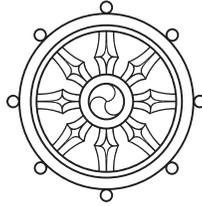


NĀGĀRJUNA
ON
MINDFULNESS OF THE BUDDHA

To refrain from doing any manner of evil,
to respectfully perform all varieties of good,
and to purify one's own mind—
This is the teaching of all buddhas.

The Ekottara Āgama Sūtra
(T02 n.125 p.551a 13–14)



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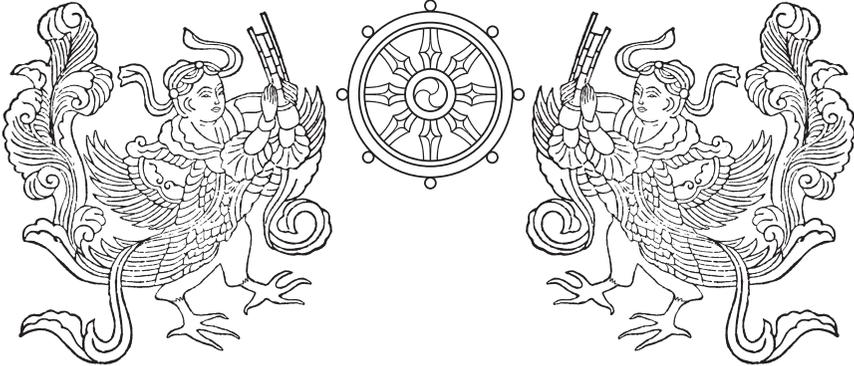
NĀGĀRJUNA
ON
MINDFULNESS OF THE BUDDHA

The Easy Practice
Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Ten Grounds, Chapter 9

The Pratuyutpanna Samādhi
Nāgārjuna's Treatise on the Ten Grounds, Chapters 20–25

Recollection of the Buddha
Nāgārjuna's Exegesis on the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra
Chapter 1, Part 36-1

As Translated into Chinese by Tripiṭaka Master Kumārajīva
Annotated English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of the selfless and marvelous life of the Venerable Dhyāna Master Hsuan Hua, the Guiyang Ch'an Patriarch and the very personification of the bodhisattva's six perfections.

DHYĀNA MASTER HSUAN HUA

宣化禪師

1918–1995

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Additionally, it would have been impossible for me to produce this translation without the Dharma teachings and personal inspiration provided to me by my late guru, the awesomely wise and compassionate Dhyāna Master Hsuan Hua, the Guiyang Ch'an Patriarch, Dharma teacher, and exegete.

Finally, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to the members of the liver care and transplant teams at Seattle's University of Washington Medical Center who cured me of liver cancer in 2010, gave me a liver transplant several months later, and finally cured me of hepatitis C in the winter of 2014–15. Without their wonderfully attentive and compassionate care along with the marvelous generosity of an anonymous liver donor, I would have died a half dozen years ago and thus never could have completed the scriptural translations I have produced in the last eight years.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya
BCSD	Hirakawa's <i>Buddhist Chinese-Sanskrit Dictionary</i>
BHSD	Edgerton's <i>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary</i>
CBETA	Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association's edition of the Taisho edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon.
CDB	<i>The Connected Discourses of the Buddha</i>
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
EA	<i>Ekottara Āgama</i>
KB	Kumārajīva and Buddhayaśas (T286)
KJ	Kumārajīva
MDPL	<i>Materials for a Dictionary of the Prajñāpāramitā Literature</i>
MLDB	<i>The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima nikāya</i>
Mppu	<i>Mahāprajñāpāramitā upadeśa</i>
MW	Monier Williams' <i>A Sanskrit-English Dictionary</i>
N	Ārya Nāgārjuna
NDB	<i>Numerical Discourses of the Buddha</i>
PDB	Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism
PTS	Pali Text Society
SN	Samyutta Nikāya
SYMG	The Song, Yuan, Ming, Gong editions of the Chinese Buddhist canon.
SZPPS	<i>Shizhu piposha lun</i>
T	Taisho Chinese Buddhist Canon via CBETA (Version 2004. ed.) Taipei)
VB	Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi

OUTLINING IN THIS WORK

The chapter titles in this work are from the Taisho Chinese text. All other outline headings originate with the translator. Buddhist canonical texts are often so structurally dense that they are best navigated with the aid of at least a simple outline structure such as I have supplied here.

