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**The Gaṇḍī Sūtra**

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*Gaṇḍīsūtra*



Toh 298

Degé Kangyur, vol. 71 (mdo sde, sha), folios 301.b–303.b.

Translated by Annie Bien  
under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha

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co.

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## SUMMARY

s.

- s.1 While the Buddha is dwelling in the Bamboo Grove monastery near Rājagṛha, together with a thousand monks and a host of bodhisattvas, King Prasenajit arises from his seat, bows at the Buddha's feet, and asks him how to uphold the Dharma in his kingdom during times of conflict. In reply the Buddha instructs the king about the gaṇḍī, a wooden ritual instrument, and tells him how the sound of this instrument, used for Dharma practice in a temple or monastery, quells conflict and strife for all who hear it. He describes how to make, consecrate, and sound the gaṇḍī. He explains that the gaṇḍī symbolizes the Perfection of Insight and describes in detail the many benefits it confers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ac.

- ac.1 This translation was produced by Annie Bien with the assistance of Dr. Robert Thurman, Dr. Paul Hackett, Geshe Dorji Damdul, and Robert Beer. The translator is also thankful to Khyongla Rato Rinpoche, Leslie Kriesel, Anming Karrer-Bien, Tarini Mehta, and Ven. Yeshe Choedup for their advice.

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

## INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1 While the Buddha is dwelling in the Bamboo Grove monastery near Rājagṛha, together with a thousand monks and a host of bodhisattvas, King Prasenajit rises from his seat, bows at the feet of the Buddha, and asks him how to uphold the Dharma in his kingdom during times of conflict. In reply the Buddha instructs the king about the gaṇḍī,<sup>1</sup> a wooden beam that is ritually struck to produce sound,<sup>2</sup> and tells him how the sound of this instrument, used for Dharma practice in a temple or monastery, quells conflict and strife for all who hear it. He then describes how to make, consecrate, and sound the gaṇḍī. He explains that the gaṇḍī symbolizes the Perfection of Insight and describes in detail the many benefits it confers.

i.2 The gaṇḍī, sometimes misleadingly translated into English as “gong,” refers to a wooden beam cut from specific trees to particular proportions. From as early as the first century CE down to the present day, it has been widely used in Buddhist monasteries as an instrument for summoning monks to assembly.<sup>3</sup> To hear its sound is said to quell all disruptive thoughts, dispel obstacles, and pacify all conflicts and negative forces. The role of the gaṇḍī in Buddhist monastic life appears to have been quite varied, extending to both nontantric and tantric forms of ritualism and daily life. As an example of its diverse functions in the day-to-day monastic itinerary, the *Vinayavastu* classifies five different types or uses of the gaṇḍī: the gaṇḍī for assembling monks, the gaṇḍī for meetings, the gaṇḍī for death ceremonies, the gaṇḍī for renunciation, and the gaṇḍī for emergencies.<sup>4</sup>

i.3 There is to our knowledge no extant Sanskrit or Chinese version of *The Gaṇḍī Sūtra*. According to the colophon to the Tibetan translations, it was translated into Tibetan by Dharmasrībhadrā and Tsültrim Yönten and subsequently edited by Rinchen Zangpo, which dates the Tibetan translation included in the Kangyur to the early eleventh century CE. The text is, however, also recorded in the Denkarma<sup>5</sup> catalog of the Tibetan imperial translations, so it appears that it

was first translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan by an unknown translator no later than the early ninth century, as the Denkarma is dated to 812 CE. It is not recorded in the Phangthangma catalog of Tibetan imperial translations.<sup>6</sup>

i.4 This English translation was prepared based on the Tibetan translation in the Degé Kangyur in consultation with the Comparative Edition (Tib. *dpe bsdur ma*) and the Stok Palace Kangyur.

tr.

