

བདེ་བྱེད་ཀྱིས་ལྷུས་པ།

The Question of Kṣemaṅkara

Kṣemaṅkaraparipṛcchā

འཕགས་པ་བདེ་བྱེད་ཀྱིས་ལྷུས་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa bde byed kyis zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Great Vehicle Sūtra “The Question of Kṣemaṅkara”

Āryakṣemaṅkarapariṣcchānāmamahāyānasūtra



Toh 165
Degé Kangyur, vol. 59 (mdo sde, ba), folios 167.b–171.b.

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co.

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SUMMARY

s.

- s.1 *The Question of Kṣemaṅkara* contains a teaching given by Buddha Śākyamuni to the Śākya youth Kṣemaṅkara, in response to a question he poses about the qualities of bodhisattvas and how to develop such qualities. The Buddha teaches him about bodhisattvas' qualities, first in prose and later reiterated in verse, and then equates the teaching of this sūtra with the perfection of insight, stating that even if one practices the first five perfections for many eons, one will not make much progress without knowing what is taught in this sūtra.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ac.

- ac.1 Translated by the Dharmachakra Translation Committee under the supervision of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche. Ani Jinpa Palmo produced the translation and wrote the introduction. Andreas Doctor checked the translation against the Tibetan and edited the text.

INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1 The setting of this short sūtra, *The Question of Kṣemaṅkara*, is Nyagrodha Park near Kapilavastu, the city in the ancient Śākya kingdom that contained the family home where Prince Siddhārtha grew up. Kapilavastu is assumed to be some ten kilometers to the west of his birthplace, Lumbini, which is in present-day Nepal, but it is not certain which of two possible sites today might be its exact location.

i.2 The sūtra describes a conversation between Buddha Śākyamuni and the Śākya youth Kṣemaṅkara, who asks the Buddha a lengthy question about the qualities good bodhisattvas should have and how to develop such qualities. The Buddha's response unfolds as a teaching on how to practice the bodhisattva path—an uncomplicated instruction given to a layperson. The teaching is without the specialized vocabulary of Buddhist philosophy and does not place strong emphasis on monastic discipline, although it does admonish against involvement with women. For the modern reader it should be kept in mind that such comments regarding women are primarily meant for men as advice in support of celibacy.

i.3 In this teaching the Buddha offers Kṣemaṅkara a set of ethical instructions, such as not retaliating when attacked, combined with teachings aimed at liberation, such as how to realize emptiness in order to successfully complete the bodhisattva path. Delighted by the Buddha's response, Kṣemaṅkara makes an offering of his jewelry. The Buddha transforms the jewelry into a multitude of magically created beings, who in turn become the basis for a further teaching on the illusory character of phenomena. Unlike many longer sūtras, *The Question of Kṣemaṅkara* does not develop an elaborate storyline, nor are we given much information regarding the setting or the characters. Instead, this is a brief teaching that responds to a simple question. The only other participant in the conversation is Ānanda, in his usual role as witness to the Buddha's teaching.

i.4 Near the end of the sūtra, the evil Māra also makes an appearance and inquires about the benefit of the Buddha's discourse. The Buddha then equates the teaching of this sūtra with the perfection of insight, stating that no matter

how long one practices the first five perfections, unless one knows this teaching, one will be unable to make much progress on the bodhisattva path.

i.5 Unfortunately, no Sanskrit version of this sūtra remains extant, but the text was translated into both Chinese and Tibetan. The Chinese translation (T 533) was produced by the prolific translator Chih-ch'ien (third century CE) sometime between 223–53 CE. As such, this sūtra can be dated to the formative period of India's Mahāyāna scriptural tradition.

i.6 In producing this translation, we have based our work on the Degé xylograph while consulting the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*), as well as the Stok Palace manuscript. The colophon of the sūtra states that it was translated from Sanskrit by the Indian scholar Prajñāvarman and the prolific Tibetan translator Yeshé Dé. So, we can date the Tibetan translation to the late eighth to the early ninth century, a dating that is also attested by the text's inclusion in the early ninth century Denkarma (*ldan dkar ma*) catalog.¹

tr.

