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Questions Regarding Death and Transmigration

Āyusṣattiyathākāraparipṛcchā

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tshe 'pho ba ji ltar 'gyur ba zhus pa'i mdo

The Sūtra of Questions Regarding Death and Transmigration

Āyuspattiyathākāraparipṛcchāsūtra

· Toh 308 ·

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SUMMARY

- s.1 *Questions Regarding Death and Transmigration* contains explanations of Buddhist views on the nature of life and death, and a number of philosophical arguments against non-Buddhist conceptions, notably some based broadly on the Vedas. The sūtra is set in the town of Kapilavastu at the time of the funeral of a young man of the Śākya clan. King Śuddhodana wonders about the validity of the ritual offerings being made for the deceased by the family and asks the Buddha seven questions about current beliefs on death and the afterlife. The Buddha answers each of the questions in turn. After two interlocutors interrupt to test the Buddha's omniscience, the discourse continues to present the Buddhist account of death and rebirth using a set of eight analogies, each of which complements the others in a detailed explanation.

ac.

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i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

Questions Regarding Death and Transmigration is a short sūtra set in Kapilavastu that explains Buddhist views on death via a dialogue between the Buddha and his father, King Śuddhodana. King Śuddhodana observes the brahmanical funeral rites for a fellow member of the Śākya clan called Nandaja.¹ Wondering what benefit will be derived from the various rituals and offerings that are being performed for the deceased by the family, King Śuddhodana asks the Buddha a number of pertinent questions: (1) Are beings consistently reborn as their own kind, with humans being reborn as humans, and so on? (2) Do beings become utterly nonexistent after death? (3) Do beings, after their death, accompany their dead ancestors and relatives in a “world of Death”? (4) Is wealth and poverty consistent from life to life, with the wealthy continuing to be wealthy and the poor to be poor? (5) Is enjoyment of clothes, mounts, and so on consistent from life to life, with people continuing to have the same clothes, horses, and so forth? (6) Can one dedicate food and other offerings to the deceased and thus assure their perpetual welfare and nourishment? (7) Do the dead show themselves to their relatives just as they were when alive?

i.2

To each of these seven questions, the Buddha’s answer is always “no.” Several beliefs that must have been current in India at the time are thus taken up and criticized, beginning with simple skepticism that anything can survive after death at all. The main position being examined, however, seems to be that the deceased survive in an afterlife which is essentially a continuation of the present one, in the company of the same friends, relatives, ancestors, and possessions. The deceased are sustained by the offerings dedicated to them by their living relatives; they remain forever in the “world of Death,” not taking rebirth in future incarnations.²

i.3

This is a broadly Vedic eschatology, a conception of death and the afterlife that goes well back to the first millennium BCE, in the *R̥gveda*, especially in the *Atharvaveda*, as well as in the *Brāhmaṇas*. When the sūtra says that the

deceased are “befriended by their ancestors” after death, this is no doubt a reference to the Vedic idea that the dead transition to the realm of their ancestors, or their “fathers” (Skt. *pitr*). The dead person also comes to be in the presence of a lineage of ancestors all the way back to an “original ancestor” (Tib. *mes po dang po*), which seems to be an allusion to the idea of the *pitr* as including first ancestors, the founders of the human race.³

i.4 The brahmanical conception is that the family should present *piṇḍa*—balls of cooked rice typically mixed with sesame seeds, milk, butter, and honey—and other offerings to assure the transition of the newly dead spirit (*preta*) from a type of limbo to the more secure status of an ancestor in heaven, i.e., in Yamaloka, the world presided over by Death, the god Yama. The brahmanical rites for Nandaja, the deceased person mentioned at the start of the sūtra, seem to be *śrāddha*-rites, the ancestral offering rituals incumbent upon householders. One of those *śrāddha*-rites, the *sapīṇḍīkaraṇa*, is performed by the deceased’s son and is the postcremation offering of *piṇḍa* to complete his transition to the afterworld.⁴ More generally, in the Vedic conceptions of death and the afterlife, rebirth as well as the closely related theories of karma and liberation (*mokṣa*) generally play no (or at most obscure) roles; significantly, the sūtra states that rebirth does not figure at all in the afterlife as it is imagined by the mourners of Nandaja.⁵

i.5 The sūtra’s stance on the rites is complex, however, as offerings to the dead are not just dismissed categorically as pointless. We find, for example, the following passage allowing a nuanced acceptance:

The Great King then asked, “Blessed One, if that is the case, then is it useless to offer deceased individuals the food, drink, mounts, clothes, and ornaments that were beneficial to them in the present world?”

The Blessed One replied, “O Great King, take the case where a deceased person is being reborn in one of various different states of being because actions he had done are ripening. And suppose people help that person by dedicating to him all sorts of virtuous actions that will constitute a collection of merit without any nonvirtue. In that case, the person will be reborn in higher states, or attain liberation. On the other hand, when someone has already taken rebirth, then if one aids him through the dedication of a virtuous action that constitutes merit, that will aid the already reborn person to gain wealth, have good crops, more and more of the pleasures he wishes, as well as honor and respect from all his other fellow beings. However, it is not so that the deceased individual stays on in the ‘world of Death,’ without rebirth, and taking on food and drink, mounts, clothing, and ornaments.” (1.30)

- i.6 This seems to be a recognizable Buddhist position, one also found in some Pāli texts. Indeed, as Sayers shows,⁶ there are passages in texts like the *Anguttaranikāya* that do acknowledge brahmanical śrāddha-rites as having some efficacy. The approach of texts in the Pāli Canon is typically to rationalize offerings and ancestor worship as a form of *gifting*. The present sūtra also seems to follow this broad approach in many respects: gifting leads to merit, which can then be dedicated to the deceased and, in the capacity of dedicated karmic merit, serve to benefit them. What is being targeted, then, does not seem to be the efficacy of householders' rites to benefit the dead *in any way*, but rather the efficacy of the offerings to nourish the dead eternally in an everlasting realm of ancestors. It is especially *that* conception of the afterlife that is being rejected.
- i.7 The argumentation against such a Vedic eschatology follows several strategies. Sometimes it invokes the fully developed theory of karma governing reincarnation, the worldview of moral causality and retribution accepted in most post-Vedic Indian thought. For example, wealth, poverty, and the like do not remain constant throughout one's subsequent lives, as they are karmic results that vary because of the ethical nature of actions in those lives. At other times simple human common sense and observation is invoked: for example, if beings, after their death, supposedly continued on with their relatives and ancestors in a "world of Death," they would be unable to recognize one another, for their usual physical form is obviously destroyed in cremation or in the grave. At still other times the argument depends upon the supernatural. For example, dreams and apparitions of the deceased turn out to be due to a very special type of spirit that mimics the appearance of the deceased in order to trick the living into making offerings that the spirits can then appropriate.
- i.8 The sūtra itself hardly attempts to provide a positive proof for rebirth. It is almost exclusively devoted to refuting what Buddhists take to be wrong conceptions of death and the afterlife. After the Buddha's extensive refutation of the Vedic views, the renegade Devadatta challenges the Buddha to prove the reliability and superiority of his own understanding—he is asked to identify the different sorts of wood from which various ashes come. The Buddha's success in this and another test leads his interlocutors to conclude that he has suprasensible knowledge enabling him to directly understand all things, including the process of death and rebirth in all its details. The closest thing to a positive argument for a Buddhist eschatology is thus that its truth is assured by the Buddha's omniscience. *A fortiori*, one finds no trace of the main Buddhist metaphysical argument for reincarnation, the so-called *paralokasādhana*, or "proof of other lives," that turns on the

nature of mind and was so important in the second chapter of the *Pramāṇa-vārttika* of Dharmakīrti (sixth–seventh century) and the *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra (fourth century).⁷

- i.9 The last part of the sūtra takes up the non-Buddhist idea that a permanent entity survives and transmigrates. A series of eight analogies are then presented in detail to show, among other things, that reincarnation needs no such permanent entity. As pointed out in Skilling (1997), these eight analogies also figure in verse 5 of the *Verses on the Essence of Dependent Origination* (*Pratītyasamutpādayakārikā*), a text credibly attributed to Nāgārjuna.

It is by means of [the analogies of] a recitation, a lamp, a stamp, a mirror, [echoing] sound, a magnifying glass, a seed, and a sour taste that the wise should understand that aggregates take rebirth but without transmigration (*asaṃkrama*) [of anything].⁸

- i.10 Indeed, it may well be, as Skilling opines, that Nāgārjuna’s own verse was based on this sūtra: the eight analogies in the *Pratītyasamutpādayakārikā* are the same (and practically in the same order) as those in the sūtra.⁹ Skilling’s historical point would be important, because it would tell against interpreting Nāgārjuna’s own term *asaṃkrama* as somehow indicating an unqualified rejection of transmigration. The sūtra, in its extensive explanations of the eight analogies (1.50–1.71), makes it clear that “no transmigration” does not mean that there is *no* transmigration or rebirth, but rather that nothing actually transmigrates; there is no transmigration from one life to another of any entity whatsoever, be it permanent or extinguished.

