently lost everything.

10. THE GOOD FORTUNE OF THE OBSERVER OF PRECEPTS

Furthermore, the reputation of the person who upholds the precepts spreads like a fragrance and pervades both the heavens and the human realm in both current and later lives. Additionally, the person who upholds the precepts is one to whom people enjoy making gifts, not stinting in giving even their valuable possessions. He does not cultivate worldly profit and yet there is nothing for which he is wanting. He succeeds in being born in the heavens. He enters the way of the Three Vehicles in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions and then succeeds in achieving liberation. It is only in a case where all manner of erroneous views figure in one's upholding of precepts that there might be nothing gained later.

Then again, even though a person may not have left behind the home life, if he is only able to cultivate the dharma of the precepts, he too will succeed in being reborn in the heavens. If a person is pure in his upholding of the precepts while also cultivating dhyāna and wisdom, and if he seeks thereby to cross himself over to liberation from the suffering of aging, sickness, and death, this wish will certainly be realized. Even though a person who upholds the precepts may not be under the protection of the military's weaponry, awful events will not befall him.

The wealth of upholding precepts is such that none can steal it away. The upholding of precepts is the most intimate of intimates. Even when one dies, one still does not become estranged from it. The adornment furnished by the upholding of precepts is superior to that of the seven precious things. It is for these sorts of reasons that one should remain just as protective of the moral precepts as one is protective of one's own physical life and just as cherishing of them as one is in cherishing precious possessions.

The person who breaks the precepts undergoes a myriad forms of suffering. He is like that man who used to be poor, subsequently became rich, but then broke the vase, and lost everything as a consequence. It is for these reasons that one should uphold the precepts of purity.

Moreover, when the person who upholds the precepts observes the karmic punishments of those who have broken the precepts, he should encourage himself on that account to devote himself to single-minded observance of the moral precepts.

## 11. THE WRETCHED STATE OF THE PRECEPT BREAKER: 32 ANALOGIES

What is meant by “the karmic punishments of those who have broken the moral precepts”?

A person who breaks the precepts is not respected by others. His house becomes like a tomb in that people do not choose to go there.

The person who breaks the moral precepts loses all of his meritorious qualities. He becomes like a dead and leafless tree in which people take no pleasure.

A person who breaks the precepts becomes like a frost-damaged lotus which people take no delight in viewing.

The person who breaks the precepts possesses an evil and fearsome mind like that of a *rākṣasa* ghost.

Just as thirsty people avoid a dried-up well, so too do people avoid returning into the presence of a precept-breaker.

The mind of the person who breaks the precepts is constantly beset with doubts and regrets. He is comparable to a criminal in that he is always fearful that punishment may come his way.

The person who breaks the precepts becomes like farmland struck by a hail storm which people cannot rely on for sustenance.

A person who breaks the precepts is like a bitter melon which, though resembling the sweet varieties, is inedible.

A person who breaks the precepts is like a village populated by thieves wherein one cannot remain.

A person who breaks the precepts is like a person afflicted with a serious disease in that one does not wish to grow close to him.

The breaker of the precepts is unable to avoid suffering. It is just as with a wretchedly bad path on which it is difficult to travel.

One cannot remain together with a person who breaks the precepts. Just as with an evil thief, it is difficult to grow close to him.

A person who breaks the precepts is like a great abyss. Those who travel by avoid it.

A person who breaks the precepts is difficult to dwell together with. In this he is comparable to a poisonous snake.

A person who breaks the precepts cannot be approached or touched. Thus he is comparable to a huge conflagration.

A person who breaks the precepts is like a wrecked boat in which one cannot ride to ferry on across the waters.

A person who breaks the precepts is like food which has been vomited up and which cannot be feasted on again.

When a person who breaks the precepts is present within a group of good people, it is like when a bad horse is present in a herd of good horses.

A person who breaks the precepts is different from good people. It is just as when a donkey is present within a herd of cattle.

When a person who breaks the precepts is present within the vigorous assembly, it is like when a weakling child is present among strong men.

Although a person who breaks the precepts may look like a bhikshu, he is like a corpse in the midst of a group of sleeping men.

A person who breaks the precepts is like a counterfeit pearl in the midst of true pearls.

A person who breaks the precepts is like an *eraṇḍa* tree<sup>5</sup> in the midst of a forest of sandalwood.

Although the person who breaks the precepts resembles a good person in appearance, he contains no good dharmas within. Although he may shave his head, dye the robes, take up vouchers according to seniority, and be referred to as a bhikshu, he is not really a bhikshu.

If a person who breaks the precepts dons the Dharma robes, [it is as if] he were to encase his body in sheets of hot brass.

If he takes up the bowl, then it is [as if it were] a vessel filled with molten brass.

If he consumes food, this amounts to swallowing burning iron pellets and drinking molten brass.

If he accepts offerings or support from people, [it is as if] they are just the minion ghosts of hell who imprison him.

If he enters a monastic dwelling, [then it is as if] he is entering a great hell.

If he sits on a seat belonging to the members of the Sangha, [it is as if] he is sitting down on a bed of hot iron.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, a person who breaks the precepts constantly experiences a feeling of fearfulness. Like a person with a serious illness, he is always afraid that death is about to come.

He is also just like a person who has committed the five relentless (*ānantarya*) transgressions.<sup>7</sup> He constantly thinks to himself, "I am a thief who steals from the Buddha. He stays in hiding and avoids contact by staying in less-frequented places. He is just like a thief who is fearful of others. As the months and days of each year go by, he always feels ill-at-ease and insecure.

Although a person who breaks the precepts may gain the benefit and pleasure of offerings, this pleasure is not pure. This circumstance is comparable to when a fool makes offerings to and adorns a corpse. When the wise hear of such a thing, they do not even wish to lay eyes on it.

There are innumerable many different sorts of examples such as these. The punishments endured by those who break the precepts are such as cannot be described. Thus it is that the cultivator should be single-minded in upholding the moral precepts.