

༄༅། །བདག་མེད་པ་རྒྱས་པ།

Questions on Selflessness

Nairātmyaparipṛcchā

འཕགས་པ་བདག་མེད་པ་དྲིས་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa bdag med pa dris pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “Questions on Selflessness”

Āryanairātmyapariṣcchānāmamahāyānasūtra



Toh 173
Degé Kangyur, vol. 60 (mdo sde, ma), folios 5.b–7.b.

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co.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ti. Title

im. Imprint

co. Contents

s. Summary

ac. Acknowledgements

i. Introduction

tr. Questions on Selflessness

1. The Translation

c. Colophon

n. Notes

b. Bibliography

· Tibetan Sources

· Sanskrit and Secondary Sources

· Chinese Sources

g. Glossary

s.

SUMMARY

- s.1 *Questions on Selflessness* consists of a dialogue between a group of followers of the Mahāyāna tradition and a group of tīrthikas, who pose several questions on the doctrine of selflessness. In the exchange that follows, the Mahāyāna proponents elucidate this and other key Buddhist doctrines, such as the distinction between relative and ultimate reality, the origin of suffering, the emptiness and illusoriness of all phenomena, and the path to awakening.

ac.

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The translation was completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

Questions on Selflessness consists of a dialogue between a group of followers of the Mahāyāna tradition and a group of tīrthika philosophers, who call upon the Buddhists to explain and defend their doctrine of selflessness. In the exchange that follows, the proponents of the Mahāyāna point out some of the problems with categorically affirming or denying the existence of a self, and they go on to clarify several related Buddhist doctrines, such as the distinction between relative and ultimate reality, the illusory nature of perceptions, and the emptiness of all phenomena. A passage of dialogue in prose is followed by a set of verses that describe the causes of suffering and the continuous transmigration in cyclic existence, as well as the liberation one attains by engendering the mind of awakening and the perfection of insight. The structure of the text deviates notably from the standard sūtra format, in which a description of the setting and the audience of the discourse is presented, followed by the delivery of the discourse itself and a conclusion extolling the benefits of the teaching. Rather, the text has neither a description of the setting nor the conclusion extolling its benefits, and its content consists not of the words of the Buddha himself but of those of the anonymous followers of the Mahāyāna.

i.2

A Sanskrit manuscript of this sūtra, written in Newari script, is preserved in the National Archives of Nepal.¹ It was edited, introduced, and translated into French by Lévi (1928). Another edition was prepared by Vaidya (1961) and recently a revised edition was published by the Nairātmapariṣcchā Study Group (2019). For our translation, we have compared the Tibetan text with this most recent Sanskrit edition by the Nairātmapariṣcchā Study Group, and mention of the Sanskrit in the notes refers to this edition.

i.3

There are also two Chinese translations of this sūtra (Taishō 846 and Taishō 1643), both of which contain some notable differences from the Tibetan and the extant Sanskrit sources. In the earliest Chinese translation (Taishō 846, 外道問聖大乘法無我義經, *Wai dao wen sheng dasheng fa wuwo yi*

jing), which was prepared by Fa Tian (d. 1001) in the year 986, the sūtra begins rather differently than it does in the Tibetan. Here the text starts with the usual opening phrase, “Thus did I hear at one time,” and we are moreover told that the Buddha is present in the assembly and is the one to whom the questions are posed. The other translation (Taishō 1643, 尼乾子問無我義經, *Ni gan zi wen wuwo yi jing*), which was prepared by Ri Cheng (1017–78) in the year 1063, has the same opening content as the Tibetan and Sanskrit sources, but instead of employing the general designation *tīrthika*, the translation uses the more specific category of *nirgranthajñātiputra* (尼乾子), which usually designates the Jains. This specification only exists in this later Chinese translation; otherwise, this translation is quite close to the extant Sanskrit. The translator also attributes the text to Aśvaghoṣa and categorizes it as a treatise (*śāstra*), rather than a sūtra.²

- i.4 According to the colophon to the Tibetan translation, it was prepared by the Indian scholar Kamalagupta and the great Tibetan translator Rinchen Sangpo. We can therefore assume that it was undertaken in the first half of the eleventh century, when these two scholars flourished. The first translation of this text from the Tibetan into a Western language was the French translation by Feer in 1883. The translation presented here is based on the Tibetan version in the Degé Kangyur, the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*) of the Kangyur, and the Stok Palace manuscript.