- i.11 A brief word on the title. The key Tibetan term that figures in the title, and repeatedly in the body of the text, is *tshe ’pho ba*, which literally means “shifting lives.” Much like the English euphemism “passing on,” *tshe ’pho ba* too can have both the sense of “death” as well as “moving to another life” or “transmigration.” In the sūtra most occurrences of the term can be translated by “death” and “dying.” And elsewhere in Buddhist literature too the term is generally used to mean simply “to die,” as we see in *Mahāvīyutpatti* 230 where the Sanskrit for *tshe ’phos nas* is given as *cyuta*.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in the final sections of the sūtra there are passages where the term *’pho ba* must be understood as referring to transmigration to the next life or to the afterlife.¹¹ Taking this dual usage into account we have hence translated the title as “Questions Regarding Death and Transmigration.” At the end of the text in all Kangyurs the title is given as *’chi ’pho ba ji ltar ’gyur ba bstan pa’i mdo*, with *’chi ’pho ba* (“death and transmigration”) replacing the *tshe ’pho ba* in the title

given at the beginning of the text.¹² Finally, it should be noted that the Sanskrit in the title, i.e., *āyusṣpatti* (or *āyuhṣpatti*), is not well attested. Indeed the usual complete title *Āyusṣpattiyathākārapariṣcchā* is dubious and probably a back translation from the Tibetan.¹³

i.12 The sūtra is not extant in Sanskrit, nor was it translated into Chinese, and nor is there a Pāli counterpart. According to the colophon it was translated into Tibetan during the earlier dissemination of the teachings. Unusually, the colophon also states that the translation was *not* modified with the “revised terminology” that we find in translations from the opening decades of the ninth century on; nevertheless, the language does not seem to be heavily reliant on so-called “ancient linguistic usage” either. No translator is mentioned. This translation was clearly done outside the ninth century institutional mainstream.¹⁴

i.13 Although the important theme of reincarnation is treated here with a sophisticated argumentation much more typical of the Tengyur (*bstan 'gyur*) than the Kangyur (*bka' 'gyur*) literature, the sūtra does not seem to have attracted notable attention in India, apart from possibly figuring as Nāgārjuna’s source for the eight analogies, and not much in Tibet, either. A global search of the Tibetan text input on the site of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (www.tbrc.org) shows only relatively few references to this text in indigenous Tibetan scholarship. The Geluk scholastic writer Choné Drakpa Shedrup (*co ne grags pa shes sgrub*, 1675–1748) quotes a large section of this sūtra in his *lho sgo'i cho ga'i rgyas 'grel gzhan phan nyi 'od*, pp. 225–27 and pp. 243–44. We have on occasion cited variants found in his text.

i.14 This sūtra is significant both philosophically as well as historically, being a reliable witness to relatively early Indian non-Buddhist views concerning death and the Buddhist polemics against them. However, with its often long, convoluted sentences and involved argumentation, the text was manifestly not an easy one for scribes, nor probably for its anonymous Tibetan translators. We have not attempted a critical edition, but have given the most significant variants that underlie our understanding of the text. The Tibetan of the Degé Kangyur was our base text, and its folio numbers appear in the translation. The versions in the Peking Kangxi, Peking Yongle, Lithang, Narthang, Choné, Urga, and Lhasa Zhol Kangyurs were also consulted via the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*) of the Kangyur. The Stok Palace and Shelkar (“London”) manuscript Kangyurs, as representatives of the Thempangma (*them spangs ma*) line of Kangyur transmission, provide invaluable alternative readings, especially on the not infrequent occasions where the Comparative Edition has only implausible variants.¹⁵

The Sūtra
Questions Regarding Death and Transmigration

1.

The Translation

[F.145.b]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One, seeing that the time had come to train all the various householders of the great city of Kapilavastu, went there with a retinue of five hundred to cause them to generate faith.

1.3 At that time, a man in the prime of his life called Śākya Nandaja, who was cherished by all his relatives and praised by all, had died. In front of his body his children, wife, relatives, and dependents had gathered together his horses, elephants, clothes, and a variety of ornaments, gold and silver, pearls, crystals, and other jewels, as well as a variety of delicious and sweet food and drink. They offered them, wailing, “We give these to Nandaja!”

1.4 This made King Śuddhodana wish [F.146.a] to ask the Blessed One what benefit¹⁶ and good would ensue if, in such a fashion, offerings, food,¹⁷ and honors to the deceased were presented according to the brahmins’ formulae. He approached the Blessed One, prostrated, and asked, “Blessed One, would you allow me to ask some questions about what it is like for sentient beings to die?”

1.5 The Blessed One replied, “O Great King, ask whatever you wish. It will be explained to the Great King’s satisfaction.”

1.6 The Great King Śuddhodana then asked the Blessed One, “Blessed One, regarding the rebirths of beings who pass from this world to the next, are gods reborn as gods? Likewise, are humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings also reborn consistently as their own kind, respectively, as humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings? Or is it the case, Blessed One, that when gods pass from this life, they are reborn as humans and

- other kinds of beings? Likewise, are humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings reborn as other kinds of beings, such as gods and so forth, as well?
- 1.7 “Or, Blessed One, when they pass from this life do sentient beings become utterly nonexistent, becoming like the ashes of a fire that has died out, and not taking any rebirth at all?
- 1.8 “Blessed One, is it really as the worldly say it is? Do all sentient beings live on after their deaths, befriending their kin¹⁸ in a beginningless lineage including fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and more, not taking rebirth in a future life but living just as they do in this life?
- 1.9 “Blessed One, do those who are wealthy and proud in this life go on to be wealthy and proud in the hereafter too, [F.146.b] and do those who are poor and humble in this life go on to be poor and humble in the next? Or do people simply switch back and forth between the two?¹⁹
- 1.10 “Blessed One, is it really as the worldly say it is? Those who, in this life, ride horses and elephants, wear fine clothes and ornaments, eat food and drink, do they continue in their future lives to ride, dress, and eat in the same way?
- 1.11 “Blessed One, is it really as the worldly say it is? When their parents, siblings and cousins, children, and so forth give or dedicate small portions of food or drink to someone who has passed from this world, is the deceased then able to eat and drink inexhaustibly for many eons?
- 1.12 “Blessed One, is it really as the worldly say it is? When sentient beings pass on from this world, do they later, after death, tell their parents, siblings, children, and so forth the same things, such as stories and so forth, that they had told them earlier before they died? And do they later exhibit the same physical features to them as they had earlier before death? Are they seen and heard to do this?”
- 1.13 After these queries, the Blessed One replied to the king Śuddhodana, “O Great King, with regard to your question as to whether gods are reborn as gods and so forth, the answer is ‘no.’ Suppose that when gods died they were reborn only as gods and not reborn as other types of beings, and the same for humans and so forth. O Great King, initially humans come from gods, and the three lower realms come from humans’ engagement in nonvirtue. Therefore, those gods and so forth who die [F.147.a] are reborn in various other types of migrations.
- 1.14 “O Great King, suppose, moreover, that the answer to this question of yours were to be ‘yes.’ Then it would be logical that the quantities of the six types of beings would always be the same as they are now. But notice how the three lower realms are more numerously repopulated²⁰ due to the preponderance²¹ of humans’ engagement in nonvirtue! Moreover, O Great

King, if the arhats of today come from the ranks of humans, then it cannot be right that beings are consistently reborn in their own types. What is more, it would be impossible for anyone to obtain the fruit of being an arhat. Therefore, O Great King, through virtuous and nonvirtuous actions beings are reborn as different types, such as those in the heavens and those in the lower realms.

1.15 “O Great King, regarding your question as to whether gods that die are reborn as other types of beings, such as humans and the like, the answer is ‘yes.’

1.16 “O Great King, regarding your question as to whether sentient beings die and become utterly nonexistent, like the ashes of a fire that has died out, and as to whether rebirth is utterly nonexistent, the answer is ‘no.’ O Great King, just as when you have a seed, a fruit will come forth, so from the seed of this life the fruit of the next life comes about. O Great King, just as the sun rises, slowly sets, becomes obscured, and then rises again the following morning, so too one passes from this life and takes rebirth. O Great King, sentient beings would become extinct species if they died without any subsequent rebirth. O Great King, if we take the grass and trees outside too, those that have withered will grow again through the changing of the seasons. Likewise, sentient beings will be reborn and die through actions and afflicted emotions, which are like the changing of the seasons. So, O Great King, know that there are future lives.

