

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

25. THE THREE TRAININGS

52

(T52-3)

Through purity in prohibitions, learning, and dhyāna concentration,
Exert intense diligence in cultivation of the four truths.³⁴
The superior practice of moral virtue, concentration, and wisdom
Should be cultivated and studied with constancy and diligence.
All of the moral prohibitions, wisdom, and samādhis
Are entirely subsumed within these three trainings.

26. THE STATION OF MINDFULNESS WITH RESPECT TO THE BODY

53

(T54)

The great power of the station of mindfulness regarding the body
Was declared by Buddha to be [essential to the] single-vehicle path.
One should constantly anchor the mind's attention therein,
Employing expedient means to skillfully guard it.
If one forgets this right mindfulness,
Then one is bound to lose all good dharmas.

54

(T55)

One's physical life abides at the extreme of floating fragility.
In this, it is analogous to a water bubble blown by the wind.
On slipping into dreams, there is no guarantee one will ever awaken.
When exhaling, there is no certainty one's breath will ever return.

55

(T56-7)

It proceeds swiftly to mere dust.
One should realize it has no durability.
Even the great earth, Mount Sumeru, and the oceans
Will all be incinerated when the seven suns appear.
Then, throughout that vast expanse, nary a cinder will remain,
How much the less any trace of this vulnerable and fragile body?

56

(T58)

It is impermanent, undependable,
And affords neither shelter or protection.
This body cannot be relied upon.
How could one fail then to generate renunciation toward it?

57

(T59)

Just as with the case of some blind turtle out in the ocean chancing
To poke its head up through the opening in a floating wooden yoke,³⁵
Return to human incarnation from the animal realm
Is even more rarely encountered than this.
How can one abiding in the path of human rebirth
Fail to cultivate the karma leading to the supreme fruits [of the Path]?

58 (T60)
 To fill up a jeweled vessel with the filth of feces
 Is an action carried out by a fool.
 Having already found the jewel of rebirth in a human body,
 Were someone to then use it to commit evil actions—
 One should realize such a person
 Thereby reaches an even greater extreme of stupidity than this.

27. ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES REQUISITE FOR CULTIVATING THE PATH

59 (T61)
 Having been born in a country possessing the Path,
 Having encountered the good spiritual friend,³⁶
 Having developed a mind governed by right views,
 And possessing merit generated in previous lives,
 One is thus perfectly equipped with the four precious wheels³⁷
 And is thereby enabled to escape from the path of birth-and-death.

60 (T62)
 As for those who have drawn close to the good spiritual friend
 And perfectly cultivated the brahman conduct,³⁸
 The Buddha declared of such persons
 That their minds will always realize quiescent cessation.³⁹

28. DESCRIPTION OF THE FAULTS OF CYCLIC EXISTENCE

A. AN INTRODUCTORY GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF FAULTS

61 (T63)
 One guided by wrong views falls into the three wretched destinies,
 Remains unable to hear the sound of the Buddha's Dharma,
 Abides in the hinterlands' regions of darkness,
 Becomes deaf, becomes mute, or inhabits the long-life heavens.⁴⁰

62 (T64)
 The King has already abandoned the eight difficulties⁴¹
 And has gained this body abiding in unrestricted circumstances.
 It is only fitting that he cultivate good karmic deeds,
 And employ the expedient means through which one seeks nirvāṇa.

63 (T65-6)
 Throughout the long night of cyclic births and deaths,
 One undergoes countless sufferings of many different sorts.
 As one courses on in it, manifesting as the six types of relatives,
 There is no fixed basis ensuring honorable or inferior social station.

64 (T67)

During an eternity of kalpas coursing in cyclic births and deaths,
 One has never not taken on birth as an infant.
 If one reckoned the amount of milk drunk from one's kindly mothers,
 Its volume would compare to the waters of the four great oceans.
 As a common person who will thenceforth take on yet more births,
 The amount yet to be drunk shall be even greater than this.

65 (T68)

Any single person, from the beginning on forth to the present,
 Has left an accumulation of bones rivaling Mount Sumeru's height.
 The number of births passed through among humans and gods
 Exceed the number of dust motes in the entire earth.

B. ON IMPERMANENCE AND REVERSIBILITY OF OSTENSIBLY DESIRABLE EXISTENCES

66 (T69)

Having formerly been a wheel-turning king,
 One later returns to become a slave.
 Though one may ascend to become Śakra Devānām Indra
 And be served by all of the other gods,
 Still, one may then fall down to be reborn in a dunghill,
 Going forth and coming back like this countless times.

