

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

64 (T60)

To use a tray made of gold and jewels to take out feces
 Would be an act of great stupidity.
 If, having gained human birth, one were to commit karmic offenses,
 He would thereby become the most extreme sort of fool.

30. ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES REQUISITE FOR CULTIVATING THE PATH

65 (T61)

With birth into a central land, reliance on the good spiritual friend,³⁸
 Generation of right vows,
 And performance of meritorious karma in one's previous lives,
 One has completely acquired all four of the great wheels.³⁹

66 (T62)

The Buddha declared of drawing near to the good spiritual friend
 And perfecting brahman conduct, one should draw close to these.⁴⁰
 Through reliance upon the Buddha, good men
 In great numbers have achieved realization of the perfect stillness.⁴¹

31. DESCRIPTION OF THE FAULTS OF CYCLIC EXISTENCE

A. AN INTRODUCTORY GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF FAULTS

67 (T63)

One possessed of wrong views is born among the ghosts or animals,
 In the hells where he cannot hear the Dharma,
 In the hinterlands of the *mleccha*, [the barbarians],
 With the facility [for worldly contentiousness], as mute, as deaf,

68 (T64)

Or perhaps he is born in the long-life heavens.⁴²
 Having set aside these eight unfortunate and faulty circumstances⁴³
 And having already gained a leisurely situation,
 It is fitting that you assume responsibility for your own future births.

69 (T65)

Separation from the loved, ageing, sickness, and death—⁴⁴
 This is the abiding place for these and many other sorts of sufferings.
 The wise should generate renunciation for it.
 You should listen as I describe but a few of its faults:

70 (T66)

[In subsequent births], one's mother may transform into one's wife,
 One's father may turn into one's son,
 And adversaries may change into friends.
 There is no fixed pattern governing the course of transmigrations.

71 (T67)
 All of the individual instances of drinking one's mothers' milk
 Exceed in their volume the four oceans' waters.
 Pursuing a common person's destiny, one takes on yet more bodies,
 Thus consuming in the future an amount even greater than that.⁴⁵

72 (T68)
 The bones from the bodies taken on from each past lifetime,
 If piled all together, would rival the height of Mount Sumeru.⁴⁶
 Were one to make the entire earth into pellets the size of date pits,
 With one for each past body, how could one count them even then?

B. THE IMPERMANENCE AND REVERSIBILITY OF OSTENSIBLY DESIRABLE EXISTENCES

73 (T69)
 Having received offerings of everyone as Brahma-World Heaven lord,
 When that karma's power ends, one is bound to fall back to earth.
 Even if one ascends to the position of a wheel-turning sage king,
 Still, on returning, one may be transformed into someone's slave.

74 (T70)
 As for the bliss with consorts in the Heaven of the Thirty-three,⁴⁷
 After enjoying it for a long time, one may then fall into the hells.
 One swiftly meets intense cruelty, enduring all manner of sufferings.
 The body is crushed, flesh smashed, one always screams and wails.⁴⁸

75 (T71)
 One may experience bliss at the peak of Mount Sumeru.
 Where the earth goes soft, cushioning every footstep.
 Still, one may turn on back and undergo suffering on burning coals
 And then be bound to pass through the hell full of feces.

76 (T72)
 One may enjoy delights in the fragrant gardens
 Where heavenly maidens follow along in playful rapture.
 But then one may fall down into the Sword-Forest Hell
 Where one encounters the slicing away of hands, feet, ears, and nose.

77 (T73)
 One may enter the marvelous *māndārava* blossom pools to bathe
 With heavenly maidens graced by golden flowers and radiant faces.
 On leaving that body, one may again endure sufferings in the hells
 In fiery blazes hard to confront and in the river of ashes.

78 (T74)
 In the desire heavens, one enjoys pleasures consistent with Dharma
 And one transcends cravings in the Great Brahma Heaven.
 Still, one may plunge down yet again into the Avīci Hells
 Where the sufferings of the flames continue on constantly.

79 (T75)
 One may be reborn as one who dwells [as a deity] of the sun or moon
 Where the body's radiance illuminates throughout four continents.
 Still, one is bound one morning to return to that blackness
 So intense one has no way to see even his own outstretched hand.

