

༄༅། །ཚེས་བཞི་བསྟན་པའི་མདོ།

The Sūtra Teaching the Four Factors

Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra

འཕགས་པ་ཚེས་བཞི་བསྟན་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

'phags pa chos bzhi bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “Teaching the Four Factors”

Āryacaturdharmanirdeśanāmamahāyānasūtra

· Toh 249 ·

Degé Kangyur, vol.66 (mdo sde, za), folios 59.a–59.b

TRANSLATED INTO TIBETAN BY

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

First published 2019

Current version v 1.6.4 (2024)

Generated by 84000 Reading Room v2.26.1

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co.

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SUMMARY

- s.1 While Buddha Śākyamuni is residing in the Sudharmā assembly hall in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, he explains to the great bodhisattva Maitreya four factors that make it possible to overcome the effects of any negative deeds one has committed. These four are: the action of repentance, which involves feeling remorse; antidotal action, which is to practice virtue as a remedy to non-virtue; the power of restraint, which involves vowing not to repeat a negative act; and the power of support, which means taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, and never forsaking the mind of awakening. The Buddha concludes by recommending that bodhisattvas regularly recite this sūtra and reflect on its meaning as an antidote to any further wrongdoing.

ac.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ac.1 Translated by Adam Pearcey, with the assistance of Alak Zenkar Rinpoche.
An earlier draft of this translation was published on Lotsawa House in 2013.

The present updated version was then completed in 2017 under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

The *The Sūtra Teaching the Four Factors* (*Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra*, Toh 249) is the first of three short sūtras with similar titles, all referring to sets of four dharmas or factors, elements that contribute to accomplishing the goal 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 Four Factors* (*Caturdharmakasūtra*, Toh 250)¹ identifies four beliefs that a wise son of a good family should not accept as true, while *The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Four Factors* (*Āryacaturdharmakanāmamahāyānasūtra*, Toh 251)² identifies four factors of the path which bodhisattvas must not abandon under any circumstance. Two further works, *The Accomplishment of the Sets of Four Qualities: The Bodhisattvas' Prātimokṣa* (Toh 248)³ and *The Fourfold Accomplishment* (Toh 252)⁴ also concern themselves with various “sets of four” (*catuṣka*, *bzhi pa*), thereby forming a 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 Sūtra Teaching the Four Factors*, translated here, the factors relate to the practice of confession (even though no equivalent of that word occurs in the sūtra itself) and the purification of misdeeds or negative, harmful actions (*pāpa*). The *Bodhyāpattideśanāvṛtti* (*Commentary on the Confession of Bodhisattva Downfalls*), for example, which is attributed to Nāgārjuna, cites the sūtra and elaborates on the four powers (*stobs bzhi*), as the four factors came to be known, despite the fact that only the final two are labeled “power” (*stobs; bala*) in the sūtra itself. Bhāviveka's *Tarkajvālā*, too, refers to the sūtra in support of the view that even the very gravest of negative actions can be purified. And chapter eight of Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (*Compendium of Training*), on the purification of misdeeds (*pāpaśodhana; sdig pa sbyong ba*), not only quotes from the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra*, but even takes the four factors as its central theme.

i.4 Tibetan authors, too, make it clear that the four powers are the key elements of confessional practice (*bshags pa*). In his famous *Ornament of Precious Liberation* (*dwags po thar rgyan*), Gampopa Sönam Rinchen (*sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen*, 1079–1153) relates the powers to episodes in the lives of the Buddha’s contemporaries Nanda, Aṅgulimāla, Ajātaśatru, and Udayana, in order to demonstrate the necessity of each factor. Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419) draws on both the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* itself and Śāntideva’s discussion in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* to explain the powers in some detail in his magnum opus, the *Lamrim Chenmo*.⁵ It is also common to find reference to the four powers in Tibetan purificatory rites and commentaries on them.⁶ There are slight variations in the spelling of the names and the sequence of these powers, and not all Tibetan works cite the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* as their source, but the derivation is clear enough.⁷

i.5 At least two Sanskrit editions of the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* exist today.⁸ One is a manuscript from a collection held in the Potala library in Lhasa, which recently became available in a critical edition.⁹ It exhibits several variations from the versions in the Tibetan canon, most notably in its inclusion, near the end, of a four-line verse that it attributes to the Buddha himself:

i.6 “Even minor transgressions prove the downfall of the foolish,
Whereas even serious transgressions do not affect the wise.
A lump of iron, though small, sinks in water;
But even a great mass of iron, when made into a vessel, floats.”¹⁰

