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The Father and Mother Sūtra

Pitṛmāṭṛsūtra



Toh 315
Degé Kangyur, vol. 72 (mdo sde, sa), folios 169.a–169.b.

Translated by the Sakya Pandita Translation Group
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SUMMARY

- s.1 This short discourse was taught to an audience of monks in the Jeta Grove in Śrāvastī. In it, the Buddha explains, by means of similes, the importance of venerating and attending to one's father and mother. The Buddha concludes by stating that those who venerate their father and mother are wise, for in this life they will not be disparaged, and in the next life they will be reborn in the higher realms.

ac.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ac.1 This sūtra was translated from Tibetan into English by Khenpo Kalsang Gyaltzen and Chodrungma Kunga Chodron. It was then edited and introduced by the 84000 editorial team.

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

i.

INTRODUCTION

Main Section

i.1

In this brief sūtra, the Buddha proclaims the importance of respect for and service to one's parents. By making use of similes to explain to the assembly of monks how exalted a child's service to their father and mother is, he proclaims one's parents worthy of gifts and tender care. The Buddha concludes the sūtra by stating that those who venerate their father and mother are wise, for in this life they will not be disparaged, and after death they will be reborn in the higher realms.

i.2

There is no known Sanskrit version of this sūtra, and it survives only in Tibetan canonical translations. Since there is no colophon at the end of the sūtra, and as the text is not included in any of the early Tibetan inventories of translations produced during the eighth and ninth centuries, we also have no information concerning its original translation from Sanskrit into Tibetan.

i.3

The Chinese canon does not contain this sūtra,¹ though there are other popular sūtras in the Chinese canon that teach the importance of respecting and serving one's parents and ancestors. Two such sūtras are *yu lan pen jing* (盂蘭盆經, Taishō 685)² and *bao'en feng pen jing* (報恩奉盆經, Taishō 686). As the textual basis for the "Ghost Festival" (*yu lan pen*), these two sūtras both describe the efforts of Maudgalyāyana, one of the two main disciples of the Buddha, to save his mother, who had been reborn in one of the lower realms. Though these two sūtras were almost certainly originally composed in China, a similar narrative of Maudgalyāyana locating his mother after her death in order to assist her is also found in *The Chapter on Medicines* in the *Vinayavastu* (Toh 1-6, 2.326 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh1-6.html#UT22084-001-006-717>)-2.337 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh1-6.html#UT22084-001-006-734>)), which was composed in India. That account begins with Maudgalyāyana recalling a discourse of the Buddha about repaying the kindness of one's parents.³ However, the contents of these sūtras in the Chinese canon and *The Chapter on Medicines* are quite different from that of this particular sūtra, which makes it a valuable addition to the Buddhist literature on what is often called "filial piety."

i.4 This translation into English is based on the version in the Degé Kangyur, with reference to the Comparative Edition (*dpe sdur ma*) and the Stok Palace manuscript. There were no variants that would alter the English translation.

The Father and Mother Sūtra

1.

The Translation

[F.169.a]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was dwelling with a saṅgha of hearers in Śrāvastī, in the Jetavana, in the park of Anāthapiṇḍada. At that time, the Blessed One proclaimed:

1.2 “Monks, those householders who properly venerate and attend to both their father and mother dwell with Brahmā. Why is that? Monks, from the perspective of the family, the father and mother of a child of noble family are like Brahmā.

1.3 “Monks, those householders who properly venerate, honor, and attend to both their father and mother [F.169.b] dwell with teachers. Why is that? Monks, from the perspective of the family, the father and mother of a child of noble family are like teachers.

1.4 “Monks, those householders who properly venerate, honor, and attend to both their father and mother dwell with those worthy of receiving offerings. Why is that? Monks, from the perspective of the family, the father and mother of a child of noble family are those worthy of receiving offerings.

1.5 “Monks, those householders who properly venerate, honor, and attend to both their father and mother dwell with humans. Why is that? Monks, from the perspective of the family, the father and mother of a child of noble family are like humans.

