ROBERT A. F. THURMAN

# Nagarjuna's Guidelines for Buddhist Social Action 1988

[O King!] Just as you love to consider
What to do to help yourself,
So should you love to consider
*What to do to help others*![1]

Nagarjuna thus expresses the basic principle of Buddhist social action: the universal altruism of "great love" (*mahamaitri*) and "great compassion," or "great empathy" (*mahakaruna*). The primary Buddhist position on social action is one of total activism, an unswerving commitment to complete self-transformation and complete world transformation. This activism becomes fully explicit in the Universal Vehicle (Mahayana), with its magnificent

1 All Nagarjuna references are from Nagarjuna, *The Precious Garland,* translated by Jeffrey Hopkins (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975). I have, however, used the Sanskrit original (Vaidya, 1960) in certain places, and on that basis altered the terminology to suit my own preference, thus to maintain coherence between quotes and commentary. [Ed. note: For the verse number of each quote from Nagarjuna, see Professor Thurman's article from which this essay is excerpted, published in *The Eastern Buddhist,* Vol. XVI, No. I, Spring 1983.]

literature on the Bodhisattva career.[1] But it is also compellingly implicit in the Individual Vehicle (Hinayana) in both the Buddha's actions and his teachings: granted, his attention in the latter was on self-transformation, the prerequisite of social transformation. Thus, it is squarely in the center of all Buddhist traditions to bring basic principles to bear on actual contemporary problems to develop ethical, even political, guidelines for action.

This is just what Nagarjuna did during the second century CE, when he wrote his *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels* to his friend and disciple, King Udayi of the powerful Satavahana dynasty of south central India. It should thus prove instructive to examine his counsels in some detail. In this essay, I will extrapolate from his specific prescriptions a set of modern "counsels" for today's "kings," in hopes that it will help the buddhistic intellectual clarify his or her own thinking about the emergencies that beset us. I will use these prescriptions as a framework on which to outline guidelines for Buddhist social action in our modern times. The fact that it is counsel to a "king" does not invalidate this approach in the least, for, as R. B. Fuller says, the average citizen of any modern, industrial, or postindustrial society lives better in many ways than most kings of bygone eras; indeed is more king of his own fate than they were in many ways.[2] Therefore, everyone can apply these counsels in their own sphere of activity. Political parties

1 I use "Universal" and "Individual" to translate *Maha-* and *Hina-*, based on the fact that the Mahayana is a vehicle designed for riders who wish all other beings to share the ride, and the Hinayana is a vehicle designed for riders who also hope others will get aboard, but who are primarily concerned with hanging on themselves at least. The former thus emphasizes "Universal" liberation, the latter "Individual" liberation. Finally, since universal liberation certainly cannot take place unless it is "universal individual" liberations in totality, these translations also capture the relationship between the two vehicles.

2 R. B. Fuller is fond of making this point in his essays in *Utopia or Oblivion* (Overlook Press, out of print, 1973).



could be formed with such principles in their platforms (indeed many parties do have such planks), and Buddhist communities and individuals in particular could work to spread such principles and attitudes. So, let us now read Nagarjuna as if he were addressing us today.

There are forty-five verses (#301–345), which contain the whole quintessence of the matter. This section begins with some acknowledgment that good advice is often unpleasant at first hearing, especially to a rich and powerful king who is used to being flattered and having his own way. The king is urged to be tolerant of the "useful but unpleasant" words, and to consider them as true words spoken without anger and from compassion, hence fit to be heard, like water fit for bathing. "Realize that I am telling you what is useful here and later. Act on it so as to help yourself and others."

People in power are still the same. In fact, the entire populations of the "developed" countries are in a way full of people of royal powers, used to consuming what they want, being flattered and waited upon by people from "underdeveloped" lands, used to having unpleasantly realistic things such as corpses, sicknesses, madnesses, the deformities of poverty, kept out of their sight. They do not want to hear that all is impermanent, that life is essentially painful and fundamentally impure. They do not want to acknowledge that all beings are equal to them and their dear ones, equally lovable and deserving. They do not want to hear that there is no real self and no absolute property and no absolute right. But that they do hear it, and hear it well, is quite the most crucial necessity of our times. The hundreds of millions of "kings" and "queens" living in the developed world must face their obligations to other peoples, to other species, and to nature itself. This is the crisis of our times, the real one, not the supposedly important competitions among the developed powers.

