

Nagarjuna's Letter to A Friend

Homage to the Gentle and Glorious Youth (Mañjugosha).

1

Listen now to these few lines of noble song
That I've composed for those with many virtues, fit for good,
To help them yearn for merit springing from
The sacred words of He Who's Gone to Bliss.

2

The wise will always honor and bow down
To Buddha statues, though they're made of wood;
So too, although these lines of mine be poor,
Do not feel scorn, they teach the Holy Way.

3

While you have surely learned and understood
The Mighty Buddha's many lovely words,
Is it not so that something made of chalk
By moonlight lit shines gleaming whiter still?

4

Six things there are the Buddhas have explained,
And all their virtues you must keep in mind:
The Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, bounteous acts,
And moral laws and gods—each one recall.

5

With body, speech, and mind always rely
On wholesome deeds, the tenfold virtuous path.
Avoiding liquor at all costs, thus find
True joy to lead a life of virtuous deeds.

6

Possessions are ephemeral and essenceless—
Know this and give them generously to monks,
To brahmins, to the poor, and to your friends:
Beyond there is no greater friend than gift.

7

Keep your vows unbroken, undegraded,
Uncorrupted, and quite free of stain.
Just as the earth's the base for all that's still or moves,
On discipline, it's said, is founded all that's good.

8

Generosity and discipline, patience, diligence,
Concentration, and the wisdom that knows thusness—
Those measureless perfections, make them grow,
And be a Mighty Conqueror who's crossed samsara's sea.

9

Those who show their parents great respect
With Brahma or a Master will be linked;
By venerating them they'll win repute,
In future they'll attain the higher realms.

10

Eschew all harm, don't steal, make love, or lie,
Abstain from drink, untimely greed for food,
Indulging in high beds, and singing too,
Refrain from dancing, all adornments shun.

11

For men and women who keep this eight- branched vow
And emulate the vows the Arhats took,
Their wish to nurture and to cleanse will grant
Them handsome bodies as celestial gods.

12

Stinginess and cunning, greed and sloth
And arrogance, attachment, hate, and pride
("I've breeding, good looks, learning, youth, and power")—
Such traits are seen as enemies of good.

13

Carefulness is the way to deathlessness,
While carelessness is death, the Buddha taught.
And thus, so that your virtuous deeds may grow,
Be careful, constantly and with respect.

14

Those who formerly were careless
But then took heed are beautiful and fair,
As is the moon emerging from the clouds,
Like Nanda, Angulimala, Darshaka, Udayana.

15

Hard to practice, patience knows no peer,
So never allow yourself a moment's rage.
Avoid all anger and you will become
A Non- Returner, so the Buddha said.

16

"He's abused me, struck, defeated me,
And all my money too he has purloined!"
To harbor such resentment leads to strife;
Give up your grudge and sleep will easily come.

17

Understand your thoughts to be like figures drawn
On water, sandy soil, or carved in stone.
Of these, for tainted thoughts the first's the best,
While when you long for Dharma, it's the last.

18

Three kinds of speech are used by humankind,
And these the Victor variously described:
Like honey, sweet; like flowers, true; like filth,
Improper speech—the last of these eschew.

19

Some there are who go from light to light,
And some whose end from dark is darkness still,
While some from light to dark, or dark to light
End up, thus four, of these be as the first.

20

Men, like mangoes, can be sour and yet look ripe,
Some though ripe look green, and others green
Are sour indeed, while others still look ripe
And ripe they are: from this know how to act.

21

Do not gaze on others' wives, but if you do,
Regard them as your mother, child, or sib,
Depending on their age. Should lust arise,
Think well: they are by nature unclean filth.

22

Guard this fickle mind as you would do
Your learning, children, treasure, or your life.
Renounce all sensual pleasure as if it were
A viper, poison, weapon, foe, or fire.

23

The pleasures we desire will bring us ruin,
They're like the kimba fruit, the Buddha said.
Eschew them, it's their chains that tightly bind
The worldly in samsara's prison- house.

24

Of he whose fickle senses are controlled—
These six that never cease to dart at things—
And he who's fought and conquered many foes,
The first is truly brave, the wise have said.