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra

Questions on Selflessness

1.

The Translation

[F.5.b]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

1.2 Now, the tīrthikas—those who hold views based on objects and who engage in concepts and analysis—went among the followers of the Mahāyāna. Respectfully, with joined palms, they asked these questions on selflessness: “Sons of noble family, the Omniscient One taught that there is no self in the body. If there truly³ is no self in the body, then how do playfulness, laughter, crying, enjoyment, anger, pride, jealousy, calumny, and so forth come about? Is there truly a self in the body or not? It would be proper for you to dispel our doubts.”

1.3 The followers of the Mahāyāna replied, “Friends, it should not be said that there truly is or is not a self in the body, because to say in this case that there truly is or is not a self is mistaken speech. Now, if there were a self, then why is it not perceptible at all, even after searching through the hair, nails, skin, head, flesh, bones, marrow, fat, ligaments, liver, intestines, throat, hands, feet, limbs, and other minor parts, both inside and outside the body?”

1.4 The tīrthikas said, “The self is only visible to those who have the divine eye. How could it be visible to us who only have eyes of flesh?”

1.5 The followers of the Mahāyāna replied, “It is not seen even by those with the divine eye. For how can something that has no color, form, or shape be seen?”⁴

1.6 The tīrthikas asked, [F.6.a] “Then is it nonexistent?”

The followers of the Mahāyāna said, “To say that it is nonexistent⁵ or to say that it is existent is mistaken speech. If it is nonexistent, then why do playfulness, laughter, crying, enjoyment, anger, pride, jealousy, calumny, and so forth arise so clearly? Therefore, it is not correct to say that it is nonexistent. One should not say that it is existent or nonexistent. Since this would be a fault, one should not say that it exists or that it does not exist.”

- 1.7 The tīrthikas asked, “Then what is apprehended in this case?”
The followers of the Mahāyāna said, “Nothing at all is apprehended.”
- 1.8 The tīrthikas asked, “Is it as empty as the sky?”
The followers of the Mahāyāna said, “Friends, it is exactly like that! It is as empty as the sky.”
- 1.9 The tīrthikas asked, “If that is so, then how should one view playfulness, laughter, crying, enjoyment, anger, pride, jealousy, calumny, and so forth?”
- 1.10 The followers of the Mahāyāna said, “They should be regarded as like an illusion, a dream, and a magical deception.”
- 1.11 The tīrthikas asked, “How are they like an illusion, a dream, and a magical deception?”
The followers of the Mahāyāna said, “An illusion is a mere analogy. A dream is a mere appearance that is not graspable, empty by nature, and nonexistent in essence. A magical deception is intentionally fabricated. This is the way things are, friends. You should regard all these things as being like an illusion, a dream, and a magical deception.
- 1.12 “Moreover, the distinction between the relative and the ultimate should be pointed out. In this regard, the relative consists in the conception ‘this is self, that is other.’ To conceptualize a soul, a person, [F.6.b] an individual, an agent, an observer, wealth, children, wives, friends, relatives, and so forth is called *the relative*.
- 1.13 “Where there is no self, no other, no soul, no person, no individual, no agent, no observer, no wealth, no children, no wives, no friends, no relatives, and so forth, this is called *the ultimate*.⁶ The relative consists in habitually labeling all things, in the results of virtuous and nonvirtuous deeds, and in birth and cessation.
- 1.14 “The very essence of suchness, where there are no virtuous results, no nonvirtuous results, no birth, and no cessation, is beyond both pollution and purification.⁷ This is the middle way teaching to strive for in practice. In this regard, it is said:
- 1.15 “Relative and ultimate
Are explained as two categories:
The relative comprises worldly phenomena;
The ultimate is beyond the worldly.
- 1.16 “Engaging with relative phenomena,
Sentient beings are overpowered by emotional defilements.
Not knowing the ultimate at all,
They wander for a long time in saṃsāra.
- 1.17 “The unwise form the concepts

