

LETTER FROM A FRIEND (THE *SUHLLEKHA*)
Edition Two: The Saṅghavarman Translation

Dharma Essentials Verses for the Exhortation of Kings
By Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva

Translated by the Indian Tripiṭaka Master Saṅghavarman
During the Early Song Dynasty (circa 434 CE)

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

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I. INTRODUCTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO PAY DUE ATTENTION

1

(T1)

O King of illustrious and supreme merit,
I have no other aspiration
Than to set forth in the Dharma proclaimed by the Buddhas
What is the import of the essentials for adornment [of the Path].
This summarizing selection of verses from the Worthies and Āryas
Is deserving of the King's attention.

2

(T2)

Just as when one uses any of the various types of wood
To create an image of the Tathāgata,
The wise would respectfully bow there in reverence
And, because it is based on the Buddha's likeness, would venerate it,

3

So too, even though I now ineloquently
Elucidate [teachings from] the treasury of reality,
The intelligent should, with faith and happiness,
Acquiesce in what is written here in reliance on Dharma.

4

(T3)

Although the Great King may have repeatedly
Heard the discourse originating with the Tathāgata's brahman voice,²
Supreme understanding arises from extensive learning.
If one hears it repeatedly, then one develops deep faith.
This is comparable to when the moon shines on something white.³
How could it not enhance the freshness of its appearance?

II. THE MAIN DOCTRINAL SECTION

01. THE SIX RECOLLECTIONS

5

(T4)

The Three Jewels,⁴ giving,⁵ moral virtue, and the heavens—
The Victorious One (*jina*)⁶ described them as the six recollections.⁷
They conduce to the creation of every sort of meritorious quality.
Make them the object of skillful reality-based contemplation.⁸

02. THE TEN GOOD KARMIC DEEDS, ABANDONING INTOXICANTS, RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

6

(T5)

In body, mouth, and mind, constantly practice
 Purity in the path of the ten [good] karmic deeds.⁹
 Abandon intoxicants. Do not be thrown into disorder by inebriation.
 Abandon what is wrong as you cultivate right livelihood.

03. THE SIX PERFECTIONS (PĀRĀMITĀ)

7

(T6)

Realize that wealth, destined to be divided among five beneficiaries,¹⁰
 Is impermanent and thus is not durable.
 Give with kindness to those possessing virtues,
 To the poor and suffering, and to relatives and retinue.
 Of all one produces which might constantly follow on after us,
 It is giving which is most supreme.

8

(T7)

As [karmic effects] cannot be either cut off or destroyed,
 One can neither escape nor simply hope for particular karmic effects.
 This being so, the moral precepts
 Are such as one should see fit to skillfully accept and uphold.
 If one acts accordingly, they become an especially fine "merit field,"¹¹
 This because they produce all of the meritorious qualities.

9

(T8)

As for giving, moral virtue, patience, vigor,
 Dhyāna meditation, and the immeasurable wisdom,
 All of these pāramitās
 Are such as the wise should cultivate.
 They can take one across the sea of the three realms of existence,¹²
 Ensuring success in becoming one honored among the *munis*.¹³

04. FILIAL RESPECT FOR PARENTS

10

(T9)

If a person treats his father and mother with filial respect
 And, with utmost sincerity, exhaustively makes offerings to them
 This serves as a gateway into reverence for the teachings
 And brings about inclusion in the superior clan of the purity heavens.
 One's reputation spreads far and wide
 And, when one relinquishes this body, he is born in the heavens.

05. THE LAYPERSON'S EIGHT-PRECEPT *UPAVĀSA* ABSTINENCE RITE

11

(T10-1)

Abandoning killing, stealing, sexual relations,¹⁴
 Deception, intoxicants, and the other three transgressing factors—¹⁵
 If one perfectly observes this eight-fold abstinence rite,¹⁶
 One thereby accords with the training laid down by all buddhas.
 On leaving this body, one is reborn in the six [desire realm] heavens
 Where whatever one desires all manifests according to one's wishes.

