

Letter to a Friend

By Arya Nagarjuna

Nature of Good Qualities, Suitable for Virtue,
I have composed this noble poem,
Distilled from the Sugata's teachings, to instill aspiration for merit.
This short composition deserves your attention. (1)

The wise venerate Sugatas' images made even of wood
And of any type of workmanship.
Just so, though my poem be poor,
Scorn it not, for it is based upon the description of the holy Dharma (2)

Though you may have comprehended
All the exquisite speech of the Great Muni,
Doesn't that which is made of chalk
Become whiter still by the moon's light? (3)

The Jina proclaimed the six remembrances:
Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha,
Generosity, morality, and deities.
Recall each of their several virtues. (4)

Constantly practice the ten paths of virtuous action
Through body, speech, and mind.
Abstain from intoxicants and likewise
Take delight in a virtuous livelihood. (5)

Recognizing wealth to be ephemeral and insubstantial,
Practice right giving toward monks,
Brahmans, the poor, and spiritual friends.
In the next world, there is no better friend than giving. (6)

Rely on morality which is
Undiminished, undeclined, unmixed, and unstained.
Morality is the foundation for all virtues,
As is the earth for all things animate and inanimate. (7)

Giving, morality, patience, diligence, concentration,
And likewise wisdom; develop these immeasurable paramitas
And having crossed the ocean of existence,
Become the Lord of Victors. (8)

Any family venerating father and mother
Will be attended by Brahmans and teachers.
Its members will be praised and renowned
And later enter the higher stages. (9)

Abandon the various forms of
Harm, thievery, sex, falsehood, liquor,
Desire for untimely food, high seats,
Delight in song, dance, and jewelry, (10)

Maintaining this eight-branch posadha,
In emulation of the Arhats' moral practices,
Bestows to those men and women
The appealing body of a desire-realm deity. (11)

View as enemies stinginess, cunning, and deceit,
Attachment, idleness, pride,
Lust, hatred, and conceit of
Caste, physical appearance, learning, youth, and great authority. (12)

The Muni declared mindfulness the way of immortality,
And heedlessness the way of death.
Thus constantly and respectfully be mindful
In order to develop virtuous dharmas. (13)

Those formerly heedless
Who later became mindful
Are as beautiful as the moon freed of clouds,
Like Nanda, Angulimala, Ajatasatu, and Udayana. (14)

There is no austerity like patience.
So do not allow opportunities for anger.
By overcoming anger, the Buddha promised
One will attain the irreversible stage. (15)

“This person insulted me, struck me,
Overwhelmed me, or stole my wealth.”
Such resentment generates conflict.
One who abandons resentment sleeps well. (16)

Understand thoughts are like designs
Drawn in water, earth, or stone.
For an afflicted mind, the first is best;
For a religious mind, the last is. (17)

The Jina declared speech to be of three types:

Pleasing, truthful, and improper;
Like honey, flowers, and filth.
Abandon the last of these. (18)

Persons are of four types:
Light to final light, darkness to final darkness,
Light to darkness, and darkness to light.
Be like the first of these. (19)

View people like mango fruit:
Unripe which appear ripe,
Ripe which appear unripe;
Unripe which appear unripe, and ripe which appear ripe. (20)

Gaze not upon another's wife.
If you look, regard her as mother, daughter, or sister,
According to her age.
If lust arises, thoroughly contemplate impurity. (21)

Guard the wavering mind like
Knowledge, sons, treasure, or life itself.
Renounce sensory pleasures, for they are like
Cruelty, poison, weapons, enemies, and fire. (22)

The Lord of Jinas said lust is like the *kimpaka* fruit.
It creates conflict and should be abandoned.
This shackle binds the world
In the prison of samsara. (23)

Victors over the six ever-unstable and wavering senses, and
Victors over a host of enemies in battle.
The wise view the first
As being the greater heroes. (24)

