

LETTER FROM A FRIEND (THE *SUHRILLEKHA*)
Edition One: The Guṇavarman Translation

The Dharma Essentials Verses
Composed by Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva for King Śatakarṇi

Translated by the Kashmiri Tripiṭaka Master Guṇavarman
During the Early Song Dynasty (circa 431 CE)

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

55

One should therefore find happiness in according with this.
It is on account of this that all Buddhas gained realization of nirvāṇa.
Having encountered this sublime and pure Dharma,
One should resolutely seek out the path abandoning desire.

28. DESCRIPTION OF THE FAULTS OF CYCLIC EXISTENCE

A. AN INTRODUCTORY GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF FAULTS

56

(T65)

Birth and death's perilous hardships and woes are so innumerable
That, expound on them for a kalpa, none could utterly describe them.
As I now briefly distinguish them for the benefit of the King,
He should listen carefully and reflect upon them well.

57

(T66)

There is no end to the three realms' cycle of transformations where⁴⁰
Fathers, mothers, wives, and children alternate in causal relations.
Hatred or loving between enemies or kin have no lasting bases.⁴¹
As with the twirling firebrand's "wheel," how could this cycle end?⁴²

58

(T67)

Through worldly existences in beginningless births and deaths,
The mothers' milk consumed is greater than the great sea's waters.
If one fails to be intensely diligent realizing emptiness and wisdom,
One will consume endlessly more in the course of one's future lives.

59

(T68)

Flowing throughout five destinies and in lives as humans and gods—
Piling up those bodies' bones, their height rivals even Mount Sumeru.
As for tears shed weeping in grief over separation from those loved,
Not even the great rivers' waters are adequate to provide comparison.

60

(T70)

Were one to count up the number of one person's fathers and mothers,
They would surpass the number of grasses and trees in the world.
Though one may enjoy celestial bliss amidst the heaven's five desires,
One finally falls back down, sinking in the wretched destinies' pains.

B. THE GODS

61

The lifespans of the gods extending extremely far into the future.
The sensual bliss they experience would be difficult even to describe.
Their singing and dances stream forth sublime sounds.
The plaintive voices are harmonious, intensely clear, and far-reaching.

62

Those of rare charms, sublime physical form, and graceful adornment
 Surround and wait on one, engaging him in the sensual pleasures.
 Fine cuisine replete with a hundred flavors is all abundantly present.
 Whatever one wishes for in amusement spontaneously arrives.

63

Bejeweled bathing pools, always brimming with fragrant pure water,
 Are ringed and overhung with all varieties of marvelous blossoms.
 A multitude of birds in exotic colors flock together just above,
 Their rarefied sounds harmonious, send forth distantly-ranging calls.

C. ON THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF OSTENSIBLY DESIRABLE STATES OF EXISTENCE

64

The gods roam about, sporting playfully, bathing themselves therein.
 Such joys and sensual blisses cannot even be described.
 As merit runs out, they come to the end, and five signs of ruin appear.
 They are then beset by suffering exceeding their earlier pleasures.⁴³

65

(T71)

Thus, though one may enjoy the sensual pleasure of celestial maidens,
 As the wise behold them, they have already generated renunciation.
 Although one may abide atop a jewel-encrusted viewing tower.
 Still, he will certainly plummet back down and abide in stinking filth.

66

(T72-3)

Though one may roam up to the heavens into the Garden of Nanda,
 One will still return again to enter the Sword-Tree Forest Hells.
 Although one might bathe in the *māndārava* blossom pools of the gods,
 In the end, one surely plummets into the molten River-of-Ashes Hells.

67

(T69, 74)

Although one might reign again as a wheel-turning monarch,
 He will return thereafter to become a slave ordered about by others.
 Though one may enjoy desire-transcending bliss in brahma heavens,
 He will fall back into the pain of the Non-Intermittent Hells' flames.⁴⁴

D. THE HELLS

68

(T75, 77)

Even if one abides in celestial palaces resplendent with brilliant light,
 He will afterwards enter into the darkness of the hells,
 Namely the Black-Line Hells and Living Hells, where he is
 Burnt, cut, skinned, and impaled, and also the Non-Intermittent Hell.

69

(T78)

These eight types of hells are constant in their burning
 And in every case exist as retribution for the evil karma of beings.
 One may endure there such great sufferings as that of the “oil-press,”
 Or that of the body’s being ground up as fine as motes of dust.

70

(T79)

One may have the limbs cut off so that they become scattered,⁴⁵
 One may be skinned and roasted,
 One may have boiling molten copper poured down one’s gullet,
 Or one may have his body split open by an iron press.

71

(T80)

Iron dogs rush forth, struggling with each other to devour one’s flesh.
 Iron birds swarm down in flocks, all striking at once with their beaks.
 Many sorts of poisonous insects chew away at one’s flesh.
 Or one is burnt by a brass pillar impaling the body’s entire length.

