

LETTER FROM A FRIEND (THE SUHRLLEKHA)
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

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I. INTRODUCTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO PAY DUE ATTENTION

1

(T2)

King Śatakarṇī should realize

The many faults associated with birth-and-death's bitter afflictions.

Everyone is covered over and obstructed by ignorance.

I wish for their sakes to allow benefit to flourish.

2

(T2)

Just as when an image of the Buddha made by carving or painting,

Beheld by the wise, appropriately inspires them to reverence,

Just so, as I rely on the Tathāgata to explain right Dharma,

The Great King too should be inspired to deep faith and acceptance.

3

(T3)

Although you may have previously heard the words of the Muni,²

If you now listen and absorb them, your discernment shall increase.

This is comparable to a lotus pool's appearance of purity—

When moonlight falls upon it, it shines forth ever more radiantly.

II. THE MAIN DOCTRINAL SECTION

01. SIX RECOLLECTIONS, TEN GOODS, QUITTING INTOXICANTS AND WRONG LIVELIHOOD

4

(T4-5)

The Buddha declared that one should cultivate the six recollections,³

Namely the Three Jewels,⁴ giving,⁵ moral virtue, and the heavens,

While cultivating ten good deeds,⁶ purifying three types of karma,⁷

And abandoning intoxicants as well as wrong livelihood.

02. THE SIX PERFECTIONS

5

(T6)

Observing that one's physical life and wealth swiftly deteriorate,

One should give to fields of merit and rescue the poor and destitute.⁸

Giving is unmatched in its durability.

It is the foremost among all of one's close companions.⁹

6 (T7)
 Diligently cultivate pure precepts to be rid of faults and defilements.
 Also, do not aspire to abide in any of the realms of existence.
 Just as the great earth supports the birth of the many creatures,
 So too, in like fashion, do moral precepts produce all forms of good.

7 (T8, 15)
 Cultivate gentle harmony with patience, relinquishing hatefulness.
 The Buddha proclaimed this practice as the most superior.¹⁰
 In like fashion, develop vigor as well as dhyāna and wisdom.
 By perfecting these six practices, one steps beyond birth and death.

03. FILIAL RESPECT FOR PARENTS

8 (T9)
 If one is able as a householder to show filial respect for one's parents,
 Then this in itself serves as a supreme field for the growth of merit.¹¹
 In this present life, a great reputation will spread afar
 While future karmic rewards from this merit become incalculable.¹²

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

9 (T10-11)
 Killing, stealing, sexual relations,¹³ deception, indulging intoxicants—
 Sleeping in ornate beds, high and broad, and using perfumes,
 Singing, attending performances, and eating past the correct time—
 It is fitting to abandon the many such unwholesome actions.¹⁴
 If one cultivates these moral precepts even for a short time,¹⁵
 One is surely destined for celestial happiness and ascent to nirvāṇa.¹⁶

05. ABANDONMENT OF FAULTS

10 (T12)
 Miserliness, hatefulness, covetousness, lust, flattery and falseness—
 Deceptiveness, inverted views, and indolence—
 The many sorts of evil and unwholesome dharmas such as these
 Are such as the Great King should reflect upon and swiftly cast off.

11 (T13)
 As for handsomeness, honorable caste, and the five objects of desire,¹⁷
 One should realize those things are as vulnerable to ruin as sea-foam.
 Don't rely on such nondurable dharmas as these,
 For arrogantly indulging them generates all manner of sufferings.
 If one wishes to develop goodness and gain the sweet dew ambrosia,
 One should abandon them just as one would cast aside poison.

06. DILIGENCE IN DISPENSING WITH HATE AND ARROGANCE

12

(T14)

When able to diligently dispensing with hatefulness and arrogance,
 This compares to when clouds disperse, revealing the autumn moon.
 Such changes are like those of Aṅgulimāla¹⁸ and Sundarananda,¹⁹
 Or like that of Śamā,²⁰ who rivaled even the Worthies and Āryas.²¹

07. THE THREE KINDS OF SPEECH

13

(T18)

The Tathāgata stated that there are three types of discourse:
 That appealing to the mind, the truthful, and that which is false.
 Speech appealing to the mind is like flowers, the true is like honey,
 And the false is base, evil, and comparable to fecal filth.
 One should cultivate the first two kinds of speech
 And, as is fitting, quickly cut off whatever is false.

08. CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING BOTH SELF AND PROSPECTIVE ASSOCIATES

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

14

(T19)

The four dharmas involving leaving or proceeding into brilliance
 Are such as the King should distinguish and carefully contemplate.
 One should cultivate the two leading forth into brilliance.
 Those leading into delusion's darkness should be swiftly abandoned.

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

15

(T20)

Just as with the four states found in the ripening of a mango,
 The difficulty of making distinctions among people is much the same.
 One should resort to wisdom and deep contemplative investigation.
 It may be fitting to draw near the genuinely worthy and good.

09. ON DEALING WITH DESIRE

A. ON GUARDING THE MIND

16

(T21)

Although one may behold an extremely beautiful and stately woman,
 One should reflect on her as with one's mother, sister, or daughter.
 If one generates lustful and defiled thoughts,
 One should cultivate correctly the contemplation of impurity.

17

(T22)

If such thoughts become restive, it is fitting to control them
 Just as one would do in guarding one's life or one's precious jewels.
 If desire-ridden thoughts arise, one should be alarmed
 Just as one feels fear encountering drawn swords or dreadful beasts.

B. ON THE HAZARDS INHERENT IN DESIRE

18

(T23)

Desire is as devoid of beneficial aspects as an enemy or poison.
 Such a declaration was uttered by the Muni himself.
 Entrapment in cyclic birth-and-death is worse than being imprisoned.
 Thus one should diligently cultivate the practices, seeking liberation.

C. ON THE SUPERIOR VALOR IN CONTROLLING DESIRE

19

(T24)

The six sense bases become restive and run to their objective realms.
 One should restrain them. One must not be negligent in this.
 If one is able to restrain the sense faculties in this manner,
 This is superior to a valiant general's crushing of a strong enemy.

D. ON THE UNLOVELINESS OF THE BODY

20

(T25)

This body's impurities flow forth from nine openings,
 Doing so ceaselessly like rivers flowing out to the sea.
 A thin skin hides this, providing the appearance of purity,
 Just as when someone puts on necklaces for personal adornment.
 The wise even then nonetheless distinguish clearly
 And, realizing its deceptiveness, bring forth renunciation.

21

(T26)

As when one with an itching disease approaches flames for relief,²²
 Although there is an initial brief pleasure, suffering later increases.
 So too it is with lust-ridden thoughts:
 Though one is first blissfully attached, the end brings much trouble.²³

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

22

(T27)

If one observes the body's true character, it is all seen as impure,²⁴
 Just then contemplate its emptiness and absence of a self.
 If one is able to cultivate the practice of this contemplation,
 Among all of the beneficial endeavors, this is the most superior.²⁵

23

(T28)

Though one possesses fine physical form, noble birth, and learning,
 If he is bereft of moral virtue and wisdom, he just like an animal.
 Though one is homely, low-born, and of little learning or experience,
 If able to embody moral virtue and wisdom, he is a superior person.

11. ON AVOIDING THE EIGHT WORLDLY DHARMAS AND OFFENSES INSPIRED BY OTHERS
24 (T29-30)

No one is able to avoid the eight dharmas of gain, loss, and so forth.²⁶
By eliminating [their influence], one becomes truly incomparable.
As for any śramaṇa or brahman,
One's father or mother, one's wife, children, or retinue—

25
Do not, influenced by their ideas or words,
Commit any extensively unwholesome, Dharma-contravening deeds.
If you generate any sort of transgression on behalf of these or others,
You alone must endure the immense future suffering this entails.

12. ON THE DELAYED ARRIVAL OF KARMIC RETRIBUTIONS
26 (T31)

Now, doing many evil deeds does not bring immediate retribution.
It is not like crossing swords and thereupon receiving injurious cuts.
Only starting at the point of death are signs of retribution revealed.
Afterward, one falls into the hells and is then assailed by sufferings.