80 (T76)
 The lamp light from three types of merit
 May be retained and taken along after one's death
 As one enters alone the boundless darkness
 Wherein the sun and moon do not stream forth their light.⁴⁹

C. THE HELLS

81 (T77)
 The Living Hells, Black-Line Hells, Burning Hells—
 The Unification, Screaming, and Non-Intermittent Hells below—
 These sorts of constantly engulfing sufferings
 Roast all who course in evil deeds.

82 (T78)
 They may be crushed on a bed into particles the size of sesame seeds,
 Or may be pulverized till they become like finely-ground flour.
 Or they may be hacked up just as a sharp axe chops away at logs,
 Or else they may be ripped open as if by saws.

83 (T79)
 They are subjected to fierce flames which constantly fry and cook,
 Are forced to drink molten copper liquid,
 Are driven along and forced to fall onto impaling swords,
 And have their bodies speared and forced down onto a hot iron bed.

84 (T80)
 At times they may raise their hands up high, [pleading],
 Only to be set upon by fierce iron-fanged dogs who devour them.
 Raptors with sharp beaks and talons [descend upon them]
 Forcing them to endure stabbing pecks at the heart and liver.

85 (T81)

Horseflies and all manner of other insects,
More than a thousand *koṭīs* in number,
With sharp beaks, consume the body.
They all rush to drop on down and proceed to devour it.

86 (T83)

If someone commits in full measure the many sorts of offense karma,
Yet, on hearing of the sufferings, finds no peril therein for himself,
Such a person possesses obdurate stupidity as impenetrable as *vajra*.
When his breath stops, he enters the hells and meets their fierce fires.

87 (T84)

Ever ponder the end's changes. Having learned of them, be mindful.
Study and recite sutras and treatises, always probing their meanings.
Having heard echoes of the hells, struck with terror, one wonders:
"How might one banish or fend off this ripening of karma?"

88 (T85)

Of all the forms of bliss, which is most supreme?
Bliss from ending desire, ensuring its non-arising, is the most refined.
Of all forms of suffering, which is most extreme?
The sufferings of the Non-Intermittent Hells reach the very extreme.

89 (T86)

If every day someone
Were impaled three hundred times with a spear,
That would be but minor suffering compared to that of the hells.
Being but a miniscule fraction of that, one would prefer impalement.

90 (T87)

One may undergo extreme sufferings in these places
Wherein one is bound to pass through a hundred *koṭīs* of years.
So long as one's evil karma had not yet been exhausted,
There would certainly be no way to bring one's life there to an end.

91 (T88)

All such negative fruitions as these
Arise from seeds planted through physical, verbal, and mental acts.
You should diligently guard your actions as best befits your powers.
One must not commit any infractions even as slight as a dust mote.

D. THE ANIMALS

92

(T89)

One may yet enter into the path of animal rebirth
 Wherein one personally experiences being bound and slaughtered.
 Once one abandons the goodness leading to quiescent cessation,
 He is bound to undergo reciprocal infliction of intense bitterness.⁵⁰

93

(T90)

One may be subjected to the sufferings of bondage and slaughter
 Arising from quests for pearls, tails, horns, or pelts.
 One may be goaded, whipped, hooked, have horns chopped off,
 Or may be kicked and smacked as one endures being ridden.

E. THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

94

(T91)

When reborn as a ghost, one's hopes are never fulfilled
 And one abides in constant proximity to matchless sufferings.
 One is subjected to hunger, thirst, cold, and heat
 While always being invaded by hardships and terror.

95

(T92)

Their throats are as narrow as the eye of a needle,
 Whilst their bellies may even grow as big as a mountain.
 Hunger so grips them that, even craving to eat their own excrement,
 They definitely have no way to get even a small measure of that.⁵¹

96

(T93)

In appearance, they resemble a withered tree shorn of branches.
 It is their own bare skin which serves for them as clothes.
 Their mouths flame like torches which burn night after night,
 Drawing flying moths to leap in, supplying them some nourishment.

97

(T94)

Not even blood, pus, or the various sorts of impure substances
 Can be obtained by them because their merit is so scant.
 They hound after each other with their mouths,
 Turning on each other to feast on their ulcerating goiters.