THE TRANSLATION

The Noble Great Vehicle Sūtra

The Question of Kṣemaṅkara

- 1.1 [F.167.b] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!
- 1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was staying in the Nyagrodha Park of the Śākya, near Kapilavastu in the Śākya country, together with a great saṅgha of five hundred monks. At that time a Śākya youth² named Kṣemaṅkara set out from the city of Kapilavastu for Nyagrodha Park, where the Blessed One was staying. As soon as he arrived there, he touched his head to the feet of the Blessed One and sat down to one side.
- 1.3 With folded palms the Śākya youth Kṣemaṅkara bowed down to the Blessed One and asked him, “Blessed One, what attributes should bodhisattvas possess in order to progress irreversibly toward unsurpassed and perfect awakening, so that even with just a little effort they will obtain the thirty-two marks of a great being, proceed from buddha realm to buddha realm, pass away free from delusion, possess the five types of superknowledge as soon as they are born, discard all unfree states, obtain leisure and advantages, gain retention, possess unobstructed eloquence, [F.168.a] possess the quality of not regressing, gain interest in emptiness, always delight in going forth, and always delight in pure conduct, even when staying in a household?”
- 1.4 In answer to this question, the Blessed One replied to the young Śākya Kṣemaṅkara, “Noble son, you have asked the Thus-Gone One about this topic for the sake of benefiting and bringing happiness to a multitude of beings, out of love for the world, for the welfare of numerous people, and in order to benefit and bring happiness to gods and humans. Excellent, excellent! Therefore, noble son, listen carefully and keep the following in mind, as I shall now explain.

- 1.5 “Bodhisattvas who possess four attributes will attain the qualities you have described. What are those four attributes? Noble son, they are as follows: bodhisattvas who possess the strength of patience and practice patience (1) do not retaliate though others revile them, (2) do not strike back though others beat them, (3) do not quarrel though others quarrel with them, and (4) do not get angry though others are hostile to them. Noble son, bodhisattvas who possess those four attributes will progress irreversibly toward unsurpassed and perfect awakening and will obtain the perfect qualities you have described.”
- 1.6 When the Blissful One had said this, the Teacher also spoke these words:
- “Although blamed, do not reciprocate.
Having been harmed, do not harm others.
Even if it means giving up their human bodies,
Bodhisattvas will attain these qualities.
- 1.7 “Always guard against evil words,
And do not be controlled by a negative mind.
Eliminate misdeeds, and you will gain such results
And quickly achieve supreme wisdom.
- 1.8 “Some people take pleasure in striking³ others,
And have a ruthless and malicious attitude. [F.168.b]
Having forsaken the wisdom of the buddhas,
Such unwise people will be burdened with unbearable suffering.
- 1.9 “Therefore, do not beat others,
And abstain from striking anything, animate or inanimate.
Benefiting all beings with love and affection,
You will quickly attain supreme wisdom.
- 1.10 “Deluded beings overwhelmed by anger
Are far from the teaching of those who are wise in this world.
Because of wrong views, they are bent on negative ways.
Therefore, wise people should not disturb them.
- 1.11 “Bodhisattvas should not get angry,
But guard the truth without harming others.
Perfecting these rare actions,
They will possess all the exquisite thirty-two marks.
- 1.12 “The unwise always have a destructive and hostile attitude;
They⁴ do not even respect their own parents.
They are enmeshed in the roots⁵ of affliction,
Which are the flaws of the lowest type of person.