A young girl's body:
Foul smelling, possessing nine holes,
Containing filth, difficult to fill,
Although adorned by skin, view it otherwise. (25)

Understand the desire for sense objects
Is like a leper's craving for comfort,
Tormented by maggots,
He relies on fire, but is not soothed. (26)

To see the ultimate truth,
Familiarize the mind with right involvement

Toward phenomena.
There is no other Dharma so virtuous. (27)

One high born, handsome, and learned,
Yet lacking wisdom and morality is not worthy of respect.
One possessing those two qualities but lacking others
Should be venerated. (28)

The World Knower said the eight worldly dharmas are:
Gain and loss, happiness and unhappiness,
Kind and harsh words, and praise and blame.
Exercise equanimity, as these are unworth to enter the mind. (29)

Do not commit sins for the sake of
Brahmans, monks, gods, guests, parents, queens, or retinue.
They will not be able to share
The smallest part of the result of hell. (30)

Although performing sinful actions
Will not instantly cut like a weapon,
The results of sinful action will manifest
When the time of death arrives. (31)

The Muni declared the seven noble treasures to be:
Faith, morality, giving, learning, stainlessness,
Shame, self-restraint, and wisdom.
Recognize other common treasures as meaningless. (32)

Gambling, watching crowds, laziness,
Relying on evil company, liquor, and going about at night
Lead to the lower states.
Abandon these six which cause loss of reputation. (33)

The Teacher of Gods and Men described
Contentment as the greatest of riches.
Remain contented always.
To know contentment is perfect wealth, even without material things. (34)

Gentle One! Just as those who own much suffer,
Those with few desires do not.
Great nagas have as many sufferings
As heads which produce them. (35)

A wife who like an executioner, associates naturally with enemies,
Who like a queen, scorns her mate,
Who like a thief, takes even small things;

Avoid these three types of wife. (36)

A wife who like a sister, is harmonious,
Who like a girlfriend, is dear to your heart,
Who like a mother, wishes your benefit,
Who like a servant, obeys; should be honored as a family god. (37)

Take food properly like medicine
Without desire or hatred.
Not for pride, robustness, or beauty,
But only to sustain the body. (38)

Occupy yourself with the essence of knowledge during the whole day,
And the first and last period of the night.
Contemplate mindfully until
Even your period of sleep is not fruitless. (39)

Constantly meditate upon loving-kindness.
Compassion, joy, and equanimity.
Even though the highest goal may not be reached,
The happiness of the Brahma Realm will be attained. (40)

The four dhyana: thoroughly renouncing
Sensory pleasure, joy, happiness, and suffering,
Is equal to the attainment of
Brahma, Clear Light, Pervading Virtue, and Great Result. (41)

Great virtue and non-virtue arise from five:
Constancy, clinging, lack of remedy,
Base of kindness, and base of good qualities.
Thus strive to perform virtue. (42)

A small measure of salt can change the taste of a little water,
But not that of the Ganges.
Understand the similarity of a small evil act
In comparison to a large root of virtue. (43)

Scattering and regret, malice, dullness and sleep,
Attachment, and doubt.
Beware these five obscurations
As thieves who steal the wealth of virtue. (44)

Earnestly perform the five excellent Dharmas:
Faith, vigor, mindfulness, samadhi, and wisdom.
Exert oneself in these,
Which are also strengths, powers, and summits. (45)

Repeatedly contemplate that
As one is unable to escape sickness, aging, and death,
Likewise, one's karma is one's own action.
Conceit will not arise through this antidote. (46)

If higher realms and liberation are sincerely desired,
Thoroughly meditate the right view.
Even good deeds done by one with wrong view
All have unbearable results. (47)

Know that humans are in reality not pleasurable,
Impermanent, devoid of self and impure.
Those who do not mindfully contemplate this
Are ruined through the four opposite views. (48)

It is said "Form is not self;
Self does not possess form; self does not reside in form,
And form does not reside in self."
Understand the remaining four aggregates as also empty. (49)