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

In this volume I present Ārya Nāgārjuna's explanations of three closely related but rather different "mindfulness-of-the-Buddha" practices that are sometimes mistaken for each other:

"Mindfulness of the Buddha" as Pure land practice;

"Mindfulness of the Buddhas" as cultivation of the "seeing-the-Buddhas" (*pratyutpanna*) samādhi;¹ and

"Recollection of the Buddha" as a protective practice.

In order to facilitate the clear understanding of the first two of these three topics, I present exemplary chapters from Nāgārjuna's *Treatise on the Ten Grounds*,² and, to distinguish and clarify the final topic, I present a long passage from Nāgārjuna's *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*.³

In his *Treatise on the Ten Grounds*, a third of the way through his discussion of the first bodhisattva ground, Nāgārjuna explains the "pure land" practice that involves reverential devotion to and invocation of the name of a particular buddha with the aim of achieving irreversibility on the bodhisattva path with the option of gaining rebirth in that buddha's purified buddha world. It is my translation of that single-chapter discussion, "The Easy Practice" (Chapter 9) that constitutes the first section of this book.

Later in that same text, in the final third of his discussion of the first bodhisattva ground, Nāgārjuna explains in great detail how to engage in "mindfulness of the Buddhas" practice in such a way that one may then enter the *pratyutpanna* samādhi,⁴ the samādhi in which one is able to see the buddhas of the ten directions and listen to them teach the Dharma. It is my translation of that marvelously detailed six-chapter discussion of "mindfulness of the Buddhas" that forms the second section of this book.

Two thirds of the way through the immense (34-fascicle) "Introduction" to his 100-fascicle *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, Nāgārjuna presents a very detailed description of "the eight recollections" of which the initial subsection is his discussion of "recollection of the Buddha." It is my translation of that discussion that forms the third section of this book.

The Rationale for Issuing This Volume

My primary reason for bringing forth this volume is to introduce to the English-speaking Buddhist audience selections from two classic Indian Mahāyāna texts that serve to distinguish and clarify the meaning and practice of these three important Mahāyāna practices that may otherwise be so closely associated with each other as to be thought of as somewhat synonymous.

The first of these three practices, “mindfulness of the Buddha” as “pure land” practice, is seldom recognized in Western Buddhism as a very early and important classic Indian Mahāyāna practice used as a means of progressing on the bodhisattva path to buddhahood. Rather it is most often associated with the later pure land schools of, first, China, and then, much later, Japan, where pure land practice has often been most focused on mere recitation of Amitābha Buddha’s name with the aim of being reborn in his pure land. I feel it is very important for students of the Dharma to understand this practice in accordance with its early Mahāyāna character and meaning wherein it was regarded as a practice to be integrated into one’s practice of the bodhisattva path.

The second of these three practices, “mindfulness of the Buddhas” aimed at acquisition of the *pratyutpanna* samādhi, is not much known in Western Buddhism. Where it is known, it may be easily confused with the “mindfulness of the Buddha samādhi” that one may enter through recitation of Amitābha Buddha’s name. But these are two somewhat different samādhis and it is important to distinguish them and understand them as such. Nāgārjuna’s extensive explanation of the practice leading to acquisition of this “seeing-the-Buddhas” samādhi eliminates any such confusion.

The third and last of these three practices, “recollection of the Buddha,” is also easily confused with pure land practice. In fact, it is an entirely different practice with very different purposes that is found in both Southern Tradition Buddhism⁵ and classic Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. It has as its principal aims the allaying of fear and the provision of protection for practitioners attempting to pursue practice of the path in frightening, dangerous, or discouraging circumstances. The initial section of Nāgārjuna’s discussion of the “eight recollections” focuses exclusively on “recollection of the Buddha” and serves quite well to distinguish this practice from others while also clarifying precisely how to employ this practice as an aid to cultivation.

Part One: The Easy Practice

In Nāgārjuna's discussion of the first bodhisattva ground, in response to a discouraged interlocutor fearful of the difficulty of achieving "irreversibility" on the seemingly interminably long bodhisattva path, he offers an alternative means for the bodhisattva practitioner to very quickly and easily achieve irreversibility on this path to buddhahood. This alternative means which he refers to as "the easy practice" involves earnest invocation of the name of particular buddhas who have vowed to come to the aid of anyone who sincerely calls upon them. The practitioner who takes up this "easy practice" is then said to be able to achieve irreversibility on the path to buddhahood by this means.