13. ON THE ĀRYAS' SEVEN FORMS OF WEALTH
27 (T32)

Faith, morality, giving, learning, wisdom, shame, dread of blame—
These seven dharmas are “the wealth of the Āryas.”
The Muni declared them to be genuine and incomparable,
Far surpassing the many precious jewels found in the world.
Great King, if one accumulates these superior form of wealth,
He too may before long realize the fruits of the *bodhimāṇḍala*.²⁷

14. ON SIX COARSE FAULTS TO BE ELIMINATED
28 (T33)

Gambling, inebriation, fondness for musical entertainments,
Unrestrained indulgence in indolence, consorting with bad friends,
And rousting about creating disturbances at inappropriate times—
These six dharmas should be abandoned.²⁸

15. IN PRAISE OF BEING EASILY SATISFIED
29 (T34-5)

Being easily satisfied is the most supreme of all forms of wealth.
Words of this sort were uttered by the World Honored One.
When easily satisfied, though poor, one still qualifies as wealthy.
When rich, if one has many desires, this still amounts to poverty.
If one lives the life of abundant wealth, this increases one's sufferings,
Just as a many-headed dragon suffers an increased amount of pain.²⁹

16. ON MODERATION AND SENSIBILITY IN EATING

30

(T38)

One should contemplate even exquisite flavors as like toxic medicines
 On which one sprinkles the waters of wisdom to make them pure.
 Although one should eat for the sake of insuring survival of this body,
 Do not crave food's form or flavor or let it lead to pretentiousness.

17. RENOUNCE DESIRES, SEEK NIRVĀṆA, REGULATE THE BODY, TAKE UP THE UPAVĀSA

31

(TX)

One should generate renunciation for the defilement of the desires
 And should diligently seek the unsurpassed path to nirvāṇa.
 One should train and regulate this body in a way securing its welfare.
 Afterwards, it is fitting to cultivate the abstinence rite precepts.³⁰

18. EXHORTATION TO ENCOURAGE DILIGENCE IN CULTIVATING THE PATH

32

(T39)

A single night is divided into five periods.³¹
 In two of them, one should allow oneself to sleep.
 Contemplate birth-and-death at night's beginning, middle, and end.
 Diligence in seeking liberation is fitting. Do not let time pass emptyly.

19. ON THE FOUR IMMEASURABLE MINDS AND CULTIVATION OF DHYĀNA ABSORPTIONS

33

(T40-1)

One should cultivate the four immeasurables' meditative absorptions.
 These are renowned for opening the path to the Brahma Heavens.³²
 If one focuses mindfulness on the four dhyānas' mind-states,
 At life's end, one will certainly be reborn in those celestial abodes.³³

20. ON THE NECESSITY OF CULTIVATING COUNTERACTIVE DHARMAS

34

(T42)

All which transpires in conditioned existence is impermanent,
 Suffering, empty of inherent existence, destructible, nondurable,
 Devoid of self, devoid of bliss, and impure.
 [Contemplations of] all such concepts serve as counteractive dharmas.

35

If one develops deep contemplations on these gateways to Dharma,
 In the future, he will always abide in esteemed and powerful stations.
 As for five-precepts practice and severance of those five wrong deeds,
 The Great King should be all the more mindful of these.

21. ON THE MITIGATING EFFECT OF PREDOMINANT GOODNESS

36

(T43)

Just as a little salt placed in the Ganges River
Is unable to make its waters salty,
So too, when minor evil encounters abundant goodness,
Its dispersion and dilution is much the same.

22. FIVE WRONG ACTIONS AS THIEVES; FIVE ROOT-FACULTIES AS SOURCES OF GOODNESS

37

(T44-5)

If the five erroneous deeds increase, they steal away one's merit.³⁴
The King should do away with them, preventing them from growing.
The five root-faculties of faith and such are sources of much good.³⁵
It is these one should cultivate and allow to develop abundantly.

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

A. THE EIGHT SUFFERINGS; THE NECESSITY OF RIGHT VIEWS

38

(T46-7)

The eight sufferings of birth and such are constant in their blazing.³⁶
With the waters of wisdom, one should douse and extinguish them.
Whether one desires to strive for heavenly bliss or for nirvāṇa,
One must diligently cultivate right knowledge and views.

B. THE FOUR INVERTED VIEWS AND THE HARM THEY WREAK

39

(T48)

Though possessing sharp intelligence, if one enters erroneous paths,
One's sublime qualities will disappear forever and leave not a trace.
The four types of inverted views do harm to every form of goodness.
Therefore, one must contemplate them and prevent their arising.

C. RIGHT AND WRONG VIEWS ON THE AGGREGATES

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

40

(T49)

[The Buddha] has declared that form is not self, self is not form,
There is no form in a self, and there is no self in form.
These four ideas are conceived in relation to the form aggregate.
Any link of a "self" to the other aggregates is in all respects the same.
These twenty ideas are inverted views.
If one can cut them off entirely, this is the most superior [insight].