1.17 “O Great King, you asked whether [F.147.b] it is as the worldly say it is. You asked whether all sentient beings after their deaths live on, befriending their kin in a beginningless lineage, including parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so forth, and not taking rebirth in a future life but living just as they did in this life. O Great King, in this life, when a parent or a child and the like see each other, it is one embodied being seeing another, not one mind seeing another. If, in this life, the body perishes and is gone, then in the hereafter how would one mind see another and befriend it? Children, nephews, and nieces who are alive and have physical forms cannot even see their deceased parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Then how would disembodied deceased people see and befriend their formless parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents?

1.18 “What is more, O Great King, in this life, when the many parents, children, and other relatives get together, even then, it is only their respective physical forms that appear. Unable to see even their own minds,²² how could children and other relatives ever see each other’s minds? How would they see them after death? How would they, in an afterlife, first see the children, relatives, grandparents, and great-grandparents and then befriend them?

- 1.19 “O Great King, let us suppose that an ancestor, one who had no one before him at any point in beginningless time, and his presently existing descendants were to befriend each other in a future life. Now, there are at present many different clans, castes, factions, and parties, some of which have become enemies of each other and whose places of residence, associates of clan and caste, language, and style of dress are neither heard of nor seen. Suppose that they too issued from the same original ancestor.²³ How would you delineate which children and relatives do or do not befriend present children, relatives, grandfathers, and so forth? The offspring from this first ancestor, up to and including the presently existing relatives and children, [F.148.a] would be alike in their respective affections [and antagonisms] for one another, just like the presently existing children and relatives. If this is so, who befriends whom and who fails to befriend whom?
24
- 1.20 “People who are now living each apprehend their own factions and parties, saying, ‘So-and-so is our ancestor.’ And they determine the factions and parties, saying, ‘We are children of the same father as so-and-so.’ Suppose, too, that they now each grasped as ‘our ancestors’ the lineage of all the fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and great-great-grandfathers all the way down to the first ancestor—that is, the lineage of all those who respectively apprehend each other as ‘ancestors.’ And suppose, following what the worldly say, these ancestors did not take rebirth after passing from this world, but instead befriended children and relatives in an afterlife. Then they would have to befriend as one unified faction²⁵ the presently different clans, castes, and factions, as well as all those people that have become enemies, too.
- 1.21 “O Great King, in this life, although people appear as embodied entities, nonetheless when they are in the dark or hidden they do not see one another. Then, given that deceased beings do not have any bodies, how could they see and thus befriend one another? O Great King, if embodied sentient beings who are alive now cannot even make their bodies visible to people in some other country or in the different places that they do not see, then how could they ever make their bodies visible after death? O Great King, you should not listen to worldly individuals who seek fame and gain²⁶ and thus deceive others with the tales they tell.
- 1.22 “O Great King, you asked whether those who are wealthy and proud in this life are also wealthy and proud in the hereafter, whether the poor and humble in this life go on to be poor and humble in the next, or whether people switch between the two. O Great King, just take sentient beings in this life who have not yet died: some are wealthy and proud from the moment of birth, but are then poor and humble from the age of fifty or sixty

onward into their old age; [F.148.b] others are poor and humble from birth and throughout their youth, but then, from the age of fifty or sixty up until their old age, they are wealthy and proud. If that is so, then it is all the more obvious that people's riches and poverty are impermanent when they are dead! O Great King, to use an analogy, in this world when conditions like warmth and moisture are present, grass, trees, and other plants grow leaves, but when it is cold and dry they wither. Similarly, one becomes wealthy and proud due to conditions such as generosity, but poor and humble from theft and miserliness.

1.23 "O Great King, some people are wealthy and proud from life to life because they have always been generous. Others are poor and humble in some lives, or at the beginning or end of certain lives, because they were partial or had regrets about giving. Some are poor and humble life after life because they always stole or were miserly. Yet others are wealthy and proud in some lives, or at the beginning or end of certain lives, because they regretted their theft and miserliness. O Great King, being poor and humble does not come about through generosity. Being wealthy and proud does not come about through miserliness. One does not simply [arbitrarily] switch between riches and poverty from one life to the next.

1.24 "O Great King, you asked whether what the worldly say is really true. You asked whether those who, in this life, ride horses and elephants and so forth, wear fine clothes and ornaments, and eat food and drink, continue in future lives after their deaths to ride, dress, eat, and drink in the same ways. O Great King, when humans die, they take rebirth in the heavens or in the lower realms in line with how they had practiced virtuous or nonvirtuous actions. O Great King, it is not as the worldly say it is.

1.25 "What about an apparition of a deceased individual's style of dress? In the heavenly realm there exists an unfathomable, unimaginable, limitless [F.149.a] world of gandharvas. One type there is called *the gandharva who preys upon the minds of those on the verge of death*.²⁷ In search of the food that gandharvas eat, they create an illusion of the body, clothes, ornaments, and style of dress of someone who lived previously. They thus create and display illusions of the style of dress and the speech of a deceased person. But there is more here, O Great King. Not only gandharvas, but other spirits, such as yakṣas, piśācas, and bhūtas, also seek to trick the deceased person's father, sons, relatives, and so forth. Thus these demons use their worldly magical powers to know the distinctive signs, final resting place, and the history of the deceased individual, and then they use their demonic influence so that parents and others see and dream of that individual.

1.26 “Furthermore, O Great King, consider the following. It is due also to the maturation of habitual tendencies stemming from longstanding association that one sees children and relatives and that they appear in dreams. Suppose, for example, that a person dreamed of their own presently undeceased²⁸ parents, relatives, servants, or any others who might befriend them, and as well dreamed of their pleasures coming from various enjoyments, or their pleasures and pains from grappling with enemies or thieves. If the parents, relatives, and servants they dreamed of, or any others appearing in their dream, actually were to have the feelings in question, just as that person dreamed they did, then that of which they dreamed would have been real. But how could the parents, relatives, and servants they dreamed of, or any others appearing in their dream, ever be thought to be real?²⁹ O Great King, even among living people, that which one person dreams is never felt by another. Then how could what is dreamed concerning a deceased person ever be that deceased person?³⁰ What is involved is the maturation of habitual tendencies.

1.27 “O Great King, there is yet another analogy for this being a matter of habitual tendencies. Suppose that a person left whatever castles, houses, and cities they had been in during an earlier part of their life, and that in the later part of their life, [F.149.b] when they lived elsewhere, the city they knew previously was destroyed. This person dreams of the shape and size of their house as they were when it was neither destroyed nor scattered about,³¹ no different from before. If the city and the house were to have mental natures,³² then the mental nature of that house might have actually appeared to them. But since their house and city are earth and stone,³³ then why would what that person dreamed not be a maturation of their habitual tendencies? Likewise, that which has the distinctive signs of a now deceased person is comparable to the undestroyed house of one’s dreams. And if the deceased individual’s mind too had already taken rebirth in accordance with their previous actions, then could they actually appear³⁴ to anyone? We conclude, O Great King, that it is through the maturation of habitual tendencies that people see and dream of distinctive signs and styles of dress of now deceased individuals. Likewise, the appearances and occurrences in dreams of the deceased holding swords and other weapons, wearing clothes and other ornaments, and riding their horses and elephants, and so forth are also just appearances due to habitual tendencies. You should understand them along the lines of the analogy of the house.

1.28 “O Great King, you asked whether it is as the worldly say it is. You asked whether those who have passed on from this world can eat and drink inexhaustibly for many eons the small portions of food and drink given and dedicated to them by their parents, siblings and cousins, children, and other

relatives. O Great King, anywhere, be it on the four continents, in the chiliocosms, the dichiliocosms, the trichiliocosms, or in the limitless, unfathomable, unimaginable world systems, have you ever seen a sentient being who consumes one small portion of food and drink all the time and over many eons? Have you ever heard of such a sentient being? O Great King, though the Cakravartin king has a wish-fulfilling gem that gives whatever he might wish, it came to exist because of immeasurable [F.150.a] collections of merit collected earlier over numerous eons—it did not fall from the sky or emerge accidentally. Is it then reasonable that this small portion of food and drink would remain unexpended until the end of the eon?

1.29 “O Great King, suppose that some living parents, children, siblings, and cousins, who have a mutual relationship and wish to be of benefit to one another, have not yet died and are still physically embodied. And suppose one of them went off to another country. Although any of the parents, children, siblings, or cousins might resolve to give and offer a lot of food and drink to that person, none of that would appear to the person who had gone off to the other country, even in their dreams—let alone food and drink in reality. So why even mention food and drink dedicated to people who have died and have no body? O Great King, how would those people, whose minds have separated from their bodies after death, use their immaterial and formless minds to take possession of the real items of food and drink provided to them by their children, siblings, and the like? Why would this be a problem? The answer is that eating and chewing depend on the workings of body parts. In that case, are the workings of the parts of the body to be found present in the mind?”