67 (T70)

One may at times gain rebirth in the heavens
 And enjoy ecstatic pleasures with consorts there.
 One's eyes may be dazzled by all manner of marvelous forms
 And one's ears may hear a myriad sorts of sounds.

68 (T71-2)

The contact experienced by the body is all smooth and soft
 And the pleasures are so blissful, they are difficult even to describe.
 Afterwards, however, one plummets down into the hells
 Where there is no excruciating cruelty one avoids experiencing.
 When one is reborn into the Sword-Forest [Hells],
 One's head falls away as it encounters the blades.

69 (T73)

One may roam to the very summit of Mount Sumeru,
 Experiencing the rising and falling adapting to one's thoughts.⁴²
 Together with numerous heavenly maidens,
 One bathes in the *māṇḍārava* flower ponds.

70

Precious blossoms are arrayed there in adornment
 As one experiences extremely blissful coolness.
 One then enters once again the river of boiling ashes,
 Where one is boiled and steamed till one's flesh falls away.

(T74)

71

One may enjoy the five desires in the six desire heavens
 As well as desire-transcending bliss in the Brahma-World Heaven.
 Still, when one dies, one may enter the Non-Intermittent Hells⁴³
 There to suffer in full measure many sorts of agonizing cruelties.

(T75)

72

One may become a deity of the sun or moon
 Whose radiance illuminates the four continents.
 Still, one may afterwards enter the darkness of the hells
 Where [it is so dark] one cannot even see his own body.

C. THE HELLS

73

The King should light the lamp of wisdom.
 Do not continue to follow the path of everlasting darkness.
 In the eight great hells,
 One is dealt the pain of being roasted, slaughtered, and split open.

(T76)

74

One passes in full measure through many excruciating punishments
 Which are countless and impossible to describe even by analogy.
 If a person courses along in stupidity and delusion,
 He creates in repletion a multitude of evil karmic deeds.

(T77-82)

75

If someone merely hears of all of these immense sufferings
 And then, in the moment it takes to exhale a breath,
 Has not yet been struck with a terrified mind,
 He must certainly be a man made of wood or stone.

(T83)

76

If someone sees with his own eyes images of the retributions,
 Hears a knowledgeable person describe them,
 Or else reads a choice Buddhist scripture
 And then correctly contemplates this matter in his own mind,
 He should then be struck with great terror.
 How much the more would this be so were one to undergo it himself.

(T84)

77 (T85)
 Of all of the forms of suffering,
 The Non-Intermittent Hells have the most extremely great suffering.
 Of all of the forms of bliss,
 The ending of desire is the foremost type of bliss.

78 (T86)
 If one were to endure three times each day and night
 Being impaled by three hundred spears,
 And wished to compare it to the Non-Intermittent Hell's sufferings,
 It could not compare even if multiplied a hundred thousand times.

79 (T87)
 One undergoes countless forms of excruciating torture
 And, though one might wish to die, that cannot come to pass.
 One undergoes punishments for a hundred thousand years
 And only once one's evil karma is exhausted does it finally end.

80 (T88)
 The painful retribution arising from impurity
 Finds its seeds in the karmic actions of one's body and mouth.
 If one does not plant them, then they do not come into existence.
 It is only fitting that the King cut off the roots of suffering.

D. THE ANIMALS

81 (T89)
 If one falls down into the path of animal rebirth,
 One endures the suffering of being tied up, killed, or injured.
 As desire and injuriousness craze and disorder the mind,
 Enemies are made who then consume each other there.

82 (T90)
 It may happen that, due to quests for pearls,
 Furs, tails, hides, flesh, or bones,
 One becomes bound on these accounts to lose one's life,
 Enduring then the pain of being cut open, skinned, or hacked apart.

83
 Being swift-footed or possessed of great strength,
 One may suffer from being yoked, bearing loads, or being ridden.
 If one is wild, disobedient, or untrained,
 One may be subjected to the whip, to reins, and to flogging.

E. THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

84

(T91)

Though the hungry ghosts obsess on obtaining food and drink,
 They never succeed in obtaining anything they wish for.
 They are driven along by hunger, thirst, cold, and heat,
 Continuing ceaselessly on like that into the long night [of the future].

85

(T92)

Their bodies may become as huge as a great mountain
 While their throats remain as narrow as a needle.
 Their hunger and thirst always burn within them
 And, though they may encounter food, they have no way to obtain it.

