Marvelous Stories from The Perfection of Wisdom

130 Didactic Stories from Ārya Nāgārjuna’s Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra

By the Great Indian Buddhist Patriarch Ārya Nāgārjuna (ca 200 CE)

Translation by Bhikshu Dhammaditra

Kalavinka Press
Seattle, Washington
www.kalavinkapress.org
Part One:

Nāgārjuna’s Stories on Giving
复次以七宝人民车乘金银灯烛房舍香华布施故。得作转轮王七宝具足。复次施得时故。报亦增多。如佛说。施远行人远来人。病人看病人。风寒众难时施。是为时施。复次布施时随土地所须施故。得报增多。复次旷路中施故。得福增多。常施不废故。得报增多。如求者所欲施故。得福增多。施物重故。得福增多。如以精舍园林浴池等若施善人故。得报增多。若施僧故。得报增多。若施者受者俱有德故。[23]（丹注云如菩萨及佛慈悲心布施是为施者若施佛及菩萨阿罗汉辟支佛是为受者故）得报增多。种种将迎恭敬受者故。得福增多。难得物施故。得福增多。
The Painter Who Gave Away His Savings

Nāgārjuna’s Preamble: Karmically-Rewarding Forms of Giving

Furthermore, on account of making gifts of the seven precious things, workers, carriages, gold, silver, lamps, candles, buildings, incense and flowers, one is able to become a wheel-turning monarch possessing an abundance of his seven types of treasures.

Additionally, through making gifts with timely appropriateness, one’s resulting karmic reward is increased. This is as explained by the Buddha when he said, “If one gives to a person about to travel far, to a person come from afar, to a sick person, to a person caring for the sick, or if one gives to assist with manifold difficulties arising from storms or cold, this qualifies as timely giving.”

Again, if one gives in a way which accords with what is most needed in a particular place, one reaps an increased karmic reward from that.

Also, if one performs an act of giving on the road in a wilderness area, one thereby gains an increased measure of merit.

If one continues giving constantly and without neglecting that practice, one gains from that an increased karmic reward.

If one gives a gift which accords with what the solicitor desires, one gains from that an increased measure of merit.

If one gives gifts which are valuable, one gains an increased measure of merit.

If one gives monastic dwellings, parks, forests, bathing ponds, and so forth—provided that those gifts are bestowed upon people who are good—one gains an increased karmic reward on that account.

If one gives gifts to the Sangha, one thereby gains an increased karmic reward.

If both the benefactor and the recipient are possessed of virtue, an increased karmic reward is gained as a result of that.

(Chinese textual note: “The notes in red read, ‘Take for example bodhisattvas and buddhas who give with a mind of compassion. This is what is intended with respect to the benefactor. Giving for example to buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, or pratyekabuddhas—this is what is intended in regard to the recipient.’”)

When one extends all manner of welcoming courtesies out of respect for the recipient, one gains from this an increased measure of merit.

If one gives that which was difficult to come by, one gains an increased amount of merit.
随所有物尽能布施故。得福增多。譬如大月氏弗迦罗城中有一画师。名千那。到东方多诃陀罗国。客画十二年得三十两金。持还本国于弗迦罗城中。闻打鼓作大会声。往见众僧。信心清净即问维那。此众中几许物。得作一日食。维那答曰。三十两金足得一日食。即以所有三十两金付维那。为我作一日食。我明日当来。空手而归。其妇问曰。十二年作得何等物。答言。我得三十两金。即问三十两金今在何所。答言。已在福田中种。妇言。何等福田。答言施与众僧。妇便缚其夫送官治罪断事。大官问。以何事故。妇言我夫狂痴。十二年客作得三十两金。不憐愍妇儿尽以与他人。依如官制辄縛送来。大官问其夫。汝何以不供给妇儿。乃以与他。