Nagarjuna's first real statement is straight to this most crucial point. "If you do not make contributions of the wealth obtained from former giving, through such ingratitude and attachment you will not gain wealth in the future." There are two beliefs behind this simple yet far-reaching injunction to generosity, an injunction essential today. First, wealth accrues to an individual as the evolutionary effect of generosity in former lives or previously in this life. Second, wealth in this life accrues to one by the generosity of others who give to one, for whatever reason, and therefore one must be grateful to them. Bracketing the question of former lives, which is difficult for modern people, it is a fact that people who are wealthy today usually are so because previous generations worked hard and gave of themselves to the future. Capitalism itself is, in its essence, not a matter of hoarding and attachment, but a matter of ascetic self-restraint, the "investment" of wealth or the giving it up to a larger causality. The more given up from present consumption to productive investment, the more is produced for future consumption. Those who lose sight of the essence of this process and simply consume and hoard, soon lose their wealth, just as Nagarjuna states. It is a fact of economics that the basis of wealth is generosity.

Petty-mindedness, scarcity psychology, short-term profit seeking, destructive rapacity—these are the real enemies. Their opposite is magnanimity, which makes all people friends. In sum, transcendence is the root of generosity. Generosity is the root of evolutionary survival. Evolutionary survival eventually brings forth freedom for the bliss of transcendence. This is a golden three-strand cord more powerful than the usual heap-habit, ego-habit, addiction cycle. The former is a living Nirvana. The latter is the samsara of continual dying.

The foremost type of giving is, interestingly, not just giving of material needs, although that is a natural part of generosity. That of



greatest value to beings is freedom and transcendence and enlightenment. These are obtained only through the door of Dharma, Transcendent Truth of Selflessness, Voidness, Openness, and so forth. Therefore, the educational system of a society is not there to "service" the society, to produce its drone-"professionals," its workers, its servants. The educational system is the individual's doorway to liberation, to enlightenment. It is therefore the brain of the body politic. Society has no other purpose than to foster it. It is society's door of liberation. By giving others the gift of education, they gain freedom, self-reliance, understanding, choice, all that is still summed up in the word "enlightenment." Life is for the purpose of enlightenment, not enlightenment for life. The wondrous paradox is, of course, that enlightenment makes life worthwhile: because it makes it less important, it makes it easier to give it away, whereby at last it becomes enjoyable. Therefore, human evolution is consummated in transformative education. Society becomes meaningful when it fosters education. Life is worth living when it values education supremely. And so our "royal" giving should first of all go to support universal, total, unlimited education of all individuals. Nagarjuna is very specific: "Create centers of Teaching, institutions of the Three Jewels, whose name and glory are inconceivable to lesser kings, for fear of their ill-repute after death (if they rule unwisely and selfishly)."

Nagarjuna is not talking about merely creating "religious centers." He is not even talking about creating "Buddhist centers," "Buddhism" understood in its usual sense as one of a number of world religions. It does not matter what symbols or ideologies provide the umbrella, as long as the function is liberation and enlightenment. Clearly Nagarjuna, who proclaims repeatedly that "belief-systems," "dogmatic views," "closed convictions," "fanatic ideologies," and so forth, are sicknesses to be cured by the medicine of emptiness, is not a missionary for any particular

"belief-system," even if it is labeled "Buddhism." Rather, he wants the social space filled with doorways to Nirvana, shrines of liberating Truth, facilities for Teaching and Practice, where "things," "duties," "laws," "religions," and "doctrines" can be examined, criticized, refined, used, transcended, and so forth. As already mentioned, these centers are not primarily even for the service of society, although in fact they are essential facilities for the evolutionary betterment of the people. They are the highest product of the society. As society itself has the main function of service to the individual, its highest gift to its individuals is to expose them to the transcendent potential developed by education.