72

(T82)

A huge blaze, fierce and full, blazes intensely everywhere.
 As this is caused by offense karma, one cannot run away or avoid it.
 The pot’s broth splashes up as it boils, leaping to the highest heights.
 Then those with inverted-view karmic offenses are heaved on into it.

73

(T83)

The human life is vulnerable to ruin, extremely swift in its passing,
 And comparable in length to but a single breath of a god.
 If a person in the midst of this brief life
 Hears of the sufferings described above but is not terrified by them,
 One should realize this sort of mind is so extreme in its obduracy
 As to be comparable to *vajra* in the difficulty of breaking it open.

74

(T84)

If one views illustrations of them, hears someone else describe them,
 Or reflects upon them in accordance with the scriptural descriptions,
 Then, having become aware of them, one finds them difficult to bear.
 How much the more so were one bound to undergo them himself.

75

(T86)

In the non-intermittent, inescapable great hells,
 The sufferings endured would be difficult to exhaustively describe.
 If there was a person who in the course of a single day
 Was compelled to endure three hundred spears assailing his body,

76 (T87)
 Compared to a single instant of the suffering in the Avīci Hells,
 It would not even come close to equaling a billionth part.
 One undergoes this great suffering, passing through an entire kalpa.
 Only after offense karma has been exhausted is one able to escape it.

77 (T88)
 By who are such sufferings as these produced?
 They all arise through unskillful generation of three types of karma.
 Great King, although one is now free of these sorts of troubles,
 If one fails to cultivate causes and conditions, he will fall down below.

E. THE ANIMALS

78 (T89)
 The suffering within the realm of animals is incalculably great.
 They are subjected therein to being bound up, whipped, or beaten.
 Due to having no faith, moral virtue, or learning,
 They constantly cherish evil thoughts and devour one another.

79 (T90)
 It may be that, due to quests for bright pearls, feathers, horns, tusks,
 Bones, fur, hides, or flesh, one is subjected to excruciating injury.
 One may be ridden by people, deprived of independence,
 And constantly endure suffering from tiles, stones, knives, or staves.

F. THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

80 (T91)
 The suffering endured in the hungry ghost realm is of the same sort.
 Whatever they need or desire does not come in accord with wishes.
 They are driven by hunger and thirst and straitened by cold and heat.
 Pains such as weariness and privation are extreme and incalculable.

81 (T92-3)
 Their bellies are the size of mountains and their throats like needles.
 Their seeking for feces, urine, pus, and blood is unspeakably horrible.
 They go naked, are robed in hair, and are very ugly and loathsome,
 Appearing like *tāla* trees burned and damaged by hacking.
 At night, their mouths blaze with a great fire
 Causing insects to struggle to fly in where they are eaten as food.

82 (T94)
 Though they seek excrement's fecal filth, urine, and other impurities,
 They are still unable to obtain them as food even in a billion kalpas.
 If it happens while seeking them, they obtain even a small portion,
 They steal it away from each other so that it is soon scattered and lost.

83

(T95)

The clear and cool autumn moon afflicts them with flaming heat.
 The warm, agreeable spring sun turns into intense cold's suffering.
 If they go into an orchard, the many fruits all disappear.
 On reaching clear flowing water, it transforms and entirely dries up.

84

(T96-7)

Due to the karmic offenses they have committed, their lives last long,
 Going on even for a period of fifteen thousand years.
 They endure without respite many sorts of excruciating sufferings,
 All of these are forms of karmic retribution visited on hungry ghosts.
 The Rightly Enlightened One described such bitter afflictions' causes,
 Declaring them to be the karma of miserly covetousness and jealousy.

G. REBIRTH SCENARIOS OF THE GODS

85

(T101)

If one's god-realm merit is ended, but good causes still remain,
 He may yet succeed in becoming a king within the human realm.
 If one then indulges indolence, his merit becomes entirely exhausted
 And, without a doubt, he plummets into the three wretched destinies.

H. THE ASURAS

86

(T102)

One may be reborn among *asuras* and thus become arrogant,
 Hateful, jealous, covetous, harmful, and bound to increase afflictions.
 Though the gods coursed in actions producing roots of goodness,
 Here, due to stinginess and jealousy, one loses such benefits' bliss.⁴⁶
 Therefore one should realize that the fetter of jealousy
 Amounts to a profoundly evil dharma fit to be cast out.

I. SUMMATION ON CYCLIC EXISTENCE WITH EXHORTATION TO PURSUE THE PATH

87

(T103-4)

Great King, you now already completely realize
 The faults, troubles, and many sufferings in cyclic births and deaths.
 You should cultivate world-transcending goodness with urgency,
 As one seeks water when thirsty or douses a turban that's caught fire.
 If one is vigorous in severing one's coursing in all realms of existence,
 This, among all forms of goodness, is the sort most unsurpassed.