25

Regard a young girl's body on its own,
Its smell so foul, its openings nine—a pot
Of filth, insatiable, and clothed with skin.
Regard too her adornments on their own.

26

A man with leprosy, consumed by germs,
Will stand before the fire for comfort's sake
But still find no relief, so know the same is true
For those attached to the pleasures they desire.

27

In order that you see the absolute,
Get used to truly understanding things.
No other practice is there such as this
Possessed of special virtues such as these.

28

To those possessed of breeding, learning, handsome looks,
Who have no wisdom, neither discipline, you need not bow.
But those who do have these two qualities,
Though lacking other virtues, you should revere.

29

You who know the world, take gain and loss,
Or bliss and pain, or kind words and abuse,
Or praise and blame—these eight mundane concerns—
Make them the same, and don't disturb your mind.

30

Perform no evil, even for the sake
Of brahmins, bhikshus, gods, or honored guests,
Your father, mother, queen, or for your court.
The ripened fruit in hell's for you alone.

31

Although performing wrong and evil deeds
Does not at once, like swords, create a gash,
When death arrives, those evil acts will show,
Their karmic fruit will clearly be revealed.

32

Faith and ethics, learning, bounteousness,
A flawless sense of shame and decency,
And wisdom are the seven riches
Buddha taught. Know, other common riches have no worth.

33

Gambling, public spectacles and shows,
And indolence, bad company, strong drink,
And nightly prowls—these six will lead to lower realms
And damage your good name, so give them up

34

Of all great wealth, contentment is supreme,
Said he who taught and guided gods and men.
So always be content; if you know this
Yet have no wealth, true riches you'll have found.

35

Kind Sir, to own a lot brings so much misery,
There's no such grief for those with few desires.
The more the naga lords possess of heads,
The more their headaches, the more they have of cares.

36

A murderer who sides with enemies,
A queen who holds her husband in contempt,
A thieving wife who steals the smallest thing—
It's these three kinds of wife you must avoid.

37

A wife who like a sister follows you,
Affectionate like a true and loving friend,
Supportive like a mother, obedient like a maid—
She must be honored like a family god.

38

Take food as medicine, in the right amount,
Without attachment, without hatefulness:
Don't eat for vanity, for pride or ego's sake,
Eat only for your body's sustenance.

38

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39

O Knowledgeable One, recite all day
And in the first and last watch of the night.
Then in between these two sleep mindfully
So that your slumbers are not spent in vain.

40

Constantly and perfectly reflect
On love, compassion, joy, impartiality.
And should you not attain the higher state,
At least you will find bliss in Brahma's world.

41

The four samadhis, which in turn discard
Pursuit of pleasure, joy and bliss and pain,
Will lead to fortune equal to the gods'
In Brahma, Light, Great Virtue, or Great Fruit.

42

Great good and evil deeds are of five kinds,
Determined by their constancy, their zeal,
Their lack of counteragent, their perfect fields.
So strive in this respect to practice good.

43

A pinch of salt can give its salty taste
To a little water, but not to the Ganges stream.
So know that, likewise, minor evil deeds
Can never change a mighty source of good.

44

Wildness and remorse, and hateful thoughts,
And dullness- somnolence, and yearning lust,
And doubt are hindrances—please know these five
Are thieves that steal the gem of virtuous deeds.

45

With faith and diligence and mindfulness,
And concentration, wisdom, five in all,
You must strive hard to reach the “highest state”:
As “powers” these “forces” take you to the “peak.”

46

“I’m not beyond my karma, the deeds I’ve done;
I’ll still fall ill, age, die, and leave my friends.”
Think like this again and yet again
And with this remedy avoid all arrogance.

47

If higher birth and freedom is your quest,
You must become accustomed to right views.
Those who practice good with inverse views
Will yet experience terrible results.

48

Know this truth: that men are ever sad,
Impermanent, devoid of self, impure.
Those who do not have close mindfulness,
Their view four times inverted, head for ruin.

49

Form is not the self, the Buddha taught,
And self does not have form, nor dwell in form,
While form dwells not in self.

Thus you must see

The four remaining aggregates are empty too.

50

The aggregates are not a simple whim,
From neither time nor nature do they come,
Nor by themselves, from God, or without cause;
Their source, you ought to know, is ignorance,
From karmic deeds and craving have they come.

