

། །སྤྲུལ་སྤྲུལ་ལྟར་ལ།

The Question of Maitreya (3)

Maitreyapariṣcchā

འཕགས་པ་བྱམས་པས་ལྷས་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa byams pas zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Question of Maitreya”

Āryamaitreyapariṣcchānāmamahāyānasūtra



Toh 149
Degé Kangyur, vol. 57 (mdo sde, pa), folios 330.b–331.a

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co.

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SUMMARY

- s.1 The bodhisattva Maitreya approaches the Buddha on Vulture Peak Mountain and asks him to explain the karmic results of teaching the Dharma. The Buddha responds by comparing the merit gained by a person who makes an unfathomably enormous material offering to the buddhas, to the merit gained by another person who teaches a single verse of Dharma, declaring that the merit of the latter is far superior.

ac.

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ac.1 This sūtra was translated by the Kīrtimukha Translation Group. Celso Wilkinson, Laura Goetz, and L.S. Summer translated the text from the Tibetan and Sanskrit.

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

INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1 On Vulture Peak Mountain in Rājagṛha, the bodhisattva Maitreya arises from an audience of monks and bodhisattvas and asks the Buddha to explain the karmic results of teaching the Dharma. The Buddha responds by comparing the merit gained by a person who makes an unfathomably enormous material offering to the buddhas, to the merit gained by another person who teaches a single verse of Dharma, declaring that the merit of the latter is far superior. The Buddha then concludes with a two-verse summary of his pithy explanation.

i.2 This very brief sūtra, found in the General Sūtra (*mdo sde*) section of the Degé Kangyur, is not to be confused with two other sūtras from the Ratnakūṭa (*dkon brtsegs*) collection of the Kangyur called *The Question of Maitreya* (Toh 85)¹ and *The Question of Maitreya on the Eight Qualities* (Toh 86),² which are longer and differ thematically from this sūtra.

i.3 While the longer *Question of Maitreya* is well known and has been the subject of several commentaries in the Tibetan tradition, this text seems to have been less utilized. We were only able to locate a few references to it, one of which is in a Prajñāpāramitā commentary by the Indian scholar Dharmamitra (twelfth century) on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, located in the Tengyur.³ This shorter *Question of Maitreya* is cited among a series of scriptural quotations regarding how bodhisattvas should not conceal teachings from students but offer them freely out of compassion.

i.4 There was no known Sanskrit original of *The Question of Maitreya* available until recently, when a manuscript containing a collection of twenty sūtras was found in the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Bhikṣuṇī Vinītā published a critical edition and English translation of this collection in the series Sanskrit Texts from the Autonomous Region (2010). Unfortunately, due to the inaccessibility of the manuscript collection and because it is missing a final colophon, its origin and date are currently unknown.⁴ There seems to be a thematic connection among these twenty sūtras: Vinītā notes that moral

discipline (*śīla*) is a recurrent theme in the manuscript,⁵ and we can likewise identify the prevalence of themes of karmic cause and effect and, as in the case of *The Question of Maitreya*, the hierarchy of merit.⁶ In our translation, citations of the Sanskrit are given using Vinītā's emendations of the handwritten manuscript.

i.5 While the Sanskrit manuscript is entitled *Āryamaitreyapariṣcchānāmamahāyānasūtra*, the Degé edition gives the transliterated Sanskrit title *Āryamaitri-pariṣcchānāmamahāyānasūtra*, a variation on the name of the bodhisattva Maitreya. Other Tibetan editions give similar variants, such as *maitre*, *metre*, or *mitri*. We have chosen to adopt the more familiar rendering (*maitreya*) for the title.

i.6 In addition to the Degé Kangyur, we have consulted the Comparative Edition (Tib. *dpe bsdur ma*) and several other editions, including those from Tshalpa, Thempangma, and independent lines, to compare and record variant readings. These editions are generally consistent and closely match the Sanskrit text. There is no known Chinese translation of this sūtra.

i.7 There are three sūtras entitled *The Question of Maitreya* listed in the imperial catalogs, but judging by this sūtra's length it likely corresponds to the "small" (*chung ngu*) *Question of Maitreya* recorded in both the Denkarma (*ldan dkar ma*) and Phangthangma (*'phang thang ma*) catalogs.⁷ This suggests that the sūtra was translated into Tibetan by the early ninth century at the latest, as the Denkarma catalog is thought to be dated to 812 CE.⁸ The sūtra lacks a translator's colophon, so it is not possible to identify its translators or more precisely determine the context of its transmission to Tibet.

