

སྐྱའི་རྒྱལ་པོ་རྩ་སྐྱའི་ཚོགས་སུ་བཅད་པ།

The Verses of Nāga King Drum

Nāgarājabherīgāthā



Toh 325

Degé Kangyur, vol. 72 (sa), folios 204.b–208.b.

Translated by Sonam Tsering Ngulphu and Norzin Dolma
under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha

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SUMMARY

s.

- s.1 *The Verses of Nāga King Drum* contains the Buddha's narration of a tale from one of his past lives as the nāga king Drum. While traveling with his younger brother Tambour, they come under verbal attack by another nāga named Drumbeat. Tambour's anger at their mistreatment and desire for retaliation prompts Drum to counsel Tambour on the virtues of patience and nonviolence in the face of aggression and abusiveness. Through a series of didactic aphorisms, he advises his brother to meet disrespect and persecution with serenity, patience, compassion, and insight, in order to accomplish what is best for oneself and others. The Buddha now recounts King Drum's wise counsel as a helpful instruction for his own followers.

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ac.

- ac.1 Translated by Sonam Tsering Ngulphu and Norzin Dolma.

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INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1

*The Verses of Nāga King Drum*¹ is a short sūtra composed entirely in verse, in which the Buddha recounts an episode from one of his former lives as a nāga king to illustrate and explain the importance of practicing patience and nonviolence in order to maintain harmony within the monastic community. The sūtra refers to a time when discord had broken out among the monastic saṅgha. This prompts the Buddha to outline the types of behavior that are worthy of someone who has adopted the religious life. His lesson takes the form of a parable from one of his previous lives as a righteous nāga king named Drum. The story recounts how King Drum, accompanied by his brother Tambour, set out in search of the Dharma, only to encounter the belligerent nāga Drumbeat, who proceeds to harass and verbally abuse the two brothers. Tambour is unable to withstand such ill treatment from someone he considers inferior and, in a burst of anger, makes plans to lay waste to Drumbeat's city. However, King Drum intervenes with wise counsel as to why one should eschew violence at all costs and face belligerence with patience and wisdom. Tambour takes this message to heart, and his need for retaliation is assuaged. The Buddha concludes the sūtra by disclosing that in their past lives, he was King Drum, Ānanda was Tambour, and Devadatta was Drumbeat.

i.2

There are no known Sanskrit manuscripts or Chinese translations of this sūtra. As for the Tibetan translation, the text is found in Kangyur collections of different periods and is also recorded in the Denkarma² and Phangthangma³ catalogs of Tibetan imperial translations. Thus, it appears that it was first translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan no later than the early ninth century, as the Denkarma is dated to 812 CE. This provides us with the only information to date the Tibetan translation, as the text does not include a translators' colophon. Hence, we do not know the names of the Tibetan translators and editors involved in the translation. This English translation was prepared based on the Degé Kangyur in consultation with the Comparative Edition (Tib. *dpe bsdur ma*) and the Stok Palace Kangyur.

tr.

THE TRANSLATION

The Verses of Nāga King Drum

- 1.1 [F.204.b] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!
- 1.2 The Thus-Gone One has spoken
Of his past lives as a bodhisattva.
As these stories have been carefully collected,
Listen now with a faithful mind.
- 1.3 Once, when the perfect Buddha, the god of gods,
The Thus-Gone One, was still alive,
Some monks sought to get the better of each other,
Through rhetoric and other means.
- 1.4 The Great Sage overheard
The negative words uttered by the monks.
So the Sage summoned the saṅgha
And told everyone,
- 1.5 “You inflict harm on one another
By rhetoric and other means.
Such actions are not suitable
For those who have gone forth from home to homelessness.
- 1.6 “Engage in six practices
That are sure to always bring joy.
These are suitable
For those who have gone forth from home to homelessness.
- 1.7 “Monks, hear from me

