The Sūtra on Wisdom at the Hour of Death

Atyayajñānasūtra
The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “Wisdom at the Hour of Death”

Āryātyayañānamāmahāyānasūtra
Toh 122
Degé Kangyur vol. 54 (mdo sde, tha), folios 153.a–153.b.

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While the Buddha is residing in the Akaniṣṭha realm, the bodhisattva mahāsattva Ākāśagarbha asks him how to consider the mind of a bodhisattva who is about to die. The Buddha replies that when death comes a bodhisattva should develop the wisdom of the hour of death. He explains that a bodhisattva should cultivate a clear understanding of the non-existence of entities, great compassion, non-apprehension, non-attachment, and a clear understanding that, since wisdom is the realization of one’s own mind, the Buddha should not be sought elsewhere. After these points have been repeated in verse form, the assembly praises the Buddha’s words, concluding the sūtra.
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INTRODUCTION

This sūtra, brief though it is, addresses central Mahāyāna concepts in relation to practices to be carried out at the hour of death. When the Buddha is asked how one is to consider the mind (or mindset) of a bodhisattva who is about to die, he replies by giving pith instructions on the nature of phenomena and the mind, and instructs that a bodhisattva should accordingly engender specific clear understandings. The Buddha points out that all phenomena are pure, subsumed within the mind of enlightenment, and naturally luminous. Entities are impermanent, and the realization of mind is wisdom. Consequently, a bodhisattva should arouse a clear understanding that no entities truly exist, a clear understanding of great compassion, a clear understanding of non-apprehension, a clear understanding of non-attachment, and a clear understanding that the Buddha should not be sought elsewhere than in one’s own mind. Although he refers to these instructions as the wisdom of the hour of death, the implication is that these teachings can be cultivated and realized throughout a bodhisattva’s lifetime in order to prepare for death and attain liberation.

The Sanskrit title of the sūtra is found transcribed in all Kangyurs as Ārya-ātajñāna-nāmanahāyānasūtra. This transcription, however, appears to have been truncated; as Sanskrit, it is not readily comprehensible, and certainly not equivalent to the Tibetan 'da' ka ye shes. Another version of the Sanskrit title occasionally given is Atijñānasūtra, which, although certainly understandable, yields a meaning quite different from that of the Tibetan. The more likely Sanskrit phrase that would capture 'da' ka ye shes is atyayajñāna ("wisdom at the time of passing away"), and this has been proposed as a revision of the Sanskrit title in several modern catalogues.

There is no extant Sanskrit text to our knowledge, although it is clear that there was such an original at one time—the Tibetan colophon to Śāntideva’s commentary mentions that the Indian abbot Dharmaśāra collaborated with Pakpa Sherab ('phags pa shes rab) in the translation of the commentarial text. The sūtra translation preserved in the Kangyur, however, has no colophon
with the usual mention of the Tibetan translators and Indian paṇḍits, and
was most likely made not from the Sanskrit but from an earlier Chinese
translation, as the early 9th century Denkarma (ldan dkar ma) catalogue
explicitly includes the Atyayajñāna in a list of sūtras translated into Tibetan
from Chinese. Its inclusion in the Denkarma allows it to be dated to the first
decades of the ninth century at the latest, and possibly earlier if it was
indeed known to King Trisong Detsen (see below). The putative Chinese
version, however, does not seem to have survived and the sūtra does not
seem to figure in the Chinese canon.

There are two commentaries on this text written by Indian authors in the
Degé Tengyur, one attributed to Śāntideva (c. eighth century) and the other
to Prajñāsamudra (dates unknown). There are also six known Tibetan
commentaries, four of which were written by seventeenth to nineteenth
century Gelukpa (dge lugs pa) scholars, the longest and most detailed being
one by the seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso. Our translation mainly
follows the commentary of Prajñāsamudra and, to a lesser degree, that of
Choné Drakpa Shedrub (co ne gms gs bshad sgrub, 1675–1748).