- 1.13 “Therefore, always rely wholly on patience,
Attend to monks who teach the Dharma,
And never forsake spiritual friends.
Then supreme awakening will be easy.
- 1.14 “Noble son, bodhisattvas who possess four additional attributes will progress irreversibly toward unsurpassed and perfect awakening, and they will achieve the perfect qualities you have described. What are those four attributes? Noble son, they are (1) pursuing the Dharma, yearning for the Dharma, and rejoicing, delighting in, and being inspired by the Dharma, as well as holding the Dharma and teaching the Dharma; (2) renouncing women and not indulging in women; (3) rejoicing in benefactors, in their giving nature, and in their giving,⁶ as well as renouncing dullness and sleep; and (4) feeling inspired by emptiness and abiding in emptiness. Noble son, bodhisattvas who possess those four attributes will progress irreversibly toward unsurpassed and perfect awakening and they will achieve the qualities you have described.” [F.169.a]
- 1.15 When the Blissful One had said this, the Teacher also spoke these words:

“Beings who yearn for the Dharma
And generate effort for the sake of the Dharma are rare.
Anyone who makes the wheel of Dharma turn
Will attain supreme wisdom.
- 1.16 “Hearing it from others they will genuinely retain it,
And then teach the Dharma to others who are interested.
Such wise ones will not lose courage in a gathering.
They will reach unsurpassed and supreme awakening.
- 1.17 “Rejecting women, the cause of downfalls,
A son of the victors will always practice pure conduct.
Stable in the practice of pure conduct,
He will turn the unsurpassed, sacred wheel.
- 1.18 “Those who delight in⁷ the features of women
Will become miserable, poor, and feeble.
Indulging in them will not bring peace,
So forsake them and engage in bodhisattva conduct.”
- 1.19 Upon hearing these teachings, the Śākya youth Kṣemaṅkara felt satisfied, delighted, and thrilled. Feeling joyful and happy, he unfastened the ornaments on his body and scattered them before the Blessed One. Through the Blessed One’s power these ornaments now transformed into a mansion made of precious substances, hovering directly above the Blessed One’s crown. From that mansion

emanated five hundred people decorated with all manner of ornaments, who scattered their own ornaments in the direction of the Blessed One. In addition, they aroused the mind set on unsurpassed and perfect awakening and said, “Blessed One, we are sharing our roots of virtue with all beings, and we dedicate them toward unsurpassed and perfect awakening.”

1.20 The Śākya youth Kṣemaṅkara also perceived these emanated people. Seeing them, the hairs on his body stood on end, so he asked the Blessed One, “Blessed One, where are these people from? Are they from the east, from the south, from the west, from the north, from below, or from above? [F.169.b] From which cardinal or intermediate direction did they come?”

1.21 “Noble son,” replied the Blessed One, “these people are from neither the east, south, west, or north; nor from below or above; nor are they from any cardinal or intermediate direction. They are not gods, they are not nāgas, they are not yakṣas, they are not gandharvas, they are not demigods, they are not garuḍas, they are not kiṃnaras, they are not mahoraḡas, they are not humans, and they are not non-humans—they do not abide in the earth element, they do not abide in the water element, they do not abide in the fire element, they do not abide in the wind element, and they do not abide in the space element. They have no form, no feeling, no perception, no formation, no thinking, no mind, no consciousness, no karma, no ripening of karma, no present world, no other world, no coming, no going, no dwelling, no death, and no birth. However, noble son, they are known as magical emanations. They are called groundless, they are called lifeless, they are called beingless, they are called personless, they are called characteristicless, they are called void, they are called empty, and they are called essenceless.

1.22 “Kṣemaṅkara, those noble sons and daughters who hold all phenomena to be like magical creations—who accept, understand, and have faith and confidence in them as such, and who are not led astray by others—such noble sons and daughters, Kṣemaṅkara, are called my children. They are known as my descendants, they are known to possess illumination, they are known to be illuminating, they are known to clear away darkness, they are known to abandon afflictions. They are known as teachers, they are known as fields of merit, they are known as worthy of veneration,⁸ they are known as mendicants, they are known as brahmins, they are known as learned, they are known as elephants, they are known as those who accept that phenomena are unborn, [F.170.a] they are known as bodhisattvas, they are known as great beings, they are known as having the quality of non-regressing, they are known as having the qualities of bodhisattvas, and they are known as having been prophesied.