Now these are institutions of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And, under the above, critically "de-religionized" interpretation, fully in keeping with Nagarjuna's own centrist (Madhyamika) critical style, these Three Jewels can demonstrate their value without any sectarian context. In universal social terms, the Buddha is the ideal of the educated person, the full flowering of human potential, the perfectly self-fulfilled and other-fulfilling being. He/she[1] is not a god, not an object of worship, but an object of emulation, a source of enlightenment teaching. He/she is the standard of achievement. The Dharma is his/her Teaching, the Truth and Nirvana he/she realized, which all people can educate themselves to realize, as already explained. The Sangha is the Community of those dedicated to teaching and practicing this Dharma with a view of becoming and helping all become such Buddhas. Very often they are so concentrated on

1 When speaking of Buddha in the context of ideal archetypes, it is important to use the double pronoun, as a modern Buddhist, for males not to monopolize access to religious virtuosity and spiritual perfection. In fact, the 112 superhuman signs of a Buddha contain definite symbols of androgyny, subliminally resonating with the famous pronouncement that "ultimate reality is beyond male and female," found in many Universal Vehicle Scriptures.



these tasks, they have no time for ordinary social activities, business, professions, family, and so forth, but are specialists in practice and teaching. These become mendicants, identityless, propertyless, selfless monastics, and often in Buddhist history they served as the core staff of Teaching centers. Sometimes, however, part of their Teaching and practice involved, as in the case of Vimalakirti and later the Great Adepts (*mahasiddhas*), participation in ordinary living patterns, so it is not necessary at all times and places and at all stages of development that they observe the monastic lifestyle.

These institutions will gain fame, as the people come to know that they are verily the gateways to a higher order of living, a higher awareness, a fuller sensibility, a more valid knowledge. They radiate glory as the persons who have developed themselves and have transcended their previous addictive habits naturally and compassionately give invaluable assistance toward the betterment of others according to their capacities and inclinations.

In the second verse, Nagarjuna puts in an important criterion of a genuine institution of Enlightenment Teaching: it must not become a servile establishment in service of the elites of existing societies, there to provide professional training and ideological indoctrination. Its teachers and students must live transcendently, that is, valuing Truth above all personal considerations. They must thus be intensely critical of all falsehood, pretense, delusion, sham. Therefore, their sayings and writings must be so ruthlessly clear and straightforward that inferior persons, elite members as well as kings, must be terrified of being exposed in their pretenses and faults, hence inspired themselves to live and act transcendently. If the institutions are not truly liberal, i.e., liberating in this manner, they had better not be established at all.

To take Nagarjuna's counsel to heart in modern times, this means a drastic revision of our practice nowadays. Liberal

education should no longer be seen as an institution necessary for the preservation and enrichment of a free society. Rather liberal education as an institution should represent the fulfillment of the very founding purpose of a free society. Kant's call for enlightenment as the "emergence from the tutelage of others" and Jefferson's call for "universal enlightenment throughout the land" should be seen as expressing the prime priority of the whole nation. Thus, it is quite proper that the major expenditure in the national budget should be for education; and it should be offered free to all, regardless of class affiliation, regardless of utilitarian calculations. "If it takes all your wealth, you should disabuse the magnificent elite of their arrogance, inspire the middle classes, and refine the coarse tastes of the lowly."

Nagarjuna seems to have been aware of the economic costliness of his insistence on the priority of education, for he devotes the next five verses to persuading the king that wealth should not be hoarded for lesser necessities, and that he should go the whole way in support of higher education. He harps on the king's death, how such contributions are an investment in his future evolution, how his successor will probably waste it, how happiness comes from the generous use of wealth, not from hoarding and eventual wasting, and how, finally, if he does not do it now while he is young and in control of his ministers, they will not respect his wishes when he sees clearly on his deathbed. In his own words:

> Having let go of all possessions (at death)
> Powerless you must go elsewhere;
> But all that has been used for Dharma
> Precedes you (as positive evolutionary force).
> All the possessions of a previous King come under the control of his successor.



> Of what use are they then to the previous King,
> Either for his practice, happiness, or fame?
> Through using wealth there is happiness in the here and now.
> Through giving there is happiness in the future.
> From wasting it without using it or giving it away there is only misery.
> How could there be happiness?
> Because of impotence while dying,
> You will be unable to make gifts through your ministers.
> Shamelessly they will lose affection for you,
> And will only seek to please the new King.
> Therefore, now while in good health,
> Create Centers of Learning with all your wealth,
> For you are living amid the causes of death
> Like a lamp standing in the breeze.
> Also other Teaching Centers established by the previous kings,
> All temples and so forth should be sustained as before.