简体字
随所有物尽能布施故。得福增多。譬如大月氏弗迦罗城中有一画师。名千那。到东方多诃陀罗国。客画十二年得三十两金。持还本国于弗迦罗城中。闻打鼓作大会声。往见众僧。信心清净即问维那。此众中几许物。得作一日食。维那答曰。三十两金足得一日食。即以所有三十两金付维那。为我作一日食。我明日当来。空手而归。其妇问曰。十二年作得何等物。答言。我得三十两金。即问三十两金今在何所。答言。已在福田中种。妇言。何等福田。答言施与众僧。妇便縛其夫送官治罪断事。大官问。以何事故。妇言我夫狂痴。十二年客作得三十两金。不憐愍妇儿尽以与他人。依如官制辄縛送来。大官问其夫。汝何以不供给妇儿。乃以与他。

正體字
Story: The Painter who Gave Away his Savings

If one is able to give all that one has, one gains thereby an increased amount of merit. This principle is illustrated by the case of a painter named Karṇa from the city of Puṣkarāvatī in the state of Greater Tokharestan. He had traveled to the east to the state of Takṣaśilā where he served as a painter to that court for a period of twelve years.

He received payment of thirty two-ounce pieces of gold for his work and took it back with him when he journeyed back to the city of Puṣkarāvatī in his home state. He chanced to hear the sound of a drum beating to convene a great assembly. He went there and saw an assembly of the Sangha. With a mind of pure faith he asked the Karmadāna, “How much would be required to provide a day’s feast for this assembly?”

The Karmadāna replied, “Thirty two-ounce pieces of gold would be adequate to supply food for one day.” At this point, he immediately brought forth the entire sum of thirty two-ounce pieces of gold and entrusted it to the Karmadāna saying, “Prepare on my behalf a day’s feast [for this entire assembly]. I will return here tomorrow.” He then went back to his home empty-handed.

His wife asked him, “Well, what did you earn for your twelve years of work?”

He replied, “I earned thirty two-ounce pieces of gold.”

She immediately asked, “Where are the thirty two-ounce pieces of gold now?”

He replied, “They have already been planted in the merit field.”

The wife asked, “What merit field?”

He replied, “I gave them to the assembly of the Sangha.” His wife then had him detained and sent before a judge that his crime could be dealt with and the matter properly adjudicated. The Grand Judge asked, “Why is it that we are convened here?”

The wife replied, “My husband has become crazy and deluded. He worked in royal service in a foreign country for twelve years and earned thirty two-ounce pieces of gold. He had no compassionate regard for his wife or child and so gave away the entire sum to other people. Thus, wishing him to be dealt with by judicial decree, I quickly moved to have him detained and brought forth.”

The Grand Judge then asked her husband, “Why did you not share it with your wife and child, preferring instead to give the gold away to others?
答言。我先世不行功德。今世贫穷受诸辛苦。今世遭遇福田。若不种福后世复贫。贫贫相续无得脱时。我今欲顿舍贫穷。以是故尽以金施众僧。大官是优婆塞信佛清净。闻是语已赞言。是为甚难。懃苦得此少物尽以施僧。汝是善人。即脱身璎珞及所乘马并一聚落以施贫人。而语之言。汝始施众僧。众僧未食是为谷子未种。[2]牙已得生。大果方在后[3]身以是故言。难得之物尽用布施其福最多。
He replied, “In previous lives I did not cultivate merit. In the present life I am poor and so have undergone all manner of bitter suffering. Now, in this life I have encountered the field of merit. If I do not plant merit, in later lives I will still be poor, and so poverty will follow upon poverty continuously, such that there will be no time when I am able to escape it. I now wish to immediately relinquish this state of poverty. It is for this reason that I took all of the gold and gave it to the Sangha community.”

The Grand Judge happened to be an upāsaka¹ who maintained a pure faith in the Buddha. When he heard these words, he praised him, saying, “This is an extremely difficult thing to have done. You applied yourself diligently and underwent hardship in order to obtain such a small material reward, and then you were able to take it all and give it to the Sangha. You are a good man.”

He then took off the strand of jewels around his neck and gave it to the poor man along with his horse and the income which he received from the taxes on an entire village. He then declared to him, “At the beginning, when you had already made the gift to an assembly of the Sangha, but that assembly of Sangha members had still not partaken of that food, it was a case of the seed still not really having been planted. But now a sprout has already come forth from it. The great fruit of this will come forth in the next life.”