- How I cultivated nonviolence
And strove for awakening,
Out of compassion for all beings.
- 1.8 “Wise persons who have heard this
Will avoid negative actions,
And for the sake of success and happiness,
Will engage in virtuous deeds.
- 1.9 “Once, there were two nāga kings
Who were brothers. [F.205.a]
The first was called Drum,
And the second, Tambour.
- 1.10 “They both abstained from killing, upheld morality,
And were known to possess great powers.
Displeased with their birth as nāgas,
They yearned for a human existence.
- 1.11 “Whenever they came across ascetics and priests
Who were disciplined and learned,
They transformed themselves into humans,
To offer their service and respect.
- 1.12 “Twice a month, whether on the eighth, fourteenth,
Or fifteenth day,
They practiced the rite of restoring vows
Involving the eight precepts.
- 1.13 “The two left their former home
And journeyed to a new land,
Where there lived, not far away,
A nāga named Drumbeat.
- 1.14 “Sensing the arrival
Of the two fine nāga brothers,
His mind was filled with arrogance and anger,
And he belched out a cloud of smoke.
- 1.15 “ ‘You two are not engaged in Dharma,
But are deceitful, undisciplined hypocrites,’ he said.
Drumbeat harassed them repeatedly
With hurtful words such as these.
- 1.16 “Hearing abuse from someone as lowly as he,

- Tambour grew enraged.
To his elder brother Drum,
He explained the things he had heard.
- 1.17 “ ‘O Drum, in this world of humans,
Hurtful words that cause much harm are spoken.
This toad-eater, born on the bank of a stream,
Is driving us away with venomous fangs.
- 1.18 “ ‘He harms both the animals who live in water
And the humans who live on land.
O Lord, though I may possess patience,
My mind cannot tolerate such abusive words.
- 1.19 “ ‘Let us now lay waste to his city,
His palace, and his relatives and attendants.
Having overthrown Drumbeat,
Let us then take leave of this place.’
- 1.20 “Hearing the words of his younger brother,
The mighty nāga king
Instructed him
By uttering these pleasing verses:
- 1.21 “ ‘Do not foster malice toward one
In whose home you have stayed for few days,
Or from whom you have received food and drink—
The virtue of gratitude is extolled by sublime beings.
- 1.22 “ ‘You would not cut off the leaves
Of a tree that has provided you shade,
No matter how briefly; [F.205.b]
Need we say anything of its trunk or branches?
- 1.23 “ ‘Trees of the forest, whether felled or burned,
Will grow again—of this there is no doubt.
But just as hands, when chopped off, do not grow back,
One who is hostile to his friends will find no lasting happiness.
- 1.24 “ ‘A bad person will abandon his friends,
No matter how long he is shown respect,
Or served delicious food and drink—
He is like an elephant in a grass hut.
- 1.25 “ ‘Just as the trees on riverbanks will fall,

- Persons who are deceptive and unreliable
Do not enjoy lasting friendship—
They are like white cloth simmered in plant dye.
- 1.26 “ ‘Should the wise desire
To cause displeasure to their enemies,
They must free their minds from negativities,
For this hurts them just as much.
- 1.27 “ ‘The oceans, mountains, and lands
Do not weigh us down.
But not repaying kindness
Does, in fact, weigh us down.
- 1.28 “ ‘People who are calm
Will repay kindness, acknowledge it,
And not squander it;
They are thus commended by the wise.
- 1.29 “ ‘The Dharma is joyful, and love is joyful,
Like a river with pleasant banks.
Similarly, those who rid themselves of pride and arrogance
And do not begrudge friends are indeed joyful.
- 1.30 “ ‘Conceit, deception, and arrogance;
Reliance on immoral friends; and
Conflict with the powerful—
These will ruin your reputation.
- 1.31 “ ‘Therefore, do not be conceited,
And completely relinquish anger.
When conceit and anger arise,
They completely ruin your reputation.
- 1.32 “ ‘Whoever lacks compassion for elders, infants, and the sick;
For the weak, helpless, and lowly; and
For those who are banished and helpless—
Such a person shall not be deemed human.
- 1.33 “ ‘If you leave your country and home,
And travel to a foreign land,
You must cultivate strong patience
To counter all harsh words.
- 1.34 “ ‘If suffering abuse in your own land,