- Of relative worldly phenomena.
Due to such conceptualization,
They experience suffering.
- 1.18 “Ordinary individuals, due to their immaturity,
Do not know the path of liberation.⁸
They experience sundry forms
Of unending suffering.⁹
- 1.19 “Oblivious to the ultimate,
Where worldly existence ceases,
They are born and cease.
Although birthless, they come and go.
- 1.20 “Fools who dwell on worldly phenomena
Will rove around like a wheel.
In saṃsāra, the place of suffering,
They will revolve again and again.¹⁰
- 1.21 “Just as the sun and the moon
Continue to come and go,
Likewise, these beings, transmigrating in the world,
Come and go, again and again.
- 1.22 “The whole of saṃsāra¹¹ is impermanent and unstable, [F.7.a]
Disintegrating at every moment.
That is why, by knowing the ultimate,
One abandons the state of relative reality.
- 1.23 “Devas from the higher realms,
As well as gandharvas, apsarases, and humans,¹²
Are all subject to transmigration—
All this is the result of the relative.
- 1.24 “Siddhas, vidyādharas, and yakṣas,
Gandharvas¹³ and mahoragas,
Go again and again to hell—
All this is the result of the relative.
- 1.25 “Those with great perseverance who come to abide
In the abode of the devas due to good qualities
Must again pass away and fall from the higher realms—
All this is the result of the relative.¹⁴
- 1.26 “Whoever attains the supreme state

- Of Śakra or of a universal monarch
Will once again enter the birthplace of animals—
All this is the result of the relative.
- 1.27 “Abandoning the great bliss¹⁵
Of the devas of the higher realms,
A yogin should always meditate
On the mind of awakening, which is luminosity.
- 1.28 “Essenceless, unapprehendable,
Entirely empty, groundless,
And beyond all conceptual elaboration—
Such is the definition of the mind of awakening.
- 1.29 “Neither hard nor soft,
Neither warm nor cold,
Neither tangible nor graspable—
Such is the definition of the mind of awakening.
- 1.30 “Neither long nor short,
Neither round nor triangular,
Neither thin nor thick—
Such is the definition of the mind of awakening.¹⁶
- 1.31 “Beyond meditation,
Out of range for tīrthikas,
And having the perfection of insight as its practice¹⁷—
Such is the definition of the mind of awakening.
- 1.32 “Beyond analogy, it is nothing to meditate on.
The supreme unseen abode,
Completely pure by nature—
Such is the definition of the mind of awakening.
- 1.33 “All things are like foam,
Essenceless like water bubbles,
Neither permanent nor having self.
They are similar to magical illusions and mirages.
- 1.34 “Like a vase that is made from a lump of clay,¹⁸
Beings are filled with conceptual elaborations—
Desire, anger, and so forth—
They are utterly illusion-like.
- 1.35 “Just as in the morning where there was a dew drop

- A moment later there is nothing to be seen, [F.7.b]
So, too, when one sees the perfection of insight
The intellect gives way to the unconditioned.¹⁹
- 1.36 “Continuous laughter and play,
Talking, singing, music,
The enjoyment of material things, and so forth
Are all similar to dreams.
- 1.37 “Things constructed by beings
Are all similar to dreams.
Dreams are imaginings of the mind.
Mind itself is like the sky.
- 1.38 “One who constantly meditates²⁰
On this way of the perfection of insight
Becomes free of all entities
And attains the supreme state.²¹
- 1.39 “Those who uphold, with meditation,
The highest awakening
Cultivated by all the buddhas
Will gain the fruit of the Mahāyāna.”²²
- 1.40 *Here ends the noble Mahāyāna sūtra “Questions on Selflessness.”*

c.

Colophon

c.1 Translated, edited, and finalized by the Indian preceptor Kamalagupta and the great Tibetan editor-translator Bhikṣu Rinchen Sangpo.

n.

NOTES

n.1

NAK 3/693; NGMPP reel no. A 936-11(5).

n.2

This attribution to Aśvaghoṣa, however, was called into question by Lévi (1928) and Bhattacharya (1966). In addition to comparing the Tibetan text with the Sanskrit, we have also made occasional reference to the second Chinese translation by Ri Cheng.

n.3

The Skt. here reads “If the body is without self, there is no supreme self” (*yadi śarīraṃ nairātmakaṃ paramātmā na vidyate*).

n.4

The Skt. reads “compounded nature” (*saṃskāra*).

n.5

The phrase “or to say that it is existent” is absent in the Skt., which instead reads “friends” (*mārṣā*). Taishō 1643 lacks this entire sentence.