**Conclusion**

It is for reasons such as this that it is said that one gains the most merit if one is able to give entirely of that which has been hard to come by.

**Notes**

1. An *upāsaka* (feminine: *upāsikā*) is a Buddhist layman, the minimum qualification for which is having formally received from duly-ordained clergy (usually a bhikshu with at least five years full ordination) the Three Refuges: refuge in the Buddha; refuge in the Dharma; and refuge in the Ārya Sangha. (“Ārya” is a reference to those who have realized the path of seeing or above.) Although pledging adherence to specific moral norms is not a prerequisite to obtain the Refuges and become formally “Buddhist,” the universal ethical standard for the Buddhist layperson consists in the five precepts which prohibit: killing; stealing; sexual misconduct; false speech; intoxicants.
复次不为众生。亦不为知诸法实相故施。但求脱生老病死。是为声闻檀。为一切众生故施。亦为知诸法实相故施。是为诸佛菩萨檀。于诸功德不能具足。[7]但欲得少许分。是为声闻檀。一切诸功德欲具足满。是为诸佛菩萨檀。畏老病死故施。是为声闻檀。为助佛道为化众生不畏老病死。是为诸佛菩萨檀。是中应说菩萨本生经。如说阿婆陀那经中。昔阎浮提中有王。名婆萨婆。尔时有婆罗门菩萨。名韦罗摩。是国王师。教王作转轮圣王法。韦罗摩财富无量珍宝具足。作是思惟。人谓我为贵人财富无量。饶益众生今正是时应当大施。富贵虽乐一切无常。五家所共令人心散轻泆不定。譬如猕猴不能暂住。人命逝疾于电灭。人身无常众苦之薮。以是之故应行布施。
The Fabulous Giving of Velāma Bodhisattva

Nāgārjuna’s Preamble: Hearer Dāna versus Bodhisattva Dāna

Moreover, if it is not done for the sake of beings, if it is not done for the sake of realizing the true character of dharmas, and if it is done solely for the sake of gaining liberation from birth, old age, sickness, and death, this is the dāna of the Hearers. If one gives for the sake of all beings and if one does so for the sake of realizing the true character of dharmas, this is the dāna of the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas.

If one is unable to make one’s giving replete with every manner of meritorious quality, but rather desires only to gain a minor measure thereof, this is the dāna of the Hearers. If one wishes to make it entirely replete with every manner of meritorious quality, this is the dāna of the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas.

If one gives out of a fear of old age, sickness, and death, this is the dāna of the Hearers. If it is done to assist the realization of the Buddha Path, if it is done for the sake of transforming beings, and if it is not done out of fear of old age, sickness, and death, this is the dāna of the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas.

Story: The Fabulous Giving of Velāma Bodhisattva

In this connection, one ought to draw upon The Sutra of the Past Lives of the Bodhisattva. As discussed in The Avadāna Sutra, in the past, in Jambudvīpa, there was a king named Vāsava. At that time there was a brahman bodhisattva named Velāma who served as the teacher of the King. He taught the King the method for becoming a wheel-turning sage king.

Velāma’s own wealth was immeasurable. He possessed an abundance of precious jewels. He had these thoughts: “People look upon me as a noble man possessed of immeasurable wealth. If I am to be of benefit to beings, now is precisely the right time. I should perform a great act of giving. Although being wealthy and noble is blissful, everything is impermanent. This wealth, held in common with five types of agents (the King, thieves, fire, flood, and bad sons), causes a man’s mind to be so scattered, agitated and unfocused as to make it like a monkey which is unable to remain still. A person’s life passes more quickly than the disappearance of a lightning bolt. A person’s body is impermanent and is a thicket of the manifold sufferings. On account of these things, one ought to practice giving.”
After having these thoughts he wrote out a personal declaration in which he announced to all of the brahmans and monastics throughout Jambudvīpa, “We pray that each shall condescend to come and gather at our estate as we desire to present a great offering lasting for a period of twelve years during which boats will cruise on streams of rice consommé and there will be ponds filled with curds. There will be mountains made of rice and noodles and canals created of perilla oil. There will be robes, food, drink, bedding, and medicines. Everything will be of the most supremely marvelous quality for over a dozen years during which time we desire to make offerings in this way.”

