

སྐྱུ་རྒྱལ་པོ་རྒྱ་མཚོས་ལུས་པ།

The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara

Sāgaranāgarājaparipṛcchā

འཕགས་པ་སྐྱེ་རྒྱལ་པོ་རྒྱ་མཚོས་ལྷུས་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

*'phags pa klu'i rgyal po rgya mtshos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i
mdo*

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara”

Āryasāgaranāgarājaparipṛcchānāmamahāyanasūtra



Toh 155
Degé Kangyur, vol. 58 (mdo sde, pa), folios 205.a-205.b.

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s.

SUMMARY

s.1

In this very short sūtra, the Buddha explains to a nāga king and an assembly of monks that reciting the four aphorisms of the Dharma is equivalent to recitation of all of the 84,000 articles of the Dharma. He urges them to make diligent efforts to engage in understanding the four aphorisms (also called the four seals), which are the defining philosophical tenets of the Buddhist doctrine: (1) all compounded phenomena are impermanent; (2) all contaminated phenomena are suffering; (3) all phenomena are without self; (4) nirvāṇa is peace.

ac.

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ac.1

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i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

In the Tibetan canon there are three sūtras entitled *The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara* (*Sāgaranāgarājaparipṛcchā*): a long version (Toh 153), one of middle length (Toh 154), and a short sūtra (Toh 155).¹ They have quite different contents and are all to be found in a group of sūtras in the Kangyur entitled “The Questions of ...” (... *paripṛcchā*), including *The Questions of Brahmā*, *The Questions of Mañjuśrī*, *The Questions of an Old Lady*, and several others. There is also another nāga king whose questions were the occasion for a sūtra in this group entitled *The Questions of the Nāga King Anavatapta* (*Anavataptanāgarājaparipṛcchā*), Toh 156.

i.2

The text translated here is the shortest of the three *Sāgaranāgarājaparipṛcchā* sūtras. The Buddha’s teaching of this very brief sūtra to an assembly of monks is presumed—from the title—to be in response to a question or questions put to him by a king of the supernatural beings known as nāgas, serpents who guard the Dharma, although in this sūtra the questions themselves are not explicitly stated. The Buddha explains that recitation of the four aphorisms of the Dharma is equivalent to recitation of the entire 84,000 articles of the Dharma, and that they constitute the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattvas. The four are:

i.3

all compounded phenomena are impermanent (*anitya*);
all contaminated phenomena are suffering (*duḥkha*);
all phenomena are without self (*anātman*);
nirvāṇa is peaceful/peace (*śānta/śānti*).

i.4

These four aphorisms, or tenets—also called the four seals—are central to Buddhist philosophy and characterize the Buddhist view of the nature of reality. The Buddha stated that any doctrine characterized by these four seals is genuinely in accord with the philosophical view of Buddhism, just as a document purportedly written by a king that has the proper seals is known as genuine. Because the concepts of *anitya(tva)*, *duḥkha*, *anātman*, and *nirvāṇa* are central to the Buddhist philosophical view, over the centuries,

countless commentaries and elaborations on these concepts have been written by scholars from every Buddhist tradition.² Various sūtras and commentaries focus on one, two, three or all four of the concepts.³

i.5 Indian texts speak of the four aphorisms of the Dharma as well as of the four seals. The Sanskrit of the four aphorisms can be extracted from Vasubandhu's commentary to verse XVIII.80 of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* of Asaṅga (fifth century C.E.):

i.6 *sarvasaṃskārā anityāḥ* (all compounded phenomena are impermanent);
sarvasaṃskārā duḥkhāḥ (all compounded phenomena are suffering);
sarvadharmā anātmānaḥ (all phenomena are without self);
śāntaṃ nirvāṇaṃ (peaceful is nirvāṇa).⁴

i.7 The same four aphorisms are listed and described in the 17th chapter of Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.⁵ The only minor difference in these formulations of them, compared to the four aphorisms as set out in the present sūtra, is that here the second aphorism does not speak of "all contaminated phenomena," but simply "all compounded phenomena."⁶

i.8 Although this sūtra's Sanskrit original is no longer extant, the colophon to the Tibetan translation of the sūtra tells us that it was translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan by the Indian abbot Surendrabodhi and the Tibetan editor-translator Yeshé Dé (*ye shes sde*). We can thus infer that this sūtra was translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan sometime during the late eighth to early ninth century.