It is better to live in the lands of others;
Because wherever you are not abused
Is your land, and they are your people. [F.206.a]

- 1.35 “ ‘Excellent beings, when subjected to abuse,
Give up beautiful wives and vast wealth.
Immoral ones, however, are entangled in these,
And end up drenched with abuse.
- 1.36 “ ‘Because prosperity is rare⁴
While poverty is abundant,
When people face ruin,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.37 “ ‘When left with no wealth and few options,
When your kin are weak,
Or when your rivals are strong,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.38 “ ‘When people indulge in immoral deeds,
Strongly crave sense pleasures,
And have little faith and no sense of shame,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.39 “ ‘When people show anger and
A profusion of malice,
And are spiteful toward others,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.40 “ ‘When people lack faith,
Prattle on like crows,
And resort to guile and deception,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.41 “ ‘When people are morally debased,
Act fiercely and callously,
And lack righteousness,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.42 “ ‘When people are ill-natured,
Overcome by false views,
And fierce and hateful,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.43 “ ‘When people are shameless and tell lies,

- Or resort to pointless, divisive, hurtful,
Gossipy, or divisive speech,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.44 “ ‘When people are bereft of noble ways,
Extremely arrogant, and inflated with pride,
And are jealous, greedy, and lacking in manners,
Just keep quiet and you will find joy.
- 1.45 “ ‘When living amidst people
Whose caste and paternal lineage
Are unknown,
It is not right to be prideful.
- 1.46 “ ‘When dwelling in a foreign land,
Sustained by others’ provisions,
For the sake of the land and peoples’ well-being,
Have patience when scorned by others.
- 1.47 “ ‘When living in a foreign land,
Sustained by others’ provisions,
If caught in a spiteful conflict,
Have patience when scorned by others. [F.206.b]
- 1.48 “ ‘When dwelling in a foreign land,
Sustained by others’ provisions,
Even if a lowly person tries to drive you away,
The wise should show patience.
- 1.49 “ ‘Alas! If I’m living in a backward land,
Where I meet vile companions,
Wicked people who fraternize with childish fools
Offer no reliable support.
- 1.50 “ ‘The wise, having considered this,
May befriend ignorant people;
Yet, they will refrain from resenting their hypocritical
Concern with wealth and amenities.
- 1.51 “ ‘Embers covered by ashes
Can burst back into flames,
When fueled with straw and twigs
And fanned by the wind.
- 1.52 “ ‘Burning through the straw and twigs,

- Fire spreads and blazes,
Burning ever more straw and twigs
And full-grown trees as well.
- 1.53 “ ‘Likewise, anger is like a wildfire,
Blazing from the fuelwood of thinking, and
Wreaking massive devastation
Upon oneself and others.
- 1.54 “ ‘Therefore, whenever anger arises,
The learned, in order to counter this,
Cultivate the attitude of love,
Which is the antidote to aggression.
- 1.55 “ ‘To be friendly when praised,
And unfriendly when not,
Should be immediately discarded,
For these are traits of childish fools.
- 1.56 “ ‘If these childish fools,
Who are like birds with their feathers plucked,
Were not so bereft of intelligence and in need of insight,
Then how would the learned eke out a living?
- 1.57 “ ‘But most childish people
Are bereft of intelligence and in need of insight;
Therefore, it is quite easy
For the learned and insightful to eke out a livelihood.
- 1.58 “ ‘The learned do not take joy in amassing wealth,
Nor they are bewildered or disturbed by poverty.
Since they preach what is beneficial to adopt,
Why do others not recognize it as wise counsel?
- 1.59 “ ‘The learned are without impetuosity—
They pay heed to what they have examined,
And having contemplated such subjects well,
They implement whatever is good for themselves and others.
- 1.60 “ ‘The learned do not indulge in negative deeds
For the sake of survival. [F.207.a]
Whether in pleasure or in pain,
They never forsake their virtuous goals.
- 1.61 “ ‘The learned are not deceitful,

