

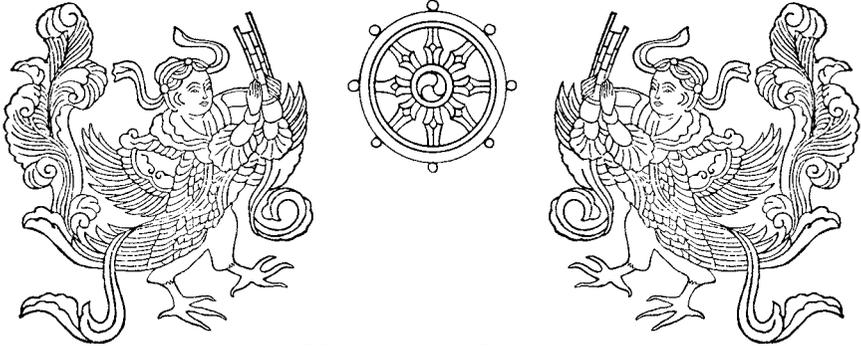
LETTER FROM A FRIEND

*Nāgārjuna's Epistle to an Indian King
On Right Living, View, and Practice of the Path*

The Three Earliest Sanskrit Translations of the *Suḥṛllekha* by:

Tripīṭaka Master Guṇavarman	(circa 425 CE)
Tripīṭaka Master Saṅghavarman	(circa 450 CE)
Tripīṭaka Master Yijing	(circa 675 CE)

English Translations by Bhikshu Dharmamitra



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INTRODUCTION

General Introduction to the *Suḥḥllekha*

Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Letter from a Friend (Suḥḥllekha)* is a short discourse composed in the form of a royal-advisory letter presented by a spiritual teacher to the king of his country. It is unknown precisely to which of several similarly-titled Sātavāhana monarchs known as Śatakarṇī that Ārya Nāgārjuna addressed the *Letter*. The king in question likely held sway in the southeast Indian city of Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh sometime during the first quarter of the first millennium CE. (The Sātavāhana Empire lasted at most some 450 years, from roughly 230 BCE to approximately 220 CE.)

On the Author of this Text

The author of this treatise, Ārya Nāgārjuna lived in Southern India in the early years of the first millennium CE. He is recognized by followers of all Northern School Buddhist traditions as one of the foremost advocates of the Mahāyāna path dedicated to universal spiritual liberation and realization of buddhahood. Nāgārjuna championed this altruistic path as ultimately of a higher order than the individual-liberation paths idealizing personal escape from suffering through the enlightenment of arhats or pratyekabuddhas.

The works of Ārya Nāgārjuna are unsurpassed in their ability to clarify the fundamental tenets, aims, and right practice of the bodhisattva's universal-liberation path. Details about his life and the texts he composed are, due to constraints of space, beyond the scope of this introduction. The reader may look to the introduction to my translation of Nāgārjuna's *Strand of Jewels (Ratnāvalī)* for a few more relevant comments. Alternatively, one may choose to explore this topic through perusal of secular buddhology's endless conjectures about Nāgārjuna's life and works.

On the Especially Valuable Qualities of This Text

Although Ārya Nāgārjuna has certainly written many other texts which are more metaphysically abstruse and doctrinally encyclopedic than this *Letter from a Friend*, this text is in fact one of the most accessible, appropriate, and useful basic Buddhist instruction

manuals available to the Western student of Dharma. It is especially valuable because it presents in a very short text practical advice from an acknowledged master, practical advice which is equally useful to both layperson and monastic. This letter of spiritual counsel from Nāgārjuna himself emphasizes the most important aspects of the Buddhist Path: right living, right Buddhist practice, and the right doctrinal bases for developing world-transcending moral virtue, contemplative practice, and wisdom.

On the Surviving Editions and Their Origins

Although there are apparently no surviving traces of the original Sanskrit text of Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Suḥṛllekha* or *Letter from a Friend*, we do have four significantly-varying editions extant in secondary languages, three preserved in the Chinese canon (T32.1672-4), and one preserved in Tibetan (TP-5409, duplicated as TP-5682). There is also an Indian commentary translated into Tibetan (TP-5690).

Dating on all of these materials involves some uncertainty with dating of the Tibetan texts being least clear. (It is probably safe to say the Tibetan translations were made between 800-1200 CE.)

