

The Easy Method of Entering the Stage of Non-Retrogression

by Hisao Inagaki

INTRODUCTION

Nāgārjuna, the First Patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism's greatest philosopher, presents the "Easy Method" of entering *avaivartika-bhūmi* in his reputed commentary on the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* (*Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā*).

Avaivartika-bhūmi is the stage at which bodhisattvas are assured of reaching enlightenment and never thereafter falling out of it, that is, retrogressively. Until they reach this stage, they are liable to regress to the self-satisfied stage of *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha* which Nāgārjuna rates as worse than falling into hell.¹ Mahayana scriptures often divide bodhisattvas into two classes: those liable to regression and those firmly set for enlightenment without regression. In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, there is a chapter entitled "Regression and Non-regression", in which it is explained that the bodhisattvas of non-regression are those who will not fall back to the stage of a *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha* and will certainly reach the highest, perfect enlightenment.²

The *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā* is intended primarily to present the essentials of bodhisattva practice based on the 'Ten Stages' of the *Garland Sutra*, but Nāgārjuna is seen in the Chapter on "Easy Practice" as an advocate of an easy method of entering the First Bhūmi, the Stage of Non-Retrogression. While recommending reciting the names of the Buddhas, especially Amitābha, as the easy method of entering the Stage of Non-Retrogression, he

professes his reverence for Amitābha and other Buddhas of the past, present and future. Furthermore, at the end of this chapter, he mentions 143 bodhisattvas and urges us to worship and remember them in order to reach the Stage of Non-Retrogression.

NON-RETROGRESSION IN EARLY BUDDHISM

The concept of non-regression is not restricted to Mahayana Buddhism. For instance, Abhidharma discourses, such as *Abhidharmakośa* and *Mahāvibhāṣā*,³ state that when practitioners reach the Stage of *Kṣānti* (Insightful Patience), or the third of the four stages before that of Śrotāpanna Stream Winner, they are no longer liable to commit the grave offenses called '*ānantarya karma*' and so will not fall into those evil realms of samsara to which those offenses would consign them. Hence, the Stage of *Kṣānti* is also 'unretrogressive'.

Further, the *Mahāvastu*, a discourse of the *Lokottaravāda* school which entertained certain Mahayanistic ideas, divides the careers of bodhisattvas into four stages:⁴

1. *prakṛti-caryā* (nature-based practice),
2. *pranidhāna-caryā* (resolution practice),
3. *anuloma-caryā* (conforming practice),
4. *avivarta-caryā* (perseverance practice).

This last is explained thus:

“*Vivarta-caryā* means that bodhisattvas fall away and go again through the round of rebirths. *Avivarta-caryā* means that they are unwaveringly set for enlightenment.”

NON-RETROGRESSION IN MAHAYANA

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Stage of Non-Retrogression is usually identified with the First *Bhūmi*. Before reaching the First *Bhūmi*, bodhisattvas have imperfect and ‘defiled’ wisdom and so they are not basically different from ordinary people. Entering the First *Bhūmi* after a long period of practice marks the transformation of bodhisattvas into sages. They are now rid of the nature of ordinary people (*prthagjanatva*) and have acquired the nature of righteous people (*samyaktva*). For this reason, they are called ‘those who are firmly set for righteousness’ (*samyaktvaniyatarāṣī*); ‘righteousness’ here means Nirvana or Bodhi. They are also called ‘those who have been born into the Tathāgata family’ for it is certain that they will reach the highest, perfect enlightenment.

In the ordinary course of bodhisattvahood, a bodhisattva must work diligently for a long time to reach the Stage of Non-Retrogression. Nāgārjuna says in the *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā*, Chapter on ‘Easy Practice’:

“If a bodhisattva has not yet entered the Stage of Non-Retrogression,
He should always strive and be diligent
as if putting out a fire on his head.”

According to a widely accepted view, it takes one *asamkhyā kalpa* of practice for a bodhisattva to reach this stage. It is hardly possible for ordinary people to keep on practicing over many lives.

BUDDHA-VISUALIZATION AS A METHOD OF ATTAINING THE STAGE OF NON-RETROGRESSION

However, in the *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā*, we find much easier methods of reaching this stage. In Chapter 5,⁸ Nāgārjuna explains that the Stage of Non-Retrogression is attainable by visualizing a Buddha or by hearing a Buddha’s Name. Buddha-visualizing, as explained in later chapters, refers particularly to two *Samādhis*: 1. the *Buddha-Manifestation-Samādhi* (*Pratyutpanna Samādhi*) and 2. the *Buddha-Remembering-Samādhi* (*Buddha-anusmṛti samādhi*).

