

༄༅། །ཟས་ཀྱི་འཚོ་བ་རྣམ་པར་དག་པ།

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**Pure Sustenance of Food**

ཟས་ཀྱི་འཚོ་བ་རྣམ་པར་དག་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

*zas kyi 'tsho ba rnam par dag pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*

The Mahāyāna Sūtra “Pure Sustenance of Food”



Toh 206  
Degé Kangyur, vol. 62 (mdo sde, tsha), folios 94.a–95.a

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co.

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## SUMMARY

- s.1 While the Buddha is staying at the Bamboo Grove with a diverse retinue, the monk Maudgalyāyana asks him about some unusual beings he saw during an alms round. The Buddha informs Maudgalyāyana that these beings are starving spirits. The Buddha gives a discourse explaining how these starving spirits were once humans yet committed misdeeds related to food that led them to their current dismal state. The misdeeds connected with food described by the Buddha present a picture of food-related prohibitions for the monastic saṅgha, such as failing to eat only a single meal a day, improperly partaking of meals, carrying away leftovers, and other forms of abusing food offerings. Food-related ethics are also given for lay people, mainly concerning how to prepare food for the saṅgha in a hygienic manner.

ac.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- ac.1 Translated, edited, and finalized by the Subhashita Translation Group. The translation was produced by Lowell Cook, who also wrote the introduction. Benjamin Ewing edited the translation against the Tibetan and revised the introduction.
- ac.2 The translation was completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

i.

## INTRODUCTION

i.1

The sūtra *Pure Sustenance of Food* begins with Maudgalyāyana asking the Buddha about some unusual beings he saw while on an alms round. After describing their bizarre features, such as their enormous stomachs and needle-thin throats, the Buddha informs Maudgalyāyana that these beings are, in fact, starving spirits. The Buddha gives a discourse explaining how these starving spirits were once humans but attained this dismal state by committing misdeeds related to food. He uses their example as an opportunity to describe the misdeeds and meritorious actions related to food, along with their results. The first half of the discourse concerns the saṅgha and monastic rules surrounding food—eating only a single meal a day, how to participate in meals, how to treat leftovers, and the way to receive offerings—that are fundamental to the Vinaya, the Buddhist monastic code. The second half of the discourse concerns food hygiene and is specifically directed to the laypeople who handle the saṅgha’s food. To illustrate these strictures around food for both the monastic and lay audiences, the Buddha describes the workings of karma with vivid, sometimes graphic, imagery. These descriptions include positive results, such as being blessed and protected by the entire pantheon of gods, as well as negative results, such as being reborn as starving spirits who consume the contents of toilets.

i.2

The provenance of *Pure Sustenance of Food* is far from certain. While the notions of purity and pollution presented in the sūtra would appear to be rooted in an Indic worldview, and the narrative connection between Maudgalyāyana and starving spirits is common in Indic Buddhist literature,<sup>1</sup> the sūtra is bereft of the expected Sanskrit title and lacks the traditional colophon naming its Indian and Tibetan translators. Thus, there is the possibility that this sūtra is a “gray text,” one that is neither purely Indic in origin nor fully Tibetan apocrypha.<sup>2</sup> Rather than a translation in the strict sense of the term, it may have been derived from Indic material in a Tibetan



setting. The sūtra is not listed in the Denkarma (Tib. *ldan/lhan dkar ma*) or the Phangthangma (Tib. *'phang thang ma*) catalogs, the two surviving indexes from the Imperial Period (629–841 CE). This dearth of information makes it impossible to date the translation of *Pure Sustenance of Food* or otherwise determine its status in the Tibetan canon. There is no known Sanskrit witness of the sūtra, nor does there appear to be a Chinese translation.

i.3 This English translation was produced based on the edition preserved in the Degé Kangyur, which was informed by references to the Comparative Edition Kangyur (Tib. *dpe bsdur ma*) and the version of the translation in the Stok Palace Kangyur. *Pure Sustenance of Food* has not previously been translated into any Western languages, nor has it received any scholarly treatment.

The Mahāyāna Sūtra

**Pure Sustenance of Food**

1.