As for the translation dates from Sanskrit of the three Chinese editions featured in this volume, Takakusu provisionally assigns them as follows (*A Record of the Buddhist Religion*, p. 158):

T32.1672, by Tripiṭaka Master Guṇavarman:	431 CE
T32.1673, by Tripiṭaka Master Saṅghavarman:	434 CE
T32.1674, by Tripiṭaka Master Yijing:	673 CE

On Similarities to and Differences from the *Ratnāvalī*

Students of Ārya Nāgārjuna's works will already be familiar with another royal-advisory discourse (*rāja-parikathā*), the immensely-important *Ratnāvalī*, also composed in the form of discourse presented to one of the Sātavāhana monarchs ruling in Amaravati. The similarities between the *Suḥṛllekha* and the *Ratnāvalī* are fewer than one might expect, for they differ markedly in the range and meta-physical abstruseness of doctrinal content while also apparently being composed for kings at different stages of path development.

A thorough study of the two texts makes it seem probable that, if they were not written for two entirely different kings, they were at minimum composed for the same king at very different stages in his study of the Path. However, a close comparative reading of the two texts reveals internal circumstantial evidence contradicting

this latter theory, for it seems highly likely from such evidence that both texts were composed for relatively young kings still at the beginning stages of their careers in state governance.

Of particular importance are the numerous examples of categorical differences in doctrinal content between the *Suḥṛllekha* and the *Ratnāvalī*, including (but not limited to) the following:

1) Whereas the *Suḥṛllekha* does indeed mention Mahāyāna topics such as the six perfections and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (in the Yijing edition, Amitābha Buddha is mentioned as well), its greatest emphasis is on the more basic Buddhist practices most essential to individual liberation. In marked contrast, the *Ratnāvalī* devotes itself almost entirely to a bodhisattva's universal-liberation doctrines, aspirations, and practice.

2) Although the *Ratnāvalī* does in fact encourage renunciation for sense-bound enslavement to cyclic existence, it emphasizes altruistic bodhisattva works during a very long course of countless lifetimes in the very midst of cyclic existence. In marked contrast, and as well befits a less heroically-inclined target audience, the *Suḥṛllekha* devotes a great deal of effort to articulating the direct-experience rationales for developing a strong aversion to uncontrolled coursing in cyclic existence while only peripherally mentioning the self-sacrificing details of the bodhisattva career.

Most noteworthy in this respect are the *Suḥṛllekha* passages reserved for cataloguing the inescapable sufferings associated with each level of cyclic existence from the hells on up to the heavens. As one might expect, due attention is paid to the baseless nature of loveliness imputations commonly associated with members of one's opposite gender. Additionally, the eight major categories of suffering and the rarity of encountering a human rebirth well-suited to cultivating the Path are also discussed.

3) The *Suḥṛllekha* does make a point of noting the indispensability of right view to spiritual liberation and so does mention essential basic related topics such as: the thirty-seven wings of enlightenment, the four inverted views, absence of an inherently-existent "self" anywhere in the five aggregates, the three fetters impeding liberation, the twelve-fold causal chain, avoidance of the fourteen indeterminate dharmas wedded to useless discourse, and the three trainings. Still, the depth of discussion is not nearly so thoroughgoing and abstruse as we find in the *Ratnāvalī*. Also, the *Ratnāvalī* really does go hammer-and-tongs at demonstrating virtually the

entire range of exemplary illustrations of the doctrine of emptiness, whereas the *Suḥṛllekha* barely touches on this essential doctrine so crucial to right Mahāyāna realization and practice.

At first glance, it might be tempting to attribute the above-listed differences between these two texts to inevitable condensation factors at play in very short works such as the *Suḥṛllekha*. (At 500 ślokas, the *Ratnāvalī* is more than four times the length of the 120-odd ślokas found in each of the *Suḥṛllekha*'s four editions.) However, this would still not adequately explain the major differences which extend more deeply to matters of widely-varying doctrinal emphasis, tenor, and target audience.