In this chapter entitled "The Easy Practice," Nāgārjuna first lists the names of ten buddhas, one from each of the ten directions, stating that, through the practice of invoking these buddhas' names, one can swiftly reach the ground of irreversibility. He then quotes a long passage in the *Questions of Precious Moon Sutra*⁶ that describes the purified buddha world of Meritorious Qualities Buddha off in the East and describes how, through faith in this buddha, one may achieve irreversibility on the bodhisattva path.

After quoting this sutra, Nāgārjuna then notes the identical circumstances and practices associated with the nine other exemplary buddhas that dwell off in the other nine directions. Having done so, he then names and describes each of these other nine buddhas and their buddha lands.

Next, in response to a questioner wondering if there are other such buddhas, Nāgārjuna lists the names of Amitābha Buddha and 108 other such buddhas, after which he presents a 32-stanza verse praising and describing Amitābha Buddha, his vows, his pure land, his audience, and the advantages of achieving rebirth in his land. This praise verse concludes with Nāgārjuna's declaration of his own personal aspiration to always be borne in mind by this buddha and to succeed in achieving eternal purification of mind in Amitābha Buddha's presence.

Having so extensively described and praised Amitābha Buddha, Nāgārjuna then instructs us to praise and revere the seven historical buddhas of this era (including Śākyamuni Buddha) as well as Maitreya, the next buddha to appear in this world, after which he sets forth verses in praise of each of them. Then he lists ten⁷ more buddhas followed by corresponding praise verses after which he

lists “all buddhas of the past, the future, and the present” and also sets forth corresponding praise verses to them.

“The Easy Practice” chapter then concludes with Nāgārjuna’s instruction to also bear in mind all of the great bodhisattvas, after which he lists 143 great bodhisattvas and states: “One should bear in mind all such bodhisattvas and bow down to them in reverence as one seeks to attain the *avaivartika*’s “ground of irreversibility.”⁸

Part Two: The *Pratyutpanna Samādhi*

Toward the end of his discussion of the first bodhisattva ground, the Ground of Joyfulness, Nāgārjuna sets forth a verse indicating that, once the bodhisattva path practitioner has already come to dwell on the first ground, “he will naturally be able to see several hundred buddhas,” whereupon he is immediately asked by an interlocutor who is clearly worried about the immense difficulty of even reaching the first bodhisattva ground: “Is it solely through the power of roots of goodness and merit [resulting from completely fulfilling the first-ground practices] that one becomes able to see buddhas, or is there instead some other method by which one can do so?”

In answer to this question, quoting from the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra*,⁹ Nāgārjuna sets forth a very detailed explanation of the means by which, without first reaching the first bodhisattva ground, acquiring the heavenly eye, or acquiring the heavenly ear, one may nonetheless be able to see the buddhas of the ten directions and listen to them speak the Dharma.

In the extremely detailed and precisely organized subsequent discussion, Nāgārjuna describes how to envision the Buddhas as seated on a lion throne in the midst of a great assembly and tells how to recollect the qualities of the Buddhas, including their vows, their four immeasurable minds, their four bases of meritorious qualities, their six perfections, and their thirty-two major marks and eighty minor characteristics along with the causes for acquiring each of those physical signs. After describing many more qualities and skills of the Buddhas, this “Mindfulness of the Buddhas” chapter ends with a long reiterative verse.

This initial chapter on “Mindfulness of the Buddhas” is then followed by three chapters devoted to close explanation of “forty dharmas exclusive to the Buddhas,” a single chapter consisting entirely of praise verses, and a final very detailed chapter on exactly

which practices to cultivate and how to cultivate them in order to acquire this *pratyutpanna* samādhi wherein one can see and hear the buddhas of the present. This final chapter is entitled “Teachings to Assist the Mindfulness of the Buddhas Samādhi.”

Part Three: Recollection of the Buddha

In subchapter 36 of the 52-part introductory chapter to his *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, Nāgārjuna discusses the “eight recollections” of which “recollection of the Buddha” is the first part. It is preceded by a short prefatory introduction to this practice wherein its fear-allaying, protective, and practice-inspiring functions are described.