There were eighty-four thousand white elephants girded in gold-adorned rhinoceros hide armor. Rare gems were strung together to create a huge gold pavilion ornamented with four kinds of precious things. There were eighty-four thousand horses also clad in gold-adorned rhinoceros hide armor and caparisoned with strands of the four kinds of precious things.

There were eighty-four thousand carriages, each adorned with gold, silver, beryl, and crystal, shaded with the skins of lions, tigers, and leopards, draped with curtains of pāṇḍukambala gems and ornamented with various embellishments.

There were eighty-four thousand precious thrones fitted and adorned with multicolored cushions which were soft and smooth. Arranged at each end of the thrones were crimson pillows and embroidered blankets. Marvelous garments and flowing robes were supplied in abundance. There were eighty-four thousand gold bowls filled with silver nuggets, silver bowls filled with gold nuggets, beryl bowls filled with crystals, and crystal bowls filled with beryl gems.

There were eighty-four thousand dairy cattle. The cows each produced an abundant measure of milk. The horns of the bulls were adorned with gold. They were each dressed in white blankets.

There were eighty-four thousand beautiful women of refined appearance and endowed with meritorious qualities. Their bodies were draped in strands of white pearls and precious gems.

This represents only a summary recital of the main features. There were all manner of other arrangements which one could never succeed in detailing.

At that time, King Vāsava and eighty-four thousand kings of lesser states, together with their ministers, national heroes, and
长者。各以十万旧金钱赠遗劝助。设此法祠具足施已。
释提婆那民来语韦罗摩菩萨。说此偈言天地难得物能喜悦一切汝今皆[18]以得为佛道布施[0142c18]尔时净居诸天现身而赞。说此偈言
大布施汝所为者是怜愍众生故为之求佛道[0142c21]是时诸天作是思惟。我当闭其金瓶令水不下。所以者何。有施者无福田故。是时魔王语净居天。此诸婆罗门。皆出家持戒清净入道。何以[19]故乃言无有福田。净居天言。是菩萨为佛道故布施。今此诸人皆是邪见。是故我言无有福田。魔王语天言。云何知是人为佛道故布施。是时净居天化作婆罗门身。持金瓶执金杖。至韦罗摩菩萨所语言。汝大布施难舍能舍欲求何等。欲作转轮圣王七宝千子王四天下耶。菩萨答言。不求此事。
those who served as elders each offered a contribution in encouragement and support consisting of ten thousand pieces of ancient gold.

After this Dharma offering had been arranged and completely set forth, the god Śakra Devānām Indra came forth and addressed the Bodhisattva Velāma by uttering this verse, in which he said:

The most rarely encountered things in heaven and on earth
Which are able to delight everyone,—
You have now already obtained them
And made gifts of them for the sake of the Buddha Path.

At that time the gods of the Pure Dwelling Heaven showed themselves and offered praises through the utterance of this verse:

You have thrown open the gate of great giving.
It is on account of feeling pity for all beings
And out of the desire to seek the Buddha Path for their sakes
That you now act here in this manner.

At this time the gods all had this thought, “We should stop up his gold vase so as to prevent the water from flowing forth. Why? Because, although there is a benefactor, there is no one suitable to serve as a field of merit.”

At that time the Demon King said to the gods of the Pure Dwelling Heaven, “All of these brahmans have left behind the home life. They uphold the moral precepts purely and have entered upon the Path. Why is it that you now say that there is no one to serve as a field of merit?”

The gods of the Pure Dwelling Heaven said, “This bodhisattva is giving for the sake of the Buddha Path. All of those now here are possessed of erroneous views. It is for this reason that we claim there is no one to serve as a field of merit.”

The Demon King said to the gods, “How do you know that this man is giving for the sake of the Buddha Path?”