The first entails concentrating on a particular Buddha, especially on Amitābha. According to the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi Sūtra* which explains this practice, if we perform it single-heartedly for one to seven days, we shall see the Buddha, thus entering this *Samādhi*. The same sutra explains that the practice of concentrating on the Buddha for three months enables us to enter this *samādhi*. Since we enter this *samādhi* by the Buddha’s power (*adhiṣṭhāna*), it is much easier to then practice the usual bodhisattva practices which are based on our own power. Nāgārjuna explains this *samādhi* fully in Chapters 20 and 25.

The Buddha-Remembering *Samādhi* is threefold:⁹ (a) meditation on the Buddha’s glorious physical characteristics; (b) (for advanced bodhisattvas) meditation on the Buddha’s 40 special qualities, and (c) meditation on Thusness (*tathatā*) which only the most capable bodhisattvas can practice. The first part of the Buddha-Remembering *Samādhi*, therefore, is basically the same as the Buddha-Manifestation *Samādhi* and is distinguished from the latter in that in the former the practitioner contemplates the Buddha’s thirty-two major physical characteristics and eighty minor ones. Further, it is taught that when the Buddha-Manifestation *Samādhi* is ac-

complished, one sees all the Buddhas, as indicated by the full Sanskrit name of this sutra, '*pratyutpanna-buddha-sammukha-avasthita-samādhi*' (Samādhi in which one stands in the presence of the Buddhas of the present).

RECITATION OF THE HOLY NAME AS THE EASIEST METHOD

The method described in Chapter 9 of the *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā*, entitled "Easy Practice", is more important than the Buddha-visualisation practices because it is much easier and more practicable for ordinary people. The "Easy Practice" entails reciting the Name of any Buddha or Great Bodhisattva¹⁰ with firm faith, although Amitābha's Name is specially mentioned together with his Original Vow. A 32-stanza hymn in his praise is added, in which Nāgārjuna professes his faith in the adoration of Amitābha. It is clear that Nāgārjuna's intention was to present Amitābha's salvation as the most relevant path of "Easy Practice" for all who seek a quick way to the Stage of Non-Retrogression and subsequently to the Stage of Buddhahood.

Although he does not mention it, presumably Nāgārjuna based his recitation practice exposition on the Pure Land (*Sukhāvatīvyūha*) group of sutras, because most of the 107 Buddhas mentioned in the text¹¹ appear in the Sanskrit *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* and several verses in this chapter suggest strong connections with it.¹²

It should be noted that reciting the Names of the Buddhas is not supposed to be a mere oral practice or mechanical repetition without heartfelt awareness or mindfulness but should be based on 'faith' and accompanied by reverential acts such as 'joining one's hands,' 'bowing down,' 'prostrating oneself' and 'worshipping.' The relation between 'faith' and recitation may be gauged from the following quotations:

"The practitioner should reverentially hold the Name close to the heart and recite it."

"He should recite the Name with singleness of heart."

"He should recite the Name and remember it single-heartedly."

"He should remember me (i.e., Amitābha), recite my Name and take refuge in me."

Deep and continuous Buddha-remembering as the basis of reciting is mentioned by Nāgārjuna to be the cause of reaching the Stage of Non-Retrogression:

"Therefore, you should always remember (Amitābha)."

"If anyone remembers this Buddha's (i.e., Amitābha's) infinite power and merit, he will instantly enter the Stage of Assurance."

"You should remember all (these bodhisattvas), revere and worship them and thereby seek to reach the Stage of Non-Retrogression."

The act of Hearing the Name, or the explanation of its merit etc., naturally precedes its recitation or remembrance and so the merit of hearing the Name is often mentioned. Nāgārjuna even asserts that hearing the Name ensures that the aspirants will reach the Stage of Non-Retrogression:

"If a man is able to hear the exposition of the Name of these Buddhas, he will acquire immeasurable merit."

"If a man hears the Buddha's Name, he will become unretrogressive."

"Those who hear the Buddha's Name will attain the Stage of Non-Retrogression."

CONCLUSION

The 'Easy Practice' for entering the Stage of Non-Retrogression may be summarized

from the foregoing as embracing two aspects:

1. Name- or sound-based practice which consists of hearing and reciting the Name of Buddhas and bodhisattvas while continuously remembering them.