86

They may lay eyes on excrement, pus, or spittle
 And run together toward it, struggling as they race,
 Only to see it spontaneously disappear just as they reach it.
 The dashing of hopes only serves to increase their bitter afflictions.

87

(T94)

Hunger and thirst so boil within them that,
 When one of their goiters develops external ulcers,
 The others swarm around, pounce on him,
 And sink their teeth into it to suck the pus and blood.

88

(T93)

They are emaciated, covered with sores, but skin and bones,
 And naked, robed only in their long hair.
 Their bodies grow in appearance like withered trees
 While their mouths spew forth intense flames
 Which, streaming back onto them, scorch their bodies,
 Giving them the appearance of burned *tāla* trees.

89

(T95)

When they go through the summer and wish for evening's coolness,
 The light of the moon only increases the heat they feel.
 When they abide in winter and long for daytime warmth,
 Once the sunlight shines, it feels colder for them than ice.
 When they move toward fruit on trees, it immediately disappears
 And when they go to a river's waters, they straightaway all dry up.

90

(T96)

They live on for fifteen thousand years
 Wherein karma preserves their lifespan, not allowing it to be cut off.
 Their having to enduring for so long these countless sufferings
 Is due to karmic offenses they committed in previous lives.

91 (T97)
 They are driven along by all manner of afflictions,
 Enduring absolute suffering, unremitting since its very onset.
 The Buddha explained the cause for birth as a hungry ghost as being
 Covetous cherishing involving the most extreme miserly attachment.

F. THE GODS

92 (T98)
 Although taking birth in the heavens is blissful,
 Once merit has been exhausted, the most extreme sufferings ensue.
 Hence this is not the karmic fruit sought by the Worthies and Āryas.
 It is something on which the wise refuse to rely.

93 (T99)
 The bodies of the gods lose their luster
 And they are no longer happy where they formerly sat.
 Their floral chaplets abruptly wilt and fall away
 And filth suddenly begins to adhere to their bodies.

94 (T100-1)
 When next their armpits begin to stream with perspiration,
 One should realize then that the time of death has come.
 When the pure karma which brought good rebirth is exhausted,
 They plummet once again into the three wretched destinies.

G. THE ASURAS

95 (T102)
 One may take rebirth as an *asura*, [a demigod],
 Who is, [by nature], covetous, jealous, and afflicted with bitterness.
 Although they may be possessed of sharp intelligence,
 Still, to the very end, they remain incapable of perceiving the truths.⁴⁴

H. SUMMATION ON CYCLIC EXISTENCE

96 (T103)
 In the six destinies of cyclic births and deaths,
 One constantly turns about without cease.
 The most supreme Dharma involves not being bound to take rebirths,
 For those compelled to rebirth are receptacles of the many sufferings.

29. EXHORTATION TO PURSUE THE PATH WITH VIGOR

97 (T104)
 Just as, in an instance where flames burn [the turban] on one's head,
 One acts with focused mind, being sure not to be lost in thought,
 So too, in order to avoid creating karma compelling later existences,
 One must [urgently] focus the mind on diligent cultivation.

30. EXHORTATION TO CULTIVATE THE THREE TRAININGS AND SEEK NIRVĀṆA
98 (T105)

It is through the moral precepts, dhyāna absorption, and wisdom
That one trains oneself in the unmoving state of quiescent stillness.
One must seek out the path to nirvāṇa
And proceed toward the ultimate abandonment of births and deaths.

31. THE SEVEN LIMBS OF ENLIGHTENMENT
99 (T106)

Mindfulness, dharmic analysis, vigor,
Joy, buoyant mental ease, samādhi, and equanimity—
These seven limbs of bodhi
Place one on the path to pure sweet-dew ambrosia (*amṛta*).⁴⁵

32. THE NECESSITY AND DECISIVE EFFECT OF MEDITATIVE ABSORPTION AND WISDOM
100 (T107)

In the absence of wisdom, one does not enter dhyāna absorption.
In the absence of dhyāna absorption, one is not wise, either.
If one is able to perfect both of these,
Then one is able to escape from the flow of birth and death
And, regarding the boundlessly great sea of suffering,
One sees it as a mere puddle in a bull's hoof print.

