

LETTER FROM A FRIEND (THE SUHRLLEKHA)
Edition Three: The Yijing Translation

*Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva's Verses
Exhorting and Admonishing the King*

**Translated by the Tripiṭaka Master Yijing
Of the Great Tang Dynasty (circa 673 CE)**

English Translation by Bhikshu Dharmamitra

LETTER FROM A FRIEND¹

Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva's Verses Exhorting and Admonishing the King

Translated by the Tang Dynasty Tripiṭaka Master Yijing

These verses are a poetic work presented as a letter by Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva to a close friend, the king of the South Indian country of *Chengtu*.² This "letter" was already translated at an earlier time. Nonetheless, it has for the most part not been seen by those who peruse the Canon in Shenzhou. The result has been that it has been impossible to gain a detailed knowledge of these marvelous words. On account of this, there has now been an additional publication of the original text, this with the hope that it might be caused to circulate unimpededly. This work was translated by Śramaṇa Yijing when he journeyed to the Eastern Indian state of Amaravati.³

I. INTRODUCTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT TO PAY DUE ATTENTION

1

Because ignorance covers over the minds of beings,
May compassion flourish from this so they begin to comprehend.⁴
"The greatly virtuous eminence Nāgārjuna, for the sake of the King,
Sent this letter to him to influence him to cultivate and study it."⁵

An editorial note added to the Chinese comments on the above line:

"This one stanza line was written by some later person to indicate the basic rationale for composing the letter."

2

(T1)

Meritorious One, I expound the authentic teaching
And let flourish this writing in order to generate fondness for merit.
The truly good will find it appropriate to listen studiously.
These verses describe the grand foundation of the Āryas' intent.

3

(T2)

Whichever wood or other material is used to sculpt a buddha image,
The wise are all inspired by it to make offerings.
Even if my verses are not artful or sublime,
Do not slight them, for they rely on proclamations of right Dharma.

4 (T3)
 Though the King may have already understood authentic teachings,
 Listening to Buddha's words again refines supreme comprehension,
 Just as when a plaster wall is seen in the radiance of the moonlight—
 How could its fresh brilliance not appear especially sublime?

II. THE MAIN DOCTRINAL SECTION

01. THE SIX RECOLLECTIONS

5 (T4)
 [Recollection of] the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha,
 Giving,⁶ moral virtue, and the heavens—
 These are bases for collecting each and every meritorious quality,
 The Buddha declared that one should always bear them in mind.⁷

02. THE TEN GOOD DEEDS, ABANDONMENT OF INTOXICANTS, RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

6 (T5)
 As for the path of the ten good karmic deeds,⁸
 One should constantly draw close to them in body, speech, and mind.
 Abandon all forms of intoxicants
 While also practicing pure livelihood.

03. THE SIX PERFECTIONS

7 (T6)
 Realize that wealth and the body are not durable.
 In accordance with Dharma, practice giving to the Bhikshus,
 To the poor, to the lowly, and also to the "born-again" (*devija*).⁹
 That [this giving] may become your close friend in future lives.¹⁰

8 (T7)
 The manifold virtues abide in reliance on the precepts
 Just as all things grow forth from the earth.
 Do not indulge, but rather reduce the various aspirations.
 Buddha declared this as something one should constantly practice.

9 (T8)
 As for giving, moral virtue, patience, vigor, meditative discipline,
 And immeasurably-vast wisdom,
 These enable reaching one's destination and so should be cultivated
 In order to cross beyond the sea of existences and become a buddha.¹¹

04. FILIAL RESPECT FOR PARENTS

10 (T9)
 If one cares for one's parents with filial attentiveness,
 His own household will be attended by the Brahma Heaven King.
 In the present, he will elicit a fine reputation.
 In the future life, he will be born into celestial palaces.

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

11 (T10)

Abstinence from killing, stealing, sexual relations,¹² false speech,
 Indulgence in untimely eating, fondness for high seats and beds—
 Cutting off all intoxicants, singing, dancing,
 Floral adornment, cosmetics, and perfumes—

12 (T11)

If either women or men are able to perfectly observe
 These eight moral precepts of the Āryas,¹³
 Then, among the six heavens of the desire realm,
 They will be reborn in the abode of enduring purity and goodness.

06. ABANDONMENT OF FAULTS

13 (T12)

Miserliness, flattery, deceptiveness, covetousness, indolence,
 Pride, lust, hatred, caste-based arrogance, clan-based arrogance,
 And arrogance based on extensive learning or youthful qualities—
 All of these should be looked upon as enemies.