One of the Pure Dwelling gods then appeared in the body of a brahman. Holding a gold vase and a branch made of gold, he went up to the Bodhisattva Velāma and said to him, “What is it that you seek to gain through this act of great giving where you relinquishing what is so hard to give up? Is it that you desire to become a wheel-turning sage king who has the seven precious things, a thousand sons, and dominion over the entire world?”

The Bodhisattva replied by saying, “I do not seek this sort of circumstance.”
汝求释提婆那民。为八千那由他天女主耶。答言不。
汝求六欲天主耶。答言不。
汝求梵天王主三千大千世界为众生祖父耶。答言不。汝
欲何所求。是时菩萨。说此偈言我求无欲处离生老病
死欲度诸众生求如是佛道
化婆罗门言。布施主。佛道难得当大辛苦。汝
心软串乐。必不能求成办此道。如我先语。转轮圣王释
提婆那民六欲天王梵天王是易可得。不如求此。菩萨答
言。汝听我一心誓假令热铁轮在我头上转一心求佛道终
不怀悔恨若使三恶道人中无量苦一心求佛道终不为此转
化婆罗门言。布施主。善哉善哉求佛如是。便
赞偈言汝精进力大慈愍于一切

汝求释提婆那民。为八千那由他天女主耶。答言不。
汝求六欲天主耶。答言不。
汝求梵天王主三千大千世界为众生祖父耶。答言不。汝
欲何所求。是时菩萨。说此偈言我求无欲处离生老病
死欲度诸众生求如是佛道
化婆罗门言。布施主。佛道难得当大辛苦。汝
心软串乐。必不能求成办此道。如我先语。转轮圣王释
提婆那民六欲天王梵天王是易可得。不如求此。菩萨答
言。汝听我一心誓假令热铁轮在我头上转一心求佛道终
不怀悔恨若使三恶道人中无量苦一心求佛道终不为此转
化婆罗门言。布施主。善哉善哉求佛如是。便
赞偈言汝精进力大慈愍于一切
“Is it that you seek to become Śakra Devānām Indra so that you might then be lord to eight thousand nayutas of heavenly nymphs?”

He replied, “No.”

“Are you seeking to become the Lord of the Six Desire Heavens?”

He replied, “No.”

“Are you seeking to become the Brahma Heaven God who serves as lord over the great trichiliocosm and who is looked on as the patriarchal father of all beings?”

He replied, “No.”

“What is it that you seek?”

At this time the Bodhisattva spoke forth a verse, saying:

I seek that place which is without desire
And which transcends birth, aging, sickness, and death.
I yearn to bring deliverance to all beings.
I seek the path to buddhahood which is just thus.

The transformationally-produced brahman said, “Benefactor, the Buddha Path is difficult to achieve. It is beset with great bitterness and suffering. Your mind is soft and accustomed to pleasures. It is certainly the case that you will be unable to seek out and accomplish realization of this path. As I suggested before: to become a wheel-turning sage king, or Śakra Devānām Indra, or King of the Six Desire Heavens, or the King of the Brahma Heaven gods—these would be easily achievable. It would be better to seek these instead.”

The Bodhisattva replied, saying, “Listen to my single-minded vow:”

Even if one were to cause a wheel of hot steel
To spin around atop my head,
I shall single-mindedly seek the Buddha Path
And never cherish any regrets.

Were I to be subjected to the three wretched destinies
And to the countless sufferings of the human realm,
I would single-mindedly seek the Buddha Path
And would never be turned aside by this.