## The Translation

[F.94.a]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was staying in the Bamboo Grove, accompanied by a great saṅgha of twelve hundred fifty monks, as well as other monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, the eight classes of beings, and many bodhisattvas.

1.2 The great Maudgalyāyana rose from his seat, bowed to the Blessed One, and said, “Blessed One, once when I went to town for alms, I noticed tens of thousands of people on the way. Their heads were as big as mountains and their bellies the size of Mount Sumeru, yet their throats were as thin as needles. When they moved back and forth, they emitted a sound like the rumbling of five hundred chariots and spewed intolerable acrid smoke everywhere. Who are they and where do they come from? Please tell us, Blessed One.”

1.3 “Maudgalyāyana,” replied the Blessed One, “those are starving spirits. That is the ripening of past misdeeds such as ruining meals<sup>3</sup> or the preparations for meals. It can also be the ripening of the misdeed of failing to eat only one meal per day because they consumed a meal offered to someone else.

1.4 “The leftovers from meals are not to be given to those who fail to eat only one meal per day. The polluted leftovers of a patron are to be used for the saṅgha; it is polluted food but is to be tolerated. Polluted food made by the saṅgha must be given; otherwise, the saṅgha will incur a downfall.”

“The Blessed One is correct,” Maudgalyāyana remarked.<sup>4</sup>

1.5 The Blessed One continued, “Articles of offering collected in accordance with the Dharma, no matter who the patron may be, can serve as the sustenance for those who eat only a single meal.<sup>5</sup> [F.94.b] Those who fail to eat only one meal will lack for food. Conversely, the ability to eat only one

meal a day is the equivalent of sixty thousand days' worth of merit, and it leads to an increase of foodstuffs. Those unable to eat only a single meal will become starving spirits for six hundred thousand days. How does that happen? It happens because the donations to them are weighty. It would be preferable to eat lumps of iron. The food from faithful patrons will not be easy to digest; they will experience suffering for an extremely long time and become the entity known as a starving spirit for a million lifetimes. Exercise extreme caution with all meritorious food offerings.

1.6 "If you stash leftovers in your breast pockets or in your sleeve, you will descend into the hells for five hundred lifetimes, and red-hot lumps of iron will tumble out of both your left and right armpits. Do not stash leftovers! Even if you stash as little as a single grain of millet, you will at least end up in the hell of iron wheels.

1.7 "Laypeople should also avoid polluting any of the meritorious food preparations by tasting them first. They should avoid polluting prepared food by tasting it. Doing so will render it impotent; it would have been better not to have made it at all. Why is that? It will displease all the gods and upset one's companions.<sup>6</sup> Anyone who tastes such food will become a starving spirit for fifty thousand lifetimes and experience various forms of unbearable suffering.

1.8 "Whoever seeks merit for the future should apportion the meritorious food offerings properly, hygienically, and respectfully. They should wash their hands thoroughly, cover all the warm dishes such as vegetables and the like, handle them carefully, and not taste them beforehand. Doing so will be meritorious and please all the gods and gain the favor of all one's companions. This will bring about the protection and blessings of all the gods. This is a statement of fact. [F.95.a]

1.9 "The ripening of merit is like an echo or a reflection. It is in this way that starving spirits were initially humans. At an earlier time, they handled the saṅgha's clean food with unclean hands, dug their unclean hands into the saṅgha's clean food, or mixed unclean food into clean food and offered it to the saṅgha. Later, they fell to the state of a starving spirit for five hundred lifetimes, and they constantly consume filth and eat toilet waste. When they consume toilet waste, the toilet protectors run them off with iron clubs and disparage the starving spirits as receptacles of filth. They consume filth such as people's pus, blood, mucus, snot, and dirty bathwater. They guard such filth and consume the unclean blood that drips from women after childbirth.

1.10 "After five hundred thousand years, they are reborn in the body of a dog, pig, insect, or something similar and continuously reek and consume feces and filth. They experience this sort of suffering for ten million eons, without

any escape. To fully free themselves from this state is extremely difficult. Their utterly unbearable suffering is all but indescribable.