n.6

Instead of “this is called the ultimate,” the Skt. reads “this is the middle way of all phenomena” (*sā madhyamā pratipattir dharmāṇām*).

n.7

The passage “The relative consists in . . . and purification” is missing in the Skt.

n.8

The Skt. reads “Ordinary immature people, being blind, / Do not see the path to liberation” (*muktimārgaṃ na paśyanti andhā bālāḥ pṛthagjanāḥ*).

n.9

The Skt. reads “They are born and perish unceasingly in the five realms” (*utpadyante nirudhyante ajasraṃ gatipañcasu*).

n.10

In the extant Sanskrit, the preceding two verses appear to have become conflated into a single verse of six lines:

“Fools involved in worldly phenomena
Wander round and round like a wheel.
They do not know the ultimate,

Where saṃsāra ceases.
Trapped in the net of saṃsāra,
They go round again and again.”

(*bhramanti cakravan mūḍhā lokadharmasamāvṛtāḥ | paramārthaṃ na jānanti bhavo
yatra nirudhyate | veṣṭitā bhavajālena saṃsaranti punaḥ punaḥ.*)

n.11 The Skt. reads “all compounded things” (*sarvasaṃskārā*).

n.12 The Tib. reads “devas and humans” (*lha mi*). Since devas are already mentioned in the first line of this verse, we opted for the Skt. reading “apsaras.” Taishō 1643 has only “gandharva” (乾闥婆).

n.13 The Skt. reads “kinnaras” (*kinnara*).

n.14 This verse is missing in the Skt.

n.15 According to the Skt. *mahāsukha*. The Tib. reads “pleasant truth” (*bden pa bzang po*).

n.16 The Skt. has two more stanzas here:

“Neither white nor red,
Neither dark blue nor yellow,
Without color or form—
Such is the definition of the mind of awakening.

“Without transformation or manifestation,
Without antagonism or bondage,
Without form, like the sky—
Such is the definition of the mind of awakening.”

(*na śvetaṃ nāpi raktaṃ ca na kṣṇaṃ na ca pītakaṃ | avaraṇaṃ ca nirākāraṃ
bodhicittasya lakṣaṇam | nirvikāraṃ nirābhāsaṃ nirūhaṃ nirvibandhakam | arūpaṃ
vyomasamkāśaṃ bodhicittasya lakṣaṇam.*)

n.17 The Skt. reads “form” (*rūpaṃ*).

n.18 We are translating “vase” based on the Skt. (*ghaṭī*). The Tibetan translation reads “Assembled from a lump of clay,” (*gong bu bzhin du bsdus gyur pa*).

n.19 Translation of this verse is tentative. The Sanskrit and the two Chinese translations all differ slightly.

The Skt. reads:

“Just as a lightning in the midst of clouds,

Is no longer seen after a moment,
With the view of transcendent insight,
The supreme state should be cultivated.”

(*abhrāntare yathā vidyut kṣaṇād api na dṛśyate | prajñāpāramitādṛṣṭyā bhāvayet
paramaṇi padam | |*.)

Taishō 1643 reads:

“Just as a moon in the midst of clouds
Is no longer seen after a moment,
Using profound insight,
One realizes that the conditioned is like an illusion.”

(如月處雲中 剎那而不現 以甚深般若 達有為如幻.)

Taishō 846 reads:

“Just as lightning is no longer seen after a moment, observe that the
perfection of insight and virtuous actions are also thus.”

(如電之住剎那不見。觀彼般若波羅蜜多。及作諸善。亦復如是.)

n.20 In the Tib. this line seems to have been rendered twice, in two slightly
different ways. To leave both in place would make for an irregular verse of
five lines, whereas the Skt. verse only has four lines. We have therefore
followed the Skt. here.

n.21 The Sanskrit reads “Is liberated from all wrongdoing” (*sarvāpānirmuktaḥ*).

n.22 The Skt. reads “nirvāṇa” instead of “Mahāyāna.” After this verse, the
Sanskrit adds another verse and a concluding sentence:

“As many faults as relative reality has,
Just as many virtues does nirvāṇa have.
Nirvāṇa is nonarising;
It is unstained by any faults.

“Then the tīrthikas, being satisfied, became free from conceptualization, and
having concentrated on the practice, they acquired the wisdom of the
Mahāyāna.”