On Possibly Different Authorship of the *Suḥṛllekha* and *Ratnāvalī*

This matter of "target audience" mentioned directly above explains why, doctrinally-speaking, it is not reasonable merely on grounds of the less-exalted version of doctrine articulated in the *Suḥṛllekha*, to propose different authorship to the *Suḥṛllekha* and the *Ratnāvalī*. The bodhisattva guru is well aware of the need to tailor teaching stratagems to the faculties of the student.

One need only reference the counsel to adopt varying levels of teaching stratagems recommended in both the *Ratnāvalī* and the *Bodhisambhāra Sāstra* to realize why a single bodhisattva-path guru would adopt very basic teachings for one student and extremely challenging and abstruse teachings for another. It would be an entirely commonplace scenario for a guru to adopt only a basic individual-liberation teaching stratagem in the early phases of teaching one individual of only limited spiritual capacities whilst on the very same day employing refined teachings demanding super-human resolve and far-reaching spiritual vision in the instruction of a student possessing marvelously well-developed bodhisattva-path capacities.

It is on this basis that I tend to dismiss as merely conjectural any doctrinally-rooted arguments proposing that the *Suḥṛllekha* and the *Ratnāvalī* might have been composed by different hands.

Śloka Numbering in the Chinese Editions

Specialists and original-language students of these texts will know from their reading experience that, although there may be some exceptions, it is the norm for the Chinese translations produced by both Indian and Chinese translators to not include any sort of

śloka numbering. In fact, translations into Chinese very often run the *ślokas* together and thus entirely do away with any boundaries between *ślokas*. As one will note from examination of my translations of these three texts, it was also not uncommon at all for particular translators to render doctrinally dense stanzas with more lines and doctrinally very simple stanzas with fewer lines.

Sanskrit source texts perhaps varied somewhat as to whether they retained scribal demarcations or rather simply let the structure of the Sanskrit speak for itself. Apparently, even in more complex texts, it was not particularly uncommon for helpful apparatuses to be entirely absent from Sanskrit manuscripts with the result being that there was no linguistic demarcation between extensive comments by an exegete and the root-text passage upon which it commented. In cases of that sort, the Chinese translation process often involved adding clear demarcations and detailed titles, subtitles, headings, and subheadings.

In any case, specifically because English translations of Tibetan editions of the *Suḥrillekha* have carefully preserved a numbering schema for the 123 *ślokas* of their text, I have inserted a moderately-accurate *śloka*-numbering schema in all three of my *Suḥrillekha* translations, including also the corresponding Tibetan *śloka* numbers (where such correlation is possible at all), this to facilitate investigative comparison of the various editions and also to provide additional convenience for Dharma students and practitioners who have so far only studied this text from the standpoint of the Tibetan edition.

On Other Elements Added by the Translator

The reader will notice the presence of an outline structure containing headings and subheadings both in the tables of contents and also in the translations themselves. These elements were created by the English-language translator as a means to assist more ready access to the structure of the texts by the reader. This outlining apparatus is only approximate and was created more-or-less “on-the-fly” while I produced each of the translations. Consequently I cannot claim to have precisely captured the more subtle terrains of Ārya Nāgārjuna’s text. It would not surprise me in the least if readers were to find bases for further refinements of my outlining heads and sub-heads which are, after all, intended solely to act as a rough guide to the structure of the text.

Additionally, I've included on verso pages the source-language texts in both simplified-character and traditional-character scripts. These apparatuses are included for two primary reasons:

First, it may be helpful for Dharma students and specialists who have taken the time to develop Chinese-language skills to have ready access to the source-language when contemplating difficult passages.

Second, there are a fair number of Dharma students today who, native speakers or not, can read the Chinese moderately well, but who still find it useful to have some assistance in dealing with Sino-Buddhist technical terms not found anywhere in the modern Chinese lexicon. Facing-page English allows easy access to correct understanding of technical terms while also offering cues on the meaning of relatively obscure Chinese passages couched in the sometimes less-familiar Classical Chinese literary style.

Why Translate All Three Chinese Editions Instead of Just One?

This is certainly a question which occurred to me right away when first pondering a *Suḥr̥llekha* translation project. Closer study of all four surviving editions of the text made it obvious to me that the differences in the texts were so marked that the most meaningful contribution to study of this text by modern-day Dharma students would consist in going ahead and rendering into English all three Sanskrit-to-Chinese editions.

