
Song of the Skin Bag

-by Venerable Elder Master Hsu Yun ("Empty Cloud", 1840-1959). The Master wrote this song at the age of nineteen and left it to his two wives when he escaped from his house-hold to become a monk. His marriage to the two women was pressed upon him by his family and was never consummated in either case. Inspired and deeply moved by the Master's virtue in the Way, his two wives later left the home-life and became bhikshunis.

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Song of the skin bag,

The skin bag lament!

Before the Empty Kalpa, it had no name or shape.

Since Buddha Awesome Sound, a hindrance it has been.

Three hundred sixty joints connect the body's frame;

It's every inch is covered by eighty-four thousand pores.

One of the triad of primal forces¹

Combining the four great elements,²

It holds up heaven and pillars earth --a spirit magnificent!

Know cause and effect.

Discern the times.

Due to our views of past and present, muddled we remain;

All because of confused attachment to this illusory shape.

We tire out our parents;

Cling to our wives and children.

Our vain ignorance leaves behind a trail of karmic debts.

Song of the skin bag,
The skin bag lament!
Drinking wine and eating meat confound the mental nature.
Indulging desires in greed for pleasure brings ruin in the end.
The higher the office, the greater influence and power to oppress;
Buying and selling is cheating people by means of craftiness.
Honor, wealth, extravagance--how long can they last?
When misfortune and poverty come, all is spent in an instant.
False discernment of self and others creates inequality.
By harming living things, we treat them as so many weeds.
And every day our reckoning's based on stupidity, anger, and greed.
Sinking in these perversities, we're destroyed entirely.
Recklessly we kill, steal, lust, lie. Contemptuous
Of kin and friends, we're ravaged by love and hate.
Scolding the wind, cursing the rain, deriding the spirits and gods;
Not understanding birth and death, we're truly at a loss.
From a cow's belly born,
We enter the womb of a mare.
As heads and faces change, who praises his luck? Who mourns his doom?
We create much evil,
But plant no blessings.
How vain our passage through birth and death!
How useless the clamor of our life!
Thence to the three evil path:
We fall to the hells

Or suffer as ghosts or animals.
The sages of old kept
Wagging their tongues
Like morning chimes and evening drums,
Attempting to stir the strings of our hearts.
Retributions for good and evil are sharp and clear as can be.
They awaken us so that we want to leave the fivefold turbidity.
Song of the skin bag,
The skin bag lament!
Endowed with form, let it not encumber you.
Illusory substance, mere false name, it's just a relative dharma.
Quickly turn your heart around, and contemplate at ease.
To kin bid farewell and sever ties of love,
Withdraw from the world and leave.
Don't cling to wife.
Don't pine for children.
Enter the door of emptiness;³ receive the Buddha's Precepts.
Seek a bright teacher.
Ask for instruction.
Investigate Ch'an, meditate well,
Stop the climbing mind's insanity.
Once and for all, to the red dust, wave goodbye.
Subdue the six senses.
Cut off thoughts.
Without self or others, afflictions cease.

Be not like the worldly, who sigh at the passing of mist and dew.⁴

A robe to shield you, food to fill you --enough to sustain your body's needs.

Riches and jewels renounce. Look lightly on body and life.

Reject them as spit and phelgm, and do not hesitate!

Hold Precepts purely,

Blemishness.

In four comports be clear as ice and pure as jade.

When scolded, don't be angry;

When beaten, do not hate.

Bear what is hard to bear. Forget about mockery. Overlook sarcasm.

Ignore both winter and summer. Work without interruption.

From beginning to end recite with a single mind "Namo Amita Buddha."

Do not lapse into torpor; refrain from getting scattered.

Be like the pine and the cypress, never fading, evergreen.

Doubt not the Buddha.

Doubt not the Dharma.

Wholesome knowledge is to understand what it is you hear and see.

Bore through the paper.

Pierce the cowhide.⁵

Do not err. Make your mind round and bright.

Return to the origin;

Reach liberation.

Go back to the source, retrieve your heaven-true nature.

Nothing's not nothing;

Emptiness isn't empty.

The divine potential's revealed; its wonder hard to imagine.

You've arrived;

You haven't toiled in vain.

Just in that instant, for you it is finished.

you are rightfully called

The name "Great Hero."

You embody ten titles--perfect and bright --teaching ten thousand generations.

Ah! The same leaking shell can now manifest bodies throughout ten directions!

With good and evil distinguished clearly, no more mistakes occur.

But why do you rely

On the false alone

And yet not practice the true?

The *t'ai chi* "absolute"⁶ divides into heaven and earth.

With a lively thrust you should turn the *ch'ien* and *k'un* of your efficacious mind.