33. AVOIDANCE OF THE FOURTEEN INDETERMINATE DHARMAS
101 (T108)

The fourteen indeterminate theorizations⁴⁶
Were declared by Buddha to be inappropriate for contemplation.
These are unrelated to the path of peace and security
And are not bases for achieving [nirvāṇa's] quiescent cessation.

34. THE TWELVE-FOLD CHAIN OF CAUSES AND CONDITIONS
102 (T109-10)

Ignorance serves as a condition for karmic actions.
Taking the "other" as its objective condition, it creates consciousness.
Name-and-form arises from consciousness
And the six sense faculties are in turn caused by name-and-form.⁴⁷
The six sense faculties generate the six types of contact
And it is from contact that there is the production of all feeling.⁴⁸

103
Feeling serves as a cause for craving
And it is from craving that the four types of grasping are produced.⁴⁹
The four types of grasping produce the three realms of becoming
And it is on account of becoming that one craves subsequent births.⁵⁰

104

(T111)

It is from birth that there is the causation of ageing, death,
Worry, lamentation, and all manner of bitter affliction.
The mass of the innumerably many sufferings
Are all extinguished through the cessation of births.

105

(T112)

As for that which was revealed by the Supreme One
As the extremely profound dharma of conditioned arising,
If one were able to correctly contemplate and analyze it,
This in itself would be supreme among genuine perceptions.⁵¹
Just such a genuine perception as this
Amounts to seeing the Buddha.

35. THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

106

(T113)

Right views, right thought,
Right speech, right action and livelihood,
Right mindfulness, right effort,
And right samādhi—
These constitute the eightfold path of the Āryas and Worthies.
To realize [nirvāṇa's] quiescent cessation, one must cultivate them.

36. THE FOUR TRUTHS: SUFFERING, ACCUMULATION, CESSATION, AND PATH

107

(T114)

It is physical birth which makes for the “suffering” of the truths
And it is craving which is the source of “accumulation.”
It is the “cessation” of suffering which qualifies as liberation.
That conducing to reaching that destination is the eightfold “path.”⁵²

III. CONCLUDING EXHORTATORY SECTION

108

(T115)

For the sake of “seeing” those truths,
Be constant in the diligent cultivation guided by right knowledge.
Though one may dwell amidst of the pleasures of the five desires,
If one is wise, he will be able to succeed in abandoning them.

109

(T116)

Those who have been able to gain realization of right Dharma
All began as common persons.
They did not just drop down from empty space,
Nor did they simply grow forth from the earth.

110

(T117)

The sagacious and fearless king
 Grasps the essentials and doesn't tarry in troublesome complexities.
 It is fitting that one cultivate the bridge of right Dharma
 And thus cross beyond the abyss of births and deaths.

111

(T118)

Profound dharmas such as set forth above
 Would be difficult to perfect even for a monastic.
 How much the less might a world-ruling lord
 Be able to practice them completely.
 One may gradually cultivate them as time allows.
 Still, one must not allow one's days to pass emptily by.

112

(T119)

When any person at all cultivates goodness,
 Always bring forth thoughts of joyful accordance with it.
 The three types of karmic actions which one cultivates
 Should be directly dedicated to realization of the Buddha Path.⁵³
 Thus, in a future life, one will be able
 To receive [the fruits of] this incalculably vast merit.

113

(T120-1)

Constantly take on birth among gods and humans,
 Becoming for them a sovereignly-independent king.
 Acting in concert with the congregation of great bodhisattvas,
 Roam about, bringing into play the spiritual superknowledges.
 Use skillful means to carry on the transformative teaching of beings,
 And, in so doing, adorn and purify the buddhaland.

114

(T122-23)

Disseminating giving, moral virtue, and wisdom like seeds,
 Travel back and forth among humans and gods,
 Making the stainless purity of their illustriousness
 Spread throughout the lands of the ten directions.

115

When in the World, serve as a ruler acting as the people's guide.
 Above, take births as kings bringing transformative teaching to gods.
 Influence them then to relinquish the pleasures of the five desires
 And to abandon all endeavors neglectful [of the Path].

116

Beings abide in confusion about the right means to be rescued
And so are swept along in the waves of the four floods.⁵⁴
They endure countless sufferings amidst cyclic births and deaths.
Bring them across to liberation, causing them to reach that far shore.
Taking this as the goal, gain realization of the path to buddhahood,
Realizing as well the ultimate great nirvāṇa.⁵⁵

The Dharma Essentials Verses for the Exhortation of Kings

(The end of the Tripiṭaka Master Saṅghavarman translation.)