1.30 The Great King then asked, “Blessed One, if that is the case, then is it useless to offer deceased individuals the food, drink, mounts, clothes, and ornaments that were beneficial to them in the present world?”

1.31 The Blessed One replied, “O Great King, take the case where a deceased person is being reborn in one of various different states of being because actions he had done are ripening. And suppose people help³⁵ that person by [dedicating to him] all sorts of virtuous actions that will constitute a collection of merit without any nonvirtue. In that case, the person will be reborn in higher states, or attain liberation. On the other hand, when someone has already taken rebirth, then if one aids³⁶ him through [the dedication of] a virtuous action that constitutes merit, that will aid the already reborn person to gain wealth, have good crops, more and more of the pleasures he wishes, as well as honor and respect from all his other fellow beings. However, it is not so that the deceased individual stays on in the ‘world of Death,’³⁷ without rebirth, [F.150.b] and taking on food and drink, mounts, clothing, and ornaments.

- 1.32 “O Great King, suppose people say that things seen by the worldly and dreamed of by parents and others are dedicated to the deceased,³⁸ and that consequently the dead person is satisfied with the food and drink, rides the mounts, and wears the clothes and ornaments. While this might appear to be so,³⁹ there are demons and gandharvas who prey upon the minds of those on the verge of death, and who make such apparitions manifest in that way and [make them seem to be] saying they are unsatisfied with the food and drink, do not have the mounts, and do not wear the clothes and ornaments.⁴⁰
- 1.33 “O Great King, the worldly say the following: whatever words sentient beings say and stories they tell, and whatever physical features they exhibit to their parents, siblings, and so forth when on the verge of death, later, after death, they will tell the same stories and so forth to their parents, siblings, and children that they had told earlier before they died, and they will exhibit the same physical features to them later as they had earlier before their death—such visions and exhibitions supposedly exist. The Great King has asked whether what the worldly say is true or not.
- 1.34 “O Great King, take the case of speech. Speech depends upon the vocal tract of an embodied person. So then, if the body of the dead person is left behind in this world, how could their incorporeal mind ever speak? Now, when we say that a dead person has a body, we mean that they have taken rebirth, for which parents were required. So there is no ‘world of Death’ either.
- 1.35 “O Great King, what the worldly call characteristics and distinctive signs of the living⁴¹ are things fabricated by a type of gandharva called *the pervader*. The so-called *vicana* sorts of gandharvas, the talkative sorts of yakṣas, and the inquisitive *bar hi ni ta* sorts of bhūtas pervade the minds of all the dying, just like a strong wind that instantly blows over the wide plains and waters.⁴² They conjure up⁴³ such things. And then, [F.151.a] in order to trick the worldly, these demons tell stories in the same way the deceased people used to do earlier, and exhibit their characteristic styles of dress.”
- 1.36 At that time Devadatta was present and, not believing what the Blessed One had said, he questioned him: “Gautama, you have explained whatever distinctive signs there are, or are not, in the afterlife that follows death. From whom did you first hear about them, Gautama? When did you come to know about them? Who heard and knew about them along with you?”
- 1.37 The Blessed One replied, “Devadatta, for countless eons I practiced numerous sorts of austerities, such as sacrificing my body; I purified all obstructions, perfectly accumulated a great collection of merit, and thus

attained omniscient wisdom. There is nothing I do not know concerning any knowable matter before me in the past or in the limitless ten directions in the present, or concerning all knowable matters that will occur in the future.

1.38 “Just as when the sun shines here in Jambudvīpa, it does not shine over things gradually or in stages, but shines clearly all at once, so too I know, in one instant, everything that can be known. And thus it is said that I possess the exalted wisdom that knows all aspects.”

1.39 Devadatta did not believe in these sorts of statements either. In order to test whether the Blessed One actually did possess omniscience, he cut samples of a vast number⁴⁴ of different sorts of wood, that is, of all the types of trees here on Jambudvīpa, including sandalwood, waved-leaf fig trees, catechu, and so forth. He burnt them and made small bags for the ashes of each one. So as not to be mistaken about which type of wood each bag of ash came from, he labelled each bag of ash with the appropriate name. He then went to the Blessed One and asked, “Blessed One [F.151.b], if you possess omniscient wisdom, then which bag of ash belongs to which tree?” And he showed him the small bags of ashes one by one. For each small bag, the Blessed One explained unmistakably which tree the ash had come from, saying, “This one is sandalwood ash. This one is waved-leaf fig tree ash. This one is catechu ash,” and so forth. Devadatta thus came to believe that the Blessed One really did have omniscient wisdom. Thinking that the Blessed One’s pronouncements on death were all true, he praised him in the following terms:

1.40 “The Blessed One is omniscient;
What he has said about death must be true.
Without previously seeing them or hearing of them,
He recognizes these different varieties of ashes of wood.”

He thus praised him and was left at a loss for words.

1.41 At that time the Śākya Mahānāman was present, too. Not believing what the Blessed One had said about death, he asked, “Blessed One, did you directly perceive what you have explained about the death of beings, or did you hear it from someone else?”

1.42 The Blessed One replied, “Mahānāman, there is nothing in the world that my buddha-eye does not see. When a fresh gooseberry is placed in the palm of the hand, all the features of the hand are conspicuous in it. Likewise, there is no knowable thing whatsoever in the three times that I do not see. I do not base myself on hearsay.”

1.43 In order to test whether the Buddha was truly omniscient or not, Śākya Mahānāman then went to the great city of Kapilavastu. From each household, he took a small bag of rice, and so that he would not mistake

whose rice was whose, he wrote down the name of every Śākya he took them from and put these names inside the small bags. When the rice bags came to be a full load for an elephant, [F.152.a] he went to the Blessed One and requested of him, “Blessed One, if your buddha-eye sees all, then please recognize, without opening them, which Śākyas’ small bags of rice are which.” And he put down the elephant’s load of small bags in front of the Buddha.

1.44 The Blessed One held up each small bag in turn and said, “This one belongs to Śākya Nandaka, this one belongs to Śākya Kaya, this one belongs to Śākya Desire,”⁴⁵ and so forth, assigning the appropriate Śākya to each bag of rice and thus unmistakably, step by step, stating the names till they were finished. With this, Śākya Mahānāman and the others were all convinced that the Blessed One’s buddha-eye saw all things. They thought that the Blessed One’s explanation about death was surely right and commended him as follows:

1.45 “With his buddha-eye, he sees all.
Unlike the worldly, he does not lie.
He unmistakably knows the small bags of rice
Of everyone in Kapilavastu.

1.46 “The world lies about beings’ deaths
And how they appear in the beyond.
The Blessed One has spoken truly.
Praise and homage to you who sees all.”

They were at a loss for words after offering such praises, and thus remained silent.

1.47 The father, the Great King, then spoke. “Blessed One, there are sentient beings who have committed nonvirtues, such as the actions that bring immediate retribution, on account of which they come to experience the unbearable ripening of such actions. Please explain what sorts of things they should do to attain happiness.”

1.48 The Blessed One replied, “O Great King, those sentient beings who have committed nonvirtuous actions, like those actions that bring immediate retribution, will become pure if they sincerely believe in the [F.152.b] ripening of the actions and confess them deeply. If, at death, they regret the negative actions they committed earlier, pay homage, and go for refuge to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, their negativities will become pure; such beings will also be reborn in high states. Do not think that there are no future

lives. Nor should you think that rebirth is caused by God, arbitrarily, or through mere caprice and the like. Have no attachment to any worldly happiness or cyclic existence.

1.49 “O Great King, when you pass from this world to the next and take rebirth, it is not something permanent that transmigrates in this way,⁴⁶ nor something that is extinguished, halted, and hence nonexistent. It is neither uncaused, nor arisen from something without a cause, nor made by an external agent. Understand it to be produced by an aggregate of causes and conditions, that is, actions and afflictive emotions.”

1.50 The Great King then asked, “Blessed One, if the transmigration and rebirth of sentient beings is not the transmigration of something permanent, nor of something extinguished, nor without a cause, nor made by an external agent, and if, moreover, the established fact of rebirth in the world beyond is difficult to understand, are there any analogies for it?”

1.51 The Blessed One replied, “O Great King, there are eight analogies for rebirth: (1) the analogy of students learning that which is recited by the teacher, (2) a lamp being lit from another lamp, (3) a reflection occurring because of a mirror, (4) an impression and image coming from a stamp, (5) fire coming from a magnifying glass, (6) a sprout arising from a seed, (7) the production of saliva when someone says the word ‘sour,’ and (8) the sound of an echo. O Great King, in these eight analogies, the fact that earlier things give rise to the later ones illustrates how nothing permanent transmigrates. The fact that later things arise from [F.153.a] earlier ones illustrates how transmigration and rebirth do not occur without a cause and that they are not of something extinguished and halted.