- Being neither deluded, nor scornful, nor angry.
Misfortune does not cause them suffering—
So how could they be affected when others harm them?
- 1.62 “ ‘They are not the type of inferior person
Who is overly impetuous or diffident.
Keeping an even keel
Is a characteristic of such learned ones.
- 1.63 “ ‘Excessive impetuosity leads to perpetual resentment,
While excessive diffidence leads to perpetual loathing.
Therefore, by avoiding these two,
One should maintain a balanced position.
- 1.64 “ ‘Act deaf and mute at times,
But command like a ruler when the time is right.
Remain cool like a snow mountain at times,
But burn like fire when the time is right.
- 1.65 “ ‘Be humble like the grass at times,
But stand firm like a mountain when the time is right.
Act like a king at times,
But leave for the forest like a sage when the time is right.
- 1.66 “ ‘Accept hunger and thirst at times,
And embrace pain and pleasure at other times.
Avoid being exploited like a servant for the sake of wealth,
And do not let yourself be controlled by anger.
- 1.67 “ ‘Take pleasure in song and music at times;
And relish meat and alcohol.
Move cautiously like a deer at times,
Yet display the prowess of a predator when the time is right.
- 1.68 “ ‘Initially, assess whether or not the time is right,
Whether or not you have the necessary strength,
And whether there will be success or failure—
Only then should you act upon the matter.
- 1.69 “ ‘Be patient with those who are impatient,
And also with those who are patient.
Be patient with those who are weak,
And always with those who are strong.
- 1.70 “ ‘Since hostility never pacifies hostility, [F.207.b]

It is better to be patient with those who lack patience themselves.
Always be tranquil with those who are irritable,
And always ignore others' faults.

- 1.71 " 'Words of superiors are meant to intimidate, and
Words of rivals are meant to provoke a fight, so have patience.
The noble ones have declared that showing patience for the words of one's
inferiors
Is known as the supreme patience.
- 1.72 " 'Small-minded people who are impatient
With those who curse, speak rashly,
And use harsh words
Are like hail falling on a lotus flower.
- 1.73 " 'Those learned ones who demonstrate great patience
To those who curse, speak rashly,
And use harsh words
Are like a rain of flowers falling on an elephant.
- 1.74 " 'The learned, possessing wisdom,
Have patience for all those
Who are angry and deceitful,
And who use harsh words.
- 1.75 " 'A rock does not melt when burned,
Nor does it dissolve in the rain;
Likewise, the learned never succumb
To either happiness or pain.
- 1.76 " 'When justly scolded,
The learned remain patient;
But they also remain patient when unjustly accused.
No one demonstrates this apart from them.
- 1.77 " 'In this way, the learned may strive to endure
Tolerable suffering for the sake of wealth;
But if they can abandon intolerable miseries
And go elsewhere, it is like gaining a thousandfold.
- 1.78 " 'Don't try to reach and grasp for branches.
Instead, be free from desire, and don't let your mind become attached.
Since the Earth is filled with good and pleasant things,
Surely you can go elsewhere in this wide world?

