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The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Four Factors

Āryacaturdharmakanāmahāyānasūtra



Toh 251
Degé Kangyur, vol. 66 (mdo sde, za), folios 60.b–61.a

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under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha

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co.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ti. Title
- im. Imprint
- co. Contents
- s. Summary
- ac. Acknowledgements
- i. Introduction
- tr. The Translation
 - 1. The Four Factors
- n. Notes
- b. Bibliography
 - Tibetan Texts
 - Western Language Sources and Translations
- g. Glossary
- ci. Citation Index

s.

SUMMARY

- s.1 While residing in the Jeta Grove in Śrāvastī, the Buddha explains to an assembly of monks and bodhisattvas four factors of the path that bodhisattvas must not abandon even at the cost of their lives: (1) the thought of awakening, (2) the spiritual friend, (3) tolerance and lenience (which are here counted as one), and (4) dwelling in the wilderness. The sūtra concludes with two verses in which the Buddha restates the four factors and asserts that those who do not relinquish them will attain complete awakening.

ac.

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ac.1 The translation was completed by Adam Pearcey under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha and edited by the 84000 editorial team.

INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1 *The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Four Factors* (*Āryacaturdharmakanāmamahāyāna sūtra*) is the third of three short sūtras with similar titles (all referring to sets of four *dharma*s or factors of the path). In many Kangyurs (predominantly those of Tshalpa origin, including the Degé Kangyur) these sūtras are found grouped together.

i.2 Of the other sūtras in this set, *The Sūtra Teaching the Four Factors* (Toh 249)¹ is concerned with the four factors necessary for the practice of confession, while *The Four Factors* (Toh 250)² identifies four beliefs that a wise son of a good family should not accept as true. Two further works, *The Accomplishment of the Sets of Four Qualities: The Bodhisattvas' Prātimokṣa* (Toh 248) and *The Fourfold Accomplishment* (Toh 252)³ also concern themselves with “sets of four” (*catuṣka*, *bzhi pa*), thereby forming a larger group of five sūtras in the Degé Kangyur that lay out key elements of the practice of the path in discrete sets of four factors.

i.3 In the present sūtra, *dharma* is a flexible term used to refer to a specific set or category of four important components or factors of the path that a bodhisattva, someone who aspires to achieve the perfect awakening of a buddha, should not abandon under any circumstances. These four factors are (1) the thought of awakening, (2) the spiritual friend or companion and guide in virtue, (3) tolerance and lenience, considered here as a pair, and (4) dwelling in the wilderness, that is, in a place suitably removed from the social world of the town so as to enable spiritual practice.

i.4 The Buddha presents these four factors using this formula: “For as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon *x* even at the cost of their lives.” This is repeated in six successive lines, first to introduce all four factors together, then for each one in turn, and finally to refer to all four by way of recapitulation. The sūtra thus employs the rhetorical device of

repetition—combining *anaphora* and *epistrophe*, repetition of the beginning and end phrases of a line—that is such a common feature of Buddhist canonical literature.

- i.5 The text concludes with two stanzas, also spoken by the Buddha, that summarize the sūtra’s message and explain the benefit of maintaining the four factors. These verses present the factors in a slightly different sequence, with tolerance and lenience preceding the factor of the spiritual friend. They also exhort the wise bodhisattva to be as fearless as a lion, “the king of beasts,” while dwelling in the wilderness.
- i.6 The Chinese Tripiṭaka contains two translations of the sūtra (Taishō 772⁴ & Taishō 773⁵), both by Divākara and dated to 680 CE and 681 CE.⁶ The sūtra and commentaries also appear in several manuscripts of the Dunhuang collection. Among those manuscripts is an annotated translation of the sūtra (IOL Tib J 69) that identifies the translators as Surendrabodhi and Yeshe Dé. This manuscript is significant not only because of the annotations to the translation itself but also because the Kangyur versions lack a translator’s colophon (*gyur byang*). The sūtra is listed in both the Denkarma⁷ and Phangthangma⁸ catalogs of translated works, indicating that the first Tibetan translation of the text was complete by the early ninth century.
- i.7 There is a short commentary on this sūtra attributed to Vasubandhu and preserved in Tibetan in the Tengyur, (**Āryacaturdharmakaavyākhyāna*, *’phags pa chos bzhi pa’i rnam par bshad pa*, Toh 3990), which we have also translated,⁹ as well as a slightly longer commentary on this commentary, attributed to Jñānadatta (**Āryacaturdharmakaavyākhyānaṭīkā*, *’phags pa chos bzhi pa’i rgya cher bshad pa’i rgya cher ’grel pa*, Toh 3990a).
- i.8 Several independent treatises found within the Tengyur also make reference to this sūtra. Śāntideva’s *Compendium of Training* (*Śikṣāsamuccaya*, Toh 3940), for instance, refers to the second of the four factors when discussing the importance of the teacher.¹⁰ Prajñākaramati also cites the same line in his *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*; *byang chub kyi spyod pa la ’jug pa’i dka’ ’grel*, Toh 3872).¹¹ Vimalamitra refers to the fourth factor on the importance of dwelling in the wilderness in *The Meaning of the Gradual Cultivation* (*rim gyis ’jug pa’i sgom don*, Toh 3938).¹² The sūtra has also been cited in works by Tibetan authors. To give just one example, the celebrated Nyingma master Longchen Rabjam (1308–64) quotes the sūtra’s line about the importance of the spiritual friend in the eighth chapter of *The White Lotus Autocommentary on the Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* (*yiid bzhin mdzod kyi ’grel pa pad ma dkar po*).¹³