1.23 “However, noble children who do not agree that all phenomena are like magical creations, and who do not accept this, do not engage with it, have no faith in it, and lack trust in it—who feel frightened and scared upon hearing

about it and start to panic, turn away from it, and challenge it—such noble children are known as not being mendicants. They are known as not being brahmins, they are known as non-Buddhists, they are known as those who apprehend things, they are known as depraved, they are known as unwholesome companions, they are known as people to avoid, they are known as deceitful bodhisattvas, they are known as immoral bodhisattvas, they are known as fake bodhisattvas, they are known as worthless bodhisattvas, they are known as corrupted bodhisattvas, and they are known as savage bodhisattvas.”

1.24 At this point the evil Māra, feeling frustrated and unhappy, went to the location where the Blessed One was staying and asked, “Blessed One, by delivering this Dharma teaching, how many beings’ welfare are you accomplishing?”

“Evil one,” replied the Blessed One, “through the delivery of this Dharma teaching, eighty-four thousand deities in the realms of desire and form will attain the acceptance that phenomena are unborn. The minds of five hundred monks will become free of defilements with no further appropriation. Seventy-five nuns will also attain the acceptance that phenomena are unborn. The bodhisattva Kṣemaṅkara and five hundred other laymen will also attain the acceptance that phenomena are unborn. Twenty-five female lay practitioners will purify the eye of Dharma, making it free from dust and dirt with regard to all phenomena, and all of them will attain the acceptance that phenomena are unborn. [F.170.b] When passing away, all of them will be reborn in Sukhāvātī, the buddha realm of the thus-gone, worthy, perfect buddha Amitābha. Once born there, they will all jointly uphold the awakening of the buddhahood of⁹ infinite blessed buddhas. They will express it, teach it, and authentically expound it. In the future, after as many eons as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River, during the so-called Good Eon of this trichilocosm, they will fully awaken to unsurpassed and perfect buddhahood.”

1.25 The evil Māra felt frustrated and unhappy. With regret, he began to weep. As he was leaving, he said, “Blessed One, please do not deliver this Dharma teaching again!”

“Evil one, you should not speak like that!” replied the Blessed One. “And why not? Because the turning of the Dharma wheel of all the blessed buddhas is unimpeded.”

1.26 Then venerable Ānanda asked the Blessed One, “Blessed One, what is this Dharma teaching called, and how should it be identified?”

The Blessed One responded, “Ānanda, you may call this Dharma discourse *The Bodhisattva’s Renunciation*, or you should call it *The Question of Kṣemaṅkara*. Ānanda, I entrust you with this Dharma discourse. I entrust it to you in order that you retain it, read it aloud, explain it, and accurately teach it to others in great detail. Why? Ānanda, noble sons and noble daughters who have genuinely

entered the Great Vehicle [F.171.a] might practice the five perfections without the perfection of insight for ten eons. Yet those noble sons and noble daughters who retain this Dharma discourse, hold it, read it aloud, understand it, accurately teach it to others in detail, or even make it into a book and carry it, will create much more merit.”

1.27 Then the Blessed One spoke these verses:

“Whoever practices generosity for ten eons
Without having heard about this way of so doing
Will not be praised
As having unsurpassed generosity.

1.28 “Those who observe mundane discipline
Even for tens of eons
Will continue to dwell on observations—
Such discipline will not be pure.

1.29 “Those who retain this profound discourse,
Which is praised by the buddhas,
Will have unsurpassed discipline
And will themselves be praised by all the buddhas.

1.30 “Though people may advocate patience for tens of eons,
And practice patience toward all who revile them,
That patience will not be praiseworthy
Unless they have heard about this way of doing it.

1.31 “Those who retain this discourse,
And correctly teach it to others,
Will have unsurpassed patience
And be praised by all the buddhas.

1.32 “Those who have not heard about this way of so doing
May never transgress the rules,
Even for tens of eons,
Yet such effort will not be praiseworthy.

1.33 “For those who retain this profound discourse,
Explained by the Buddha,
Their effort will be unsurpassed
And they will be praised by all the buddhas.

