

འདུལ་ལེན་ལེ་ཤེས་ཀྱི་མདོ།

The Sūtra on Wisdom at the Hour of Death

Atyayajñānasūtra

འཕགས་པ་འདའ་ཀ་ཡེ་ཤེས་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa 'da' ka ye shes zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

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

Āryātyajñānanāmahāyānasūtra



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

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co.

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SUMMARY

s.

- s.1 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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ac.

- ac.1 Translated into English by Tom Tillemans' class in the University of Vienna's program of Buddhist Translation Studies in 2014. The introduction was written by Casey Kemp and Tom Tillemans.

This translation has been completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1

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.

i.2

The Sanskrit title of the sūtra is found transcribed in all Kangyurs as *Ārya-ātajñāna-nāmamahāyānasūtra*.¹ 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*,² 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 *atyajajñāna* ("wisdom at the time of passing away"), and this has been proposed as a revision of the Sanskrit title in several modern catalogues.³

i.3

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 Dharmarāja 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.

i.4 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).⁴ 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.⁵ Our translation mainly follows the commentary of Prajñāsamudra and, to a lesser degree, that of Choné Drakpa Shedrub (*co ne grags pa bshad sgrub*, 1675–1748).

i.5 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 works⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.

i.6 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), Sakya Paṇḍita (*sa skya paN+Di ta*, 1182–1251), Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (*rang byung rdo rje*, 1284–1339), Longchen

Rabjampa (*klong chen rab 'byams pa*, 1308–1364), Shākya Chogden (*shAkya mchog ldan*, 1428–1507), Drukpa Padma Karpo (*'brug pa pad+ma dkar po*, 1527–1592), Tāranātha (*tA ra nA tha*, 1575–1634), and the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617–1682). The most frequent excerpt quoted is from the final verses on the mind (1.14):

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

- i.7 Unsurprisingly, this brief yet well-known sūtra has been translated into English a number of times. Several translations can be found on the internet, including translations by Ruth Sonam and at least one anonymous version. Published translations include those by Roger Jackson (2009), Sherab Raldri (2010), Tony Duff (2011), and Erick Tsiknopoulos (2019). A translation of the sūtra together with translations of Prajñāsamudra's and Śāntideva's commentaries has been published online by Lhasey Lotsawa Translations (2015). We hope that our translation will contribute to readers' appreciation of this remarkable and justly celebrated work.

tr.

THE TRANSLATION

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on **Wisdom at the Hour of Death**

- 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,⁹ 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.¹⁰
- 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 phenomena¹¹ are connected with the enlightened mind,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of great compassion.¹²”
- 1.12 “Since all phenomena are naturally luminous,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of non-apprehension.
- 1.13 “Since all entities are impermanent,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of non-attachment.
- 1.14 “Since the mind is the cause for the arising of wisdom,
Do not look for the Buddha elsewhere.”
- 1.15 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.
- 1.16 *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.
- 2 See Rhaldri (2010) and Jackson (2011).
- 3 Including the Tōhoku Catalogue's (1934) Sanskrit transliteration of the titles of the associated commentaries (though not of the sūtra itself); the catalogue of the Nyingma Edition of the Degé Kangyur published by Dharma Publishing (1977–1983); and Tadeusz Skorupski's *Catalogue of the Stog Palace Kanjur* (1985).
- 4 See bibliography.
- 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.
- 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*.
- 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.
- 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.

- 9 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*) buddhafiield and indicates that the Buddha is present here in his saṃbhogakāya form, perceptible only to bodhisattvas on the highest levels.
- 10 Prajñāsamudra's commentary here explains that all phenomena of saṃsāra 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.
- 11 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.
- 12 Prajñāsamudra, commenting on this verse, first cites a passage from the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* 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*.

b.

