

༄། །རྟེན་ཅིང་འབྲེལ་བར་འབྱུང་བའི་མདོ།

The Sūtra on Dependent Arising

Pratītyasamutpādasūtra

འཕགས་པ་རྟེན་ཅིང་འབྲེལ་བར་འབྱུང་བ་ཞེས་བྱ་བའི་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on Dependent Arising

Āryapratītyasamutpādanāmamahāyānasūtra



Toh 980
Degé Kangyur vol. 101 (gzungs 'dus, waM), folios 99.a–99.b.

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co.

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s.

SUMMARY

s.1 While the Buddha is residing in the Realm of the Thirty-Three Gods with a retinue of deities, great hearers, and bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara asks the Buddha how beings can gain merit from building a stūpa. The Buddha responds by stating the Buddhist creed on dependent arising:

All phenomena that arise from causes,
The Tathāgata has taught their cause,
And that which is their cessation,
Thus has proclaimed the Great Renunciant.

The Buddha then explains that this dependent arising is the dharmakāya, and that whoever sees dependent arising sees the Buddha. He concludes the sūtra by saying that one should place these verses inside stūpas to attain the merit of Brahmā.

ac.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ac.1 Translation by the Buddhavacana Translation Group, Vienna, under the supervision of Khenpo Konchok Tamphel. This sūtra was translated into English by Rolf Scheuermann and Casey Kemp with the aid of Tom Tillemans.

This translation has been completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

The topic of this sūtra, as is evident from its title, is the Buddhist doctrine of the dependent arising of conditioned phenomena. This concept is considered by many Buddhists to be the essence of the teaching, the Dharma. Dependent arising is often presented as a series of twelve links (*nidāna*) of causes and effects that begins with ignorance and ends with death. This schema is found in many canonical texts, and is the principal topic of the two works that precede the present sūtra in the Degé Kangyur, the *Rice Seedling Sūtra* (*Śālistambhasūtra*, Toh 210), and the *Sūtra Teaching the Fundamental Exposition and Detailed Analysis of Dependent Arising* (*Pratītya-samutpādādivibhaṅganirdeśasūtra*, Toh 211).¹

i.2

The teaching on dependent arising is epitomized by the famous “creed” (*dhāraṇī*) in verse-form, stating that the Buddha teaches the causes for the arising of phenomena as well as that which is their cessation. This verse formula is perhaps best known from a narrative in the Vinaya recounting Śāriputra’s life. The story tells of Upatiṣya (as Śāriputra was called before he met the Buddha) first hearing about the Buddha from Aśvajit, one of the Buddha’s five erstwhile companions and earliest disciples. When Upatiṣya asks Aśvajit to summarize the very essence of the Buddha’s teaching, Aśvajit answers him by reciting this verse. As soon as he hears it, Upatiṣya immediately attains a preliminary state of realization.²

i.3

In the sūtra translated here, however, these same lines are taught to Avalokiteśvara by the Buddha himself.³ The Buddha then instructs his followers to insert them into stūpas in order to generate the merit of Brahmā, an extraordinary type of merit.⁴ The practice of inserting these verses, as well as impressing or inscribing them on religious images, appears to have become popular during the second half of the first millennium,⁵ and was observed by Xuanzang in the seventh century.⁶ The creed can be found inscribed on, or inserted within, miniature caityas or stūpas at holy sites throughout the Buddhist world such as Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, and Rājagṛha,

as far east as Kedah and Java, and as far west as Afghanistan.⁷ This practice was continued by the Tibetans into the second millennium and to this day it is considered by Buddhists to be a meritorious act.⁸

i.4 Xuanzang mentions that these objects were considered relics of the Dharma (*dharmasārīra*). Buddhist scripture came to be identified as a type of relic of the Buddha from the time of early Mahāyāna discourse, according to which worshipping the words of the Buddha was considered to be equivalent, if not superior, to worshipping the Buddha himself.⁹ Canonical sources, such as the *Rice Seedling Sūtra* (Toh 210), have furthermore equated dependent arising with the Dharma itself.¹⁰ Thus, inserting or inscribing the verse of dependent arising empowers an object just as a fragment of the Buddha's remains would.¹¹ Included in the Tibetan text of this sūtra is the Sanskrit transliteration of the verse, implying that they were used like a mantra or *dhāraṇī*;¹² the Sanskrit syllables are considered potent in their own right as a manifestation of the Dharma and thus of the Buddha himself.