06. ABANDONMENT OF FAULTS

12

(T12)

Miserliness, flattery, deceptiveness, falseness, pride,
 Indolence, covetousness, hatefulness, delusion—
 [Arrogance based on] caste, clan, on fine countenance or appearance,
 On youthfulness, strength, extensive learning, or one's pleasures—
 All such delusions as these
 Should be seen as one's adversaries.

07. NON-NEGLECTFULNESS VERSUS NEGLECTFULNESS

13

(T13)

If one cultivates non-neglectfulness,
 This then constitutes the road to the deathless.
 Neglectfulness is the path leading toward death.
 This is as taught by the World Honored One.
 For the sake of increasing good dharmas,
 One should cultivate non-neglectfulness.

14

(T14)

If a person who previously acted badly
 Then afterwards becomes able to refrain from neglectfulness,
 Then this brings a shining radiance into the world
 As when clouds disperse and moonlight shines forth.

08. ON THE SPECIAL IMPORTANCE OF PATIENCE AND RELINQUISHING HATEFULNESS

15

(T15)

Patience has no peer.
 In preventing one from following the hateful mind.
 The Buddha declared that, if one is able to abandon [hatred],
 This conduces to realization of the path of the non-returner.¹⁷

16

(T17)

When influenced by hatred, one may act as if drawing on water,
 As if etching in the dirt, or as if carving on stone.
 To speak of the best course of action for transcending afflictions,
 The first person's actions would be supreme.
 When turning from evil to cultivation of compassion and patience,
 Following the third course of action is superior.

09. THREE KINDS OF SPEECH

17

(T18)

The Victorious One (*jina*) declared that beings
 Use three different kinds of good or bad discourse.
 The first is that which leads forth a person's mind.
 Such pleasing words are comparable to rice-honey.¹⁸
 The next is truthful discourse.
 This is comparable to the blooming of marvelous flowers.

18

The last is that which is not truthful.
 This is base, groundless, and comparable to feces.
 The wise should make these distinctions,
 Abandoning the latter while cultivating the first two.

10. CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING BOTH SELF AND PROSPECTIVE ASSOCIATES

A. FOUR TYPES OF PERSONAL DESTINIES LINKED TO BRILLIANCE OR DARKNESS

19

(T19)

One may go from present brilliance to being brilliant in the end,
 Or go from present darkness to abiding in darkness at the very end.
 There are those who go from present darkness into later brilliance
 And those who go from present brilliance into later darkness.
 The wise should truly understand this,
 Dispense with three of them, ascending to the first type of brilliance.

B. FOUR TYPES OF PERSONS COMPARED TO A MANGO'S RIPENESS

20

(T20)

There are those [mangoes] which, though unripe, appear ripe,
 Those which, though ripe, appear unripe, and
 Those which, both in fact and appearance, are either unripe or ripe.
 One possessed of brilliance should carefully make these distinctions.

11. ON DEALING WITH DESIRE

A. ON GUARDING THE MIND

21

(T21)

Do not look upon the physical form of others' wives.
 If one lays eyes on one, reflect upon her as one's mother or daughter.
 If, even doing this, one still generates delusions,
 One should cultivate the contemplation of impurity.

22

(T22)

The mind easily runs off and becomes confused.
 One should be diligent and skillful in guarding and restraining it,
 Doing so just as one guards a superior reputation,
 A treasury of jewels, a cherished son, or one's life.

23

One should contemplate the five types of desire
 As comparable to a fearsome and venomous snake,
 To detested adversaries, or to swords and fire,
 Thus using skillful means to cultivate renunciation.

B. ON THE HAZARDS INHERENT IN DESIRE

24

(T23)

The five desires create circumstances contrary to principle.
 They are analogous to the *bimba* fruit.¹⁹
 They hide the true character of things, easily deceive one,
 And imprison a person in the domain of birth and death.
 The wise person should analytically contemplate them
 And renounce them. He must not become defiled by them.

C. ON THE SUPERIOR VALOR IN CONTROLLING DESIRE

25

(T24)

The sense faculties tend to be constantly restive and agitated,
 Running off and scattering in the realms of the six sense objects.
 If one is able to skillfully train and discipline them,
 One becomes thereby a great and valiant stalwart.