- i.9 A French translation of the sūtra by Léon Feer was first published in 1866 (and reprinted in 1883).¹⁴ Peter Skilling has included a fine English translation along with some helpful notes under the title “Four Dharmas Never to Be Abandoned” in his recent collection *Questioning the Buddha: A Selection of Twenty-Five Sutras*.¹⁵
- i.10 The following translation was made primarily on the basis of the Degé block print with reference to the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*), the Stok Palace Kangyur, IOL Tib J 69, and the commentaries ascribed to Vasubandhu and Jñānadatta.

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on

The Four Factors

1.

The Translation

[F.60.b]

1.1 Homage to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Buddha was residing in Śrāvastī at Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍada's park, together with a great community of monks, consisting of 1,250 monks, and a great assembly of bodhisattvas. At that time, the Blessed One addressed the monks:

1.3 "Monks, for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon four factors even at the cost of their lives. What are these four?

1.4 "Monks, for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon the thought of awakening even at the cost of their lives.

1.5 "Monks, for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon the spiritual friend even at the cost of their lives.

1.6 "Monks, for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon tolerance and lenience even at the cost of their lives.¹⁶

1.7 "Monks, for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon dwelling in the wilderness¹⁷ even at the cost of their lives.

1.8 "Monks, for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon these four factors even at the cost of their lives."

1.9 The Blessed One spoke these words, and once the Sugata had spoken in this way, he, the Teacher, also said the following:

1.10 "Let the wise conceive the thought of perfect awakening,
And not cast aside the thought of omniscience;¹⁸
Let them maintain the strength of tolerance and lenience,
And never forsake the spiritual friend.

1.11 "If the wise, like the king of beasts, abandon fear, [F.61.a]
Always remain dwelling in the wilderness,
And constantly maintain these factors,

They will conquer the māras and attain awakening.”

1.12 When the Blessed One had said this, the monks and bodhisattvas, together with the entire assembly, rejoiced and praised the words of the Blessed One.

1.13 *This concludes “The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Four Factors.”*

n.

NOTES

- n.1 Pearcey, Adam. trans. (2019), *The Sūtra Teaching the Four Factors* (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh249.html>), Toh 249 (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2019).
- n.2 Pearcey, Adam. trans. (2023a), *The Four Factors* (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh250.html>), Toh 250 (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2023).
- n.3 Dharmachakra Translation Committee, trans., *The Fourfold Accomplishment* (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh252.html>), Toh 252 (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2020).
- n.4 *Dasheng si fa jing* 大乘四法經 (*Caturdharmakasūtra*), Taishō 772 (CBETA (<https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/en/T0772>); SAT (<https://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT2018/T0772.html>)).
- n.5 *Fo shuo pusa xiuxing si fa jing* 佛說菩薩修行四法經 (*Caturdharmakasūtra*), Taishō 773 (CBETA (<https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/en/T0773>); SAT (<https://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT2018/T0773.html>)).
- n.6 See Skilling (2021), pp. 200–1.
- n.7 See Denkarma, F.300.a.2. See also Herrmann-Pfandt (2008), pp. 125–26, no. 238.
- n.8 *dkar chag 'phang thang ma*, p. 18.
- n.9 See Pearcey (2023b), *An Explanation of The Noble Sūtra on the Four Factors* (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh3990.html>).
- n.10 Śāntideva, 29a.4. Translations appear in Bendall & Rouse (1922), p. 43, and Goodman (2016), p. 44.