- 1.79 “ ‘Wherever you are scorned, disrespected,
Ridiculed, or defamed,
It is better to leave quietly like a solitary buddha.
There is no good reason for the learned to keep company with fools.
- 1.80 “ ‘Wherever people take delight in conflict,
Entertain deceitful thoughts, are persistently malicious,
And indulge in gossipy, divisive, deceitful, or abusive speech, [F.208.a]
The learned will swiftly leave for other places.
- 1.81 “ ‘Wherever people indulge in violence
To make their living,
And are frivolous in thought, word, and deed,
The learned will swiftly leave for other places.
- 1.82 “ ‘Wherever people are overcome by jealousy,
And can never accept the success of others,
Or maliciously resort to treachery and duplicity,
Those who care for their own good must leave for other places.
- 1.83 “ ‘Wherever people are bent on committing evil,
Seek veneration while resorting to treachery and duplicity,
Or are impure both within and without,
Those who care for their own good must leave for other places.
- 1.84 “ ‘Wherever people lack respect, and
Are lacking good manners, proud, and arrogant, and
Wherever the childish constantly belittle the learned,
Those who care for their own good must leave for other places.
- 1.85 “ ‘Wherever you can find food and drink,
Clothing and sustenance,
Go there—
Dwell not in havens that breed desire.
- 1.86 “ ‘Abandon craving, which occasionally even causes fights,
Abandon arrogance, which is always inflated and vain,
Abandon anger, which bears only harmful consequences,
And abandon friends, who do not visit when you are in need.
- 1.87 “ ‘Abandon ignorance, which is like a fiery path;
Abandon desire, which is like an ungrateful friend;
Abandon attachment, which is like a nāga with terrifying fangs; and
Abandon suffering, which is like well-armed enemy.

- 1.88 “ ‘Abandon your wife, that horrific nāginī;
Give up your children, who are like fire burning on your head;
Give up your household, which is like a contagious disease; and
Give up desire, which is like a poisonous drink.
- 1.89 “ ‘For the sake of the family, one must give up a member;
For the sake of the town, one must give up a family;
For the sake of the country, one must give up a town; and
For one’s own sake, one must give up the world.
- 1.90 “ ‘For the sake of their limbs, people will give up money;
And for the sake of their lives, they will give up their limbs.
Yet, to practice the Dharma, one must give away everything—
Wealth, limbs, and even one’s life. [F.208.b]
- 1.91 “ ‘Those practicing the Dharma will have no fear.
Those practicing the Dharma will not go to the lower realms.
Those practicing the Dharma will go wherever they wish.
Those not practicing the Dharma will die and suffer.
- 1.92 “ ‘The learned take no joy in gaining wealth,
Nor do they lose their minds when it runs out.
The ability to move easily wherever one wants in the world
Is what makes humans so special among all its beings.
- 1.93 “ ‘Those who happily give to others,
Abandon arrogance and harm, remain truthful,
And possess oceanic minds
Are indeed courageous, valorous, courteous, and skillful.
- 1.94 “ ‘Whoever trains in all these things
Will become learned in all subjects.
Such gentle and amiable people
Will be praised by sublime beings.’
- 1.95 “ ‘Tambour then replied,
‘O Drum, as time has passed,
My faith in you has greatly increased.
Whether my body becomes emaciated,
- 1.96 “ ‘Or I lose my senses, I care not!
Even if I fall into unbearable suffering,
I shall not commit negativities in the future.
Rather than living with impaired discipline,

- 1.97 “ ‘It is better to die with my discipline intact.
Therefore, within a single lifetime,
I will train correctly and untiringly.’ ”
The Blessed One continued,
- 1.98 “In the past, wherever I dwelled,
And wherever I was born,
I wound up committing negative deeds
Due to keeping all sorts of negative company.
- 1.99 “Once I met a spiritual friend,
I abandoned negative deeds
And so I eradicated negative karma.”⁵
- 1.100 The Blessed Thus-Gone One
Knows the realities of all former lives.
Therefore, the Sage now turned to the monks
And spoke these words:
- 1.101 “In the past, I was Drum,
Ānanda was Tambour, and
Devadatta was Drumbeat.
Remember our past lives in this fashion.”
- 1.102 Having heard this meaningful discourse
That condenses the entire Dharma,
All the monks respectfully engaged
In the practice of the Dharma.
- 1.103 *This completes The Verses of Nāga King Drum.*

NOTES

n.