51

To feel that one is ethically superior,
To view one's body wrongly, and to doubt—
With these three fetters, you should understand,
The way through freedom's city gates is blocked.

52

Freedom will depend on you alone
And there is no one else, no friend can help.
So bring endeavor to the Four Noble Truths
With study, discipline, and concentration.

53

Train always in superior discipline,
Superior wisdom, and superior mind.
Monks' vows exceed a hundred and five tens,
Yet they are all included in these three.

54

My lord, the Buddha taught close mindfulness
Of body as the single path to tread.
Hold fast and guard it well, for all the Dharma

Is destroyed by loss of mindfulness.

55

With all its many risks, this life endures
No more than windblown bubbles in a stream.
How marvellous to breathe in and out again,
To fall asleep and then awake refreshed.

56

This body ends as ash, dry dust, or slime,
And ultimately shit, no essence left.
Consumed, evaporated, rotted down—
Thus know its nature: to disintegrate.

57

The ground, Mount Meru, and the oceans too
Will be consumed by seven blazing suns;
Of things with form no ashes will be left,
No need to speak of puny, frail man.

58

It's all impermanent, devoid of self,
So if you're not to stay there refugeeless
And helpless, drag your mind away, O King,
From plantainlike samsara, which has no core.

59

Harder, harder still than that a turtle chance upon
The opening in a yoke upon a great and single sea
Is rebirth as a human after rebirth as a beast;
So heed the sacred Dharma, King, and make your life bear fruit.

60

More stupid yet than one who throws some slops
Into a golden vessel all bejewelled
Is he who's gained a precious human birth
And wastes it in an evil, sinful life.

61

To dwell in places that befit the task,
To follow and rely on holy beings,
Aspiring high, with merit from the past—
These four great wheels are yours for you to use.

62

The virtuous friend in whom to place your trust
Has brought pure conduct to perfection, said the Lord.
So follow holy beings, many are they
Who relied upon the Buddhas and found peace.

63

To be reborn with false beliefs, or yet
As animals, or pretas, or in hell,
Deprived of Buddha's words, barbarians
In border lands, or reborn dull and dumb,

64

Or born among the long- lived gods—
Of these eight defective states that give no opportunity
You must be free, and, finding opportunity,
Be diligent, to put a stop to birth.

65

O Gentle Sir, to make your disenchantment grow
With this samsara, source of many pains—
Desires frustrated, death, ill health, old age—
Please heed its defects, even just a few.

66

Men who've fathered sons in turn are sons,
And mothers likewise daughters.
Bitter foes Turn into friends, the converse too is true.
Because of this samsara's never sure.

67

Know that every being has drunk more milk
Than all the four great oceans could contain,
And still, by emulating common folk,
They'll circle, drinking ever more and more.

68

A heap of all the bones each being has left
Would reach to Meru's top or even higher.
To count one's mother's lineage with pills
The size of berries, the earth would not suffice.

69

Indra, universally revered,
Will fall again to earth through action's force.
And he who ruled the universe as king
Will be a slave within samsara's wheel.

70

For ages it was rapture to caress
The lovely breasts and waists of heaven's maids,
Now one will bear the terrible caress—
The crush, the slash, and tear—of hell's machine.

71

For years you might have stayed on Meru's crest
Delighting as it yielded underfoot,
But think now of the torment that will strike:
To wade through glowing coals and rotten flesh.

72

Those who in the Joyous Garden played,
And in Beauty's Grove were served by heaven's maids,
Will come to woods of trees with swordlike leaves
And cut their hands and feet, their ears and nose.

73

Among the golden lotuses and lovely maids
They bathed in heaven's Gently Flowing Pool,
But into hell's own waters will they plunge,
The scalding, caustic River None Can Ford.

74

A Kamaloka god, one gains such bliss,
As Brahma, bliss that's free from all desire;
But know that after that comes constant pain:
As firewood one feeds Avici's flames.

75

One who was reborn as sun or moon,
Whose body's light lit whole worlds far below,
Will then arrive in states of darkest gloom,
His outstretched hands will be invisible.