The Atyayajñāna is included in lists of sūtras known as the Five Royal
Sūtras and Ten Royal Sūtras, two sets of profound, relatively short, and pithy
works traditionally said to have been translated on Padmasambhava’s
recommendation and used for daily practice by the eighth century Tibetan
king Trisong Detsen (khri srong lde btsan). Their use is said to have
contributed (along with other practices) to the king’s life being prolonged by
thirteen years beyond the limit predicted by astrological reckoning. The texts
recounting this incident list the applications or uses of each of these texts; in
the case of the Atyayajñāna, this is meditation or cultivation (sgom pa). In the
same accounts the sūtra is described as being of definitive meaning.

Another Tibetan tradition explains that the Five Royal Sūtras each present
the condensed, essentialized meaning of five of the major canonical texts, all
much longer, known as the Five Sets of One Hundred Thousand. From
this viewpoint, the Atyayajñāna represents the essence of the Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra
(Toh 119–120). Yet another, more prosaic explanation sometimes found for
the epithet “royal” being applied to these works is simply that each of them,
compared to other works on similar themes, is of paramount importance.

The Atyayajñāna is considered particularly important in several Tibetan
Buddhist traditions, including Dzogchen (rdzogs chen) and Mahāmudrā.
Roger Jackson points out that it seems to be the only sūtra from the Kangyur
that is included in indigenous Tibetan lists of Indian canonical texts on
Mahāmudrā. As a search of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center
(www.tbrc.org) data reveals, the Atyayajñāna is quoted by well-known
Tibetan authors of all schools—including Gampopa (sgam po pa, 1079–1153),
Since the mind is the cause for the arising of wisdom,
Do not look for the Buddha elsewhere.
The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on

Wisdom at the Hour of Death
The Translation

1.1 [F.153.a] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. While the Blessed One was residing in the palace of the king of the gods in the Akaniṣṭha realm, he taught the Dharma to the entire assembly.

1.3 The bodhisattva mahāsattva Ākāśagarbha then paid homage to the Blessed One and asked, “Blessed One, how should we think about the mind of a bodhisattva who is about to die?”

1.4 The Blessed One replied, “Ākāśagarbha, when a bodhisattva is about to die, he should cultivate the wisdom of the hour of death. The wisdom of the hour of death is as follows:

1.5 “All phenomena are naturally pure. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding that there are no entities.

1.6 “All phenomena are subsumed within the mind of enlightenment. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of great compassion.

1.7 “All phenomena are naturally luminous. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of non-apprehension.

1.8 “All entities are impermanent. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of non-attachment to anything whatsoever.

1.9 “When one realizes mind, this is wisdom. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of not seeking the Buddha elsewhere.”

The Blessed One then spoke the following verses:

1.10 “Since all phenomena are naturally pure,
One should cultivate the clear understanding that there are no entities.

1.11 “Since all phenomena are connected with the enlightened mind,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of great compassion.

1.12 “Since all phenomena are naturally luminous,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of non-apprehension.
“Since all entities are impermanent, 
One should cultivate the clear understanding of non-attachment.

“Since the mind is the cause for the arising of wisdom, 
Do not look for the Buddha elsewhere.”

After the Blessed One had spoken, [F.153.b] the whole assembly, including 
the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha and others, were overjoyed and full of praise 
for the Buddha’s words.