1.52 “Furthermore, O Great King, all of these analogies are things that come about when three conditions are gathered together. When there are teachers, students, and sense faculties, we have recitation and language learning. When there exist butter, wicks, and vessels, we have lamps. When there are bright skies, faces, and mirrors, we have reflections. When there are signets, lumps of clay, and human manual effort, we have impressions and images from stamps. When there are crystals, sunlight, grass, and wood, we get fire. When there are seeds, earth, and moisture, we get sprouts. When there is salt, a previous experience of drinking salty water, and when the word ‘sour’ is pronounced, people then begin to salivate. When someone speaks, when there is no other loud sound, and when there is a nearby mountain, then an echo will occur. These are all analogies showing how sentient beings’ rebirths are not made by external agents, but are produced through the causal conditions of actions and afflictive emotions.

- 1.53 “Furthermore, O Great King, the teacher illustrates this life; the student illustrates future lives; recitation illustrates how consciousness bridges the gap between lives. The earlier lamp illustrates this present life; the later lamp illustrates future lives; though the later lamp arose from the earlier lamp, the fact that the one existed before the other illustrates how nothing permanent transmigrates. That the later one arose from the earlier one illustrates how things do not occur without causes. The mirror illustrates how future lives exist because present lives exist, how nothing real transmigrates, and how future lives definitely do exist. The stamp illustrates how one takes rebirth in a future life in accordance with actions one has done in this life. The magnifying glass illustrates how one exists as one type of being and is then reborn as another. The seed illustrates how one does not cease and become nonexistent. The sour taste illustrates how one takes rebirth due to actions one has experienced. The echoing sound illustrates how one takes a rebirth when causes and conditions are present without other annulling conditions; [F.153.b] it illustrates how a [reborn individual] is not the same as or different [from that of the earlier life].
- 1.54 “O Great King, if I had not explained all eight analogies but had taught only some of them, then those who maintain that rebirth is due to God, arbitrary, due to mere caprice, or without any causes would use the Śramaṇa Gautama’s analogy of recitation to say that consciousness will transmigrate to the next life without losing the aggregates and consciousness of this life. To refute those who might say this, I taught the remaining analogies.
- 1.55 “Some might use the analogy of the lamp to say that the aggregates in both this life and the next exist at one and the same time. To refute them I taught the remaining analogies.
- 1.56 “Some others might use the mirror analogy to say that the lame are reborn lame and the fair are reborn fair because the mirror illustrates similarity. To refute them I taught the remaining analogies.
- 1.57 “Others might use the analogy of the stamp to say that gods who have died are reborn as gods and that humans who have died are reborn as humans. To refute them I taught the remaining analogies.
- 1.58 “Yet others might use the analogy of the magnifying glass to say that from virtue come the lower realms and from nonvirtue comes high status because a magnifying glass illustrates dissimilarity.⁴⁷ To refute them I taught the remaining analogies.
- 1.59 “Some might use the analogy of the seed to say that one consciousness grows to be many. To refute them I taught the remaining analogies.
- 1.60 “Some too might use the analogy of a sour taste, because it illustrates experience, to say that those who have a history of rebirth as gods will be reborn as gods even though they have not done virtuous deeds, and that

those who have a history of rebirth in the lower realms will be reborn in the lower realms even though they have done no nonvirtuous deeds. To refute them I taught the remaining analogies.

1.61 “Yet some others might use the analogy of the echoing sound to say that rebirth does not come from causes and conditions, as they would maintain that such an analogy illustrates agency. To refute them I taught the remaining analogies. It is for these reasons that I taught all eight analogies.

1.62 “O Great King, it is not the case that life ceases, with no rebirth in the hereafter, and that it is extinguished and halted. Neither is this life a permanent entity that transmigrates to the hereafter intact. People cannot take rebirth in the hereafter without any dependence upon this life. Nor do they have a rebirth by simply thinking that they [F.154.a] will take such and such a rebirth. Rebirth does not occur because people think that they rely on God and the like, and that they will thus be reborn in the heavens. Nor do people take rebirth thinking that they will be reborn wherever they wish, whether in the heavens or in the lower realms. And rebirth does not occur because people think that they will in any case be reborn, even without doing anything and irrespective of causes and conditions.

1.63 “Nor can one say that one’s aggregates perish, one dies, and that afterward there is nothing at all. One cannot say either that after death in this world, people in the afterlife abide continuously⁴⁸ in the ‘world of Death,’ and thus do whatever they did in this life without taking rebirth. Nor can one say that consciousness takes rebirth without any halt to the consciousness one has in the present life. One cannot say that the aggregates of this life and the next exist at the same time. Nor can one say that the lame are reborn lame, the fair are reborn fair, and so forth. One cannot say that gods who have died are reborn as gods and that humans who have died are reborn as humans. Nor can one say that virtue leads to the lower realms and that nonvirtue leads to higher status. Many consciousnesses do not develop from one. Beings are not reborn as gods without having practiced virtue, nor are they reborn in the lower realms without having committed some nonvirtuous deeds. Rebirth is not brought about through the actions of an external agent.

1.64 “Let us suppose someone asks why these things are not the case. Here is what we would reply. Someone might say about the analogy of a recitation that it shows that one takes rebirth in the next life without the consciousness of this life perishing. To eliminate this misinterpretation we put forth the analogy of the seed. Indeed, if a sprout were to be produced without the seed being destroyed, then the positions of those who accept real selves would be right. However, the sprout is produced upon the destruction of the seed—that is, from something that has changed from what it was earlier on.

- 1.65 “Someone might say about the analogy of the lamp that it shows that the aggregates of this life and the next exist at one and the same time, because when one lamp is lit from another they both exist at the same time. It is in order to rule out this misinterpretation that we put forth the analogy of echoing sound. An echo does not resound without a person having first spoken and does not occur at the same time as that speech. So the aggregates do not exist at the same time. [F.154.b].
- 1.66 “About the illustration of the mirror, it might be said that lame people are born from lame people because of the similarity the mirror illustrates. To refute such ideas we put forth the analogy of the magnifying glass, for a magnifying glass gives rise to a fire from which it is dissimilar.
- 1.67 “Someone might say that the analogy of the stamp shows that dead gods are born as gods and dead people as people. To rule this out we put forth the analogy of a recitation: what illustrates the present life is the teacher and what illustrates the next life is the student; as they are different, the teacher is not the student, nor the student the teacher.
- 1.68 “About the analogy of the magnifying glass, someone might say that it is an illustration of dissimilarity and thus shows that virtue leads to lower states and nonvirtue to higher states. To rule this out we put forth the analogy of a lamp. A lamp does not give rise to something dissimilar to a lamp, but rather to a lamp. Similarly, it is logical that virtue gives rise to high status and nonvirtue to lower states.
- 1.69 “As for the analogy of the seed, someone might say that it shows that [many different] consciousnesses develop. To rule this out we put forth the analogy of the stamp, for the image produced in the lump of clay is not other than that of the stamp.
- 1.70 “Because of the analogy of the sour taste, someone might say that those who experience a history of birth as gods will always be born as gods, in spite of doing no virtue, and that those who experience a history of birth in the lower realms will always be born in lower realms, though they have done no nonvirtue. To refute this we put forth the illustration of the mirror, for just as a face appears in a mirror as it is, so too the similar results of virtue and nonvirtue would match [their respective causes] and it would thus be contradictory to make them dissimilar.
- 1.71 “Some might say, with regard to the analogy of echoing sound, that echoes do not come about unless they are made by an external agent—that is, unless someone shouts. And analogously, so it might be said, beings are not born unless made by an external agent. To rule out that misinterpretation we put forth the illustration of the sour taste. The point is that it is those who

have previously had the experience of eating or drinking something who will later salivate when it is described, and likewise, it is because of previously engaging in actions and afflictions that one will later take rebirth.

1.72 “O Great King, let it be known that such are the ways sentient beings take birth, perish, and transmigrate from this life to the next.”

1.73 All the retinue [F.155.a] then rejoiced and praised what the Blessed One had said.

1.74 *Thus ends “The Sūtra of the Teaching Regarding Death and Transmigration.”*⁴⁹

c.

Colophon

c.1 The translation done at the time of the earlier dissemination of the teaching has not been modified at all with revised terminology.

ab.