07. DILIGENCE VERSUS NEGLIGENCE

14 (T13)

[Buddha] stated that realizing the unproduced arises from diligence
 And that vulnerability to death is caused by negligence in cultivation.
 Diligence is able to bring about the growth of good dharmas,
 Hence you could cultivate with scrupulous carefulness.¹⁴

15 (T14)

If one abandons neglectfulness of the past
 And changes, cultivating diligently henceforth,
 This is comparable to when obscuring clouds are pushed aside
 And, on a lovely night, one gazes up at the brilliant moon.

16

Sundarananda,¹⁵
 Aṅgulimāla,¹⁶
 And Kṣemadarśin¹⁷
 All turned away from evil and perfected goodness.

08. ON THE SPECIAL IMPORTANCE OF PATIENCE AND RELINQUISHING ENMITY

17 (T15)

In making valiant progress, nothing is the equal of patience.
 One must not allow the power of anger to manifest in one's actions.
 Then, finally, one will gain the station of the "non-returner."¹⁸
 Buddha verified that [patience] enables riddance of hatefulness.

18

(T16)

"That person struck me, scolded me,
Cheated me, persecuted me, stole my wealth..."
Such nursing of grudges brings on the feuding of enemies.
When one lets go of grudges, one sleeps peacefully.

19

(T17)

Just as when drawing on water, inscribing in dirt, or carving stone—
Just so may be the effect of one's mental actions.
In the arising of afflictions, the former is the best.
In cherishing Dharma, one prefers the latter.

09. THREE KINDS OF DISCOURSE

20

(T18)

The Buddha stated that there are three types of discourse:
Words which please people, true words, and false words.
Accordingly, they are like honey, like flowers, or like feces.
Cast out the latter while putting to use the previous types.

10. CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING BOTH SELF AND PROSPECTIVE ASSOCIATES

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

21

(T19)

People may now abide in brilliance and be brilliant later as well,
May now abide in darkness and later still abide in darkness,
May now abide in brilliance, but later abide in darkness,
Or may now abide in darkness, but later abide in brilliance.
Of these four sorts of persons,
The King should be reliant on the first.

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

22

(T20)

There are [mangoes] which are unripe but which appear to be ripe,
Those which are ripe but which appear to be unripe,
Those which are ripe and also appear to be ripe,
And those which are still unripe and also appear to be unripe.

23

Among the fruits of the mango,
There are distinctions such as these.
People, too, are the same as those four types.
The King should be aware that they may be difficult to distinguish.

11. ON DEALING WITH DESIRE

A. ON GUARDING THE MIND

24

(T21)

Don't let your gaze fall on the wife or consort of another man.
 If it should happen, contemplate her as one's own mother, daughter,
 Or sister, reflecting as befits her age.
 If lust arises, deliberate upon impurity.¹⁹

25

(T22)

Just as with one's reputation, one's son, one's valuables, or one's life,
 Guard against and restrain any restive movement by the mind.
 Just as one guards against beasts, poison, blades, enemies, or fire,
 So too, prevent lust from invading.

B. ON THE HAZARDS INHERENT IN DESIRE

26

(T23)

Through desire, one becomes involved with what is so non-beneficial
 As to be likened to the [attractive, but poisonous] *kimpāka* fruit.²⁰
 The Buddha declared that one should cast off
 The manacles and fetters of birth-and-death's prison.

C. ON THE SUPERIOR VALOR IN CONTROLLING DESIRE

27

(T24)

In comparing one beset by the deceptive, ever-harassing sense realms
 Who is able to subdue these six sense consciousnesses
 With someone else taking up arms to drive away a host of enemies,
 We must acknowledge the first as the ultimate in valor.

D. ON THE IMPURITY OF THE BODY

28

(T25)

A foul-smelling chamber exuding many sorts of filth from nine gates,
 This moving carcass, so hard to keep filled, is encased by a thin skin.
 Please, observe a young woman bereft of adornments or cosmetics.
 Body parts and bones, considered apart, are unspeakably repulsive.

29

(T26)

When the boring of itch-inducing parasites becomes painful,
 One may draw close to fire, seeking relief.²¹
 But once one ceases that, there is no way to avoid [pain's return].
 Indulgence in the desires is just the same as this.²²

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

30

(T27)

For the sake of knowing the genuine and supreme reality,
 One may analytically contemplate a multitude of phenomena.
 [To gain such insight], one need only practice this meritorious skill,
 For there are no other dharmas which can approach it.²³

31

(T28)

Where someone is of prestigious social caste
 And possesses a pleasing appearance and abundant learning,
 But has no wisdom and breaks *śīla's* moral prohibitions,
 How is such a person worthy of esteem?²⁴

32

If a person is not of prestigious social caste,
 Has a homely appearance, and has but little experience or learning,
 But possesses wisdom and guards against breaking *śīla's* moral code,
 He is thereby worthy of offerings from everyone.