i.5 The sūtra is found in three places within the Degé Kangyur: in the General Sūtra section (Toh 212), the Action Tantra section (Toh 520), and the Dhāraṇīs (Toh 980).¹³ In two of those locations, it is followed by duplicates of a short separate text (Toh 521, Toh 981)¹⁴ containing the verse of dependent arising, which is also, of course, cited in numerous other texts. To date we do not know of any extant Sanskrit original version of the sūtra,¹⁵ and although there appear to be a few minor spelling mistakes and inconsistencies found in some versions, there are no significant variations among the available Tibetan texts. One modern translation of the sūtra that should be mentioned is that of Peter Skilling, who published it along with some helpful notes on it in his 2021 collection, *Questioning the Buddha: A Selection of Twenty-Five Sutras*.¹⁶

The Translation
The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on
Dependent Arising

1. The Sūtra on Dependent Arising

[F.99.a]¹⁷

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was in the Realm of the Thirty-Three Gods, seated on the throne of Indra. With him were great hearers such as the venerable Aśvajit; bodhisattva mahāsattvas such as noble Maitreya, noble Avalokiteśvara, and Vajrapāṇi, who were adorned with immeasurable precious qualities; as well as various gods such as the great Brahmā, who is the lord of the Sahā world, Nārāyaṇa, the great Īśvara, Śakra, who is the chief of the gods, and Pañcaśikha, who is the king of the gandharvas.

1.3 On that occasion, the bodhisattva mahāsattva Avalokiteśvara rose from his seat and, having draped his upper robe over one shoulder, knelt down with his right knee on the peak of Mount Meru. His palms together, he then bowed toward the Blessed One and addressed to him these words:

1.4 “Blessed One, these gods all really wish to build a stūpa. Now that they are present in this entourage, please teach them the Dharma in such a way so that their merit of Brahmā will increase, and the merit of the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen will increase much more than that of all types of beings in the world of gods, māras, and Brahmā, including renunciants and brahmins.” [F.99.b]

1.5 At this, the Blessed One spoke the verses of dependent arising:

*ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato hy avadat
teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃvādī mahāśramaṇaḥ*¹⁸

“All phenomena that arise from causes,
The Tathāgata has taught their cause,
And that which is their cessation;
Thus has proclaimed the Great Renunciant.

- 1.6 “Avalokiteśvara, it is like this. This dependent arising is the dharmakāya of all the tathāgatas. A person who sees dependent arising sees the Tathāgata. Avalokiteśvara, if a faithful son or daughter of a noble family, who has built in an uninhabited place a stūpa—even one no bigger than a gooseberry fruit, with a central pillar the size of a needle and a parasol the size of a flower of the bakula tree—inserts into it this verse of dependent arising which is the dharmadhātu, he or she will generate the merit of Brahmā. When such persons pass on from here and die, they will be reborn in the world of Brahmā. When they pass on from there and die, they will be reborn with fortunes equaling those of the gods of the Pure Abodes.”¹⁹
- 1.7 After the Blessed One had thus spoken, the hearers, bodhisattvas, the whole assembly, and the universe of gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas rejoiced and praised his words.
- 1.8 *This concludes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on Dependent Arising.*

c.

Colophon

c.1 Translated and edited by the Indian preceptor Surendrabodhi and the principal editor and translator Bandé Yeshé Dé.²⁰

n.