29. ENCOURAGEMENT TO CULTIVATE THE THREE TRAININGS AND SEEK NIRVĀṆA

88

(T105)

Be diligent in moral precepts, practicing dhyāna, and wisdom,
 Thus training the mind and striving toward nirvāṇa.
 Nirvāṇa is sublime, transcends all signs,
 Is free of birth, aging, death, and afflictions wrought by destruction,
 And is even devoid of mountains and rivers, sun and moon.
 One should therefore be swift in achieving its realization.

30. THE SEVEN LIMBS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

89

(T106)

If one wishes to realize the wisdom not dependent on any guru,
 One should focus on cultivating the seven enlightenment dharmas.⁴⁷
 If one boards this ship of the limbs of enlightenment,
 It will become easy to cross beyond the great sea of births and deaths.

31. AVOIDANCE OF THE FOURTEEN INDETERMINATE DHARMAS

90

(T108)

As for those fourteen dharmas the Buddha declined to discuss,⁴⁸
 Simply have faith, refraining from doubts and delusions.
 One should devote oneself solely to right-minded diligence and vigor,
 Remaining resolutely determined to cultivate all good dharmas.

32. THE TWELVE-FOLD CAUSAL CHAIN, THE FOUR TRUTHS, AND THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

91

(T109-11)

Ignorance conditions karmic action, consciousness, name-and-form,
 Six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, and becoming.⁴⁹
 Becoming then conditions birth and birth conditions death.
 If one ends one's births, the causes and conditions for death cease.

92

(T112-4)

If there be someone who rightly contemplates these twelve conditions,
 Then he will thereby behold the Lion of the Āryas.⁵⁰
 If one wishes to succeed in sequential perception of the four truths,⁵¹
 He should diligently cultivate the eight-fold right path.⁵²

III. CONCLUDING EXHORTATORY SECTION

93

(T115)

Although one might abide in honor and glory amidst the five desires,
 One may still realizing the path of the Āryas by severing the fetters.
 This sort of fruition is not such as one might seek from others.
 One must embody it in his own mind to succeed in its realization.

94

(T117)

I have explained the manifold sufferings as well as nirvāṇa
 Out of a wish to be of benefit to the Great King.
 You should not allow your mind to succumb to fearfulness.
 Simply recite and practice this diligently, devoting yourself to good.

95

The mind is the root of all dharmas.
 If one first trains and subdues it, one's endeavors thereby succeed.
 In discussing Dharma's essentials, I give only a general explanation.
 Thus it would not be fitting for the King to be satisfied merely by this.

96

For the immensely wise, one would expound more extensively.
 Still, one should listen and absorb this with an utterly sincere mind.
 The King now qualifies as a great vessel for the retention of Dharma.
 If one has vast Dharma learning, one certainly provides much benefit.

97

(T119)

On observing someone cultivating goodness in the three karmas,
 One should be profoundly helpful and feel concordant joy in it.⁵³
 One should dedicate [to highest enlightenment] all of the merit
 From one's own practice of goodness and from concordant rejoicing.

98

(T120)

The King should look up in his studies to the Worthies and the Āryas
 And strive to liberate beings just as do Avalokiteśvara and the others.
 In the future, you will certainly be able to realize right enlightenment
 In a land free of cyclic birth, aging, and harm from the three poisons.

99

If the Great King cultivates all of the superior forms of goodness,
 Then a fine reputation will circulate widely.
 He may thereafter employ these teachings in the instruction of others
 And influence everyone toward realization of right enlightenment.

100

The bounding floods of the torrents of afflictions inundate beings,
 Deeply terrorizing them and subjecting them to burning sufferings.⁵⁴
 If one wishes to extinguish such sense-object weariness as this,
 One must cultivate the truths leading to genuine liberation.
 If one abandons the dharmas of the world's false naming,
 Then one will gain the station of purity and immovability.

01. ADDENDUM ON THE VARIOUS SORTS OF CANDIDATES FOR MARRIAGE

101

(T36-7)

Were one to consider as a wife someone cherishing thoughts of harm,
It would only be right to avoid such a mate.

If one were to have a chaste, harmonious, loving, and respectful mate
As humbly deferential and diligent in endeavors as a maidservant,
Or one who always acts like a close friend, a sister, or a mother,
It would be fitting to honor and respect her like a household deity.

02. FINAL CLOSING STATEMENT

102

The Dharma which I proclaim is of this very sort.
The King should be dedicated day and night to its diligent cultivation.

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(The end of the Tripiṭaka Master Guṇavarman translation.)