D. ON THE UNLOVELINESS OF THE BODY

26

(T25)

This body is a moving outhouse,
 Constantly streaming filth from nine apertures.
 As they flow on out, it is difficult to keep it full.
 A thin skin disguises its impurity.²⁰
 The foolish are deceived by it.
 The wise gentleman should turn away from it in disgust.

27

(T26)

Just as when someone afflicted with itch-inducing parasites²¹
 Draws close to a fire, wishing to be rid of his distress,
 But after a brief sense of pleasure, the pain only increases—
 So too it is when indulging the desires.²²

12. IN PRAISE OF CONTEMPLATION-BASED INSIGHT, WISDOM, AND MORAL VIRTUE

28

(T27)

If one is able to well understand the faults inhering in the desires,
 Then from this he may succeed in abandoning the many sufferings.
 If one wishes to realize the ultimate truth,
 The Buddha declared one should contemplate conditioned arising.
 One should diligently cultivate this practice
 For it is the most supreme practice. There are none which surpass it.²³

29

(T28)

Though well-born, possessed of fine and attractive physical form,
 Abundant learning, and graced as if by a jeweled necklace,
 Still, if one fails to cultivate moral virtue and wisdom,
 This does not qualify one as being especially superior.
 If, however, one is able to embody these latter two qualities
 Even absent the former three, one is still especially distinguished.

13. ON AVOIDING THE EIGHT WORLDLY DHARMAS AND OFFENSES INSPIRED BY OTHERS

30

(T29)

Gain and loss, esteem and disgrace,
 Praise and blame, happiness and suffering—
 If one is not even slightly shaken by these eight dharmas,
 This in itself makes one a king among the Āryas.

31

(T30)

Do not, influenced by some god, spirit,
 Śramaṇa, brahman,
 Clansman, or visitor,
 Allow yourself to harm any being or engage in any evil karmic deed.
 When one's life comes to an end and one plummets into the hells,
 One endures that retribution alone, for they will not stand in for you.

14. ON THE DELAYED ARRIVAL OF KARMIC RETRIBUTIONS

32

(T31)

If a person commits evil karmic deeds,
 He does not straightaway suffer the fierce punishments they entail.
 Only at the end of this life does one then reap the bitter retribution.
 Though one may finally regret it, of what use will that be then?

15. ON THE ĀRYAS' SEVEN FORMS OF WEALTH

33

(T32)

Faith, moral virtue, giving, abundant learning,
 Wisdom, a sense of shame, and a sense of blame—
 Buddha described these as the especially exclusive forms of wealth,
 Whereas all other forms of wealth are held in common by everyone.²⁴

16. ON SIX COARSE FAULTS TO BE ELIMINATED

34

(T33)

Gambling, attending mass-entertainment gatherings,
 Indolence, habitually consorting with bad friends,
 Drinking intoxicants, indulging muddle-headed, licentious behavior,
 Roaming about at night bereft of any sense of shame—
 These six sully one's reputation.
 The wise should abandon them.

17. IN PRAISE OF BEING EASILY SATISFIED

35

(T34-5)

Being easily satisfied is a form of great wealth.
 This is as declared by the World Honored One.
 If one is able to cultivate being easily satisfied,
 Though poor and of low social status, one still possesses great riches.
 [One who fails in this] is comparable to the many-headed dragon
 Which, having many heads, experiences all the more suffering.

18. ON THE VARIOUS SORTS OF CANDIDATES FOR MARRIAGE

36

(T36)

One who by nature cherishes deep resentment—
 This type is known as the adversarial wife.
 One who is arrogant and unaccommodating—
 This type is known as the husband-slighting wife.

37

One who wastes the wealth generated by the husband—
 This type is known as the plundering wife.
 Take care! The worthy husband
 Finds it fitting to avoid these three types of prospects for marriage.

38

(T37)

One so accommodating as to be like a sister,
 One so cherishing and pleasing as to be like a fine friend,
 One so comforting as to be like a mother,
 Or one so compliant as to be like a maidservant—
 Any of these four refined and good marriage prospects
 Could be regarded as fitting for the retinue of a god.²⁵

19. ON MODERATION AND SENSIBILITY IN EATING

39

(T38)

Food and drink serve as medicines
 Which one ingests without indulging craving, aversion, or delusion.
 They are taken solely to halt the sufferings of the body.
 One must not partake of them in a way which increases negligence.