NOTES

- n.1 For the first, see Reat (1993) and Dharmasāgara Translation Group (2018) (<http://read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-062-010.html>); for the second, see Bien (2020) (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh211.html>). There is a famous commentary to the *Pratītyasamutpādādivibhaṅganirdeśasūtra* entitled the *Pratītyasamutpādavyākhyā*, attributed to Vasubandhu. For an overview of the content of this sūtra and its commentary, see Mejer (1997a, 1997b).
- n.2 In the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya, the story is told in the *Pravrajyavastu*, the first chapter of the *Vinayavastu* (Toh 1-1), Degé Kangyur vol. 1 ('dul ba, ka), folios 32b *et seq.* For a translation, see Miller (2018), 1.232 (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh1-1.html#UT22084-001-001-554>) *et seq.* In the Pāli Canon, the same story is told in the Vinayapiṭaka (Mahāvagga I.23.1-10). See also Oldenberg (1997, pp 39-41).
- n.3 It would nevertheless seem significant, in view of the story mentioned in the previous paragraph, that this sūtra makes specific mention of Aśvajit, his name (unusually) being the only individual one used to represent the group of hearer disciples in the assembly.
- n.4 For a detailed study of the use of the concept of the merit of Brahmā in Buddhist inscriptions and textual sources, see Salomon and Schopen (1984). This article also includes a partial translation of the *Pratītyasamutpādasūtra* (see p 117).
- n.5 See Boucher (1991), p 1.
- n.6 See Boucher (1991), p 7.
- n.7 See Sykes (1856), pp 40 and 48; and Skilling (2003). Both articles outline some locations in which this “creed” has been discovered and the linguistic variations found among them.

- n.8 Bentor mentions that prominent Tibetan Buddhist figures such as Jetsün Trakpa Gyaltsen (*rje btsun grags pa rgyal mtshan*), the fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*), and Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé (*'jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha 'yas*) all list the verses on dependent arising (*rten 'brel snying po*) among the Five Great Dhāraṇīs (*gzungs chen sde lnga*) that are to be inserted into stūpas. See Bentor (1995), p 254.
- n.9 The identification of the Dharma with the Buddha himself is expressed in multiple early canonical sources, including the *Samyutta Nikāya* (III, 120), of the Pāli sūtra canon (*Suttapiṭaka*), in which the Buddha states, “He who sees the Dharma, Vikkali, sees me. He who sees me, sees the Dharma.” (*yo kho vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati, yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati*). *Ibid.*, p 2.
- n.10 *dge slong dag sus rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba mthong ba des chos mthong ngo/ sus chos mthong ba des sangs rgyas mthong ngo*, “Bhikṣus, whoever sees dependent arising sees the Dharma. Whoever sees the Dharma sees the Buddha.” (Dharmasāgara Translation Group, 2018, 1.3 (<http://read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-062-010.html#UT22084-062-010-12>)). For available editions of the relevant passage, see Reat (1993), p 27.
- n.11 This equivalence is made explicit in another sūtra preserved in Chinese, which may in fact be a slightly longer version of the same sūtra, titled *Sūtra on the Merit of Building a Stūpa by the Buddha*. Boucher (1991), pp 8-9, provides a full translation of this sūtra.
- n.12 This is also attested, of course, by the inclusion of a copy of this work (as Toh 980) in the *gzungs 'dus* (Dhāraṇī) section of the Kangyur.
- n.13 The present text (Toh 980), and all those contained in the same volume (*gzungs 'dus, waM*), are listed as being located in volume 101 of the Degé Kangyur by the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC). However, several other Kangyur databases—including the eKangyur that supplies the digital input version displayed by the 84000 Reading Room—list this work as being located in volume 102. This discrepancy is partly due to the fact that the two volumes of the *gzungs 'dus* section are an added supplement not mentioned in the original catalog, and also hinges on the fact that the compilers of the Tōhoku catalog placed another text—which forms a whole, very large volume—the *Vimalaprabhānāmakālacakratantṛāṭikā* (*dus 'khor 'grel bshad dri med 'od*, Toh 845), before the present volume, numbering it as vol. 100, although it is almost certainly intended to come right at the end of the Degé Kangyur

texts as volume 102; indeed its final fifth chapter is often carried over and wrapped in the same volume as the Kangyur *dkar chags* (catalog). Please note this discrepancy when using the eKangyur viewer in this translation.

n.14 See bibliography.