There are certainly differences in all of the translations on crucial elements. These involve ideas being included in one translation but not in all or any of the others.

There are also other significant variations worth pondering, among which, for example, we have Tripiṭaka Master Yijing's preference for a more elegant literary style almost certainly more appealing to the well-educated Chinese reader but, unfortunately, also somewhat more amenable to generating ambiguity. In technical documents such as those concerned with teaching details of Dharma, any unnecessary ambiguity increases the likelihood that any given reader might choose one valid Chinese reading over another and hence miss the intent of the Sanskrit original which in fact intended to convey one and only one meaning for the given phrase or passage.

There are yet other factors discoverable through examining multiple translations, factors perhaps implicitly freighted with a

degree of historical and doctrinal significance. Take for instance Tripiṭaka Master Guṇavarman's very condensed statement on factors to consider in choosing a wife (included more-or-less like an "addendum" as the very last stanza in his edition). This stands in marked contrast to the case obtaining with the other three editions (including the Tibetan) wherein discussions of ideal and disastrous marriage partners for a monarch are both much more detailed and also appear to be integral to an earlier section of the text.

Noting that Tripiṭaka Master Guṇavarman was in fact an arhat whose extraordinary powers were well known in his time (walking on mud without leaving tracks, knowing when Buddha-hall bells were being struck even when still miles away from the monastery, etc.), one wonders if his edition of the *Suḥṛllekha* might have been a somewhat different version more commonly encountered in Indian monasteries more focused on the individual-liberation arhatship path. On the other hand, it might perhaps have occurred that in all subsequent editions, we have a case of someone's commentary becoming intentionally or unintentionally integrated into the text, thus making the treatment of the "royal marriage" topic much more detailed than Ārya Nāgārjuna might ever have intended.

Translation of all extant editions also contributes a little more "grist" for discussions on the degree of accuracy preserved in orally-transmitted texts. Limitations of space preclude pursuing that topic in this introduction.

On the Meaning of the *Suḥṛllekha* Title

I have noticed that the currently circulating English translations made from the Tibetan edition of the *Suḥṛllekha* tend to translate this work's title as "Letter *to* a Friend" (in contrast to my choice of "Letter *from* a Friend"). This may or may not involve some artifact in the way the title was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. (The Sanskrit itself appears to be "neutral" on this issue.)

Having noted this seemingly minor point, I still do think it worth pointing out that an entirely standard feature of Buddhist doctrine incidentally bears very directly on what might or might not constitute a valid rendering of Nāgārjuna's intent: Although the king in question here may indeed have been a "friend" of Nāgārjuna in the loose sense of the term, it is Nāgārjuna who adopts in this letter of instruction the role of the "good spiritual friend" (*kalyāṇa-mitra*) or "spiritual guide."

Additionally, it is Nāgārjuna who is the already-enlightened *ārya*, not the King, for the King is, no different from the rest of us, a mere "foolish common person" (*prthag-jana*) who, by definition, is still vulnerable to being subverted by his own constantly-varying affections and aversions. As is often pointed out in Buddhist doctrinal literature, it is a person who has become an *ārya* and *only* a person who has become an *ārya* whom one can rely upon to act as one's friend throughout this and all future lives. This is because, by definition, only an *ārya* has already reached that level of enlightenment from which he can never fall back in either this or future lives. (This stage is synonymous with "stream-entry" on the individual liberation path and, at the latest, eighth-stage bodhisattvahood on the universal-liberation path.)

The king, "friend" that he might appear to be for the time being, might just as easily change into a deadly enemy with a change of circumstances (say, were he to convert to another religion, for instance) or a change of lifetimes. Hence my distinctly different translation choice for the English rendering of *Suḥṛllekha*.

In Summary

Ārya Nāgārjuna's *Letter from a Friend* is an especially accessible and concise outline of the most essential elements of the Buddhist path. If studied with due respect and care, it should serve well as a source of constant and trustworthy spiritual counsel for any student of the Dharma. This being the case, I hope that this three-edition volume may enjoy wide circulation among Buddhist practitioners and others wishing to explore more deeply the works of Nāgārjuna.

Suggestions for improvements in this translation from clergy, scholars, or Dharma students may be forwarded via website email and will certainly be very much appreciated.

Bhikshu Dharmamitra

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