From the universalism underlying the educational emphasis of Buddhist activism, Nagarjuna moves to the principle of pacifism, in specific application to the appointment of ministers, generals, officials, administration of justice, and vigilance over the actual conditions in the nation.

The choice of ministers, generals, and officials is mainly determined by whether or not they practice the Teachings, and manifest this personally by honesty, generosity, kindliness, and intelligent discrimination. Even with such people, the ruler should be in constant contact with them, and constantly admonish them to remember the overall aim and purpose of the nation: namely

the Teaching, realization, and practice of the liberating Truth. "If your kingdom exists for the Truth, and not for fame, wealth, or consumption, then it will be extremely fruitful; otherwise all will finally be in vain." In modern terms, this counsel accords well with the experience of successful corporations and government administrations and agencies. They always choose their leaders from among liberally educated persons, rather than from narrow professional circles, as it takes the special "enlightened" ability of clear critical insight to manage large complex affairs successfully.

In regard to justice, Nagarjuna tells the king to appoint elder judges, responsible, well-educated, virtuous, and pleasant persons, and even so he should intervene as much as possible to exercise compassion for criminals. "Even if they (the judges) have rightfully fined, bound, or punished people, You, being softened with compassion, should still take care (of the offenders). O King, through compassion you should always generate an attitude of help, even for all beings who have committed the most appalling sins. Especially generate compassion for those murderers, whose sins are horrible; those of fallen nature are receptacles of compassion from those whose nature is great." Nagarjuna goes to the central issue concerning violence and nonviolence in a society, the issue of murder and its retribution. Taking of life is the worst violence, especially in enlightenment-valuing nations, where the precious human life, hard-won by struggle up from the tormented lower forms of evolution, is the inestimably valuable stage from which most effectively to attain freedom and enlightenment. But to take a second life to avenge the first is to add violence to violence, and hence capital punishment is abolished by Nagarjuna. Punishment must be rehabilitative, and Nagarjuna's formulation of this principle may be the earliest on historical record. "As long as the prisoners are not freed (which, he says, they should be as



soon as possible) they should be made comfortable with barbers, baths, food, drink, medicine, and clothing. Just as unworthy sons are punished out of a wish to make them worthy, so punishment should be enforced with compassion and not from hatred or concern for wealth. Once you have examined the fierce murderers and judged them correctly, you should banish them without killing or torturing them." The nonviolent treatment of criminals, even capital offenders, accords with every principle of Buddhist teaching: 1) compassion, of course, in that love must be extended most of all to the undeserving, the difficult to love; further, for society to kill, sanctions killing indirectly, setting a bad example; 2) impermanence, in that the minds of beings are changeable, and commission of evil once does not necessarily imply a permanent habit of doing evil; 3) selflessness implies the conditionality of each act, and the reformability of any personality; 4) the preciousness and value of life, especially human life.

In modern times, it is to the great credit of those modern societies founded on enlightenment principles that they finally have abolished capital punishment. By the same token, it is sad that there are strong political pressures to reinstate it. In such a context, it is even more astounding that Nagarjuna should have set forth this clear-cut principle almost two thousand years ago, in such specific, practical terms.

Nagarjuna gives specific advice regarding socialistic universal welfare policy: "Cause the blind, the sick, the humble, the unprotected, the destitute, and the crippled, all equally to attain food and drink without omission." He does not elaborate upon this in specific policy terms. It is perfectly clear that he considers it obvious that the king is obligated to care for everyone in the whole nation as if they were his children. In modern terms, the welfare system created by Roosevelt in the United States, and the welfare

socialism the socialist states have implemented, fit extremely well with this policy. But recently, we can observe a trend of assumption that, while any reasonable person would like to give everything to everyone, it is bad for people to get goods for nothing, and it is impossible to support everyone; there is not enough wealth for that purpose. The assumptions underlying this anti-welfare reaction we see around the world are that 1) people are inherently lazy, and 2) wealth is inherently insufficient. Indeed, there were certainly such attitudes in Nagarjuna's day and earlier. The central Buddhist story of Prince Vessantara turns on the paradox of generosity and wealth. Everyone loves him because he gives everyone everything they ask for. Yet the nation comes to fear him when it seems he will give away even the very sources of their wealth. So they shrink back in fright, clutch what they have to themselves, and banish their real source of joy, the generous Prince.