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

33

(T29)

Gain and loss, happiness and suffering,
 Esteem and disgrace, praise and blame—²⁵
 Completely comprehend these eight worldly dharmas,
 And, imposing order on one's thoughts, abandon these mind states.

34

(T30)

As for members of the "born-again" caste, gods, almsmen,
 One's father, mother, wife, sons, or others,
 Do not create karmic offenses on their account,
 For they will not share with you the karmic retributions in hell.

14. ON THE DELAYED ARRIVAL OF KARMIC RETRIBUTIONS

35

(T31)

If one commits some karmic deed entailing retribution,
 It does not manifest straightaway like a wound inflicted by a sword.
 Rather it waits until one is close to the moment of death.
 Then the retributions for evil karmic deeds will be entirely revealed.

15. ON THE ĀRYAS' SEVEN FORMS OF WEALTH

36

(T32)

Faith, moral virtue, giving, pure learning,
 A sense of shame, a dread of blame, and right wisdom
 Are the seven forms of wealth [of the Āryas] spoken of by the Muni.²⁶
 Things commonly possessed [as wealth] are actually mere vanities.

16. ON SIX COARSE FAULTS TO BE ELIMINATED

37

(T33)

Gambling, attending clamorous or unseemly entertainments,
 Indolence, consorting with bad friends,
 Intoxication, and going out at inappropriate times, these six faults—
 These steal away a fine reputation and so should be done away with.

17. IN PRAISE OF REDUCED DESIRES

38

(T34)

Having but few desires is the best form of wealth.

This was extensively taught by the Teacher of Gods and Men.²⁷

If one is able to cultivate having but few desires,

Then, even though poor, he is in fact a rich man.

39

(T35)

If one extensively seeks all manner of things,

He is paradoxically beset by just that many sorts of sufferings.

The wise realize that, if one fails to cultivate having but few desires,

Like the many-headed dragon, he falls prey to [yet more] aggravation.

18. ON THE VARIOUS SORTS OF CANDIDATES FOR MARRIAGE

40

(T36)

One naturally inclined to be as resentful as an assassin,

One deceiving and slighting her husband, treating him like a puppet,

Or one compelled to steal even trivial things—

It is fitting to reject these three insurgent-like women as a wife.

41

(T37)

One as accommodating as a sister, one as lovingly-kind as a mother,

One compliant as a servant, or as companionate as a close relative—

Any of these four potential wives are worthy of your gifts.

One should realize such a wife is fit to be addressed as a goddess.

19. ON MODERATION AND SENSIBILITY IN EATING

42

(T38)

One should take one's meals as if ingesting medicine,

Being aware of right measure and being rid of craving and aversion.

One does not eat to enhance [connoisseurial] pretentiousness,

But rather solely out of a wish to maintain the body.

20. EXHORTATION TO ENCOURAGE DILIGENCE AND MINDFULNESS

43

(T39)

One should spend the entire day being diligent in his endeavors

And should be so as well in the early and later periods of the night.

One must still maintain mindfulness even in sleeping and dreams,

And must not allow one's life to pass emptily by.

21. ON THE FOUR IMMEASURABLE MINDS AND CULTIVATING THE DHYĀNA ABSORPTIONS

44

(T40)

Kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and right equanimity

Are to be cultivated and are amenable to constant training.

Even though one might not reach the highest level of this practice,

One will nonetheless be able to reborn in the Brahma-world Heaven.²⁸

45 (T41)
 If, seeking joy and bliss, one renounces the various desires' suffering,
 As befits such karma, one may be reborn in any of four stations
 Corresponding to the Great Brahma, Light-and-Sound,
 Universal Purity, or Extensive Fruition Heavens.²⁹

22. ON THE NECESSITY OF CULTIVATING COUNTERACTIVE DHARMAS

46 (T42)
 If one constantly cultivates counteractive methods,³⁰
 His merit will become supreme and he will feel pity for beings.
 These five [countervailing] practices serve as the basis of goodness.
 Failing to practice them amounts to the commission of great evil.

23. ON THE MITIGATING EFFECT OF PREDOMINANT GOODNESS

47 (T43)
 Sprinkling in a bit of salt to make a little water salty—
 How could this be comparable to pouring it into a river or a lake?
 Even if one has allowed himself to commit slight karmic offenses,
 One should realize they may be mitigated by predominant goodness.