ABBREVIATIONS

- A* Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*) of the Kangyur
BDRC Buddhist Digital Resource Center (www.tbrc.org)
C Choné (*co ne*) Kangyur
CDs Choné Drakpa Shedrup, *lho sgo'i cho ga'i rgyas 'grel*
D Degé (*sde dge*) Kangyur
L Shelkar (*shel mkhar*) or "London" manuscript Kangyur
MW M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*
Negi J.S. Negi, *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary*
S Stok Palace manuscript (*stog pho brang bris ma*) Kangyur
Y Peking Yongle (*g.yung lo*) Kangyur

n.

NOTES

- n.1 A natural reconstruction from the Tib. *dga' skyes*. However, there seems to be no information on this individual. There is, for example, nothing relevant in G.P. Malalasekera's *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* or in Negi.
- n.2 The sūtra regularly uses the term *gshin gyi 'jig rten*, which is not a usual term, but is probably the same as the more usual *gshin rje'i 'jig rten*, i.e., the Sanskrit *yamaloka*, the world of Yama, Death, or the lord of death and ruler over the various departed ancestors (*pitṛ*). Cf. Negi s.v. *gshin rje'i 'jig rten* (= *yamaloka*).
- n.3 Note that the Tibetan term *mes po* is often used in the sūtra to simply mean "grandfather," but in other places the sūtra clearly uses it to mean "ancestor." It is attested in the *Mahāvvyutpatti* 3880 and in other glossaries as the equivalent of *pitāmaha* (paternal grandfathers), which can also mean simply the *pitṛ* or "ancestors." See Monier-Williams, s.v. *pitāmaha*.
- n.4 On the four śrāddha-rites, see Sayers (2013), chapter 4. Brahmanical texts, like the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, advocate other offerings too, such as beans, barley, water, roots, fruits, cattle, buffalo, fish, and even rhinoceros. See Sayers (2013), pp. 107–8. *Āpastamba's* list does not, however, seem to match the offerings of the family of Nandaja, viz., "horses, elephants, clothes, and a variety of ornaments, gold and silver, pearls, crystals, and other jewels, and a variety of delicious and sweet food and drink."
- n.5 Cf. Renou and Filliozat (1985) vol. 1, §670: "All the images of future lives are physical; it is said in the *Atharvaveda* that cremation produces a new body that is *revitalized*, free from imperfections." Cf. also *ibid.* §674: "The term *fathers* (*pitṛ*) designates, in the *Vedas*, the first ancestors, the founders of the human race, those who gave their names to the brahmanical families. But more generally it designates the dead as a whole, providing that they have been cremated or buried according to the rituals." (Our translation from the

original French of Louis Renou). Sayers (2013) provides a recent and thorough treatment of brahmanical ancestor worship; see also Hopkins (1992) as well as Jamison and Witzel (1992/2003) on the role of Vedic ritual and the offerings of food (*piṇḍa*) in death and the afterlife. See also Knipe (1977) on *sapinḍīkaraṇa* and Bodewitz (1999) on the Vedic afterlife and the role of the god of Death (*yama*) in particular. Shushan (2011) gives an overview of the basic Vedic eschatology. Doniger O’Flaherty (1983) looks at the early Vedic and Purānic antecedents of theories of karma and reincarnation, notably the idea of *redeath* (*punarmṛtyu*), a type of dissolution of the afterlife that is to be *prevented* by ritual.

n.6 Sayers (2013), pp. 86–99.

n.7 See Namai (1991). The argument of Āryaśūra and Dharmakīrti alike is that consciousness can only exist when preceded by a previous consciousness; thus the initial consciousness of a baby must have an anterior consciousness in a previous life.

n.8 The Sanskrit of verse five of the *Pratītyasamutpādaḥṛdayakārikā*, as cited in Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā* 428.11–12 and 551.14 (ed. La Vallée Poussin), reads: *svādhyāyatīpamudrādarpaṇaḥhoṣārkaḥkāntabījāmlaiḥ / skandhapratīsamūdhiraśaṃkramaś ca vīvadavadbhir avadhāryau* / *Prasannapadā 428: upadhāryau*. The translation is our own, informed by the sūtra’s own explanation of the eight. Cf. the translations of this verse in May (1959), p. 259, and Skilling (1997), p. 253. For further canonical sources for each of the eight examples, see May (1959), n. 908 and n. 933. On the “sunstone” (*arkakānta* = *sūryakānta*), which is contrasted with the “moonstone” (*candrakānta*), see Lamotte (1949), p. 446, n. 1. Cf. Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala* II, 7: “Indeed, burning fiery energy lies hidden in ascetics focussed on calm, just as *sūryakāntas* which are cool enough to be touched spit out their [fiery energy] when another such energy prevails.” (*śamapradhāneṣu tapodhaneṣu gūḍaṃ hi dāhātmakam asti tejaḥ / sparśānukūlā iva sūryakāntās tad anyatejo’bhibhavād vamananti*). Less poetically put, a sunstone functions as a magnifying glass: it emits heat when aligned with the blazing sun.

n.9 Skilling (1997), p. 255: “The eight similes are not only identical to those of the *Pratītyasamutpādaḥṛdaya-kārikā*, but also occur in a very similar order: this is sufficient to establish a relationship between the two texts. We may therefore conclude that one of the texts is referring to the other. Since the similes are not only listed in the sūtra, but also described at length, and since the similes are only a part of the long sūtra, of which they form a natural component, I suggest that it is Nāgārjuna who has based his verse on the sūtra, and not

the composer or editor of the sūtra who has adapted Nāgārjuna's verse into his text. It is indeed characteristic of Nāgārjuna's style to give brief paraphrases of canonical passages in his important works, such as the *Madhyamaka-kārikās*, the *Ratnāvalī*, and the *Suhṛllekha*." Skilling points out that Sanskrit and Tibetan texts of Nāgārjuna's verse 5 have the eight analogies in slightly different orders, but that the order in the sūtra is *exactly* the same as that in the Tibetan of verse 5.

- n.10 The other entry for *tshe 'phos pa* in the *Mahāvīyutpatti*, i.e., 2980, gives the Sanskrit as *jātivyatīvṛttaḥ*, "one who has left birth"; the Tibetan given here is *tshe 'phos pa'am tshe rjes pa*, "leaving life or changing lives."
- n.11 See [n.40](#).
- n.12 Note too that in this version of the title found at the end of the text, *bstan pa'i mdo* ("The Sūtra Teaching...") replaces *zhus pa'i mdo* (The Sūtra of Questions Regarding...). This title given at the end of the text is the one that figures in Butön's list of canonical translations (F.144.b), Situ Pañchen's catalogue (*dkar chag*) of the Degé Kangyur (F.134.b), and quite frequently (or as the variant *'chi 'pho ba ji ltar 'gyur ba lung bstan pa'i mdo*) in later commentarial literature citing the sūtra.
- n.13 The *them spangs ma* recension Kangyurs have *Āyuhyathabhutāgrahapariṣcchāsūtra* (S, L: *Āyuhyathabhutāgrahasūtra*), which also remains dubious even when corrected to *Āyuhyathābhūtagrahapariṣcchāsūtra* (S: *Āyuhyathābhūtagrahasūtra*). Cf. Skilling (1997), p. 257: "Both titles seem awkward and unlikely, and may be later concoctions."
- n.14 The sūtra is absent from both early ninth century inventories, the Denkarma (*ldan dkar ma*) and Phangthangma (*'phang thang ma*), but is mentioned in Butön's fourteenth century list of canonical texts. On Tibetan institutions of translation and their procedures, before and during the ninth century, see Scherrer-Schaub (2002), which also provides, *inter alia*, a bibliography of the main research on these subjects.
- n.15 See [Bibliography](#) and [Abbreviations](#) for details.
- n.16 We find *sman pa* in all editions. It clearly needs to be read in its attested sense of *phan pa* ("benefit") and not in the sense of "a doctor." See Zhang Yisun et al. (1985), s.v. *sman pa*.
- n.17 *gsol ba* = honorific for *lto chas*.
- n.18 *ris 'thun pa*. The term is later replaced by *mes po*, "ancestors."