The aggregates arise neither at random,
Nor from time, nature, their own essence,
Ishvara, or without cause.
Understand that they arise through ignorance, karma, and desire. (50)

Clinging to morality and behavior as supreme,
Viewing one's body with the opposite views,
And doubt are the three complete bonds.
Know that they block the gate to the city of liberation. (51)

Liberation depends upon oneself.
In this, no assistance can be given by others.
Through study, morality, and concentration
Exert yourself in the four truths. (52)

Train always in exalted morality,
Exalted wisdom, and exalted mind.
More than one hundred and five precepts
Are completely included within these three. (53)

Noble One, the Sugata taught mindful analysis of the body
As the single path to travel.
Very attentively guard this.
Loss of mindfulness destroys all Dharma. (54)

Life is full of harm.
It is more impermanent than a wind-blown bubble.
After breathing in and out during sleep,
To awaken is miraculous. (55)

The body's end is to become ashes,
Dried up, rotten, impure, and insubstantial.
It disintegrates, desiccates, and putrefies.
Therefore understand it as subject to dispersal. (56)

The earth, Meru, the oceans, and all beings;
Will be consumed by the seven blazing suns.
If not even dust will remain,
What need to speak of the frail human body? (57)

Thus all is impermanent, selfless,
Refugeless, protectorless, and without place.
Therefore, Great One,
Renounce insubstantial samsara like a plantain tree. (58)

It is even more difficult for a turtle
To intersect with the hole of a yoke in the ocean
Than to obtain a human birth from an animal birth.
Lord of Men, through practice of the holy Dharma, make it fruitful. (59)

Even more stupid than one who fills
A jewel-encrusted golden vessel with excrement
Is he who, having been born a human,
Performs evil deeds. (60)

Dwelling in a favorable place, relying on holy ones,
Being of virtuous aspiration,
And having previously performed merit,
One possesses the four great wheels. (61)

The Muni declared that through reliance on a spiritual teacher,
Pure action is accomplished.
Hence, rely upon the holy ones.
By relying on the Jina, many attained peace. (62)

Holder of wrong view, animal,
Hungry ghost, hell being,
One lacking the Jina's religion, barbarian,
Savage, one stupid, or dumb, (63)

Or a long-lived god. Any of these eight

Are defects of opportunity.
Freed of these, having found opportunity,
Exert yourself to reverse the process of birth. (64)

Gentle One! Desire is the source of many sufferings,
Like destitution, death, illness, and old age.
Develop disgust for samsara.
Harken to a few of its faults. (65)

Father becomes son, mother becomes wife.
Enemy becomes friend,
And vice versa. Therefore,
Nothing at all is certain in samsara. (66)

Each person has drunk more milk
Than the four oceans, yet still cycles
As an ordinary being in samsara.
Much more than that is still to be drunk. (67)

Each person's own heap of bones
Equals or surpasses Mount Meru.
The earth's soil is not enough to count the number of mothers
With pellets of soil the size of juniper berries. (68)

Having been Indra, worthy of the world's veneration,
One falls again to earth by the force of karma.
Having been a universal monarch,
One becomes a servant's servant in samsara. (69)

Having long tasted the happiness
Of feeling the breasts and hips of heavenly maidens,
Again, from the crushing, cutting, and piercing devices in the hells,
One must endure unbearable feelings. (70)

Having had the pleasant experience
Of walking on the soft slope of Meru for a long time,
Again, traversing smoldering embers and cesspools,
One must experience unbearable suffering. (71)

Having enjoyed being surrounded by heavenly goddesses
And played in the delightfully beautiful garden,
Again in the realm of the garden of swordlike leaves,
One's arms, legs, ears, and nose will be slashed. (72)

Having entered Gentle Current with golden lotuses
And beautiful heavenly goddesses,

Again, in hell's River without Ford,
One must enter unbearably hot, salty water. (73)