## THE TRANSLATION

### The Gaṇḍī Sūtra

- 1.1 [F.301.b] Homage to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas.
- 1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavān was dwelling in the Bamboo Grove, in the Kalandakanivāpa near Rājagṛha, together with a great saṅgha of a thousand monks and a great gathering of bodhisattvas. They were all worthy ones. Their contaminations were exhausted, their duties fulfilled, their work concluded, their burdens put down, their personal welfare attained, their bonds to existence destroyed, and their minds fully liberated through perfect knowledge.
- 1.3 At that time, King Prasenajit arose from his seat and went to meet the Bhagavān. He bowed his head down at the feet of the Bhagavān and addressed him with these words: “Bhagavān, in the future, during times of conflict, all beings will have evil minds, quarrelsome minds filled with desire, hatred, and delusion. While intensely coveting others’ possessions and striving to devour one another, they will cause the previous period when teachings were given by the Bhagavān to decline. They will cause the abandonment of the true Dharma. They will go against the Buddha, the Dharma, and those who are free of desire. Please teach a way to eliminate such behavior so that beings may be strongly inclined to awakening.”
- 1.4 Thus entreated, the Bhagavān declared, “King, since you make this request for the sake of the welfare of all beings, for their benefit and happiness, and in order to protect the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha, your inquiry is excellent! Excellent! Therefore, listen closely and keep this in mind! [F.302.a] I will explain.”
- 1.5 Thereupon, the Bhagavān entered the meditative absorption called *resounding everywhere*. When the Bhagavān entered that meditative absorption, all hells were terminated. All those who had been filled with hatred became free



- from their hatred and wholly devoted to the mind of awakening.
- 1.6 Then the Bhagavān asked, “Prasenajit, did you see, or hear, or understand, or realize?”
- “Bhagavān, I saw! Blissful One, I saw. I comprehended, understood, recognized, and realized!”
- 1.7 The Bhagavān said, “Prasenajit, this is the mother of all beings. She gives birth to buddhas and bodhisattvas. She is venerated, worshiped, contemplated, and cultivated by all hearers, solitary buddhas, and perfect buddhas. Taking the form of the sound of the Perfection of Insight, she nurtures all beings. She is the vanquisher of all non-Buddhists, the pacifier of angry thoughts, the subduer of sinful thoughts, the dispeller of hateful thoughts, the destroyer of deluded thoughts, and the banisher of lustful thoughts. She is the protector of the mind of awakening, the intensifier of the mind of buddhas, and the supporter for the genesis of buddhas. She is the destroyer of all fights, quarrels, strife, conflicts, miseries, and all those of bad character who contravene the monastic code. She is the pacifier of sudden illness and death and of untimely death, epidemics, and so forth. She is the subduer of foreign armies, destroyer of Māra, and dispeller of torments. She is the extender of the fortunate era, bestower of long life and freedom from disease, pacifier of the dread of death, and intensifier of freedom and prosperity. To those who hear this and rejoice, she bestows results, like a wish-fulfilling gem. The Mother, the Perfection of Insight, is present in the form of the gaṇḍī.” [F.302.b]
- 1.8 Having heard this, deep conviction rose in King Prasenajit, and he entreated the Bhagavān: “Bhagavān, what is the size of this gaṇḍī? What is its color? What are its specifications? How is it to be struck? By what is it to be struck? At what time, on what occasion, and for how long should it be struck? How should it be placed?”
- 1.9 Thus entreated, the Bhagavān declared:
- “As for the wood you wish to use,  
You should investigate with great effort:  
Sandalwood, Bengal quince, bastard teak,  
Sacred fig, and red sandalwood tree,
- 1.10 “Indian walnut, palmyra, kingshuk tree,  
Aloe wood, false mangosteen,  
Mango, walnut, myrobalan tree,  
*Tintisara*,<sup>7</sup> and aśoka.
- 1.11 “If all of these are absent,  
You should try the mulberry tree.  
King, if despite your efforts

- None of these are present, do not make it.
- 1.12 “If made without measure and from bad wood,  
The sound will not emerge when struck.  
When such a Mother of the Buddhas is struck,  
Harm will surely arise in the land.
- 1.13 “As for the monks in the temple,  
Their minds will thus be discordant,  
They will be afflicted with disease,  
And there will be all sorts of quarrels.
- 1.14 “Non-Buddhists will be empowered  
And māras will likewise come to the fore.  
Due to many noxious nāgas,  
Crops will fail.
- 1.15 “In that kingdom many beings  
Will be destroyed.  
Temples also will be destroyed,  
And the Dharma will decline as well.
- 1.16 “Demonic gods will cause unruliness  
Within the saṅgha of monks.  
Thus, knowing all this well,  
Proceed with careful inspection.
- 1.17 “As for measurements: the small ends should be eight fingers.  
Make the main body eighty-four fingers.  
Make it six fingers in breadth  
And two fingers in height.
- 1.18 “Using the measurements of finger joints,  
The measure to the four corners is two fingers.  
The perfect balance is made very clear.  
The two ends are like the head of a frog.
- 1.19 “After that, cut the striker  
From the same wood block.  
Measuring twelve fingers,  
It is rounded and has mongoose heads at both ends.
- 1.20 “The size of the handle is also like that.  
It should be very smooth and evenly ribbed.  
Thus, it is meant to be struck.