n.15 There is a version in Sanskrit, available on the internet and originally published by P.L Vaidya (*Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṅgraha*, part I, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 17, Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1961, p 119), which he reproduced from N. Aiyaswami Sastri (in *Ārya Śālistamba Sūtra, Pratītyasamutpādaḥvibhaṅgha Sūtra and Pratītyasamudtpādaḡāthā Sūtra*, Śāntiniketan: Adyar Library, 1950, pp 25-27). However, Sastri states that he back-translated his Sanskrit version from the Tibetan.

n.16 See Skilling (2021), pp. 269–75.

n.17 In the Toh 520 version of the text there is a slight discrepancy in the folio numbering between the 1737 *par phud* printings and the late (post *par phud*) printings of the Degé Kangyur. Although the discrepancy is irrelevant here, further details concerning this may be found in note 17 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh520.html#end-note-UT22084-062-012-88>) of the Toh 520 version of this text.

n.18 There are multiple variations of this creed found throughout the Buddhist world. See Sykes (1856) and Skilling (2003).

n.19 This last sentence is omitted in the otherwise identical copies of the work found in the Tantra and Dhāraṇī sections of the Kangyur, Toh 520 and Toh 980, respectively.

n.20 Mention of the translators is omitted from the colophon in the versions Toh 520 and Toh 980 (see previous note).

b.

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g.

GLOSSARY

g.1 Aśvajit

rta thul

རྟ་ཐུལ།

Aśvajit

One of the five ascetics who became the first disciples of the Buddha.

g.2 Avalokiteśvara

spyan ras gzigs

སྤྱན་རས་གཟིགས།

Avalokiteśvara

First appeared as a bodhisattva beside Amitābha in the *Sukhāvativyūha*. The name has been variously interpreted. “The lord of Avalokita,” Avalokita has been interpreted as “seeing,” although, as a past passive participle, it is literally “lord of what has been seen.” One of the principal sūtras in the Mahāsaṃghika tradition was the *Avalokita Sūtra*, which has not been translated into Tibetan, in which the word is a synonym for enlightenment, as it is “that which has been seen” by the buddhas. In the early tantras he was one of the lords of the three families, as the embodiment of the compassion of the buddhas. The Potalaka Mountain in South India became important in Southern Indian Buddhism as his residence in this world, but Potalaka does not feature in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*.

g.3 Bakula tree

ba ku la

བ་ཀུ་ལ།

bakula

Indian tree with a very fine flower.

- g.4 **Brahmā**
tshangs pa
 ཚམས་པ།
Brahmā
 The personification of the universal force of Brahman, who became a higher deity than Indra, the supreme deity of the early Vedas.
- g.5 **Central pillar**
srog shing
 སྟོག་ཤིང་།
yasṭi
- g.6 **Dependent arising**
rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba
 རྟེན་ཅིང་འབྲེལ་བར་འབྱུང་བ།
pratītyasamutpāda
- g.7 **Dharmadhātu**
chos kyi dbyings
 ཚོས་ཀྱི་དབྱིངས།
dharmadhātu
 In combination with *pratītyasamutpāda* (in this text *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba chos kyi dbyings*), the term *dharmadhātu* can refer to a type of Buddhist relic which is said to embody the essence of the Buddhist doctrine.
- g.8 **Dharmakāya**
chos sku
 ཚོས་སྐུ།
dharmakāya
 Dharmakāya or “body of dharma” refers to the Buddha’s realization of reality.
- g.9 **Gandharva**
dri za
 དྷི་ཟ།

gandharva

Gandharvas, lit. “smell-eaters.” A class of deities known for being skilled musicians. Also the name of spirits in the bardo state.

g.10 Gooseberry

skyu ru ra

ལྷུ་རུ་ར།

āmalaka

g.11 Great Renunciant

dge sbyong chen po

དགེ་སྦྱང་ཆེན་པོ།

Mahāśramaṇa

Epithet of the Buddha.

g.12 Īśvara

dbang phyug

དབང་ཕྱུག།

Īśvara

One of the most frequently used names for Śiva. A deity of the jungles, named Rudra in the Vedas, he rose to prominence in the Purāṇic literature at the beginning of the first millennium.