Kings and prime ministers certainly practiced

The Way in previous lives.

Wealth and honor or utter poverty are due to people's past causes.

Once there is birth, death then will follow;

Everyone knows this. Why moan and gripe?

For wives and riches,

For heirs and fortune

You ruin your future. It's all due to anger and greed.

For what sort of profit, for what kind of fame have I wasted nineteen springs?⁷

A thousand matters are not as you wish them to be.

Embroided in the world you're assailed by hardships constantly.

Once old your eyes grow dim; your hair turns snowy white.
With no particular virtue at all, you've wasted your whole life!
Days stretch to months,
Months reach to years.
In vain you lament the passage of time, rolling on and on like a wheel.
Who is immortal in this world?
Better return and bow to the one whose compassion is like a cloud.⁸
Visit the sacred mountains,
Places sublime,
Just as you wish, in comfort and ease.
Swiftly comes impermanence. But do you know? And are you aware?
Just how much idle, empty chatter do you want to hear?
Recite "Amitabha!",
End birth and death.
Keep yourself happy. How many can be like that?
Investigate dhyana.
Attain the purport of the school.⁹
In such endeavors there's boundless vigor and energy.
Plain tea, vegetarian food: let not your mind be greedy.
Throughout the day and night, rejoice. Be happy in the Dharma.
Get rid of self and others, do away with this and that.
See that foe and friend are equal; forget about slander and praise.
Gone are impediments,
There's no shame or insult.
Achieve a mind like the Buddha's and Patriarch's. What are you waiting for?

The Bhagavan cut the strings of love and climbed the snowy mountains.
Kuan Yin bade fare thee well to kin and became the Buddha's disciple.
At the time of Emperors Yao and Shun¹⁰ Ch'ao and Hsu were passing their days.
When Yao offered Ch'ao the empire's rule, Ch'ao washed his ears in the stream.¹¹
Chang Tzu Fang and Liu Ch'eng Yi
Also gave up officialdom to roam the rivers and mountains.
Much more should we,
In the Dharma's demise,
Fraught with anguish and difficulties,
Now strive to be like those of old in search of our enlightenment.
Indulging ignorance,
Creating ten evils
We waste our resources, reap the world's scorn.
Weapons, armies, plagues, and droughts--much misery to be borne!
Famines and wars are more and more frequent at every turn.
The daily news is fearful, full of strange forbodings.
Earthquakes, tidal waves, devastating landslides:
What can we do while caught in this age and time?
This surely is the result of evil done in former lives.
Faced with such adversity, we can fall into worse confusion.
But poor and unfortunate, if we create a thought of goodness,
Such wholesome thoughts can help us enter a temple and bow to the Dharma King.
Repent and reform your offenses;
Then your blessings can grow.
Bow to a bright-eyed teacher, seek for certification.

End birth and death: see the mind, understand the nature.
Smashing through impermanence is what we mean by permanence.
The path within the path is found through strong cultivation.
The sages and worthies bequeathed wise sayings and lucid exhortations.
Uphold the Tripitaka teachings with reverence.
Cleanse your heart. Purge your inner workings.
Encourage people to guard what is proper.
Don't think my words are idle. Don't fail to pay attention.
Great cultivators must see their own natures.
Quickly cultivate and be heroically vigorous.
Plant the proper causes of Bodhi.
Aim to be born in the nine lotus grades, to be certified by the Buddhas.
Let Amitabha Buddha take you to the West.
Put down the skin bag; ascend the utmost vehicle. That's the quest supreme.
The song of the skin bag's sung.
I urge you all to listen!

Notes:

1. heaven, earth, and people.
2. earth, water, fire, and wind
3. a Buddhist monastery
4. The signs of impermanence, since mist and dew evaporate very quickly.
5. Bore through the pages of the Sutras and deeply penetrate to their meaning; cut through the thick covering of ignorance which is like cowhide.
6. The Two Modes of the *t'ai chi*: heaven and earth, light and dark, etc.
7. The Venerable Hsu Yun left the home-life at age nineteen.
8. The Buddha, who with his Dharma Cloud compassionately shields all living beings.

9. School is the Ch'an school.

10. Yao and Shun were two sagely kings of the Golden Age of China.

11. Emperor Yao heard of the virtue of the two sages Ch'ao and Hsu and wanted to abdicate in their favor, but both of them refused. In fact, when Ch'ao Fu heard the offer, he was so displeased that he went to the stream to wash out his ears. Hsu Yu, who was downstream tending his ox, had to move upstream because he didn't want his ox to drink the water, which he said had been polluted by the filth Ch'ao Fu washed out.