i.9 This sūtra is also included in the Chinese Buddhist canon (T. 599).⁷ Both the Tibetan and Chinese versions of the sūtra are very similar in their brevity, meaning and story line, although there are a few minor differences between them.⁸ A twelfth-century fragment containing this sūtra in the Tangut, or Xixia,⁹ language was discovered, among other pieces of the Tangut canon, at Khara-khoto along the ancient Silk Road by the British explorer Sir Aurel Stein during his 1913-1916 journey.¹⁰ Now in the British Museum, the Tangut version is very close to the Chinese version, indicating that it was likely translated from the Chinese.¹¹

i.10 The present translation from Tibetan¹² is based on the version in the Degé (*sde dge*) Kangyur, with reference to the differences between this and various other versions noted in the Pedurma (*dpe sdur ma*) comparative edition of the Degé Kangyur.

THE TRANSLATION

The Noble Māhayāna Sūtra

The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara

- 1.1 [F.205.a] Prostrations to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.
- 1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavān [F.205.b] was dwelling at the place of the nāga king Sāgara together with a great assembly of 1,250 bhikṣus as well as a multitude of bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas. At that time the Bhagavān said to the nāga king Sāgara:
- 1.3 “Lord of the nāgas, if one utters these four aphorisms of the Dharma, in uttering them one is expressing all 84,000 articles of the Dharma. What are the four? They are as follows.
- 1.4 “To fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattva mahāsattvas that all compounded phenomena are impermanent; to fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattva mahāsattvas that all contaminated phenomena are suffering; to fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattva mahāsattvas that all phenomena are without self; and to fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattva mahāsattvas that nirvāṇa is peace.¹³
- 1.5 “Lord of the nāgas, if one utters these four aphorisms of the Dharma, in uttering them one is expressing all 84,000 articles of the Dharma.”
- 1.6 When the Bhagavān had spoken in this way, the bhikṣus and bodhisattvas rejoiced and greatly praised the teachings of the Bhagavān.

c.1 This completes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra, *The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara*.

Translated and finalized by the Indian abbot Surendrabodhi and the senior editor-translator, the monk Yeshé Dé.

ab.

ABBREVIATIONS

C Coné Kangyur

D Degé Kangyur

N Narthang Kangyur

Q Peking Kangyur

T Taishō Tripiṭaka (Chinese Buddhist canon)

n.

NOTES

- 1 They correspond respectively to the Chinese translations T. 598, 601, 599.
- 2 For a modern presentation in English, see Khyentse 2007.
- 3 Stanley 2009, p. 149-154.
- 4 Sanskrit in Lévi 1907, 1911, tome I, p. 149. For an English translation, see Jamspal et al. 2004 (the commentary is to verse XVIII.81 in that translation). Note that *saṃskāra* / 'du byed in these contexts and in the four seals is not being used to mean “formative factors” or “karmic conditioning,” but seems to be used in the same sense as *saṃskṛta* / 'dus byas, i.e. “compounded phenomena.” Edgerton had noticed this usage of *saṃskāra*. See Edgerton 1985, s.v. *saṃskāra*, *saṃskṛta*. Cf. also Jamspal et al. 2004, who translate the term as “creations.”
- 5 Sanskrit in Dutt 1978 and Wogihara 1978. For a recent English translation, see Engle 2016, pp 454-463.
- 6 Note that the Pāli Dhammapada includes the first three concepts in verses 277, 278, and 279: *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā' ti...sabbe saṅkhārādukkhā' ti...sabbe saṅkhārā anattā' ti...*
- 7 The Chinese version was translated during the Tang dynasty by Yijing (635-713; his name is also variously transliterated as I-Tsing, I-Ching, Yi-Tzing). An English translation of the Chinese version by an unattributed translator is posted on the internet by Fodian (see bibliography).
- 8 On Yijing, see Keown 2004.
- 9 The Western Xia (Xixia), or Tangut Empire (1038-1227), was a Buddhist empire located in what are now the Chinese provinces of Ningxia, Gansu, Eastern Qinghai, Northern Shaanxi as well as parts of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. It was known as Minyak (*mi nyag*)