98

(T95)

When exposed to moonlight, they experience feverish heat,
 While, when out in the sunshine, they are afflicted with frigid cold.
 Though they might hope to eat some fruit, they find only bare trees.
 If they look longingly at river waters, all traces of moisture dry up.

99 (T96)
 They endure manifold sufferings in this manner,
 Passing through a period of fifteen thousand years.
 That their lives are tied to misery for so very long
 Is especially because they are such solid reservoirs of suffering.⁵²

100 (T97)
 If one is born among the hungry ghosts,
 One encounters this singular flavor of suffering.
 It not such as even a worthy ascetic could be fond of.
 The Buddha declared it to be caused by the defilement of miserliness.

F. THE GODS

101 (T98)
 Although one enjoys bliss when born in the heavens,
 Once the merit is exhausted, the ensuing suffering is inconceivable.
 When the end comes, one plummets back down again.
 One may deduce why there is no pleasure to be found in that.

102 (T99)
 They become weary of their seats, their clothes become stained,
 The luster of their bodies deteriorates,
 Their armpits begin to perspire,
 And their aging floral chaplets start to wither.⁵³

103 (T100)
 When these five signs manifest,
 There is no doubt that those among the gods are about to die.
 This is just as when earth-bound humans about to die,
 Become depressed and scattered and alter their normal deportment.

104 (T101)
 If on falling from the abodes of the gods,
 All roots of goodness have been entirely exhausted,
 One becomes bound to descend into the realms of animals, ghosts,
 And hells, abiding then in one after the other.

G. THE ASURAS

105 (T102)
 The basic nature of the *asuras*, [the demigods],
 Even when endowed with a full measure of intelligence,
 Is to cherish hatred of the gods and generate embittered thoughts.
 The effect of this is that it obstructs the ability to perceive the truths.⁵⁴

H. SUMMATION ON CYCLIC EXISTENCE

106

(T103)

One flows like this through the stations of cyclic births and deaths,
Being born as a god, a human, an animal, or an *asura*, [a demigod].
Base karmic actions are a reservoir producing manifold sufferings.
Those coursing in the path of ghosts are also flung on into the hells.

32. EXHORTATION TO PURSUE THE PATH WITH VIGOR

107

(T104)

It is just as when an intense flame burns [the turban] atop one's head
And threatens to burn all the clothes worn upon one's body.
This suffering is such one brooks no delay in the ability to put it out.
No thought is lost on arising or abiding. It is all focused on *nirvāṇa*.

33. ENCOURAGEMENT TO CULTIVATE THE THREE TRAININGS AND SEEK NIRVĀṆA

108

(T105)

You should seek to practice *śīla* as well as concentration and wisdom.
Develop pliancy through stillness, leaving the disaster of defilements.
Nirvāṇa is endless and free of both ageing and death.
Even the four elements, the sun, and moon all perish there within it.

34. THE SEVEN LIMBS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

109

(T106)

Mindfulness, dharmic analysis, vigor,
Meditative concentration, wisdom, joy, and buoyant mental ease—
These seven limbs of *bodhi*
Are able to bring forth the sublime *nirvāṇa*.⁵⁵

35. ON THE NECESSITY AND DECISIVE EFFECT OF SKILL IN MEDITATION AND WISDOM

110

(T107)

In the absence of wisdom, meditative absorption is nonexistent.
If meditative absorption is incomplete, wisdom is therefore weak.
In the case of one who implements them both,
The sea of existence becomes like a mere puddle in a bull's hoof print.

36. AVOIDANCE OF THE FOURTEEN INDETERMINATE DHARMAS

111

(T108)

The fourteen indeterminate dharmas⁵⁶
Were declared by [the Buddha], the kinsman of the Solar Clan,
To be such as one should not bother to ponder,
For they cannot facilitate either awakening or [*nirvāṇa*'s] cessation.

37. THE TWELVE-FOLD CHAIN OF CAUSES AND CONDITIONS

112

(T109)

It is from ignorance that one generates karmic actions
 And from karmic actions that one in turn produces consciousness.
 Consciousness is a condition for the production of name-and-form
 While it is name-and-form that generates the six sense bases.⁵⁷

113

(T110)

The six sense bases serve as a condition for the production of contact
 While it is contact that produces the conditions for feelings.⁵⁸
 Feelings having served as a condition for the production of craving,
 It is then through craving that one beckons forth grasping.