1.11 “If you touch your penis or vagina and then touch the clean food of the saṅgha with your unclean hands, introduce filth into the food for the saṅgha, or allow the saṅgha to partake of unclean food, this sort of misdeed will ripen as infectious eye diseases that afflict everyone, a misdeed no one will be aware of. Henceforth, handling the saṅgha’s food hygienically, using clean hands to carry the containers of the saṅgha’s food, washing millet with clean hands, and offering clean foods will lead to the attainment of inconceivable merit.

1.12 “Let this be well known and swiftly internalized.”

1.13 *This completes the “Pure Sustenance Sūtra.”*

n.

## NOTES

- n.1 See, for example, Lozang Jamspal and Kaia Tara Fischer, trans., *The Hundred Deeds* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-073-001.html#UT22084-073-001-1739>), Toh 340 (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2020), 3.215–240.
- n.2 On the notion of “gray texts,” see Davidson 2000.
- n.3 Reading *mchod ston* (“meal”) from the Kangxi, Narthang, and Yongle versions instead of the Degé reading, *mchod sdong* (“sacrificial post”).
- n.4 This rendering of the transition between Maudgalyāyana’s remark and the Buddha’s speech is based on the Phukdrak version of the text. This version alone makes it clear that the Buddha resumes his discourse after Maudgalyāyana’s confirmation. Degé and the other versions of the text do not explicitly mark the transition, making it appear that Maudgalyāyana keeps speaking.
- n.5 This translation is tentative.
- n.6 Reading the attested *gnyen po* (“adversary”) as *gnyen pa* (“friend/kinsman/companion”), as that makes more sense contextually.

b.

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## GLOSSARY

## · Types of attestation for Sanskrit names and terms ·

|    |   |
|----|---|
| AS | <i>Attested in source text</i><br>This term is attested in the Sanskrit manuscript used as a source for this translation.   |
| AO | <i>Attested in other text</i><br>This term is attested in other Sanskrit manuscripts of the Kangyur or Tengyur.   |
| AD | <i>Attested in dictionary</i><br>This term is attested in Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionaries.  |
| AA | <i>Approximate attestation</i><br>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><br>This term is a reconstruction based on the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the term.   |
| RS | <i>Reconstruction from Tibetan semantic rendering</i><br>This term is a reconstruction based on the semantics of the Tibetan translation.   |
| SU | <i>Source Unspecified</i><br>This term has been supplied from an unspecified source, which most often is a widely trusted dictionary.   |

## g.1 Bamboo Grove

*'od ma'i tshal*

འོད་མའི་ཚལ།

*veṇuvana*



The famous bamboo grove near Rājagṛha where the Buddha regularly stayed and gave teachings. It was situated on land donated by King Bimbisāra of Magadha and was the first of several landholdings donated to the Buddhist community during the time of the Buddha.

g.2 eight classes of beings

*lha klu sde brgyad*

ལྷ་ལྷ་སྡེ་བརྒྱད།

—

The eight classes are gods, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kinnaras, and mahoragas.

g.3 Maudgalyāyana

*maud gal gyi bu*

མོད་གལ་གྱི་བུ།

*maudgalyāyana*

One of the closest disciples of the Buddha Śākyamuni, known for his miraculous abilities.

g.4 Mount Sumeru

*ri rab lhun po*

རི་རབ་ལུན་པོ།

*sumeru*

*Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:*

According to ancient Buddhist cosmology, Meru is the great mountain forming the axis of the universe. At its summit lies Sudarśana, home of Śakra and his thirty-two gods, and on its flanks live the asuras. The mount has four sides facing the cardinal directions, each of which is made of a different precious stone. Surrounding it are several mountain ranges and the great ocean where the four great island continents lie: in the south, Jambudvīpa (our world); in the west, Godānīya; in the north, Uttarakuru; in the east, Pūrvavideha. Above it are the abodes of the gods of the realm of desire. Often also referred to as Mount Sumeru.

g.5 starving spirits

*'dre bkren ltogs pa · 'dre ltogs*

འདྲེ་བཀེན་ལྷོགས་པ། · འདྲེ་ལྷོགས།

—

A type of spirit whose description is very similar to *pretas* (Tib. *yi dags*). It is possible that this term is a translation of *preta*, and it appears to be essentially synonymous with it.