The transformationally-produced brahman said, “Oh Benefactor, it is good indeed, good indeed that you seek buddhahood in this manner.” He then uttered a praise, saying,

Your power arising from your vigor is immense.
You manifest kindness and pity extending to everyone.
是时天雨众华供养菩萨。诸净居天闭瓶水者即隐不现。菩萨是时至婆罗门前座前。以金瓶行水。水闭不下众人疑怪。此种种大施一切具足。布施主人功德亦大。今何以故瓶水不下。菩萨自念。此非他事。将无我心不清净耶。得无施物不具足乎。何以致此。自观祠经十六种书清净无瑕。是时诸天语菩萨言。汝莫疑悔。汝无不办。是诸婆罗门恶邪不净故也。即说偈言是人邪见网烦恼破正智离诸清净戒唐苦堕。以是故水闭不下。如是语已忽然不现。尔时六欲天放种种光明照诸众会。语菩萨而说偈言。邪恶海中行不顺汝正道诸受施人中无有如汝者。
Your wisdom has become detached and unobstructed.
Your realization of buddhahood cannot be far off.

At that time the gods rained down a profusion of blossoms as an offering to the Bodhisattva. The gods of the Pure Dwelling Heaven who had stopped up the water from the vase then disappeared from sight.

The Bodhisattva then went before the most senior ranked among the brahmans and attempted to pour forth the water from the gold vase [and thus formally endow them as recipients of his offerings]. However, the water remained stopped up and would not flow out. The members of the assembly were then overcome with doubt and consternation and wondered, “All of these various kinds of great giving are replete in every way and the benefactor’s meritorious qualities are also immense. Why then does the water now fail to flow forth from the vase?”

The Bodhisattva thought to himself, “This circumstance could be due to nothing other than one of these factors: Have I freed my mind of all impurity? Have I achieved a situation where there are no deficiencies in the gifts? What could have brought this about?” He personally contemplated the sixteen parts of the Classic on Giving and found that all preparations were pure and free of defects.

At this time the gods spoke to the Bodhisattva, saying, “Do not become overcome by doubt and regret. There is nothing which you have failed to accomplish. It is because these brahmans are characterized by unwholesomeness, error, and impurity.” They then uttered a verse, saying,

These men are caught in the net of erroneous views.
Their affictions have brought on destruction of right wisdom.
They have abandoned purity in the observance of moral precepts.
They indulg useless asceticism and fall into unorthodox paths.

“It is for these reasons that the water is stopped up and will not pour forth.”

Having said this, they suddenly disappeared. The gods of the Six Desire Heavens then emitted many different kinds of light which illuminated the entire assembly and then spoke to the Bodhisattva, proclaiming in a verse:

Practices from within the sea of error and unwholesomeness
Do not accord with your orthodox path.
Among the recipients of your gifts,
There are none who can compare with you.

简体字

正體字

After speaking in this way, they suddenly disappeared. After the Bodhisattva had listened to this verse, he then thought to himself, “If it were actually the case that there was no one in the assembly who could serve as my equal, the water would indeed be stopped up and so would not flow forth. Could it actually be then that it is on account of this?” He then uttered a verse:

Throughout the ten directions, in the heavens or on earth,
Wherever there are good and pure people—
I now take refuge in them and, in reverence, make obeisance.
With the vase in the right hand, I pour an ablution on the left hand,
I now swear that I, this one person,
Should accept on their behalf such a great offering as this.

The water from the vase then straightaway spouted forth into the air, descended from above, and came down as an ablution upon his left hand. Then, when King Vāsava had witnessed this marvelous response, his mind became filled with reverence and he uttered a verse, saying:

Great Lord of the Brahmans,
This clear beryl-hued water
Has flowed on down from above
And, falling, has come to rest in your hand.

At that time, there arose thoughts of reverence in the minds of those brahmans in the great assembly. They placed their palms together, made obeisance, and took refuge in the Bodhisattva. At this time, the Bodhisattva uttered this verse, saying:

That which I have now given
Is not in quest of any blessings in the sphere of the three realms. It is for the sake of all beings,
And is to be employed in seeking the path of the Buddhas.

After he had spoken this verse, the entire earth with its mountains, rivers, and trees quaked and moved in six ways. Velāma had originally been of the opinion that this assembly should be the recipient of the offering and so gave it. Even though he realized there was no one in the assembly worthy to accept it, he now, out of pity, gave to them all those things which he had himself accepted.

Ideally, one would proceed at this point into an extensive discussion of all sorts of similar past-life causes and conditions associated with dāna (giving). The foregoing was an example of “outward giving.”