- 1 Although the Tibetan title literally translates into English as “The Verses of Nāga King Drumbeat,” we have decided to translate the title as *The Verses of Nāga King Drum* for the following reasons: First, the nāga Drumbeat (Tib. *rnga sgra*) is not the main protagonist of the sūtra, nor is he said to be a king. Second, the verses of advice that make up the bulk of the sūtra are spoken by Drum, not Drumbeat. Third, the transliterated Sanskrit title that is included in the Tibetan translation names the king Bherī, which in Sanskrit means “kettledrum.”
- 2 *ldan dkar ma*, Degé Tengyur, vol. 206, folio 301.a. See also Herrmann-Pfandt (2008), 159.
- 3 *dkar chag 'phang thang ma* (2003), 22.
- 4 Translated according to the reading in the Stok Palace and Shey Kangyurs, *rnyed pa dka'*, which seems to make most sense. The Degé, Lithang, and other Kangyurs have *rnyed pa dga'*, while the Peking (Qianlong) has *rnyed pa dkar*.
- 5 This verse only has three lines.

b.

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GLOSSARY

g.

g.1 **Ānanda**

kun dga' bo

ཀུན་དགའ་བོ།

Ānanda

The Buddha's cousin and principal attendant.

g.2 **Devadatta**

lhas byin

ལྷས་བྱིན།

Devadatta

A cousin of Buddha Śākyamuni who broke with him and established his own community. He is portrayed as engendering evil schemes against the Buddha and even succeeding in wounding him. He is usually identified with wicked beings in accounts of previous lifetimes.

g.3 **Drum**

mga

རྒ།

—

A nāga king; one of Buddha Śākyamuni's past lives.

g.4 **Drumbeat**

mga sgra

རྒ་སྒ།

—

A belligerent nāga; one of Devadatta's past lives.

g.5 **Eight precepts**

yan lag brgyad

ཡན་ལག་བརྒྱད།

aṣṭāṅgapoṣadha

Abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, intoxication, eating after noon, dancing and singing, and lying on an elevated bed.

g.6 **Great Sage**

drang srong chen po

དང་སྲོང་ཆེན་པོ།

maharṣi

Epithet of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

g.7 Nāga

klu

ལྷ

nāga

A semidivine class of beings who live in subterranean aquatic environments where they are known to guard wealth and esoteric teachings. Nāgas are associated with serpents and often assume a snakelike appearance. In Buddhist art and in written accounts, nāgas are regularly portrayed as being half human and half snake, and, as mentioned in this sūtra, said to have the ability to change into human form. Some nāgas are Dharma protectors, but they can also bring retribution if they are disturbed. Nāgas likewise fight one another, wage war, and destroy the lands of others by causing lightning, hail, and flooding.

g.8 Nāginī

klu mo

ལྷ་མོ།

nāginī

A female nāga.

g.9 Rite of restoring vows

gso sbyong

གསོ་སྦྱང།

poṣadha

A group of eight vows taken for one day on certain days of the month to restore one's connection to the virtuous path. The Tibetan translation glosses the practice (rather than translating the original Sanskrit) as "reviving (virtue) and purifying (nonvirtue)." The vows include the traditional five "lay precepts," plus the vows not to sit on high cushions or thrones, not to eat at inappropriate times, and not to engage in or listen to song or dance.

g.10 Sage

thub pa

ཐུབ་པ།

muni

Indian sage or wise man (often a wandering ascetic or hermit).

Here also used as a specific epithet of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

g.11 Śākyamuni

shAkya thub pa

ཤཱཀ་ཐུབ་པ།

Śākyamuni

The buddha of this age; the historical buddha.

g.12 Solitary buddha

rang sangs rgyas

རང་སངས་རྒྱལ།

pratyekabuddha

An individual who, in his or her final life, attains realization by realizing the nature of dependent origination without relying upon a spiritual guide.

g.13 Tambour

nye rnga

-

ཉེས།

—

A nāga king; one of Ānanda's past lives.

g.14 Thus-gone one

de bzhiñ gshegs pa

དེབཞིན་གཤེགས་པ།

tathāgata

A frequently used synonym for a buddha. The expression is interpreted in different ways, but in general it implies one who has arrived at the realization of the ultimate state.

Here used as a specific epithet of the Buddha Śākyamuni.