Since the welfare system was installed in the United States, that nation has produced the greatest wealth ever produced by any nation in history, including inventions, in principle, capable of infinite productivity; and this in the midst of a series of disastrous wars, with their aftermaths wherein the nation gave enormous treasure to rebuild the nations it had defeated. Now, the rulers of America confusedly think that their gifts to the people, the real source of their optimism, the energy of real productivity, are exhausting them, and so they want to take it all away. In this confused effort to clutch onto what they see as scarce and shrinking wealth, they will destroy the source of that wealth, the love and optimistic confidence and creativity of the people. Fortunately, this will result in a rapid disaster for all, so the error will soon come to light, and Prince Vessantara will return in triumph from his banishment. Hoarding creates poverty. Giving away creates wealth. Imagination of scarcity is thus the cause of



loss. Imagination of abundance creates endless wealth. It is terrible or wonderful, depending on one's tolerance, that life must always be so subtle, so paradoxical, and complex.

Nagarjuna seems to be aware of the charge of "impractical idealism" that tends to be levelled against his *Counsels,* and so his verses closing this passage address the practicality question. "In order to maintain control, oversee your country through the eyes of agents; attentive and mindful, always act in accordance with the principles." An effective intelligence system seems to be necessary! The king must know what is happening throughout his realm to prevent abuses and forestall disasters. In modern terms, Nagarjuna allows for the vital role of "intelligence," the gathering of insightful information about the state of the people. The very mention of an "Intelligence Agency" is so sensitive nowadays, it is hard to remember that it is not the "intelligence" but the stupidity and violence in the paramilitary activities of the CIA, KGB, and their colleagues in other nations that have caused their aura of horror. Theoretically, if the responsible leaders of all nations really had all the information about all consequences of their actions, they surely would desist from the foolish and self-destructive policies they currently espouse.

Nagarjuna sums up his practical counsels with a pleasant metaphor: "The birds of the populace will alight upon the royal tree that gives the cool shade of tolerance, that flourishes with the flowers of honors, and that provides the bounteous fruit of great rewards." That is, an idealistic social policy is realistic. Tolerance, justice, and generosity are not merely lofty ideals, "ultra-obligations" for a few saints and heroes to aspire to embody, but are the essential components of any viable social policy. The ruler or government must manifest them first, and each citizen must strive to cultivate them. Since animals' habits do not

automatically tend away from anger, delusion, and greed toward tolerance, justice, and giving, these virtues must gradually be cultivated. As each must do this for himself or herself, individualistic transcendentalism is the foundation of any viable activism. From this basis, pacifism is the social expression of tolerance; educational universalism is the social expression of wise justice; and socialistic sharing of wealth is the social expression of generosity.

These four principles seem to encompass mainstream Buddhist social practice, as counseled by Nagarjuna. These four guidelines should be reliable in choosing a line of action in particular situations. It is always essential to remember, however, the fundamental inconceivability of all things, for which great love seems finally the only adequate response. Nagarjuna insists that "the profound, enlightenment in practice, is emptiness creative as compassion." Jesus Christ's "Love God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself," and Augustine's "Love God and do what you will"—these two great "pivotal phrases" are very much in the same vein, using of course the theistic term for emptiness. In a culture more used to those great statements, we might express Nagarjuna as follows: "Open thy heart to absolute emptiness, and love all thy neighbors as thyself!" It is such love that is the whole "Law," and is the very body of all Buddhas. Vimalakirti describes it to Manjusri:

> The love that is firm, its high resolve unbreakable like a diamond; . . . the love that is never exhausted because it acknowledges voidness and selflessness; the love that is generosity because it bestows the gift of Truth without the tight fist of bad teachers; the love that is justice because it benefits immoral beings; the love that is tolerance because it protects both self and others; the love that is enterprise because it takes responsibility for all living things; the love that is meditation because it refrains from indulgence in tastes; the love that is wisdom because it causes attainment at the proper time; the love that is liberative technique because it shows the way everywhere; the love that is without formality because it is pure in motivation; the love that is without deviation because it acts decisively; the love that is high resolve because it is free of passions; the love that is without deceit because it is not artificial; the love that is happiness because it introduces living beings to the happiness of a Buddha. Such, Manjusri, is the great love of a bodhisattva.[1]



1 Thurman, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1976), 57.