Some other minor differences are also noted below.

i.7 Recently, Peter Skilling has included a fine translation of the sūtra from the Tibetan along with some helpful notes in his 2021 collection, *Questioning the Buddha: A Selection of Twenty-Five Sutras*.¹¹

i.8 The following translation was made primarily on the basis of the Degé block print and the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*), although it follows the Peking Yongle and Kangxi recensions on one significant point, for reasons that are explained in a note. Otherwise, since the various Tibetan canonical versions vary among themselves only slightly in matters of orthography, such instances have not been specified here.

**The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra Entitled
Teaching the Four Factors**

1.

The Translation

[F.59.a]

1.1 Homage to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was dwelling in the Sudharmā assembly hall in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, together with a great gathering of five hundred monks,¹² and very many bodhisattva mahāsattvas, including Maitreya and Mañjuśrī.

1.3 At that time the Blessed One said to the bodhisattva mahāsattva Maitreya, [F.59.b] “O Maitreya, bodhisattva mahāsattva, if you possess four factors, the misdeeds you have committed and accumulated will be overcome.

1.4 “What are these four? The action of repentance, antidotal action, the power of restraint, and the power of support.

1.5 “The action of repentance is to feel intense remorse for any non-virtuous action you have committed.

1.6 “Antidotal action is to put great effort into virtuous actions once you have committed a non-virtuous action.

1.7 “The power of restraint is to make a pledge and thereby refrain from any similar action.¹³

1.8 “The power of support is to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, and not to forsake the mind of awakening. By relying on such powerful forces, you will be immune to misdeeds.

1.9 “O Maitreya, bodhisattva mahāsattva, if you possess these four factors, you will overcome any misdeeds that you have committed and accumulated. The bodhisattva mahāsattva should continually read this sūtra, recite it aloud, and reflect and meditate on it, doing so many times. Through this, the effects of negative conduct will not come about.”

1.10 Once the Blessed One had said this, the whole assembly, including the bodhisattva mahāsattva Maitreya, the monks, the bodhisattvas, and the ranks of the gods, such as Śakra, were overjoyed and full of praise for what

the Blessed One had taught.

1.11 *This concludes the noble Mahāyāna sūtra entitled “Teaching the Four Factors.”*

c.

Colophon

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

n.

NOTES

- n.1 Pearcey, Adam, trans., *The Four Factors* (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh250.html>) (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2023a).
- n.2 Pearcey, Adam, trans., *The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Four Factors* (<http://read.84000.co/translation/toh251.html>) (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2023b).
- n.3 Dharmachakra Translation Committee, trans., *The Accomplishment of the Sets of Four Qualities: The Bodhisattvas' Prātimokṣa* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh248.html>) (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2024).
- n.4 Dharmachakra Translation Committee, trans., *The Fourfold Accomplishment* (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh252.html>) (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2020).
- n.5 See Tsong-kha-pa 2000 vol. 1, 251–4. Dza Patrul Rinpoche's (*rdza dpal sprul*, 1808–87) famous nineteenth century work *kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* and its commentary by Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang (*ngag dbang dpal bzang*, 1879–1941) discuss the four powers in relation to meditation on the deity Vajrasattva. See Patrul Rinpoche 1998, 265–7 and Ngawang Pelzang 2004, 226–7.
- n.6 One such text, entitled *stobs bzhi'i bshags bsdoms bya tshul*, was composed by the First (or Fourth according to some methods of counting) Pañchen Lama, Losang Chökyi Gyaltsen (*blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*, 1570–1662). The same author also wrote another rite incorporating the four powers that focuses on the thirty-five buddhas of confession. See *stobs bzhi tshang ba sangs rgyas so lnga'i bya tshul*.