Having attained the extremely great joy of heaven
And Brahma's bliss of non-attachment,
Again becoming kindling for the fire of no greater torture,
One must endure unceasing suffering. (74)

Having attained the state of the sun and moon,
And illuminated the whole world with one's body,
Again in dense black darkness,
One will be unable to see one's outstretched hand. (75)

Because of such ruination,
Take only the lamp of the three virtuous merits.
One must enter endless darkness,
Without the light of sun or moon. (76)

Beings who perform evil deeds
Will perpetually suffer in the hells of Reviving,
Black Line, Intense Heat,
Crushing, Screaming, and No Greater Torture. (77)

Some are pressed like sesame seed,
Others are ground to dust like fine flour.
Some are cut by saws, and
Others are split by unbearably sharp-bladed axes. (78)

Likewise others are incinerated by
Flaming liquid of molten iron.
Some are completely impaled by
Flaming, barbed iron spears. (79)

Some, ripped by fierce dogs with iron fangs,
Wave their arms to the sky.
Others are helplessly pecked by ravens
With sharp iron beaks and unbearable claws. (80)

Some writhe screaming and
Are eaten by various worms and beetles, and
Tens of thousands of black flesh flies,
The touch of which cause unbearable sores. (81)

Some, with mouths agape,
Are incessantly burned in a heap of blazing coals.
Others are cooked head first

In a huge iron pot like rice dumplings. (82)

Such evildoers have a diamond-hard nature.
Being kept from the hells only until the breath's ceasing,
They are not frightened in a thousand ways
After hearing the hells' immeasurable suffering. (83)

If even seeing drawings or statues,
Recalling, reading, or hearing of the hells engenders fear,
What need to speak of experiencing
This dreadful maturation? (84)

Just as the extinction of craving
Is supreme happiness,
So too, is the suffering of Avici Hell
The most horrible of all sufferings. (85)

The suffering here, of being jabbed for a single day
By three hundred spears at full force,
Does not approach or equal even the least portion
Of the smallest suffering of the hells. (86)

Even though such very unbearable suffering
Is experienced for a billion years,
One will never be freed from that life
As long as the non-virtue is not exhausted. (87)

The seeds of the fruits of non-virtue
Are wrongdoing of body, speech, and mind.
Exert every strength to prevent by every means
Even their smallest occurrence. (88)

The dreadful existence of an animal
Has multiple sufferings of being killed,
Bound, beaten, and eating each other,
For those who have abandoned virtue, which brings peace. (89)

Some die for the sake
Of pearls or wool, bones, flesh, or skin.
Others, helpless, are exploited
With steel beneath their hoofs and paws, whips, hooks, and prods. (90)

Among the pretas there is constant suffering
Caused by desire.
They undergo unbearable misery of
Fear, anguish, hunger, thirst, cold, and heat. (91)

Some, with needle-eye mouths
And stomachs the size of mountains,
Are tortured by hunger, but unable to eat
Even the smallest quantity of discarded filth. (92)

Some are naked, a mere skin and bones,
Like the dried top of a palm tree.
Others have mouths which blaze at night.
For food they eat sand which falls into their mouths. (93)

Several lowly classes cannot find
Even such filth as pus, excrement, blood, or the like.
They attach one another,
Eating pus from festered goiters growing in the throat. (94)

In summer even the moon feels hot to them.
In winter, the sun feels cold.
At a mere glance, trees become fruitless and
Rivers run dry. (95)

Experiencing unhindered suffering, and
Tightly bound by the karmic fetters of misdeeds,
Some do not die for
Five or even ten thousand years. (96)

The cause of each single taste
Of pretas' multitude of sufferings is
Beings' delight in stinginess.
The Buddha declared miserliness to be ignoble. (97)

Greater than celestial beings' pleasures
Is their suffering when passing away.
Having considered that,
The righteous do not crave for transitory celestial realms. (98)

The body's complexion turns unattractive.
They feel dislike for their seats.
Garlands wilt, clothing assumes an odor,
And the body is soiled as never before. (99)