1.34 “Those who practice concentration
For tens of eons

- May abide in the taste of concentration,
But will not be known as adepts at concentration.
- 1.35 “Yet those who do not conceive¹⁰—whether inwardly or outwardly—
Of any phenomena at all
Have unsurpassed concentration,
And are called adepts at concentration.
- 1.36 “In this way, through the sameness [F.171.b]
Of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence,
Concentration, and insight,
Awakening will be quickly attained.”
- 1.37 When the Blessed One had spoken, venerable Ānanda, the Śākya youth
Kṣemaṅkara, the entire retinue, and the world including its gods, humans,
demigods, and gandharvas rejoiced and praised what the Blessed One had said.
- 1.38 *This concludes the noble Great Vehicle sūtra “The Question of Kṣemaṅkara.”*

c.

COLOPHON

- c.1 This was translated, edited, and finalized by the Indian scholar Prajñāvarman,
and the translator and chief editor venerable Yeshe Dé, and others.

n.

NOTES

- 1 The Denkarma catalog is usually dated to ca. 812 CE. In this catalog, *The Question of Kṣemaṅkara* is included among the “Miscellaneous Sūtras” (*mdo sde sna tshogs*), which are fewer than one hundred ślokas long. See Denkarma, folio 299.b.4; also Herrmann-Pfandt 2008, p. 115, n. 217.
- 2 *gzhon nu* is missing from Yongle, Lithang, Kangxi, Narthang, Choné, and Lhasa. Only Stok and Degé have it.
- 3 Translated based on Yongle, Lithang, Kangxi, Choné, and Stok: *'tshog rdung*. Degé: *'tshog rung*.
- 4 Translated based on Stok: *'di ni*. Degé and the other versions in the Comparative Edition: *'di na*.
- 5 Translated based on Yongle and Stok: *rtsa bar*. Degé: *rtsa ba*.
- 6 Translated based on Stok: *sbyin pa'i bdag po dang / kun 'gyed pa'i ngang tshul can dang / kun 'gyed pa la dga' ba*. Degé and other Kangyurs have *kun bged pa* instead of *kun 'gyed pa* in both instances. Although *bged pa* occurs quite commonly in the Kangyur and must have a similar meaning, it does not seem to be found in any dictionaries.
- 7 Translated based on Stok: *dga'*. Degé: *'ga'*.
- 8 Translated based on Stok: *yon gyi gnas*. Degé: *yon tan gyi gnas*.
- 9 Translated based on Yongle and Stok: *kyi*. Degé: *kyis*.
- 10 Translated based on Yongle and Stok: *rtog*. Degé: *rtogs*.

b.

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GLOSSARY

g.

g.1 Amitābha

'od dpag med

འོད་དཔག་མེད།

Amitābha

The buddha who resides in Sukhāvati.

g.2 Ānanda

kun dga' bo

ཀུན་དགའ་བོ།

Ānanda

Attendant of the Buddha and the one who is said to have memorized the sūtras.

g.3 Demigod

lha ma yin

ལྷ་མ་ཡིན།

asura

The traditional adversaries of the devas (gods) who are frequently portrayed in Brahmanical mythology as having a disruptive effect on cosmological and social harmony.

g.4 Five perfections

phar phyin lnga

ཕར་ཕྱིན་ལྔ།

pañcapāramitā

The five perfections of generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, and concentration.

g.5 Gandharva

dri za

དྷི་ཟ།

gandharva

Lower class of divine being, under the control of the Guardian King of the East. Capable of flight, they are often described as “celestial musicians.”

g.6 Ganges

gang gA

གངས་ལྷོ།

Gaṅgā

The sacred river of North India.

g.7 Garuḍa

nam mkha' lding

ནམ་མཁའ་ལྗོངས།

garuḍa

Lower class of divine being, described as an eagle-type bird with a gigantic wing span. They are traditionally enemies of the nāgas. In the Vedas, they are thought to have brought nectar from the heavens to earth.