Below, make a stand for it. [F.303.a]

- 1.21 “Place it above the temple gate,  
Or place it above the central gate.  
As for its consecration,  
It is the very stable<sup>8</sup> Dharma body.
- 1.22 “It is unproduced, indestructible,  
And primordially unborn virtue.  
Having been consecrated as such,  
The gaṇḍī’s eyes are opened.
- 1.23 “Next, having opened the gaṇḍī’s eyes,  
One must strike it to increasingly produce sound<sup>9</sup>  
Throughout the temple,  
As if adorned by seven nāgas.<sup>10</sup>
- 1.24 “Thereafter, one should pay homage to the Three Jewels  
And then strike the gaṇḍī.  
One should then sound the cymbal<sup>11</sup> three times  
And beat the Dharma drums.
- 1.25 “Cleansing the gaṇḍī with flower-petal water  
At mealtime, sunrise, and sunset,  
Strike it three times at the three intervals.  
When it is time for bathing, let it resound twice.
- 1.26 “It should be struck consecutively without hesitation  
To prevent sudden harm  
And likewise quarrels, disputes,  
Lightning, and great devastation.
- 1.27 “It should be struck to invite the elders  
And to pacify plagues and famines.  
It should be struck constantly at all times  
By monks and novices.
- 1.28 “During monthly purification,  
It should be struck by laypeople as well.  
All its qualities being complete,  
It should be adorned by seven nāgas.<sup>12</sup>
- 1.29 “O King, when throughout the land  
That gaṇḍī resounds,  
The year will be good there,

- With splendor, fame, and all desirable things.
- 1.30 “There will be no fear of foreign armies,  
And the crops will never fail.  
With the wealth of the Buddha’s blessings,  
Māras will be tamed there.
- 1.31 “The Dharma drum will thunder everywhere,  
Right up to the summit of existence.  
The worlds of hell and pretas  
Will undoubtedly be destroyed.
- 1.32 “Everyone will have enduring conviction in the Buddha,  
And everyone will be devoted to the Dharma.  
There, the saṅgha will be disciplined,  
And the wise will flourish as well.
- 1.33 “Lust, hate, and delusion  
Will subside there.  
The king will live long and uphold the Dharma,  
And he will have every happiness.
- 1.34 “O King, in every temple,  
When beating the Dharma drum,  
Its sound will be renowned  
In the pathways of peoples’ ears;
- 1.35 “Those who hear it four times a day  
Will attain spiritual awakening. [F.303.b]  
Those who rejoice from the heart  
Will undoubtedly be free.
- 1.36 “Hearing just once *The Gaṇḍī Sūtra*,  
One will remember one’s former lives.  
Where this best among sūtras is present,  
That land will be prosperous.
- 1.37 “Those who observe it at all times,  
Read it aloud, worship it,  
And keep it in mind  
Will be freed from evil.”
- 1.38 When the Bhagavān had said this, King Prasenajit paid his respects to the Bhagavān repeatedly and then departed. When the Bhagavān had spoken these words, the entire assembly, along with the world with its gods, humans,

asuras, garuḍas, and gandharvas, rejoiced and praised what the Bhagavān had said.

1.39 *This completes "The Gaṇḍī Sūtra."*

c.

## COLOPHON

c.1 It was translated by the Indian abbot Dharmasīrībhadrā and the monk-translator Tsültrim Yönten, and edited and finalized by the monk and chief editor-translator Rinchen Zangpo.

## NOTES

n.

- 1 For historical and ethnographical details concerning the gaṇḍī and its wide-ranging usage in Buddhist monasteries, see Helffer (1983), Hu-von Hinüber (1991), and Sobkovyak (2015).
- 2 In *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, the term gaṇḍī is defined as “a shaft or stalk, used as a bar.” The related Sanskrit term gaṇḍī is defined in the Monier-Williams dictionary as “the trunk of a tree from the root to the beginning of the branches.” For a discussion of the various definitions and etymologies of the term, see Sobkovyak (2015), p. 689.
- 3 As noted by ethnomusicologist Mireille Helffer, “The oldest writings on Indian Buddhism mention an instrument, the gandi, used to call monks to assembly. Recent observations show an instrument called gandi, or ganti, used similarly in Tibetan monasteries. Other recent texts confirm that the old gandi, like the modern version, is a phonoxylophone; its shape is similar to that of certain wooden semanterions used in Greek Orthodox monasteries. The prescriptions of the canonical writings are still followed, and the Tibetan Buddhists, faithful to a tradition received from India, continue to build and use the gandi.” Helffer (1983), p. 112.
- 4 This classification is given in the *Poṣadhavastu*, which comprises the second chapter of the Tibetan version of the *Vinayavastu* included in the Kangyur and corresponds to the Khandhaka section of the Theravāda Vinaya in Pāli. For a translation of this passage as it occurs in the Sanskrit Gilgit manuscript purported to belong to the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, see Hu-von Hinüber (1991), p. 746. The passage appears to distinguish five different kinds of gaṇḍī but more likely specifies five different ways in which the gaṇḍī is used in monastic life. Indeed, the *Poṣadhavastu* elsewhere specifies the different ways of striking the gaṇḍī beam in each of these five contexts. For details on these contexts as well as traditional classifications of its use in tantric practice, see Sobkovyak (2015), 690–93.
- 5 Denkarma, folio 301.a.5. See also Herrmann-Pfandt (2008), p. 167.