76

So thus it is you'll ail, and knowing this
Please seize the lamp of merit's triple form,
For otherwise you'll plunge and go alone
In deepest dark unlit by sun or moon.

77

For beings who indulge in evil deeds
There's constant pain in these and other hells:
Reviving Hell, Black Line, and Intense Heat,
And Crushing, Screaming, Torment Unsurpassed.

78

Some are squeezed and pressed like sesame,
Others likewise ground like finest flour,
Some are cut and carved as if with saws,
Others hacked with axes, razor-honed.

79

Others still are forced to swallow draughts
Of burning molten bronze that flares and sparks,
Some impaled and threaded onto skewers—
Barbed and fiercely blazing stakes of steel.

80

Some, whom savage dogs with iron fangs
Will rip to shreds, in dread throw up their hands,
And others, powerless, are pecked by crows
With sharpened beaks of steel and razor claws.

81

Some there are who roll about and wail,
Devoured by worms and multicolored grubs,
Ten thousand buzzing flies and bees that leave
Great stings and bites unbearable to touch.

82

Some, in heaps of blazing red hot coals,
Are burned without a break, their mouths agape.
And some are boiled in cauldrons made of iron,
Cooked like dumplings, heads turned upside down.

83

The very instant that they cease to breathe
The wicked taste the boundless pains of hell.
And he who hearing this is not afraid
A thousandfold is truly diamond hard.

84

If simply seeing pictures of the hells
And hearing, thinking, reading of them scares,
Or making sculpted figures, need we say
How hard to bear the ripened fruit will be?

85

Of all the forms of happiness there are,
The lord is bliss where craving's fully spent.
So too, of all the misery there is,
The pain in Torment Unsurpassed is worst.

86

For one whole day on earth three hundred darts
Might strike you hard and cause you grievous pain,
But that could never illustrate or match
A fraction of the smallest pain in hell.

87

The frightful pains and torments just described
Are lived and felt throughout a billion years.
Until those evil deeds are fully spent
One will not die and shed this life in hell.

88

The seeds of these the fruits of evil deeds
Are sinful acts of body, speech, and mind.
Work hard therefore and muster all your skill
To never stray a hair's breadth into sin.

89

For animals there's multifold distress—
They're slaughtered, tied up, beaten, and the rest.
For those denied the virtue that brings peace
There's agony as one devours another.

90

Some of them are killed just for their pearls,
Their wool, or bones, their meat or skins and fur,
And other helpless beasts are forced to work,
They're kicked or struck with hands, with whips and goads.

91

For pretas too there's not the slightest break
In suffering from their unfulfilled desires.
What dire misery they must endure
From hunger, thirst, cold, heat, fatigue, and fear.

92

Some, their mouths like needles' eyes, their bellies
Huge as mountains, ache from want of food. They
do not even have the strength to eat
Discarded scraps, the smallest bits of filth.

93

Some, their naked bodies skin and bone,
Are like the dried- out tops of tala trees.
And some have mouths that belch forth fire by night:
Into their burning mouths sand falls as food.

94

A few unlucky ones don't even find
Some dirt to eat—pus, excrement, or blood.
They hit each other in the face and eat
The pus that festers from their swollen necks.

95

For hungry ghosts the summer moon's too hot,
In wintertime the sun is far too cold,
Fine trees in orchards wilt and lose their fruit,
And simply from their gaze great streams run dry.

96

And some have bodies bound by that tight noose,
Their karmic store of previous evil deeds,
Now borne as constant misery and pain;
For five, ten thousand years they will not die.

97

The cause of these the pretas' varied woes
And all such kindred torments one might get Is being greedy,
this the Buddha said:
Stinginess is not for the sublime.

98

Even in the higher realms the pains of death
Are more intense than is their greatest bliss.
And so good people who reflect on this
Don't crave the higher realms, which soon must end.

99

Their bodies' colors cease to charm and please,
Their seats grow hard, their flowered wreaths do wilt,
Their clothes are stained, and on their bodies now appear
Rank drops of sweat they never had before.

100

These five are signs that herald death in heaven,
Appearing to the gods in their abodes.
They're not unlike the signs of death that warn
Of coming death in humans on the earth.

101

Those gods who transmigrate from heavenly worlds
And do not have some little virtue left
Will tumble, helpless, to their just abodes
As beasts or hungry spirits or in hell.