i.8 In addition to the English translation found in Vinītā's critical edition of the Sanskrit manuscript, there is also a recent English translation by Peter Skilling, with helpful notes, in his 2021 anthology *Questioning the Buddha: A Selection of Twenty-Five Sutras*.⁹

i.9 We have based our translation primarily on the Degé edition of the Tibetan Kangyur, but we consulted the Sanskrit and other Kangyur editions in the case of questionable terms or passages, to establish the most plausible and accurate readings of the text. Any instance where we have diverged from the Degé has been noted, and any significant differences found in the various versions of the sūtra are recorded in the notes.

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra

The Question of Maitreya

1.

The Translation

[F.330.b]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was dwelling in Rājagṛha, on Vulture Peak Mountain, together with a great saṅgha of monks and a great saṅgha of bodhisattvas.

1.2 On that occasion the bodhisattva mahāsattva Maitreya¹⁰ rose from his seat, draped his shawl over one shoulder, and knelt on his right knee. Joining his palms and bowing to the Blessed One, he spoke these words: “Blessed One, what are the karmic results of bestowing the Dharma?”

1.3 The Blessed One replied to the bodhisattva mahāsattva Maitreya, “Maitreya, suppose one person filled as many great trichiliocosms as there are grains of sand in the river Ganges with the seven precious substances and offered them to the tathāgata, arhat, truly perfect buddhas, and another person, out of compassion, established a single verse of the Dharma in the mindstream of another. Maitreya, the former mass of merit would not even come close to a hundredth of this latter mass of merit. Nor could it be compared to even a thousandth, a hundred-thousandth, a ten-millionth, a hundred-sextillionth,¹¹ or any other portion, fraction, enumeration, or example.”

1.4 After the Sugata had said this, the Teacher furthermore declared:

“Consider one who has caused as many world realms as there are sand grains in the Ganges

To be filled to the brim with an abundance of riches¹²

And offered these to the victors with a joyful mind,

And another who has bestowed a single verse to a sentient being—

1.5 “If that exceedingly vast gift of riches
Does not equal any fraction or portion¹³

Of cultivating compassion and then bestowing a single verse, [F.331.a]
How could one fathom the ripening of giving a verse twice, or three times?"

- 1.6 When the Blessed One had spoken, the bodhisattva mahāsattva Maitreya, the other bodhisattvas and the monks,¹⁴ and the world with its gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas rejoiced and praised the words of the Blessed One.
- 1.7 *This completes the noble Mahāyāna sūtra "The Question of Maitreya."*

ab.

ABBREVIATIONS

Degé Degé (sde dge) Kangyur

Sanskrit Sanskrit manuscript found in the Potala Palace (see introduction and bibliography)

Stok Stok Palace (stog pho brang bris ma) Kangyur

n.

NOTES

- n.1 See [Liljenberg \(2016a\) \(https://read.84000.co/translation/toh85.html\)](https://read.84000.co/translation/toh85.html).
- n.2 See [Liljenberg \(2016b\) \(https://read.84000.co/translation/toh86.html\)](https://read.84000.co/translation/toh86.html).
- n.3 *Abhisamayālaṅkārikāraṅgajñāpāramitopadeśasāstraṅgikāprasphuṭapadā* (Toh 3796). The quotation from *The Question of Maitreya* can be found on folio 37.a in the Degé edition.
- n.4 Currently the manuscript is kept in the Potala. Vinītā's critical edition is based on a copy of the manuscript that is kept in the China Tibetology Research Center. For further details on the state of this manuscript, see Vinītā (2010), pp. xv–xvii.
- n.5 Vinītā (2010), pp. xxvii–xxix.
- n.6 See in particular Toh 172: *Mañjuśrīparipṛcchāsūtra* ('*jam dpal gyis dris pa'i mdo*) in Vinītā (2010), pp. 703–69. Here also the teaching of the Dharma, or the speech of the Buddha—or in this case his Dharma conch—is said to be supremely meritorious. For translation see [Kīrtimukha Translation Group \(2021\) \(https://read.84000.co/translation/toh172.html\)](https://read.84000.co/translation/toh172.html).
- n.7 Of the three sūtras called *The Question of Maitreya* (*byams pas zhus pa*) listed in the Denkarma, the first is most likely the aforementioned longer sūtra from the Ratnakūṭa, [Toh 85 \(https://read.84000.co/translation/toh85.html\)](https://read.84000.co/translation/toh85.html). The second is listed among the general Mahāyāna sūtras (*theg pa chen po'i mdo sde sna tshogs*) and described in the catalog as having the length of seventy ślokas (a śloka equaling sixteen syllables in the Sanskrit), which is far too long for this text. Finally, the “small” *Question of Maitreya* ('*phags pa byams pas zhus pa chung ngu*) has a lacuna in the printed text where the number indicating its length would normally be visible; however, since the texts listed in the catalog are ordered by descending length, it can be surmised that it is