in Tibetan. The Tanguts adopted Buddhism from both Chinese and Tibetan sources. The language, which has its own very elaborate script, has been partially deciphered by modern scholarship.

10 Grinstead 1967.

11 Nie 2007.

12 In the process of research on this sūtra, another translation from the Tibetan was found; it was done by Geshe Lhakdor in 2010 for a workshop presented at the India Habitat Centre in Delhi under the auspices of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility (see bibliography).

13 DNQ: *zhi ba* (peace/peaceful) C: *zhes bya* (known as).

b.

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- 'phags pa klu'i rgyal po rgya mtshos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*, Toh 155, Vol 58, pp 557-558, bka' 'gyur (dpe bsdur ma) [Comparative Edition of the Kangyur], krung go'i bod rig pa zhib 'jug ste gnas kyi bka' bstan dpe sdur khang (The Tibetan Tripitaka Collation Bureau of the China Tibetology Research Center). 108 volumes. Beijing: krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang (China Tibetology Publishing House), 2006-2009.
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GLOSSARY

g.

g.1

Bhikṣu

dge slong

དགེ་སློང།

bhikṣu

A fully ordained monk of the Buddhist Saṅgha.

g.2

Compounded phenomena

'du byed

འདུ་བྱེད།

samskāra

g.3

Contaminated phenomena

zag pa dang bcas pa

ཟག་པ་དང་བཅས་པ།

sāsrava

The phenomena of saṃsāra. Contaminated phenomena are those influenced by the defilements (*kleśa*, *nyon mongs*) and karma. Thus, e.g., even virtues that are under the influence of defilements like ignorance are categorized as contaminated in this way.

g.4

Four aphorisms of the Dharma

chos kyi mdo bzhi

ཚོས་ཀྱི་མདོ་བཞི།

dharmodānacatuṣṭaya

The main topic of this sūtra; known also in Tibetan by the synonym *bka' rtags kyi phyag rgya bzhi* (“the four seals of the [Buddha’s] teaching”), in Sanskrit *caturmudrā* (“the four seals”) or *dṛṣṭinimittamudrā* (“the seals that are the marks of the [Buddhist] view”).

g.5

Four seals

phyag rgya bzhi

ཕྱག་རྒྱ་བཞི།

caturmudrā

A synonym for the “four aphorisms of the Dharma,” q.v. Often seen in Tibetan in the expanded form *bka' rtags kyi phyag rgya bzhi* (“the four seals of the [Buddha’s] teaching”), the nearest Sanskrit equivalent being *dṛṣṭinimittamudrā* (“the seals that are the marks of the [Buddhist] view”).

g.6

Impermanent

mi rtag pa

མི་རྟག་པ།

anitya

- g.7** **Nāga King Sāgara**
klu'i rgyal po rgya mtsho
ལྷའི་རྒྱལ་པོ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།
Sāgaranāgarāja
Name of a king of a race of supernatural serpents who protect the doctrine.
- g.8** **Nirvāṇa**
mya ngan las 'das pa
མྱ་ངན་ལས་འདས་པ།
nirvāṇa
- g.9** **Peaceful**
zhi ba
ཞི་བ།
śānta/śānti
- g.10** **Suffering**
sdug bsngal ba
སྤུག་བསྔལ་བ།
duḥkha
- g.11** **Without self**
bdag med pa
བདག་མེད་པ།
anātman