1.6 “Monks, those householders who properly venerate, honor, and attend to both their father and mother dwell with gods. Monks, from the perspective of the family, the father and mother of a child of noble family are like gods.”

1.7 That is what the Blessed One proclaimed. The Well-Gone One having said that, the Teacher proclaimed this, too:

“Father and mother—both are Brahmā

And, likewise, one's first teachers.
Worthy of their children's every gift,
They are humans and they are gods.

1.8 "Therefore, they are worthy of prostration.
They are to be massaged⁴ and bathed, their feet anointed.
The wise should also serve them with food and drink,
With clothing, bedding, and cushions.

1.9 "Those who serve their father and mother
Are, for that reason, wise.
In this life they will not be disparaged,
And at death they will go to the higher realms."

1.10 The Blessed One having proclaimed thus, the monks rejoiced and praised
what the Blessed One had said.

1.11 *This completes "The Father and Mother Sūtra."*

n.

NOTES

n.1 Ui et al. 1934, entry number 315.

n.2 This sūtra is also known in English as the *Ullambana Sūtra*.

n.3 This discourse has further parallels in the collections of *The Numerical Discourses* in both Pāli and in Chinese translation, as well as elsewhere in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*. For references, see note 105 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh1-6.html#UT22084-001-006-719>) in *The Chapter on Medicines*.

n.4 Translation tentative. The Tibetan is *dril ba*.

b.

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g.

GLOSSARY

g.1 Anāthapiṇḍada

mgon med zas sbyin

མགོན་མེད་བཟའ་སྤྱིན།

Anāthapiṇḍada

A wealthy layman and famous benefactor of the Buddha who purchased the Jetavana and donated it to the Buddhist community. He is better known in the West by the alternative Pāli form Anāthapiṇḍika.

g.2 Blessed one

bcom ldan 'das

བཅོམ་ལྷན་འདས།

bhagavat

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 also interpreted 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.3 Brahmā

tshangs pa

ཚངས་པ།

Brahmā

A high-ranking deity who presides over a divine world where other beings consider him the creator; he is also considered to be the lord of the Saha world (our universe).

g.4 **Hearer**

nyan thos

ཉན་ཐོས།

śrāvaka

This term, based on the verb “to hear,” means disciple, and it originally referred to those direct disciples of the Buddha Śākyamuni who had actually heard the Buddha’s teachings. It is also used to refer to those who aspired to the state of an arhat, in contrast to the bodhisattvas. More generally, it refers to those who were followers of the non-Mahāyāna traditions of Buddhism.

g.5 **Jetavana**

rgyal bu rgyal byed kyi tshal

རྒྱལ་བུ་རྒྱལ་བྱེད་ཀྱི་ཚལ།

Jetavana

“Prince Jeta’s Grove,” a grove near Śrāvastī that was given to the Buddha by the householder Anāthapiṇḍada. The Buddha is said to have spent most rainy seasons there, and it is therefore the setting for many discourses.

g.6 **Monk**

dge slong

དགེ་སློང་།

bhikṣu

This term refers specifically to a monk who has received ordination, the highest level of monastic initiation available in the Buddhist tradition. The Sanskrit term literally means “beggar” or “mendicant,” which refers to the fact that Buddhist monks and nuns—like other ascetics of the time—subsisted on alms begged from the laity.

g.7 **Śrāvastī**

mnyan du yod pa

མཉན་དུ་ཡོད་པ།

Śrāvastī

The capital of the ancient Indian kingdom of Kośala, and the setting for many sūtras, as the Buddha spent most rainy seasons outside the city. It has been identified with the present-day Sāhet Māhet in Uttar Pradesh on the banks of the river Rapti.

g.8 Well-gone one

bde bar gshegs pa

བདེ་བར་གཤེགས་པ།

sugata

An epithet applied to buddhas, often interpreted to mean “one gone to bliss.” It should be noted, though, that in Sanskrit the prefix *su-* (Tib. *bde bar*) is adverbial, and that *gata* denotes a state of being rather than literal motion, hence the current rendering of “well-gone one,” that is, “one who has fared well.”