- 6      *dkar chag 'phang thang ma* (2003).
- 7      Tib. *ting ti sa ra*. We could not find a botanical listing for this tree.
- 8      We have followed Degé: *shin tu brtan pa* (“very stable”). Stok: *shin tu bstan pa* (“well revealed”).
- 9      This is a tentative rendering of the line *bskyed pa'i rim gyis brdung bar bya*. According to Geshe Dorji Damdul (personal communication), the meaning of this phrase is that the gaṇḍī should be struck softly at first, then gradually harder, and finally the sound should decrease again. Sobkovyak’s conjecture that this refers to the developing stage (*utpattikrama*) of the Vajrayāna seems anachronistic. Sobkovyak (2015), 700.
- 10     We are not sure what the seven nāgas refer to here. In some traditional representations of the Buddha, he is presented as sheltered by a seven-headed nāga, which refers to the nāga that sheltered him from the storm shortly before his awakening. Perhaps the mention of seven nāgas in this text is related to this?
- 11     We have followed Degé: *shang rtsa*. Stok: *shing rtsa* (“tree root”).
- 12     Perhaps this also refers to the gaṇḍī being sheltered by the seven-headed nāga in the same way that certain buddha statues are presented? See note 10.

b.

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## GLOSSARY

g.

g.1 **Asura**

*lha ma yin*

ལྷ་མ་ཡིན།

*asura*

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

g.2 **Awakening**

*byang chub*

བྱང་ལྡན།

*bodhi*

Awakening refers to the state of realization and understanding possessed by a buddha regarding the nature of things.

g.3 **Bamboo Grove**

*'od ma'i tshal*

འོད་མའི་ཚལ།

*Venuvana*

The famous bamboo grove near Rājagṛha where the Buddha regularly stayed and gave teachings. It was situated on land donated by King Bimbisāra of Magadha and was the first of several landholdings donated to the Buddhist saṅgha during the time of the Buddha.

g.4 **Bhagavān**

*bcom ldan 'das*

བཅོམ་ལྷན་འདས།

*bhagavān*

Epithet of a buddha.

g.5 **Blissful one**

*bde bar gshegs pa*

བདེ་བར་ག་ཤེགས་པ།

*sugata*

Epithet of a buddha.

g.6 **Bodhisattva**

*byang chub sems dpa'*

བྱང་ལྡན་སེམས་དཔལ།

*bodhisattva*

One dedicated to perfect awakening in order to liberate all living beings.

g.7 Dharmaśrībhadrā

*dhar+ma shrI bha dra*

དམ་སྒྲི་བླ་བུ་

*Dharmaśrībhadrā*

The Indian scholar who assisted with the translation of the text into Tibetan. His dates are unknown but he lived sometime during the late 10th century to the middle of the 11th century.

g.8 Gandharva

*dri za*

དྲི་ཟ།

*gandharva*

A class of celestial spirits and minor gods (*deva*) in both Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies who are said to live on scents. They are messengers, singers, and skilled musicians and dancers.

g.9 Gaṇḍī

*gaN+Di*

གཞི།

*gaṇḍī*

A percussion instrument made from a wooden beam cut from specific trees to particular proportions, it has been widely used in Buddhist monasteries as an instrument for summoning monks to assembly.

g.10 Garuḍa

*khyung*

ལྷ་པོ།

*garuḍa*

Lower class of divine beings described as eagle-type birds with gigantic wingspans. They are traditionally enemies of the nāgas. In the Vedas, they are said to have brought nectar from the heavens to earth.

g.11 Hearer

*nyan thos*

ཉན་ཐོས།

*śrāvaka*

One who listens to the Buddha's teaching in order to reach liberation.