114

(T111)

Grasping in turn serves as a condition for becoming.
 Becoming in turn serves as a condition for birth.
 Birth serves as a condition for ageing and death
 As well as worry, sickness, and the failure to gain what is sought.

115

As for the great mass of suffering produced by cyclic existence,
 This should be swiftly cut off.
 If one brings about the cessation of "birth,"
 Then the many sorts of suffering are all entirely extinguished.

116

(T112)

Among the treasury of teachings taught by the Supreme One,
 This profound and sublime gateway of conditioned arising
 Is such that, if one were able to develop correct perception of it,
 This would allow one to behold the Unsurpassed Honored One.⁵⁹

38. THE EIGHTFOLD PATH

117

(T113)

Right view and livelihood, right [effort and] mindfulness,
 Right meditative discipline, speech, action, and thought—
 These are known as the eightfold path of the Āryas.
 For the sake of realizing cessation, it is advisable to cultivate them.

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

118

(T114)

The "craving" causing "accumulation" arises baselessly.
 It is in dependence on the body that many sorts of "suffering" arise.
 It is through "cessation" of this that one realizes liberation.
 Hence it is fitting that one practice the Āryas' eightfold "path."⁶⁰

III. CONCLUDING EXHORTATORY SECTION

119

(T115)

It is just these very sorts of karmic practices of the yogin
Which serve as the causes for realizing the four truths of the Āryas.⁶¹
Though one may abide in a household accoutered with adornments,
Wisdom may nonetheless serve to block the stream of afflictions.

120

(T116)

They do not drop down from empty space,
Nor do they grow forth from the earth in the manner of grain.
All who have previously realized the fruits of Dharma
Were formerly common persons replete with afflictions.

121

(T117)

Why tarry in an abundance of explanatory writings?
Dispensing with the toilsome, I submit these summarizing words.
Matters involving individual sentiment are amenable to one's control.
In the discourse of the Āryas, the mind is the source.

122

(T118)

Dharmas such as have been explained above
Would be difficult to comprehensively implement even for a bhikshu.
One may cultivate any given endeavor as befits one's own abilities.
Still, one must not allow one's youth to pass emptily by.

123

(T119)

Accord with and rejoice in all of the many good deeds of others
Pursue the marvelous practice through three types of personal acts.⁶²
One should then dedicate these to the realization of buddhahood,
As for the accumulation of merit, see that it is constantly augmented.

124

(T120)

In subsequent lives, one's lifespan may be incalculably long
As one engages extensively in liberating gods and men.
In the manner of Avalokiteśvara,
For those in extreme straits, treat adversaries and friends equally.

125

(T121)

Once free of birth, ageing, sickness, death, and the three poisons,
Manifest birth in your buddhaland to serve the world like a father,
Enjoying an inconceivably long lifespan
Identical to that of the greatly awakened lord, Amitābha.

126

(T122-3)

Make widely known *śīla*, giving, and wisdom so that throughout
Heavens, earth, and space, their illustriousness is everywhere shown.
Whether among people in the world in celestial congregations,
Do not allow lust for bewitchingly beautiful women to cause harm.

127

The afflictions bind and entwine the multitude of beings.
Cut off the floods of *saṃsāra* and ascend to the right enlightenment.⁶³
Step beyond this world consisting of mere designations.
By realizing the unproduced, abandon the turbidity of sense objects.⁶⁴

The End of Ārya Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva's *Suḥṛllekha*

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

"An *ārya* is 'a holy person.' A *nāga* is a 'dragon.' This is an image.
The meaning of *arjuna* translates as 'valorous.' A *bodhisattva* is 'an
enlightenment being.' As for *suḥṛl*, that is 'a close confidante.' As
for *lekha*, that means 'letter.' As for earlier statements referring to
[the meaning as] 'dragon tree,' those were made in error."

Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva's Verses Exhorting and Admonishing the King

(The end of the Tripiṭaka Master Guṇavarman translation.)