This concludes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on Wisdom at the Hour of Death.
NOTES

n.1  In all Kangyurs, both printed and manuscript, the only minor variation being that the initial *a* of *-āta-* is shortened in the Peking and Yongle Kangyurs. The Tōhoku Catalogue entry for the sūtra (but not the commentaries) also has this title.

n.2  See Rhaldri (2010) and Jackson (2011).


n.4  See bibliography.

n.5  See bibliography for some of these. Also Khomthar Jamlö (2014), vol. 1, p. 4, and vol. 6, pp. 1–2 for comments and a partial list; vol. 4 contains the two Indian commentaries and five of the six known Tibetan ones. See also Jackson (2009), p. 7, n. 17.

n.6  See Khomthar Jamlö (2014), vol. 1 pp. 2–3, and Jackson (2009), p. 3. Lists of both sets can also be found in *bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (ed. Zhang Yisun) and *dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo*, s.v. *rgyal po mdo lnga* and *rgyal po mdo bcu*.

n.7  The accounts are found in the longer biographies of Guru Padmasambhava, e.g. in the twelfth century *Zanglingma* (chapter 18) and fourteenth century *Padma Kathang* (chapter 70). For these, see bibliography under Nyangrel Nyima Özer and Orgyen Lingpa, respectively.

n.8  See Khomthar Jamlö (2014), vol. 1, p. 3; Jackson (2009), pp. 5–6; and Jackson’s source, Lopez (1988), pp. 29–30 and 143. Lopez, in turn, is quoting (and translates at length) an eighteenth to nineteenth century Gelukpa author, Tendar Lharampa (*bstan dar lha ram pa*). The term *’bum [chen] sde lnga*—although it does not seem to have been particularly widespread—was used at least as early as the tenth century.
This appears to be the only Kangyur sūtra to be set in Akaniṣṭha (although a number of tantras are, too). As well as referring to the highest level of the Realm of Form, Akaniṣṭha here, according to the Indian and Tibetan commentaries, is also to be equated with the Ghanavyūha (stug po bkod pa) buddhafield and indicates that the Buddha is present here in his saṃbhoga-kāya form, perceptible only to bodhisattvas on the highest levels.

Prajñāsamudra’s commentary here explains that all phenomena of samsāra and nirvāṇa indeed have no true “outer” existence but are one’s own very mind of enlightenment, and that “great compassion” means applying all three levels of compassion, namely, (1) compassion that perceives sentient beings (sems can la dmigs pa’i snying rje) regarding their suffering; (2) compassion that perceives phenomena (chos la dmigs pa’i snying rje) regarding the impermanent, suffering, empty, and selfless nature of all phenomena; and (3) compassion that does not apprehend anything (dmigs pa med pa’i snying rje), and thus cultivating emptiness. The three together include all of the Buddha’s teaching.

Although the subject “all phenomena” is omitted in this verse, it is implicit, as can be seen in the parallel construction in the preceding and following verses, each beginning with chos rnams. Significantly too, the earlier prose passage expressing this idea had chos thams cad (“all phenomena”) as the subject.

Prajñāsamudra, commenting on this verse, first cites a passage from the Laṅkāvatāra sūtra to the effect that the nature of phenomena is like illusions that are nonexistent, and then with reference to what he has said regarding the equivalent passage in prose (see note 11), comments: “When one has cultivated in this way [i.e., with an understanding of the illusory nature of phenomena], one gives rise to compassion which does not apprehend anything; this is the best type of compassion.” Degé F.173b.2–3: de ltar bsgoms na dmigs pa med pa’i snying rje skye ste / snying rje’i mchog yin no.
Works in Tibetan


‘phags pa ’da’ ka ye shes zhes bya ba theg pa chen po’i mdo. Also in Khomthar Jamlö (2014, see below), vol. 6, pp. 23–24.


Kalsang Gyatso (bskal bzang rgya mtsho), Dalai Lama XII. ’da’ ka ye shes zhes bya ba’i theg pa chen po’i mdo’i ’grel kun mkhyen ye shes snang ba’i nyi ma. In his Collected Works [bskal bzang rgya mtsho gsung ’bum]. Gangtok: Dodrup


Khomthar Jamlö (khoM thar ’jam los), ed. *rgyal po mdo bcu’i rtsa ’grel phyogs bsgrigs* [The Ten Sūtras of the King, collected texts and commentaries]. 10 volumes. Sichuan: si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang [Sichuan Minorities Publishing House], 2014.


Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra (yongs su mya ngan las ’das pa chen po’i mdo). Toh 120 Đêgé Kangyur, vol. 54 (mdo sde, tha), folios 1.b–151.a.


**Works in Western languages**


Akaniṣṭha

The eighth and highest level of the Realm of Form (rūpadhātu, gzugs khams), and thus part of the world of the Brahmā gods (brahmaloka, gtsang rīs); it is only accessible as the result of specific states of dhyanā. According to some texts this is where non-returners (anāgāmin) dwell in their last lives. In other texts it is the realm of the enjoyment body (saṃbhoga kāya, longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku) and is a buddhafield associated with the Buddha Vairocana; it is accessible only to bodhisattvas on the tenth level.

(See also n.9).

Ākāśagarbha

An important bodhisattva, his name means “essence of space.” He is one of the “eight great close sons” (aṣṭa mahopa putra, nyé ba'i sras chen bryad).

Clear understanding

′du shes

The term is used in an ordinary sense in Sanskrit to mean “notion,” “sign,” “conception,” “clear understanding.” It is also used more specifically in Buddhist scholastic contexts in the phrase “the aggregate of perceptions” (saṃjñāskandha).

Cultivate

sgom pa

bhāvanā
Definitive meaning

nges don

nitārtha

Five Royal Sūtras

rgyal po mdo lnga

—

(1) Bhadra caryā praṇidhāna (bzang spyod smon lam, Toh 44-45a) in chapter 45 of the Avatamsaka; for aspiration (smon lam), and described as vast (rgya chen). (2) Vajravidīrṇā dhāraṇī (rdo rje rnam 'joms, Toh 750); for ablution (khrus), and described as profound (zab mo). (3) Atyayajñātā ('du' ka ye shes, Toh 122); for cultivation (sgom po) and described as of definitive meaning (nges don). (4) Inga ba ltung bshags (part of Vinayavinicryāpatī-puriprecha, Toh 68); for purification of karmic obscurations (las sgrīb dag pa).

Five Sets of One Hundred Thousand

'bum sde lnga · 'bum chen sde lnga

—

(1) The long Prajñā pāramitā (Toh 8), which contains 100,000 ślokas; (2) the Mahā pari nirvāṇa (Toh 119–120), which contains 100,000 testaments given by the Buddha at the time of his pari nirvāṇa; (3) the Ratnakūṭa (Toh 45–93), which contains 100,000 distinct names of the Buddha; (4) the Avatamsaka (Toh 44), which contains 100,000 aspirations; and (5) the Lankāvatāra (Toh 107–108), which contains 100,000 discourses that are ways of subjugating the rākṣasas. These five sets of 100,000 features are also said to correspond to the Buddha’s body, speech, mind, qualities, and activities, respectively.

Luminous

'od gsal

prabhāsva

Non-apprehension

mi dmigs pa · dmigs pa med pa

Subsumed

'dus pa
Ten Royal Sūtras

rgyal po mdo bcu

In addition to the Five Royal Sūtras: (6) Aparimitāyur jñāna (tshe dang ye shes dpag tu med po'i mdo, Toh 674); for extending longevity (tshe buring). (7) gos sngon can gyi gzungs, perhaps Bhagavatānāmbaradhrāna-vajrapāṇitantra (Toh 498 [https://read.84000.co/translation/toh498.html]) but possibly another of the several texts on this form of Vajrapāṇī; for protection (srung ba). (8) Uṣṇīṣa sitāta patrā (gtsug tor gdugs dkar, Toh 590, 591, and 592); for averting (zlog pa). (9) Vasudātra (nor rgyun ma, Toh 663 and 664); for increasing resources (longs spyod spel ba). (10) Ekākṣarīmātā prajñā pāramitā (sher phyin yi ge gcig ma, Toh 23); for the essence (snying po).

Wisdom of the hour of death

'da' ka ye shes

aṭṭhayañīṇā