g.12 Kalandakanivāpa

*bya ka lan da ka gnas pa*

བྱ་ཀ་ལན་དཀ་གནས་པ།

*Kalandakanivāpa*

A park outside Rājagrha where the Buddha often resided, within the Bamboo Grove (Veṇuvana). The Tibetan rendering *bya ka lan da ka* makes it clear that the Tibetans considered the kalandaka to be a kind of bird, while Sanskrit and Pali sources generally agree that it is a kind of squirrel. It is therefore likely that this word refers to the Indian flying squirrel, *Petaurista philippensis*.

g.13 Māra

*bdud*

བདུད།

*māra*

A class of beings related to the demon Māra (literally “death” in Sanskrit) or a term for the demon Māra himself. Māra and the māras are portrayed as the primary adversaries and tempters of people who vow to take up the religious life, and māras can be understood as a class of demonic beings responsible for perpetuating the illusion that keeps beings bound to the world and worldly attachments and the mental states those beings elicit.

g.14 Māra

*bdud*

བདུད།

*Māra*

The demon Māra. See “māra.”

g.15 Meditative absorption

*ting nge 'dzin*

ཉིང་ངེ་འཛིན།

*samādhi*

State of mental absorption or one-pointed concentration.

g.16 Nāga

*klu*

ལྷ།

*nāga*

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

g.17 Non-Buddhist

*mu stegs pa*

མུ་སྟེགས་པ།

*tīrthika*

Those of religious or philosophical orders that were contemporary with the early Buddhist order, including Jains, Jaṭilas, Ājīvikas, and Cārvākas. Initially, the term *tīrthika* or *tīrthya* may have referred to non-brahmanic ascetic orders. Tīrthika (“ford”) literally translates as “one belonging to or associated with (possessive suffix *-ika*) stairs for landing or for descent into a river,” or “a bathing place,” or “a place of pilgrimage on the banks of sacred streams” (Monier-Williams). The term may have originally referred to temple priests at river crossings or fords where travelers propitiated a deity before crossing. The Sanskrit term seems to have undergone metonymic transfer in referring to those able to ford the turbulent river of saṃsāra (as in the Jain tīrthaṅkaras, “ford makers”), and it came to be used in Buddhist sources to refer to teachers of rival religious traditions. The Sanskrit term is closely rendered by the Tibetan *mu stegs pa*: “those on the steps (*stegs pa*) at the edge (*mu*).”

g.18 Perfection of Insight

*pha rol tu phyin pa*

ཕ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་པ།

*Prajñāpāramitā*

The profound nondual understanding of the ultimate reality of emptiness of all things, it is personified as a goddess described as the “Mother of all Victorious Ones” (*Sarvajinamātā*).

g.19 Prasenajit

*gsal rgyal*

གསལ་རྒྱལ།

*Prasenajit*

King of the Kośala state during the time of the Buddha.

- g.20 **Preta**  
*yi dwags*  
 ཡི་དྭགས།  
*preta*  
 A class of beings who, in the Buddhist tradition, are particularly known to suffer from hunger and thirst and the inability to acquire sustenance.
- g.21 **Rājagṛha**  
*rgyal po'i khab*  
 རྒྱལ་པོའི་ཁབ།  
*Rājagṛha*  
 Modern Rajgir. Nearby is Vulture Peak mountain (Gṛdhrakūṭaparvata), where the Buddha is said to have taught the *Prajñāpāramitā* and other teachings, and the Bamboo Grove (Veṇuvana) where the Buddha regularly gave teachings.
- g.22 **Resounding everywhere**  
*kun tu sgra sgrogs pa*  
 ཀུན་ཏུ་སྒྲ་སྒྲོགས་པ།  
 —  
 The name of a meditative absorption.
- g.23 **Rinchen Zangpo**  
*rin chen bzang po*  
 རིན་ཆེན་བཟང་པོ།  
 —  
 A famous translator and editor of canonical texts during the second spread of Indian Buddhism into Tibet. He lived from 958–1055.
- g.24 **Solitary buddha**  
*rang sangs rgyas*  
 རང་སངས་རྒྱལ།  
*pratyekabuddha*  
 One who has attained liberation entirely through their own contemplation as a result of progress in previous lives but, unlike a buddha, does not have the accumulated merit and motivation to teach others.
- g.25 **Tsültrim Yönten**  
*tshul klirims yon tan*  
 ཚུལ་ཁྲིམས་ཡོན་ཏན།  
 —  
 The Tibetan translator of this text. His dates are unknown but he lived sometime during the late 10th century to the middle of the 11th century.
- g.26 **Worthy one**  
*dgra bcom pa*  
 དག་བཅོམ་པ།  
*arhat*  
 One who has accomplished the final fruition of the path of the hearers and is liberated from saṃsāra.