102

The asuras begrudge the gods their splendor,
Their inbred loathing thus torments their minds.
Though clever, they're obscured as all their kind,
And so it is they cannot see the truth.

103

Samsara is like this, and thus we are reborn
As gods, as humans, denizens in hell,
As ghosts or animals; but you should know
That birth's not good, a pot of many ills.

104

Give up your efforts trying to stop all this
As if your hair or clothes had just caught fire;
Just do your best to not be born again:
No greater goal or need is there than this.

105

With discipline and concentration, wisdom too,
Attain nirvana, peaceful, disciplined, immaculate,
Unageing, deathless, inexhaustible, and quite distinct
From earth and water, fire, wind, sun, and moon.

106

Mindfulness, discernment, diligence, a joyful mind,
And flexibility, concentration, evenness—
These seven limbs are elements that lead to Buddhahood,
They gather virtue and attain the state beyond all pain.

107

Lacking wisdom, concentration fails,
And without concentration, wisdom too.
For someone who has both, samsara's sea
Fills no more than the print left by a hoof.

108

The Kinsman of the Sun did well pronounce
With silence on the fourteen worldly points.
On these you must not ponder or reflect,
With them your mind will never be at peace.

109

From ignorance comes action, and from that
Comes consciousness, thence name- and- form appears.
From that arise the six sense faculties,
Whence contact comes, thus did the Buddha teach.

110

And then from contact feeling comes to be,
And based on feeling, craving will appear.
Again from craving grasping will be born,
And then becoming, and from this there's birth.

111

Then once there's birth, comes misery untold,
And sickness, ageing, wants frustrated, death,
Decay, in short the whole great mass of pain.
If birth is stopped, all this will be no more.

112

Within the treasury of Buddha's words
There's none so precious, so profound as this.
And those who see that things dependently arise
Do see the Buddha, perfect knower of the truth.

113

Perfect view and livelihood, with effort,
Mindfulness and concentration, perfect speech,
And conduct, perfect thought—the path's eight limbs—
To find true peace, please meditate on these.

114

To take birth is to suffer, and to crave
Is its immense and universal source.
Make craving cease and freedom will be yours,
To achieve that take the Eightfold Noble Path.

115

For you to see these same Four Noble Truths
You must strive hard to practice constantly.
Even worldly men with fortune in their laps,
Through knowledge, crossed that river, troubled states;

116

And even those who realized the truth
Did not fall from the heavens, nor emerge
Like crops of corn from earth's dark depths, but once
Were ruled by kleshas and were ordinary men.

117

O Fearless One, what need to tell you more?
For here's the counsel that will truly help:
The vital point is tame your mind, for mind's
The root of Dharma, so the Buddha said.

118

It's hard enough for monks to follow perfectly
All these instructions that I've given you.
Yet practice excellence, the very pith
Of one of these, and give your life its sense.

119

Rejoicing in the virtuous deeds of all,
Now dedicate your three good kinds of acts
To all that they may come to Buddhahood.
Then by this mass of virtuous deeds may you,

120

In boundless lives in worlds of gods and men,
Be master of the yoga of all excellence,
And like Sublime Chenrezig, may you work
To guide the many feeble, stricken souls.

121

And thus may you take many rebirths and dispel all ills,
Old age, desire, and hatred in a perfect Buddhafield.
May you have infinite life, as a
Protector of the World Like Buddha Amitabha,
Sublime Lord of Boundless Light.

122

And springing from your wisdom, discipline, and bounty, may your
fame
And stainless virtues spread throughout the gods' realms, in the sky
And on the earth, and may you firmly quell the carefree ways
Of gods and men whose sole delight and joy is pretty girls.

123

And once you've reached the Mighty Buddha state, removing fear
And birth and death for hosts of stricken and afflicted souls,
Then let mere name be stilled, beyond the world, and reach
The never-changing level, free from fear, that knows no wrong.

This completes the Letter to a Friend written by the Sublime Master Nagarjuna to a friend, King Surabhishadra. It was translated, corrected, and authenticated by the learned Indian abbot Sarvajñanadeva and the great reviser and translator Venerable Paltsek.