These are the five premonitory signs
Attending death in the celestial realms.
They arise for gods in a manner similar to
The signs of death attending humans on earth who are about to die. (100)

After passing away from the celestial realms,
If there is no remaining virtue,
One will helplessly enter the state of
An animal, preta, or hell being. (101)

Semi-gods have great mental suffering
Through their natural hostility to the gods' glory.
Though intelligent, they cannot see the truth
Due to the obscuration of their state of being. (102)

Birth as a god, human, animal,
Preta, or hell being is not noble.
Birth should be known
As a vessel with many harms. (103)

Even if one's head or clothing suddenly catches fire,
Forego extinguishing it.
Rather exert oneself in putting an end to rebirth.
No aim is more excellent than this. (104)

Through morality, wisdom, and meditation one must achieve nirvana;
The immaculate state of peace and power;
Ageless, deathless, eternal, and
Free of earth, water, fire, air, sun, and moon. (105)

Recollection, the discernment of dharmas,
Effort, joy, extreme agility, meditation, and equanimity:
These seven are the limbs of enlightenment,
The collection of virtues bringing about the attainment of nirvana. (106)

There is no samadhi without wisdom;
There is no wisdom without samadhi.
Those who have both should view the ocean of existence
As the size of an ox's hoofprint. (107)

One should not contemplate
What the Kinsman of the Sun declared to be
The twelve unexpounded views,
For the mind will not be pacified through them. (108)

The Muni declared that from ignorance arises karma,
From that consciousness,
And from that name and form.
From that arises the six sense faculties, and from them contact. (109)

From contact arises feeling,

Based on feeling comes craving.
From craving arises grasping, from that arises existence,
And from existence comes birth. (110)

Where there is birth
Arise grief, sickness, aging, destitution, fear of death,
And so on – a huge mass of suffering.
All these will cease by putting an end to birth. (111)

This interdependent origination is
The most profound and cherished treasure of the Jina's speech.
Whoever is able to see this perfectly sees the Buddha;
Supreme knower of reality. (112)

Right view, livelihood, effort, recollection,
Meditation, speech, activity, and right thought
Are the eight limbs of the path.
Meditate on them in order to attain peace. (113)

Birth is said to be suffering and craving, and
The source of their origin is vast.
Cessation of birth is liberation and the path.
Attaining this is the Eightfold Noble Path. (114)

That being so, strive always
To see the four noble truths.
Through knowledge, even householders in whose laps rest great worldly riches
Can cross the river of the mental afflictions. (115)

Further, those who gained realization of Dharma
Did not fall from the sky, or sprout from the ground like crops.
They were previously just ordinary persons
Subject to the mental afflictions. (116)

Fearless One, what need to preach much?
Subdue your mind.
This is the most useful and essential of instructions.
The Bhagwan said mind is the root of Dharma. (117)

To accomplish all this teaching given you
Would be difficult even for a monk.
Make your life meaningful
By developing the good qualities of these instructions. (118)

Rejoice at the virtue of all beings
And dedicate our own threefold good deeds

To the attainment of Buddhahood.
Then, with this heap of virtue, (119)

Become a master of yogas in all the worlds of gods and humans
For an immeasurable number of births,
And protect many helpless beings
With activities like those of Arya Avalokitesvara. (120)

Having taken birth, dispel sickness, aging, desire, and hatred.
Then, in a Buddha field, become the guardian of the world,
With a life span of infinite length,
As did Lord Amitabha. (121)

Having achieved the stage of victory, which pacifies
Humans and celestial youths delighting in sense pleasures,
And extinguishes fear, birth, and death
For multitudes of helpless afflicted beings, (122)

Spread the fame of immaculate wisdom, morality, and generosity
Throughout the celestial realms, space, and upon the earth.
Finally, attain the transcendent state of name only,
Peaceful, fearless, undefiled, and perfect. (123)