(*yāvantaḥ saṃvṛter doṣās tāvanto nirvṛter guṇāḥ | nirvṛtiḥ syād anutpattiḥ
sarvadoṣair na lipyate | | atha te tīrthikāḥ tuṣṭā vikalparahitāḥ | tadā bhāvanāṃ
samādhāya mahāyānajñānalābhino 'bhūvann iti | | mahāyānanirdeśe nairātma-
paripṛcchā samāptā | |*.)

b.

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g.

GLOSSARY

g.1 Apsaras

lha mo

ལྷ་མོ།

apsaras

Popular figures in Indian culture, apsaras are said to be goddesses of the clouds and water and to be wives of the gandharvas.

g.2 Deva

lha

ལྷ།

deva

One of the five or six classes of sentient beings, specifically dominated by exaltation, indulgence, and pride. According to Buddhist cosmology, the devas are said to exist in many levels of celestial or divine realms, higher than that of the human realm, in the desire realm, in the form realm, and in the formless realm.

g.3 Empty

stong pa

སྟོང་པ།

sūnya

A term used to express the absence of any intrinsic essence in all phenomena.

g.4 Gandharva

dri za

དྷི་ཟ།

gandharva

In Indian religious mythology, a class of nonhuman beings who often appear as semidivine celestial musicians. The same term is used in certain Buddhist texts in a quite different sense: to denote a disembodied sentient being or anguished spirit in the intermediate state between two lives, seeking the conditions for a new birth as a human or other kind of embodied being.

g.5 Kamalagupta

ka ma la gub ta

ཀམ་ལ་གུབ་ཏུ།

Kamalagupta

An Indian scholar who was involved in a number of translations during the eleventh century in Tibet.

g.6 Kinnara

mi'am ci

མིའམ་ཅི།

kinnara

A semidivine being, half horse, half human, also often described as a celestial musician.

g.7 Mahoraga

lto 'phyed

ལྷོ་འཕྱེད།

mahoraga

Literally “large serpent.” A semidivine being that takes the form of a large serpent, sometimes with a human torso and head. They are a class of subterranean geomantic spirits whose movement through the seasons and months of the year is deemed significant for construction projects.

g.8 Perfection of insight

shes rab pha rol phyin

ཤེས་རབ་པ་རོལ་བྱིན།

prajñāpāramitā

The sixth of the six perfections, it refers to the profound understanding of the emptiness of all phenomena, the realization of ultimate reality.

g.9 Reality

bden pa

བདེན་པ།

satya

Refers in this text to the Buddhist distinction between relative and ultimate. Relative reality refers to the world of reified entities that are believed to have essential existence, whereas ultimate reality refers to the emptiness or lack of inherent existence in all phenomena.

g.10 Rinchen Sangpo

rin chen bzang po

རིན་ཆེན་བཟང་པོ།

A famous Tibetan translator who lived from 958 to 1055 CE. He was mainly active in western Tibet, especially at Tholing monastery.

g.11 Śakra

brgya byin

བརྒྱ་བྱིན།

Śakra

An alternative name for Indra, lord of the devas, who, according to Buddhist cosmology, resides in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three.

g.12 Selflessness

bdag med

བདག་མེད།

anātman

Selflessness denotes the lack of inherent existence in self-identity and also, more subtly, in all physical and mental phenomena.

g.13 Siddha

grub thob

གྲུབ་ཐོབ།

siddha

An accomplished being; a class of semidivine beings.

g.14 Tirthika

mu stegs pa

མུ་སྟེགས་པ།

tīrthika

A follower of a non-Buddhist religious system or philosophy.

g.15 Vidyādhara

rig 'dzin

རིག་འཛིན།

vidyādhara

A class of semidivine beings who are famous for wielding (*dhara*) spells (*vidyā*). Loosely understood as “sorcerers,” these magical beings are frequently petitioned through dhāraṇī and Kriyātantra ritual to grant magical powers to the supplicant. The later Buddhist tradition, playing on the dual valences of *vidyā* as “spell” and “knowledge,” began to apply this term to realized figures in the Buddhist pantheon.

g.16 Yakṣa

gnod sbyin

གནོད་སྦྱིན།

yakṣa

A class of semidivine beings who haunt or protect forests, rivers, and other natural spaces, or serve as guardians to villages and towns. They are traditionally propitiated for health, wealth, protection, and other boons.