24. ON THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF THE FIVE HINDRANCES

48 (T44)
 Ill-will, excitedness-and-regretfulness,
 Lethargy-and-drowsiness, desire, and doubtfulness—
 Insurgent thieves such as these five hindrances
 Constantly steal away all benefits of goodness.³¹

25. THE FIVE ROOT-FACULTIES, POWERS, AND SUMMITS

49 (T45)
 There are five most superior dharmas:
 Faith, vigor, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.
 One should train diligently in the practice of these.
 They are able to beckon forth root-faculties, powers, and summits.

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

A. THE EIGHT SUFFERINGS

50 (T46)
 Sufferings of sickness, death, separation from the loved, [and such]—
 All of these are creations of one's own karmic deeds.³²
 Until one has transcended them, one might well diligently cultivate
 Counteractive practices and do away with arrogance and indulgence.

B. THE NECESSITY OF RIGHT VIEWS TO LIBERATION

51

(T47)

If you hope to gain the heavens or liberation,
 You must then cultivate right views.
 Even if one were to influence someone to practice goodness,
 Wrong views still result in precipitating wretched karmic effects.

C. THE FOUR RIGHT VIEWS VERSUS THE FOUR INVERTED VIEWS

52

(T48)

[By contemplating] absence of bliss, impermanence, absence of self,
 And impurity, one analytically cognizes [the nature of] the “person.”
 Through mentally adopting the four inverted views,
 Difficulties and sufferings reside in one’s very person.

D. RIGHT AND WRONG VIEWS ON THE AGGREGATES

1. THE NONEXISTENCE OF ANY “SELF” ASSOCIATED WITH THE FIVE AGGREGATES

53

(T49)

It has been declared that form does not constitute a self,
 That no self exist as form,
 And that it is not true that either form or self abide within the other.³³
 One should realize the other four aggregates are empty [of any self].

2. ON THE ORIGINS OF THE AGGREGATES

54

(T50)

[The aggregates] are not produced by time,
 Not produced spontaneously, not produced by their basic nature,
 Not produced without a cause, and not created by *Iśvara*.
 They arise as a result of ignorance, karmic action, and craving.³⁴

E. THREE FETTERS IMPEDING LIBERATION

55

(T51)

The views implicit in clinging to rules and in conceiving body as self,
 And *vicikitsā*, [doubtfulness]—
 One should realize these three kinds of fetters
 Can tie one up, [preventing entry into] the gate of *mokṣa*, [liberation].

27. THE NECESSITY OF SELF-RELIANCE, LEARNING, MORAL VIRTUE, AND MEDITATION

56

(T52)

Liberation finally depends upon one’s own efforts.
 It is not realized through association with others.
 Diligently cultivate learning, morality, and meditative concentration.
 Through which [realization of] the four truths will then develop.

28. THE THREE TRAININGS

57

(T53)

Superior moral virtue, concentration, and wisdom—
 These trainings are worthy of constant cultivation.
 The more than a hundred and fifty moral precepts
 Are all subsumed within these three.³⁵

29. THE STATION OF MINDFULNESS WITH RESPECT TO THE BODY

58

(T54)

Abide in the station of mindfulness with respect to the body.
 This is a path worthy of constant skillful cultivation.
 If one allows right mindfulness to deteriorate,
 All dharmas will be entirely lost.

59

(T55)

One's life is vulnerable to numerous disastrous occurrences.
 In this, it is comparable to a water bubble blown by the wind.
 When one falls asleep even briefly,
 One can only hope that, having lain down, one may yet get up again.

60

(T56)

It will suddenly return to a state of ashes, desiccation, or rot.
 This site of feces and filth is difficult to maintain for long.
 Contemplate the body as an unreal dharma
 Bound for destruction and for disintegration.

61

(T56)

The great earth, Mount Sumeru, and the seas
 Will be burned up when the seven suns appear.
 How much the more so this extremely fragile body?
 How would it not be reduced to cinders?

62

(T58)

Being thus so impermanent, it cannot endure for long.
 There is no refuge, no rescue, and no shelter which it might afford.
 Whoever would triumph over births and deaths must renounce it.
 It is comparable in its insubstantiality to the plantain.³⁶

63

(T59)

Were a sea turtle to poke his head up into a wooden yoke's opening,
 That one chance interaction would occur only as an extreme rarity.³⁷
 [Equally rare is] casting off animal rebirth to gain the human body.
 One may yet return there to encounter the fruits of one's evil actions.