- n.11 Prajñākaramati, 107a.5.
- n.12 Vimalamitra, 353a.3.
- n.13 See Longchen Rabjam (2009), vol. 13, 249–50.
- n.14 Feer (1866), pp. 299–302.
- n.15 Skilling (2021), pp. 199–205.
- n.16 According to Jñānadatta’s commentary, tolerance (*kṣanti*; *bzod pa*) means bearing the harm done to one by others (*pha rol gyi gnod pa byas pa la bzod pa*), and lenience (*sauratyā*; *des pa*) means refraining from harming them (*pha rol la gnod pa mi byed pa*).
- n.17 Dwelling in the wilderness is also one of the twelve ascetic practices (*dhūtaguṇa*). Note that related to (and sometimes conflated with) the Sanskrit *araṇya* in the compound *araṇyavāsa*—attested for *dgon pa la gnas pa* not in this text but in the Sanskrit of the *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā* (Toh 62)—is another term, *araṇa*, in the compound *araṇavihāra*, of which the Tibetan rendering is *nyon mongs pa med par gnas pa* (Mvy 6366), with the more “inner” meaning of “dwelling free of afflicted mental states.” See Edgerton s.v. *araṇya* and *araṇya*.
- n.18 The translation here follows the Degé and IOL Tib J 69 editions, which have *sems skyed cig*. The Stok Palace Kangyur version reads *sems dpa’ cig*.

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 dwelling in the wilderness

dgon pa la gnas pa

དགོན་པ་ལ་གནས་པ།

aranyavāsa^{AO}

An ideal lifestyle for a practitioner, described as dwelling in a place suitably removed from the social world of the town as to enable spiritual practice. See also [n.17](#).

g.2 great being

sems dpa' chen po

སེམས་དཔའ་ཆེན་པོ།

mahāsattva

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The term can be understood to mean “great courageous one” or “great hero,” or (from the Sanskrit) simply “great being,” and is almost always found as an epithet of “bodhisattva.” The qualification “great” in this term, according to the majority of canonical definitions, focuses on the generic greatness common to all bodhisattvas, i.e., the greatness implicit in the bodhisattva vow itself in terms of outlook, aspiration, number of beings to be benefited, potential or eventual accomplishments, and so forth. In this sense the *mahā-* (“great”) is close in its connotations to the *mahā-* in “Mahāyāna.” While individual bodhisattvas described as *mahāsattva* may in many cases also be “great” in terms of their level of realization, this is largely coincidental, and in the canonical texts the epithet is not restricted to bodhisattvas at any particular point in their career. Indeed, in a few cases even bodhisattvas whose path has taken a wrong direction are still described as *bodhisattva mahāsattva*.

Later commentarial writings do nevertheless define the term—variably—in terms of bodhisattvas having attained a particular level (*bhūmi*) or realization. The most common qualifying criteria mentioned are attaining the path of seeing, attaining irreversibility (according to its various definitions), or attaining the seventh bhūmi.

g.3 Jeta Grove

rgyal bu rgyal byed kyi tshal

རྒྱལ་བུ་རྒྱལ་བྱེད་ཀྱི་ཚལ།

jetavana

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

A park in Śrāvastī, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kośala in northern India. It was owned by Prince Jeta, and the wealthy merchant Anāthapiṇḍada, wishing to offer it to the Buddha, bought it from him by covering the entire property with gold coins. It was to become the place

where the monks could be housed during the monsoon season, thus creating the first Buddhist monastery. It is therefore the setting for many of the Buddha's discourses.

g.4 lenience

des pa

དེས་པ།

sauratya

Gentleness, especially in one's thoughts and behavior toward others; the absence of any desire for retaliation. Often paired with "tolerance."

g.5 spiritual friend

dge ba'i bshes gnyen

དགེ་བའི་བཤེས་གཉེན།

kalyāṇamitra

The teacher or guide upon the spiritual path.

g.6 Śrāvastī

mnyan yod

སུམ་ལྷོ་ཡོད།

śrāvastī

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

During the life of the Buddha, Śrāvastī was the capital city of the powerful kingdom of Kośala, ruled by King Prasenajit, who became a follower and patron of the Buddha. It was also the hometown of Anāthapiṇḍada, the wealthy patron who first invited the Buddha there, and then offered him a park known as Jetavana, Prince Jeta's Grove, which became one of the first Buddhist monasteries. The Buddha is said to have spent about twenty-five rainy seasons with his disciples in Śrāvastī, thus it is named as the setting of numerous events and teachings. It is located in present-day Uttar Pradesh in northern India.

g.7 thought of awakening

byang chub sems

བྱང་ལྷན་སེམས།

bodhicitta

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The intent at the heart of the Great Vehicle, namely to obtain buddhahood in order to liberate all beings from suffering. In its relative aspect, it is both this aspiration and the practices toward buddhahood. In its absolute aspect, it is the realization of emptiness or the awakened mind itself.

g.8 tolerance

bzod pa

བཟོད་པ།

kṣānti

Forbearance regarding the harm done to one by others.

ci.

CITATION INDEX

1.3 1 reference to this passage can be found in the commentary *Toh 3990, An Explanation of The Noble Sūtra on the Four Factors*.

[Reload this text to be read alongside this commentary \(? commentary=UT23703-113-010-249#UT22084-066-009-30/%5Bdata-quote-location%3D%22UT22084-066-009-30%22%5D\)](#)

for as long as they live, bodhisattvas, great beings, should not abandon four factors even at the cost of their lives.