between fifteen and thirty ślokas in length (Denkarma, folio 300.a). This correlates with the “small” *Question of Maitreya* (spelled slightly different, *'phags pa byams pas zhus pa nangs kyi chung ngu*) found in the Phangthangma, which is listed as having sixteen ślokas (Phangthangma (2003), p. 18). Although these lengths listed in the catalogs tend to be somewhat unreliable, this length closely matches our text. As a side note in regard to the seventy-śloka *Question of Maitreya*, the Phangthangma does not mention the seventy-śloka text in the catalog’s section for general Mahāyana sūtras, but it does mention a *Question of Maitreya* of forty ślokas in a miscellaneous section for texts that were not found in the official catalogs but in a list recorded by a certain monk, Shönu Nyingpo (*ban dhe gzhon nu snying po*; see *ibid.*, p. 50). See also Halkias (2004), pp. 75–76.

- n.8 For a discussion of dating of the Denkarma catalog, see Herrmann-Pfandt (2008), pp. xviii–xx.
- n.9 Skilling (2021), pp. 227–34.
- n.10 Sanskrit adds *devaparśanmaṇḍale saṃniṣaṇṇaḥ* (“who was seated in an assembly of gods”).
- n.11 In Sanskrit the sequence varies slightly: “not even a hundredth, a thousandth, a hundred-thousandth, a ten-millionth, a billionth, a ten-billionth, or a trillionth” (*śatatamīm api ... sahasratamīm api śatasahasratamīm api koṭīśatasahasratamīm api saṃkhyām api*).
- n.12 Sanskrit has “give excellent world realms full of riches” (*ratnasya pūrṇān varalokadhātun | dadyād*).
- n.13 Translated from Stok: *gang gi*, which aligns more closely with the attested Sanskrit *kāṃcin*. Degé has *gang gA'i* (“Ganges”), which is mentioned in the previous verse but does not fit in grammatically with this line.
- n.14 Sanskrit omits “monks” in this list.

b.

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GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for Sanskrit names and terms ·

AS	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in the Sanskrit manuscript used as a source for this translation.
AO	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other Sanskrit manuscripts of the Kangyur or Tengyur.
AD	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionaries.
AA	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where Tibetan-Sanskrit relationship 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 arhat

dgra bcom pa

དགའ་བཙུག་པོ།

*arhat**Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:*

According to Buddhist tradition, one who is worthy of worship (*pūjām arhati*), or one who has conquered the enemies, the mental afflictions or emotions (*kleśa-ari-hata-vat*), and reached liberation from the cycle of rebirth and suffering. It is the fourth and highest of the four fruits attainable by śrāvakas. Also used as an epithet of the Buddha.

g.2 blessed one

bcom ldan 'das

བཙོམ་ལྷན་འདས།

bhagavat

An epithet for a buddha. The Sanskrit means “one who has good fortune.” In Sanskrit literature the term is used for the most eminent of humans or the divine, but in a Buddhist context it refers explicitly to a buddha. The Tibetan translation of the term *bcom ldan 'das* is not a literal translation of the Sanskrit but means *bcom*: “one who has conquered (the māras or afflictions)”; *ldan*: “possesses (the qualities of enlightenment)”; and *'das*: “has transcended (saṃsāra, or both saṃsāra and nirvāṇa).”

g.3 Ganges

gang gA

གང་གླ།

gaṅgā

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The Gaṅgā, or Ganges in English, is considered to be the most sacred river of India, particularly within the Hindu tradition. It starts in the Himalayas, flows through the northern plains of India, bathing the holy city of Vārāṇasī, and meets the sea at the Bay of Bengal, in Bangladesh. In the sūtras, however, this river is mostly mentioned not for its sacredness but for its abundant sands—noticeable still today on its many sandy banks and at its delta—which serve as a usual metaphor for infinitely large numbers.