- n.19 It is clear in the reply later that the type of “switching” being discussed is one that would occur arbitrarily, without karmic or other causes.
- n.20 *phyir zhing mang ba*, literally, “once again many / more.”
- n.21 *mang ba*, “more.”
- n.22 *rang gi sems kyang rang gis mi mthong na*. Here the point seems to be that they do not literally see their minds. Seeing is reserved for physical objects.
- n.23 *thog ma mes po gcig las gyes pa yin na*.
- n.24 The argument seems to be as follows. Among our presently existing kin some are enemies (*dgra*), unfriendly to each other, while some are not. If we take the collection of kinfolk from the first ancestor on, the same would hold. We thus could not determine that our kinfolk are precisely the ones associated as friends (*grogs*), and other people’s kin are the ones that are not.
- n.25 *phyogs gcig nas*. The textual passage is long and difficult, and the translation is therefore unsure. It appears that the argument is essentially an elaboration on the argument of the previous paragraph. A collection of ancestors, some of whom are very different from and even antagonistic to the others, would have to be somehow apprehended and befriended as a unified harmonious party.
- n.26 *rnyed pa = lābha*.
- n.27 *dri za ‘chi ka ma’i sems la nye bar ‘jug pa zhes bya ba’i rigs*. We unfortunately have no information on this type of *gandharva*.
- n.28 Read with D, A, S, L: *da ltar tshe ma ‘phos pa’i rang gi pha ma*. CDs: *da ltar tshe ‘phos pa’i rang gi pha ma*.
- n.29 *mi des rmis pa bzhin du gang rmis pa’i pha ma’am / spun zla’am / bran khol lam gzhan su yang rung ba rmi lam na snang ba der* tshor ba yod na ni rmis pa de bden pa yin na / des rmis pa’i pha ma’am / spun zla’am / bran khol lam / gzhan su yang rung rmi lam na snang ba de bden par ji ltar bzung / . *S, L: der; D, A: des. CDs appears to be truncated: mi des rmis pa bzhin du gang rmis pa’i pha ma’am / spun zla’am / bral [sic] khol lam / su yang rung ba rmi lam na snang ba des tshor ba yod na ni rmis pa de bden pa yin na / des rmis pa ltar med pas bden par ji ltar bzung. “If the parents, relatives, and servants they dreamed of, or any others appearing in their dream, actually were to have the feelings in question, just as that person dreamed they did, then that which they dreamed would have been real. They*

- do not exist as they dreamed them, so how could they be thought to be real?"
- n.30 D, A, S, L: *tshe 'phos pa'i rmis pa tshe 'phos pa de yin par ga la 'gyur*; CDS: *tshe ma 'phos pas rmis pa de tshe 'phos pa de yin pa ga la 'gyur*. "How could what is dreamed by a non-deceased person ever be that deceased person?"
- n.31 We read with S and L: 'grams. This is a variant of *gram*, the intransitive verb meaning "to be spread, dispersed, scattered." See Golstein (2004), s.v. 'grams. The numerous implausible variants in editions (D, A: 'drams; K, Y: 'drangs; C: 'drems; S, L: 'grams; CDS: missing) suggest that the word in question was not understood by scribes. A search of the BDRC site shows that 'drams (homophonous with 'grams) is not attested elsewhere.
- n.32 We follow D and A: *grong dang khang pa de la sems yod na ni khang pa de'i sems snang du rung na*. More literally, "If the city and house had a mind" (*sems yod na ni*). All witnesses in A, as well as S and L, have *sems* ("mind"), except for C as recorded in A, which has *sems can* ("being"). However, C does not have *sems can* in any of the subsequent text of this argument.
- n.33 A reads *des rdo*, but one should no doubt read *de sa rdo*. The intersyllabic dot (*tsheg*) appears quite clearly in S and L.
- n.34 Read *snang* with D; A has mistakenly recorded *snad*.
- n.35 We follow D, A: *bstangs*; S: *btang*; L: *gtang*.
- n.36 D, A: *bstangs*; S, L: *btang*.
- n.37 *gshin gyi 'jig rten* is not a usual term, but is probably the same as the more usual *gshin rje'i 'jig rten*, i.e., the Sanskrit *yamaloka*, the world of Yama, the lord of Death and ruler over the various departed ancestors (*pitṛ*). Cf. Negi s.v. *gshin rje'i 'jig rten* (= *yamaloka*). On the Vedic afterlife, *yamaloka*, see Bodewitz (1999), Shushan (2011).
- n.38 Read with S, L, CDS: *tshe 'phos pa la*; D, A: *tshe 'phos pa las*.
- n.39 Read with S, L: ... *rgyan thogs so zhes smra na / de ltar snang ba de yang...*; D, A, CDS: ... *rgyan thogs so // zhes smra zhing de ltar snang ba de yang...*
- n.40 We have translated on the basis of S and L. Here is the whole passage in those editions: *kye rgyal po chen po 'jig rten pa dag gang gis mthong ba dang / pha ma la sogs pas rmi lam du rmi te / tshe 'phos pa la bsngos pas gshin de bza' btung gis mgu'o // bzhon pa zhon no // *gos gon no* // rgyan thogs so zhes smra na / de ltar snang*

*ba de yang bza' btung gis mi mgu'o // zhon pa med do // **gos mi gon no** // rgyan mi thogs so zhes smra zhing de ltar snang ba dag dri za 'chi ka'i sems la nye bar 'jug pa dang / mi ma yin pa dag gis de ltar snang bar byed pa yod do // *...* omitted in L. **...** omitted in L. The Tibetan text may be corrupt in all editions; it has a seeming over-use of the phrase *de ltar snang ba* several times in the same sentence. We have tried to take them into account as best as possible, but the translation remains tentative. The basic point, however, seems to be as earlier (see [1.25](#)), viz., people think that offerings will enable the dead to eat, ride, be clothed, etc., but what actually happens is that certain sorts of gandharvas create an apparition of a dissatisfied deceased person so that they themselves can profit from the clothes, food, etc., offered by relatives to the deceased.*

- n.41 There are quite divergent readings of more or less equal plausibility. We read with D and A: *tshe ma 'phos pa'i mtshan ma dang dan rtags 'jig rten pa gang dag smra ba ni*. CDs: *tshe 'phos pa'i mtshan ma dang dan rtags 'jig rten pa gang dag smra ba ni*; S, L: *tshe ma 'phos pa'i mtshan ma dang dan rtags dang bcas pa'i 'jig rten pa gang dag smra ba ni*. "What one calls worldlings who have characteristics and distinctive signs of the living...."
- n.42 The Sanskrit names for the sorts of gandharva and bhūta spirits are given with variants in the canonical editions as well as in CDs. We have followed D and A here, but are unable to ascertain the correct Sanskrit names for these spirits and have simply given the Tibetan transcription as is. Cf. S, L: *ba tsi na* and *ba ra hin ti*.
- n.43 *bsgrub*.
- n.44 *shing tha dad pa brgya stong bye ba dag*; literally, "the one hundred thousand times ten billion different sorts of wood."
- n.45 *'dod sred*. This term has Sanskrit equivalents, but it is not sufficiently clear what the equivalent would be if it is being used as a proper name.
- n.46 Here the term *'pho ba* clearly has the sense of "transmigrate," "pass from one life to the next." When the Tibetan reads *rtag pa mi 'pho* here, i.e., "it is not something permanent that transmigrates/passes," the Tibetan *mi 'pho* is to be understood like the Sanskrit term *asaṃkrama* (= Tib. *mi 'pho ba*) in verse 5 of the *Pratītyasamutpādayakārikā*. See [i.10](#) in our introduction.
- n.47 The point seems to be that the *sūryakānta* itself is cool to the touch and yet it emits heat. See [n.8](#) for a verse from Kālidāsa to this effect.

n.48 The term *mu chags su* is obscure. We have taken it as having a sense like that of *mu mthud kyis*, “continually.”

n.49 The title given here at the end of the sūtra, in all Kangyurs, is *'chi 'pho ba ji ltar 'gyur ba bstan pa'i mdo*, and differs from the main title at the beginning. See [i.11](#) and [n.12](#).

b.

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GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for names and terms of the corresponding ·
source language

AS	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in a manuscript used as a source for this translation.
AO	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other manuscripts with a parallel or similar context.
AD	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in dictionaries matching Tibetan to the corresponding language.
AA	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where the relationship between the Tibetan and source language is attested in dictionaries or other manuscripts.
RP	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan phonetic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the term.
RS	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan semantic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the semantics of the Tibetan translation.
SU	<i>Source unspecified</i> This term has been supplied from an unspecified source, which most often is a widely trusted dictionary.

g.1 actions that bring immediate retribution

mtshams med kyi las

མཚམས་མེད་ཀྱི་ལས།

ānantaryakarman

Matricide, parricide, killing an arhat, causing a schism in the monastic order, and drawing a buddha's blood with malicious intention. These actions are said to result in immediate birth in the hells.

g.2 afflictive emotion

nyon mongs

ཉོན་མོངས།

kleśa

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The essentially pure nature of mind is obscured and afflicted by various psychological defilements, which destroy the mind's peace and composure and lead to unwholesome deeds of body, speech, and mind, acting as causes for continued existence in saṃsāra. Included among them are the primary afflictions of desire (*rāga*), anger (*dveṣa*), and ignorance (*avidyā*). It is said that there are eighty-four thousand of these negative mental qualities, for which the eighty-four thousand categories of the Buddha's teachings serve as the antidote.