2. Image- or form-based practice which consists of visualizing the Buddha's physical characteristics or 40 special qualities or meditating on True Thusness. The first is fully discussed in Chapter 9 of the *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā* and the second, which includes the Buddha-Manifestation *Samādhi* and Buddha-Remembering *Samādhi*, is presented in other chapters.

In the later development of Pure Land thought in China, the first is called '*nien-fo*' (*nembutsu*, remembering the Buddha) and the second is called '*kuan-fo*' (*kanbutsu*, visualising the Buddha). Nāgārjuna uses the term 'Buddha-Remembering *Samādhi*' for the second but '*nien-fo*' in its wide sense includes both recitation and meditation practices.

Visualising Amitābha creates a strong bond between Amitābha and us which keeps us from falling back to lower and less secure states, but what assurance is given to those who just recite the Name, and when does it occur? In the Chapter on 'Easy Practice,' Nāgārjuna says that 'as soon as' (*chi* or *chi-shih*; Skt. *tāvat*) we hear or recite the Buddha's Name, we enter the Stage of Non-Retrogression which means we need not wait until we die and are born in the Pure Land to become a non-retrogressive bodhisattva. Nāgārjuna's reference to 'faith' indicates that the firm and pure faith that comes in the course of, and as a result of, hearing and reciting the Buddha's Name sure evidence that we have reached this stage. Faith awakened by spiritual contact with the Buddha through hearing his Name, opens up the treasury of merit and power that it embodies and enables us to proceed towards Buddhahood

unretrogressively. This faith places us under the influence of the Buddha from which there is no falling back.

Speaking in terms of temporal sequence in our spiritual experience of the Nembutsu, hearing the Name comes first, then accepting it in deep faith, and finally reciting it. Since these three are joined in an organic whole, one cannot be taken up separately from the rest. 'Hearing' in the true sense of the term is, as Shinran explains throughout his writings, nothing but 'true faith', i.e., acceptance of the Name. When accepted in us, the Name expresses itself as the Nembutsu recitation.

To repeat, the Stage of Non-Retrogression is the most important turning point in the bodhisattva's career. Before we enter this Stage, our practice is based on our limited power and imperfect insight. At that point, self-attachment is discarded along with our 'defiled' and discriminative wisdom. Our spiritual eye is opened to the Buddha's boundless merit and to his universal and eternal activity. Therefore, Nāgārjuna describes this spiritual change as "birth into the Tathāgāta family." As this change can be brought about quickly and safely by the *nien-fo* (*nembutsu*) practice, it is called the "Easy Practice."

FOOTNOTES:

1. *Taishō Tripiṭaka* (abbreviated *TT*) 26, 41a.

2. *TT*. 7, 264.

3. *Mahāvibhāṣā*, *TT*. 27, 30c; *Abhidharma-kośa*, *TT*. 29, 120b.

4. *Mahāvastu*, Vol. I, 46-63. J.J. Jones translated the terms as follows: (1) natural practices, (2) resolving career, (3) conforming career and (4) persevering career.

5. *Ibid.*, I, 63.

6. For example, Vasubandhu's commen-

tary on the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, *TT*. 31, 229c.

7. *TT*. 26, 41a: for an English translation, H. Inagaki, "The Path of Easy Practice," *Ryūkokudaigaku ronshū*, No. 422, 1983, p. 38.

8. *TT*. 26, 32c.

9. *TT*. 26, 68c, ff., 86a, and 71c, ff.

10. H. Inagaki, "The Path of Easy Practice," pp. 54-55. 143 Bodhisattvas' names are presented, of which the last 49 correspond very closely to the Bodhisattvas mentioned in the opening part of the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47. For a study on Chinese and Sanskrit correspondents of the

proper names which appear in the Chapter "The Easy Practice," see H. Inagaki, "A Glossary of the Proper Names which Appear in the Chapter on Easy Practice of the *Jūjūbibasharon*," *Jōdokyō no kenkyū*, Kyoto, 1982, pp. 43-71.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-50.

13. Tsung-mi (780-840), for example, distinguished four types of *nien-fo*: (1) *shōmyō nembutsu*, recitation of the Buddha's name, (2) *kanzō nembutsu*, contemplation of the Buddha's statue, picture, etc., (3) *kansō nembutsu*, visualization of the Buddha's figure and (4) *jissō nembutsu*, meditation on True Thusness.