After noting the role of the eight recollections in allaying fear, depression, discouragement, or disgust to which an isolated practitioner may have become subject, particularly in the wake of cultivating the nine reflections on the deterioration of a corpse, the introductory part of this “eight recollections” discussion then turns to an explanation of the first of these eight recollections, “recollection of the Buddha.” This discussion involves a detailed topic-by-topic treatment of a series of bases for carrying out an orderly reflection on the Buddha as an object of contemplation that inspires fearlessness, determination, and happiness. The main subsections of that reflection are as follows:

- a) The listing and explanation of the underlying meanings of the ten names of the Buddha;
- b) A description of the illustrious lineage and marvelous birth of the Buddha;
- c) A description of the physical characteristics, strength, and extraordinary physical marks of the Buddha’s body;
- d) A long and detailed description of the Buddha’s perfection of the five “accumulations,” namely moral precepts, meditative absorptions, wisdom, liberations, and the knowledge and vision associated with the liberations;
- e) A summarizing list of other qualities of the Buddha upon which one should reflect which includes: the Buddha’s omniscience; his manifold types of knowledge and vision; his great kindness and great compassion; his ten powers; his four fearlessnesses, his four types of unimpeded knowledge, and his eighteen special dhar-mas.

Nāgārjuna’s discussion of “recollection of the Buddha” then concludes with a summary of various *abhidharma*-related factors

regarding the stations of existence in which it can be practiced, the presence or absence of the contaminants in the practitioner, its association with bliss, joy, and equanimity, and the potential for achieving facility in “recollection of the Buddha” either through practice or as a result of prior karmic actions. In the case of those who acquire it through practice, this refers to those who practice the “mindfulness of the Buddha” samādhi. As for those who acquire it as a karmic result, this refers to such beings as those that inhabit the purified buddha world of Amitābha Buddha.

On the Authorship of the Texts

The author of both these texts, the *Treatise on the Ten Grounds* and the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, is considered by the Sino-Mahāyāna tradition to be Ārya Nāgārjuna, the same 2nd century CE Indian monk who produced such works as the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, the *Bodhisambhāra-sāstra*, the *Ratnāvalī*, and the *Suḥrillekha*. Although there have been a number of scholars who have doubted the Nāgārjunian authorship of this *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, their arguments tend to boil down to an abundance of opinionation, for there is nothing but very thin circumstantial evidence for their doubts. I have found the internal evidence of doctrinal consistency with other Nāgārjunian texts to be quite strong and I think that the testimony of Kumārajīva (the translator who produced the Chinese edition) is far more trustworthy on the issue of this text’s authorship, not least because he lived within 200 years of the life of Nāgārjuna and was the foremost authority on these matters at the time.

In Summation

I hope that this volume of Nāgārjunian texts focused on “mindfulness of the Buddha” practices will be both useful and inspiring to students of Dharma who wish to study, understand, and correctly cultivate these closely related modes of contemplation and practice common in classic Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism.

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Introduction Endnotes

- 1 “*Pratyutpanna samādhi*” is an abbreviation for *pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukha-avasthita-samādhi*, “the samādhi in which one encounters the buddhas of the present face-to-face.”
- 2 *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā* (十住毘婆沙論 / T26, no. 1521). This is Nāgārjuna’s 17-fascicle, 35-chapter discussion on the meaning of the *Ten Grounds Sutra* (*Daśabhūmika-sūtra* [十住經 / T10, no. 286]).
- 3 *Mahāprājnāpāramitopedeśa* (大智度論 / T25, no. 1509).
- 4 The complete name of this samādhi is “the *pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukha-avasthita samādhi*,” lit., “the samādhi in which the Buddhas of the present stand directly before one.”
- 5 “Recollection of the Buddha” constitutes the first of the “four protective meditations” in Southern Tradition Buddhism. (The other three protective meditations are loving-kindness, the unloveliness of the body, and death.)
- 6 See *The Sutra on the Youth Precious Moon’s Questions on Dharma* (大乘寶月童子問法經 – T14n0437_p108c01-110a07).
- 7 Actually, the text lists eleven buddha names, but it is probable that one of those names is included only as a scribal error involving unintentional redundancy. This conclusion is corroborated by the absence of any mention of this “eleventh” buddha in the ensuing verses that individually praise each of these buddhas.
- 8 An “*avaivartika*” is one who has achieved irreversibility on the bodhisattva path to buddhahood.
- 9 “The Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra” (*Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukha-avasthita-samādhi-sūtra*) is preserved in the *Taisho Canon* as the *Banzhou Sanmei Jing* (般舟三昧經 / T13.no. 0418.902c23-919c05) of which Paul Harrison has produced a translation for the BDK English Tripitaka.