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GLOSSARY

g.

g.1 Akaniṣṭha

'og min

འོག་མིན།

Akaniṣṭha

The eighth and highest level of the Realm of Form (*rūpadhātu, gzugs kham*), and thus part of the world of the Brahmā gods (*brahmaloka, gtsang ris*); it is only accessible as the result of specific states of *dhyāna*. 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 (*saṃbhogakāya, longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku*) and is a buddhfield associated with the Buddha Vairocana; it is accessible only to bodhisattvas on the tenth level.

(See also [note 9](#)).

g.2 Ākāśagarbha

nam mkha'i snying po

ནམ་མཁའི་སྙིང་པོ།

Ākāśagarbha

An important bodhisattva, his name means “essence of space.” He is one of the “eight great close sons” (*aṣṭamahopaputra, nye ba'i sras chen brgyad*).

g.3 Clear understanding

'du shes

འདུ་ཤེས།

saṃjñā

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*).

g.4 Cultivate

sgom pa

སྒོམ་པ།

bhāvanā

g.5 Definitive meaning

nges don

ངེས་དོན།

nitārtha

g.6 Five Royal Sūtras

rgyal po mdo lnga

རྒྱལ་པོ་མངོན་ལྷན།

—

(1) *Bhadracaryāprañīdhāna* (*bzang spyod smon lam*, in chapter 44 of the *Avataṃsaka*); for aspiration (*smoṅ lam*), and described as vast (*rgya chen*). (2) *Vajravīdārañādhāraṇī* (*rdo rje rnam 'joms*, Toh 750); for ablution (*khru*s). (3) *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* (*shes rab snying po*, Toh 21 and 531); for the view (*lta ba*), and described as profound (*zab mo*). (4) *Atyayañāna* (*'da' ka ye shes*, Toh 122); for cultivation (*sgom pa*) and described as of definitive meaning (*nges don*). (5) *bya ba ltung bshags* (part of *Vinayaviniścayopāliparipṛcchā*, Toh 68); for purification of karmic obscurations (*las sgrub dag pa*).

g.7 Five Sets of One Hundred Thousand

'bum sde lnga · 'bum chen sde lnga

འབུམ་སྡེ་ལྔ། · འབུམ་ཚེན་སྡེ་ལྔ།

—

(1) The long *Prajñāpāramitā* (Toh 8), which contains 100,000 ślokas; (2) the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* (Toh 119–120), which contains 100,000 testaments given by the Buddha at the time of his *parinirvāṇa*; (3) the *Ratnakūṭa* (Toh 45–93), which contains 100,000 distinct names of the Buddha; (4) the *Avataṃsaka* (Toh 44), which contains 100,000 aspirations; and (5) the *Lañkāvatāra* (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.

g.8 Luminous

'od gsal

འོད་གསལ།

prabhāsvara

g.9 Non-apprehension

mi dmigs pa · dmigs pa med pa

མི་དམིགས་པ། · དམིགས་པ་མེད་པ།

—

g.10 Subsumed

'dus pa

འདུས་པ།

—

g.11 Ten Royal Sūtras

rgyal po mdo bcu

རྒྱལ་པོ་མངོན་བརྒྱ།

—

In addition to the Five Royal Sūtras: (6) *Aparimitāyurjñāna* (*tshe dang ye shes dpag tu med pa'i mdo*, Toh 674); for extending longevity (*tshe bsring*). (7) *gos sngon can gyi gzungs*, perhaps *Bhagavānnīlāmbadaravajrapāñi-tantra* (Toh 498) but possibly another of the several texts on this form of Vajrapāñi; for protection (*srung ba*). (8) *Uṣṇīṣasītāpatrā* (*gtsug tor gdugs dkar*, Toh 590–592); for averting (*zlog pa*). (9) *Vasudhāra* (*nor rgyun ma*, Toh 663–664); for increasing resources (*longs spyod spel ba*). (10) *Ekākṣarīmātāprajñāpāramitā* (*sher phyin yi ge gcig ma*, Toh 23); for the essence (*snying po*).

g.12 Wisdom of the hour of death

'da' ka ye shes

འདེའ་ཀལ་ཡེ་ཤེས།

atyayañāna