Kleśa is also commonly translated as “negative emotions,” “disturbing emotions,” and so on. The Pāli *kilesa*, Middle Indic *kileśa*, and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit *kleśa* all primarily mean “stain” or “defilement.” The translation “affliction” is a secondary development that derives from the more general (non-Buddhist) classical understanding of √*kliś* (“to harm,” “to afflict”). Both meanings are noted by Buddhist commentators.

g.3 ancient linguistic usage

brda rnying

བར་རྟེན།

—

Translational terminology used before the revisions and codification of the ninth century.

g.4 blessed one

bcom ldan 'das

བཙེམ་ལྷན་འདས།

bhagavat

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

In Buddhist literature, an epithet applied to buddhas, most often to Śākyamuni. The Sanskrit term generally means “possessing fortune,” but in specifically Buddhist contexts it implies that a buddha is in possession of six

auspicious qualities (*bhaga*) associated with complete awakening. The Tibetan term—where *bcom* is said to refer to “subduing” the four *māras*, *ldan* to “possessing” the great qualities of buddhahood, and *'das* to “going beyond” *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*—possibly reflects the commentarial tradition where the Sanskrit *bhagavat* is interpreted, in addition, as “one who destroys the four *māras*.” This is achieved either by reading *bhagavat* as *bhagnavat* (“one who broke”), or by tracing the word *bhaga* to the root $\sqrt{bhañj}$ (“to break”).

g.5 buddha-eye

sangs rgyas kyi spyan

སངས་རྒྱལ་གྱི་སྤྱན།

buddhacakṣus

One of the five “eyes,” or qualities of vision, possessed by a buddha, viz., the eye made of flesh (*māṃsacakṣus*), the divine eye (*divyacakṣus*), the eye of insight (*prajñācakṣus*), the eye of Dharma (*dharmacakṣus*), and the buddha-eye. The buddha-eye is the omniscience seeing both how things are ultimately and how they manifest in their variety.

g.6 caprice

gyi na

གྱི་ན།

svecchā

g.7 catechu

seng ldeng

སེང་ལྗེང་།

khadira

Monier-Williams s.v. *khadira*: “Acacia Catechu (having very hard wood, the resin of which is used in medicine, called ‘Catechu,’ ‘Khayar,’ ‘Terra japonica’).”

g.8 chiliocosm

*stong gi 'jig rten gyi kham*s

སྟོང་གི་འཇིག་རྟེན་གྱི་ཁམས།

sāhasralokadhātu

A “thousandfold universe,” also called a “small chiliocosm” (*sāhasracūḍiko lokadhātu*), consisting of a thousand worlds each made up of their own Mount Meru, four continents, sun, moon, and god realms.

g.9 demons

mi ma yin pa

མི་མ་ཡིན་པ།

amānuṣa · amanuṣya

Literally “the non-humans,” i.e., demonic spirits.

g.10 Desire

'dod sred

འདོད་སྤྱད།

—

A member of the Śākya clan.

g.11 Devadatta

lha sbyin

ལྷ་སྤྱིན།

devadatta

The Śākyan cousin of the Buddha traditionally depicted as eager for gain and jealous of the Buddha’s fame.

g.12 dichiliocosm

stong gnyis pa 'jig rten gyi khams

སྟོང་གཉིས་པ་འཇིག་རྟེན་གྱི་ཁམས།

dvisāhasralokadhātu

A “twice thousandfold universe,” i.e. a millionfold universe, sometimes called a “second-order mid-sized-chiliocosm” (*dvitīyamadhyamasāhasralokadhātu*), consisting of a thousand chiliocosms (q.v.).

g.13 echo

brag ca

བྲག་ཅ།

pratiśrutkā

g.14 echoing sound

sgra

གྲ།

ghoṣa

g.15 external agent

byed pa po

ཀྱེད་པ་པོ།

kartṛ

g.16 gandharva

dri za

དྲི་ཟ།

gandharva

Here and very frequently in the canonical texts, a type of non-human, semi-divine celestial being or spirit. In a very few texts (but not this one), e.g. *The Questions of Bhadrāpāla the Merchant*, the term is also used to refer to the consciousness of a being between death and the next rebirth.

g.17 God

dbang phyug

དབང་ཕྱུག།

īśvara

The lord of the world; the permanent, single agent who created the universe; God as accepted by theistic brahmanical schools.

g.18 gooseberry

skyu ru ra

སྐུ་རུ་ར།

āmalaka · āmalakī

The Indian gooseberry, or emblic myrobalan. The simile of an āmalakī in the palm of one's hand is used to illustrate yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*) where the clarity aspect (compared to a crystal) is emphasized. See, e.g., Dharmottara's *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* 1.11. It is also used to illustrate omniscience, or seeing all aspects of things, probably on the analogy of being able to see through the semi-transparent skin of the berry into its interior structure.

g.19 heavens

mtho ris

མཐོ་རིས།

svarga

The realms of gods according to Buddhism; in Vedism the blissful afterlife presided over by Yama.

g.20 Kapilavastu

ser skya'i grong khyer

སེར་སྐྱའི་གྲོང་ཁྱེར།

kapilavastu

The city in the Śākya kingdom where Gautama Buddha grew up. It is located on the northern side of the Gangetic plain near Lumbini.

g.21 Kaya

ka ya

ཀ་ཡ།

kaya

A member of the Śākya clan.

g.22 lamp

mar me

མར་མེ།

dīpa

g.23 magnifying glass

me shel

མེ་ཤེལ།

arkakānta · sūryakānta

Literally, a “sunstone” or “sun-crystal.”

See also n.8.

g.24 Mahānāman

ming chen

མིང་ཆེན།

mahānāman

A Śākya cousin of the Buddha. See Malalasekera s.v. Mahānāma, son of Amitodana.

g.25 mirror

me long

- མེལ་དཀ
darpaṇa
- g.26 Nandaja
dga' skyes
 དགའ་སྐྱེས།
nandaja
 See also n.1.
- g.27 Nandaka
dga' byed
 དགའ་བྱེད།
nandaka
 A member of the Śākya clan.
- g.28 omniscient
thams cad mkhyen pa · kun mkhyen
 ཐམས་ཅད་མཁྱེན་པ། · ཀུན་མཁྱེན།
sarvajña
- g.29 recitation
kha ton
 ལ་ཏོན།
svādhyāya
- g.30 revised terminology
skad gsar chad
 སྐད་གསལ་རྩམ་ཆད།

—

The ninth century revision and codification of translational equivalents and procedure in Tibet. It was undertaken during the reigns of Senalek (*sad na legs*, d. 815 CE) and Ralpachen (*ral pa can*, r. 815–838) and resulted in the *Mahāvoyutpatti* and *Drajaor Bampo Nyipa* (*sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa*), the very influential manuals of translation from Sanskrit to Tibetan.

- g.31 Śākya
shAkya

सूक्त

śākya

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

Name of the ancient tribe in which the Buddha was born as a prince; their kingdom was based to the east of Kośala, in the foothills near the present-day border of India and Nepal, with Kapilavastu as its capital.

g.32 seed

sa bon

ས་བོན།

bīja

g.33 sour taste

skyur ba

སྐྱུར་བ།

amla

g.34 Śramaṇa Gautama

dge sbyong gau ta ma

དགེ་སྐྱོང་གོ་ངམ།

śramaṇa gautama

“The renunciant Gautama,” the name by which the Buddha might have been referred to prior to his enlightenment or by those who were not his followers.

g.35 stamp

rgya

ཀྲི།

mudrā

A stamp, signet, or seal.

g.36 Śuddhodana

zas gtsang ma

ཟས་གཙང་མ།

śuddhodana

The Buddha’s father, a Śākyan king.

g.37 trichiliocosm

stong gsum gyi stong chen po'i 'jig rten gyi kham

སྟོང་གསུམ་གྱི་སྟོང་ཚེན་པོའི་འཇིག་རྟེན་གྱི་ཁམས།

trisāhasramahāsāhasralokadhātu

A “thrice thousandfold universe,” i.e. a billionfold universe, sometimes called a “third-order great chiliocosm” (*trīyamahāsāhasralokadhātu*), consisting of a billion worlds, i.e. a million chiliocosms (q.v.), or a thousand dichiliocosms (q.v.).

g.38 waved-leaf fig tree

blag sha

ལྷག་ཤ།

plakṣa

Monier-Williams s.v. plakṣa: “Ficus Infectoria (a large and beautiful tree with small white fruit).”

g.39 world of Death

gshin gyi 'jig rten

གཤིན་གྱི་འཇིག་རྟེན།

yamaloka

The Vedic afterlife presided over by the lord of death, Yama, and inhabited by the ancestors (*pitr*).

See also [n.2](#).