20. EXHORTATION TO ENCOURAGE DILIGENCE AND MINDFULNESS

40

(T39)

One should cultivate diligently during the day
 And should do so as well in the beginning and end of the night.
 Even in the middle of the night, one must retain right mindfulness,
 Not allowing it to uselessly pass by in dreams.

21. THE FOUR IMMEASURABLE MINDS AND CULTIVATION OF THE DHYĀNA ABSORPTIONS

41

(T40)

Minds of kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity,
 Are to be cultivated constantly throughout the day and night.
 Even if one has not yet succeeded in transcending the world,
 One's merit will become superior even to that of the God Brahmā.²⁶

42

(T41)

If one abandons desire, awakens to joy and bliss,
 And, in both suffering and happiness, cultivates the four dhyānas,
 One enjoys bliss in the Brahma, Light-and-Sound, Universal Purity,
 And Extensive Fruition Heavens as a consequence of that.²⁷

22. ON THE MITIGATING EFFECT OF PREDOMINANT GOODNESS

43

(T43)

If someone commits but a few bad karmic deeds
 While extensively cultivating countless good deeds,
 This is analogous to taking a mere handful of salt
 And tossing it into the waters of the Ganges.

44

If one commits numerous evil deeds
 And cultivates but little in the way of pure meritorious qualities,
 This is comparable to taking a large amount of deadly poison
 And placing it into a small dish of food.²⁸

23. THE FIVE AGGREGATES AS THIEVES; THE FIVE ROOTS AND POWERS AS GUARDS

45

(T44-5)

The thieves operating in the darkness of the five aggregates
 Steal away the precious jewels of a person's goodness.²⁹
 The soldiers of faith and the other five root-faculties and powers³⁰
 Which are well able to guard and protect them.

24. SUFFERING, ITS ORIGIN, AND NECESSITY OF RIGHT VIEWS TO LIBERATION

A. THE EIGHT SUFFERINGS AND THE BASIS FOR THEIR ARISING

46

(T46)

As for the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, death,
 Separation from what one loves, [and so forth],³¹
 One's immersion in them and failing to cross beyond them
 Is a consequence of one's own karmic transgressions.

B. THE NECESSITY OF RIGHT VIEWS TO LIBERATION

47

(T47)

In seeking rebirth in the heavens or in seeking liberation,
 One must diligently cultivate right views.
 Even if one cultivates good deeds when possessed of wrong views,
 Everything one does ends up producing results involving suffering.

C. THE FOUR RIGHT VIEWS VERSUS THE FOUR INVERTED VIEWS

48

(T48)

Impermanence, suffering, impurity, [and non-self]—
 One should skillfully employ them in analytic contemplation.
 If one fails to maintain right thought,
 The four inverted views will blind one's wisdom eye.

D. RIGHT AND WRONG VIEWS ON THE AGGREGATES

1. THE ABSENCE OF ANY "SELF" ASSOCIATED WITH THE FIVE AGGREGATES

49

(T49)

One's typical physical form is not a "self," [nor is self form],
 Nor do either form or self serve as a host for existence of the other.³²
 So, too, with the other four aggregates.
 [The merely-imputed "self"] is a mere aggregation empty of inherent
 existence and characterized by suffering.

2. ON THE ORIGINS OF THE AGGREGATES

50

(T50)

[Aggregates] are not produced by time, not produced without a cause,
 Not caused to exist as a function of their intrinsic nature,
 And are not created by the Ívara god.
 They arise as a result of ignorance, craving, and karmic actions.³³

E. THREE FETTERS IMPEDING LIBERATION; NECESSITY OF WISDOM AND SELF-RELIANCE

51

(T51-2)

The view taking body as self, seizing on [non-beneficial] prohibitions,
 And doubtfulness are three factors obstructing liberation.
 The wisdom of the Āryas opens the gateway to liberation.
 This is consummated by one's own efforts, not on account of others.