According to Buddhist cosmology, as explained in the *Abhidharmakośa*, it is one of the four rivers that flow from Lake Anavatapta, and cross the southern continent of Jambudvīpa—the known human world or more specifically the Indian subcontinent.

g.4 hundred-sextillion

bye ba khrag khrig brgya stong

བྱེ་བ་ལྷག་ལྷག་བརྒྱ་ལྷོད།

koṭinīyutaśatasahasra

A number calculated by multiplying a *koṭi* (*bye ba*), or ten million, by a *niyuta* (*khrag khrig*), or a hundred billion according to the Abhidharma system (although it is only one million in Classical Sanskrit), and by a *śatasahasra* (*brgya stong*), or one hundred thousand, all of which together equals ten to the 23rd power or a hundred sextillion. This term is often used as to express a number so large as to be inconceivable.

g.5 karmic result

rnam par smin pa

རྣམ་པར་སྐྱེན་པ།

vipāka

Literally, the “ripening.”

g.6 Maitreya

byams pa

བྱམས་པ།

maitreya

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The bodhisattva Maitreya is an important figure in many Buddhist traditions, where he is unanimously regarded as the buddha of the future era. He is said to currently reside in Tuṣita heaven, as Śākyamuni’s regent, where he awaits the proper time to take his final rebirth and become the fifth buddha in the Fortunate Eon, reestablishing the Dharma in this world after the teachings of the current buddha have disappeared. Within the Mahāyāna sūtras, Maitreya is elevated to the same status as other central bodhisattvas such as Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara, and his name appears frequently in sūtras, either as the Buddha’s interlocutor or as a teacher of the Dharma. *Maitreya* literally means “Loving One.” He is also known as Ajita, meaning “Invincible.”

For more information on Maitreya, see, for example, the introduction to *Maitreya’s Setting Out* (Toh 198).

g.7 Rājagṛha

rgyal po’i khab

རྒྱལ་པོའི་ཁབ།

rājagṛha

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The ancient capital of Magadha prior to its relocation to Pāṭaliputra during the Mauryan dynasty, Rājagṛha is one of the most important locations in Buddhist history. The literature tells us that the Buddha and his saṅgha spent a considerable amount of time in residence in and around Rājagṛha—in nearby places, such as the Vulture Peak Mountain (Gṛdhṛakūṭaparvata), a major site of the Mahāyāna sūtras, and the Bamboo Grove (Veṇuvana)—enjoying the patronage of King Bimbisāra and then of his son King Ajātaśatru. Rājagṛha is also remembered as the location where the first Buddhist monastic council was held after the Buddha Śākyamuni passed into parinirvāṇa. Now known as Rajgir and located in the modern Indian state of Bihar.

g.8 seven precious substances

rin po che sna bdun

རིན་པོ་ཆེ་སྣ་བདུན།

saptaratna

The list of seven precious substances varies. They can be gold, silver, turquoise, coral, pearl, emerald, and sapphire; or they may be ruby, sapphire, beryl, emerald, diamond, pearls, and coral.

g.9 sugata

bde bar gshegs pa

བདེ་བར་གཤེགས་པ།

sugata

An epithet for a buddha meaning “well-gone one.”

g.10 tathāgata

de bzhin gshegs pa

དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པ།

tathāgata

An epithet for a buddha. The Sanskrit compound may be ambiguously parsed to mean either “thus-gone one” (*tathā + gata*) or “thus-come one” (*tathā + āgata*); this concurs with the Tibetan translation with the verb *gshegs*, which can mean either “to come” or “to go.” The Sanskrit root √*gam* (“to go”) also often denotes the meaning “to understand,” while *tathā* refers to thusness, suchness, or the way things really are, so the *tathāgata* can be rendered as the one who understands things as they really are or who has gone to such a state.

g.11 trichiliocosm

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

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

trisāhasramahāsāhasralokadhātu

A term from Abhidharma cosmology referring to one thousand dichiliocosms, or one billion world systems.

g.12 Vulture Peak Mountain

bya rgod kyi phung po'i ri

བྱ་རྫོང་གྱི་ཕུང་པོའི་རི།

gṛdhrakūṭaparvata

Mountain near Rājagṛha where the Buddha delivered many of the Mahāyāna teachings.