g.13 Layman

dge bsnyen

དགེ་བསྟེན།

upāsaka

Male lay devotees who have taken the five precepts.

g.14 Laywoman

dge bsnyen ma

དགེ་བསྟེན་མ།

upāsika

Female lay devotees who have taken the five precepts.

g.15 Maitreya

byams pa

བྱམས་པ།

Maitreya

Bodhisattva of loving kindness; the next buddha to follow Śākyamuni.

g.16 Māra

bdud

བདུད།

māra

Demon who creates obstacles to practice and enlightenment.

g.17 Merit of Brahmā

tshangs pa'i bsod nams

ཚངས་པའི་བསོད་ནམས།

brahmāpunya

Brahmic merit or pure merit refers to an extraordinary type of merit which leads to rebirth in the realm of Brahmā.

g.18 Monk

dge slong

དགེ་སློང་།

bhikṣu

Fully ordained Buddhist monk.

g.19 Mount Meru

ri rab

རི་རབ།

Meru · Sumeru

According to the ancient Indian cosmological system, Mount Meru is a mountain which forms the centre of the universe.

g.20 Nārāyaṇa

sred med kyi bu

སྲེད་མེད་ཀྱི་བུ།

Nārāyaṇa

An alternate name for Viṣṇu. The Sanskrit is variously interpreted, including as “dwelling in water,” but is most obviously “the path of human beings.”

g.21 Nun

dge slong ma

དགེ་སྤོང་མ།

bhikṣuṇī

Fully ordained Buddhist nun.

g.22 Pañcaśikha

zur phud lnga pa

ཟུར་ཕུད་ལྔ་པ།

Pañcaśikha

A gandharva known for playing the lute.

g.23 Pure Abode

gnas gtsang ma

གནས་གཙང་མ།

Śuddhāvāsa

Name for the five highest levels of existence within the form realm.

g.24 Sahā

mi mjed

མི་མཇེད།

Sahā

Indian Buddhist name usually referring to the trichiliocosm, the world system that is the universe of ordinary beings, but sometimes only to our own world with four continents around Mount Meru. It means “endurance,” as beings there have to endure suffering.

g.25 Śakra

brgya byin

བརྒྱ་བྱིན།

Śakra

Alternate name for Indra, the king of the gods in Hindu mythology.

g.26

Stūpa

mchod rten

མཚན་རྟེན།

stūpa

Reliquary for the remains of the Buddha or holy beings that represents the body of the Buddha.

g.27

Thirty-Three Gods

sum cu rtsa gsum

ལྷ་བུ་ཚ་གསུམ།

Trāyastriṃśāḥ

Name of a class of gods in the desire realm. There is also an associated heavenly realm, the Realm of the Thirty-Three Gods, which is named after these.

g.28

Throne of Indra

ar mo nig lta bu'i rdo leb

ཨ་རམ་ནིག་ལྷ་བུ་འི་རྩེ་ལེབ།

Pāṇḍukambalaśilātalām

A huge flat rock, Indra's throne in the Realm of the Thirty-Three Gods; it is called *Pāṇḍukambala*, "like a blanket," because it is made of a pale stone reminiscent of thick wollen cloth. Sakaki 7127 in the *Mahāvvyutpatti*.

g.29

Vajrapāṇi

phyag na rdo rje · lag na rdo rje

ཕྱག་ནེ་རྩེ། · ལག་ནེ་རྩེ།

Vajrapāṇi

First appeared in Buddhist literature as the yakṣa bodyguard of the Buddha, ready at times to shatter a person's head into a hundred pieces with his vajra if he speaks inappropriately to the Buddha. His identity as a bodhisattva did not take place until the rise of the Mantrayāna in such sūtras as the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* ([Toh 116 \(http://read.84000.co/translation/toh116.html\)](http://read.84000.co/translation/toh116.html)). However, although listed (paradoxically along with Avalokiteśvara) as being in the assembly that hears the teaching of this sūtra, in the sūtra itself he is grouped with the worldly spirits that Avalokiteśvara frightens.