2. ON THE ORIGINS OF THE AGGREGATES

41

(T50)

Those dharmas arose neither spontaneously nor primordially,
Were not created by the Ísvāra god, and were not created by time.
They have all arisen through ignorance, craving, and karmic action.
Absent any specific cause or condition, they are then destroyed.
Great King, having realized the nature of such causes,
One should light wisdom's lamp to dispel darkness of ignorance.³⁷

D. THREE FETTERS IMPEDING LIBERATION

42

(T51)

Viewing body as self, clinging to prohibitions, the fetter of doubt—
 These three can block the path to freedom from outflow-impurities.
 If the King destroys them, thus causing them to disappear,
 The Āryas' dharma of liberation will then manifest.

24. THE NECESSITY TO LIBERATION OF SELF-RELIANCE

43

(T52)

As when blind men inquire about the appearance of bodies of water,
 But in a hundred thousand myriad kalpas can never comprehend it,
 So too it is with the striving for nirvāṇa.
 That realization is gained only after one's own diligent efforts.

44

If one wished to rely upon one's retinue or advisors
 As means to gain it, this would be extremely difficult to bring about.
 Therefore the Great King should take up the practice vigorously.
 Then he will subsequently be able to realize quiescent cessation.

25. THE THREE TRAININGS: MORAL VIRTUE; DHYĀNA CONCENTRATION; WISDOM

45

(T53)

Implement moral virtue, much learning, and dhyāna concentration.
 Through these, one gradually draws close to the four truths.
 The ruler among men should therefore cultivate wisdom's clarity
 And practice these three dharmas through which to seek liberation.
 If one is able to cultivate this most supreme of vehicles,
 Then one will thereby subsume all other forms of goodness.

26. THE STATION OF MINDFULNESS WITH RESPECT TO THE BODY

46

(T54)

The Great King should contemplate the body-mindfulness dharmas.
 The World Honored One described them as the path to purification.
 If one is without this mindfulness, one increases unwholesome ideas.
 Therefore it is only fitting that one should diligently cultivate this.

47

(T55)

This human life is brief, hurried, and not retained for long.
 It is like a water bubble which, once arisen, is straightaway destroyed.
 Even as one exhales and then inhales, and even during sleep,
 In each instant, it constantly retreats, always going toward ruination.

48

(T56)

It will not be long before it will be worn down and destroyed,
 Whereupon skin and flesh smell, rot, and turn extremely loathsome.
 It turns stagnant-blood blue, bloats, fissures, and spills pus and blood.
 It is eaten at by worms until it becomes withered and dried up.
 The body and head hair, nails and teeth each separate and scatter.
 Blown by wind, baked by sun, it slowly dries and disappears entirely.

49

One should realize that this body is not solid or durable.
 It is the place where the many forms of suffering assemble together.
 Therefore the Worthies, the Āryas, and all wise people
 Contemplate these faults and thus are moved to renounce it.

50

(T57)

Mount Sumeru, the great seas, and the rivers as well
 Will all be melted and dried up when the seven suns shine all at once.
 If even such durable phenomena as those are utterly destroyed,
 How much the more must that be true of this ever so fragile body?

51

(T58)

Once impermanence arrives, one is beyond rescue or protection.
 It cannot be relied upon nor can one find any means of escape in it.
 Therefore the Great King should always and truly contemplate this,
 Swiftly generate renunciation, and seek out the supreme Dharma.

52

(T59)

The human body is so rarely gained and the Dharma so rarely heard
 That meeting them is as rare as a blind turtle's head happening to
 poke up into a floating wooden yoke.³⁸
 Having obtained a human body in such rare circumstances as these,
 It is only right that one diligently obey the dictates of right Dharma.

53

(T60-1)

To gain this marvelous body and yet commit all manner of evil deeds
 Is analogous to filling up a jeweled vessel with all sorts of poison.
 Having been born in a central land and met a good spiritual friend,³⁹
 One should focus the mind, generate resolve, and initiate right vows.

27. ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES REQUISITE FOR CULTIVATING THE PATH

54

(T62)

Through long sowing merit and equipping himself with the faculties,
 The King is now able to completely fulfill these many forms of good.
 If one is also able to draw close to a man of vision and knowledge—
 The Buddha declared that this is the basis of pure brahmin conduct.