g.8 Good Eon

bskal pa bzang po

བསྐྱལ་པ་བཟང་པོ།

bhadrakalpa

An epithet of our current eon, so-called because one thousand buddhas are prophesied to appear during this time.

g.9 Kapilavastu

ser skya'i gnas

ཤེར་སྐྱའི་གནས།

Kapilavastu

The capital city of the Śākya kingdom, where the Buddha had grown up as Prince Siddhārtha.

g.10 Kinnara

mi'am ci

མིའམ་ཅི།

kinṇara

A class of semidivine beings that resemble humans to the degree that their very name—which means “Is that a human?”—suggests some confusion as to their divine status.

g.11 Kṣemaṅkara

bde byed

བདེ་བྱེད།

Kṣemaṅkara

Name of a Śākya youth.

g.12 Mahoraga

lto 'phye chen po

ལྷོ་འཕྲེ་ཆེན་པོ།

mahoraga

A class of serpentine non-human beings.

g.13 Māra

bdud

བདུད།

Māra

Demon or demonic influence that creates obstacles for spiritual practice and awakening.

g.14 Mendicant

dge sbyong

དགེ་ལྡན་

śramaṇa

A term used broadly to denote a spiritual practitioner.

g.15 Nāga

klu

ལྲ

nāga

A semidivine class of beings that live in subterranean aquatic environments and that are known to hoard wealth and esoteric teachings. They are associated with snakes and serpents.

g.16 Non-Buddhist

mu stegs can

སུ་སྐྱེགས་ཅན།

tīrthika

A non-Buddhist religious practitioner who relies on sacred fords (*tīrtha*).

g.17 Nyagrodha Park

shing nya gro dha' i kun dga' ra ba

ཤིང་ཉལ་གྲོ་དྲཱ་ཀུན་དགའ་ར་བ།

Nyagrodhārāma

A grove of banyan trees (Skt. *nyagrodha*) near Kapilavastu where the Buddha sometimes took residence. It was a gift to the Buddhist community by King Śuddhodana, the father of the Buddha.

g.18 Prajñāvarman

pradz+ny+A barma

པར་ཇ་པ་མ།

Prajñāvarman

An Indian Bengali paṇḍita resident in Tibet during the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Arriving in Tibet on an invitation from the Tibetan king, he assisted in the translation of numerous canonical scriptures. He is also the author of a few philosophical commentaries contained in the Tibetan Tengyur (*bstan 'gyur*) collection.

g.19 Retention

gzungs

གཟུངས།

dhāraṇī

g.20 Śākya

shAkya

ལྷན།

Śākya

The name of the family clan into which Buddha Śākyamuni was born.

g.21 Sukhāvati

bde ba can

བདེ་བ་ཅན།

Sukhāvati

The pure land of Buddha Amitābha in which a practitioner can take rebirth through a combination of pure faith, sufficient merit, and one-pointed determination.

g.22 Those who apprehend things

dmigs pa can

དམིགས་པ་ཅན།

aupalambhika

Those who apprehend things conceptually.

g.23 Trichiliocosm

stong gsum gi 'jigs rten gyi khams

སྟོང་གསུམ་གི་འཇིགས་རྟེན་གྱི་ཁམས།

trisāhasralokadhātu

A universe containing one billion worlds.

g.24 Unsurpassed and perfect awakening

yang dag par rdzogs pa'i byang chub

ཡང་དག་པར་རྫོགས་པའི་བྱང་ཆུབ།

samyaksaṃbodhi

Manifesting the complete enlightenment of a buddha.

g.25 Yakṣa

gnod sbyin

གནོད་སྦྱིན།

yakṣa

A class of semidivine beings said to dwell in the north, under the jurisdiction of the Great King Vaiśravaṇa, otherwise known as Kubera.

g.26 Yeshé Dé

ye shes sde

ཡེ་ཤེས་སྡེ།

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Tibetan translator who was active during the late eighth and early ninth centuries. He participated in the translation of more than two hundred texts.