- n.7 Patrul Rinpoche's *kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, for example, makes no reference to the sūtra and discusses the four powers in a different sequence, beginning with the power of support. See Patrul Rinpoche 1998, 265–7.
- n.8 Besides the Potala manuscript, there is also a Sanskrit edition included in Samten and Pandey 2003, 45–52.
- n.9 See Tseng 2010.
- n.10 The Potala Sanskrit edition (Tseng 2010, vol. 1, 404) is as follows: *kṛtvābudho 'lpam api pāpam adhaḥ prayāti kṛtvā budho mahad api prajahāty anarthān | majjaty ayo 'lpam api vāriṇi saṃhataṃ hi pātrīkṛtaṃ mahad api plavate tad eva | |*. The verse also appears, without mention of its source, in Vasubandhu's auto-commentary to the *Abhidharmakośa*. For alternative English translations see Tseng 2010, vol. 1, 405, and Pruden 1988, 962.
- n.11 Skilling (2021), pp. 181–88.
- n.12 The Potala Sanskrit edition (Tseng 2010, vol. 1, 397) reads “one thousand two hundred and fifty monks” (*ardhatrayodaśabhir bhikṣuśatair*).
- n.13 Here the translation follows the Peking Kangxi and Yongle Kangyurs, as well as the Potala Sanskrit manuscript and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, in reading *mi phyed pa'i sdom pa* as *mi byed pa'i sdom pa* (*akaraṇasaṃvara*). This reading not only accords with the available Sanskrit, it also follows the definitions of the other powers in providing an instruction rather than a mere description. Moreover, the phrase *mi byed pa'i sdom pa* is also retained in the citations of the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* that appear in several treatises in the Tengyur, including Bhāviveka's *Tarkajvālā*, Prajñākaramati's *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*, and Abhayākaragupta's *Munimatālaṅkāra*. The alternative reading, which is to be found in the other Kangyurs, could be translated as: “The power of restraint is to make a pledge and thereby gain an inviolable vow.”

b.

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GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for names and terms of the corresponding ·
source language

AS	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in a manuscript used as a source for this translation.
AO	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other manuscripts with a parallel or similar context.
AD	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in dictionaries matching Tibetan to the corresponding language.
AA	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where the relationship between the Tibetan and source language 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 action of repentance

rnam par sun 'byin pa kun tu spyod pa

རྣམ་པར་སུན་འབྲིན་པ་ཀུན་ཏུ་སྦྱོང་པ།

vidūṣaṅgāsamudācāra

Feeling remorse for past negative actions.

g.2 antidotal action

gnyen po kun tu spyod pa

གཉེན་པོ་ཀུན་ཏུ་སློད་པ།

pratipakṣasamudācāra

Carrying out virtuous actions as an antidote to past negative deeds.

g.3 Heaven of the Thirty-Three

sum cu rtsa gsum

སུམ་རུ་ཚ་གསུམ།

trāyastriṃśa

The second heaven of the desire realm located above Mount Meru.

g.4 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 the heaven of Tuṣita, 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.5 Mañjuśrī

’jam dpal

འཇམ་དཔལ།

mañjuśrī

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

Mañjuśrī is one of the “eight close sons of the Buddha” and a bodhisattva who embodies wisdom. He is a major figure in the Mahāyāna sūtras, appearing often as an interlocutor of the Buddha. In his most well-known iconographic form, he is portrayed bearing the sword of wisdom in his right hand and a volume of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* in his left. To his name, Mañjuśrī, meaning “Gentle and Glorious One,” is often added the epithet Kumārabhūta, “having a youthful form.” He is also called Mañjughoṣa, Mañjusvara, and Pañcaśikha.

g.6 power of restraint

sor chud par byed pa'i stobs

སོར་ཅུད་པར་བྱེད་པའི་སྟོབས།

pratyāpattibala

Pledging not to repeat past negative actions.

g.7 power of support

rten gyi stobs

རྟེན་གྱི་སྟོབས།

āśrayabala

Calling upon the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha and vowing not to forsake the mind of awakening as a support in avoiding negative actions.

g.8 Śakra

brgya byin

བརྒྱ་བྱིན།

śakra

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

The lord of the gods in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three (*trāyastriṃśa*).

Alternatively known as Indra, the deity that is called “lord of the gods” dwells on the summit of Mount Sumeru and wields the thunderbolt. The

Tibetan translation *brgya byin* (meaning “one hundred sacrifices”) is based

on an etymology that *śakra* is an abbreviation of *śata-kratu*, one who has

performed a hundred sacrifices. Each world with a central Sumeru has a

Śakra. Also known by other names such as Kauśika, Devendra, and Śacipati.

g.9 Sudharmā

chos bzang

ཚོས་བཟང་།

sudharmā

An assembly hall located in the southwest of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three.

g.10 Surendrabodhi

su ren dra bo dhi

ལུ་རེན་བོ་ལྷི།

surendrabodhi

An Indian paṇḍita resident in Tibet during the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

g.11 Yeshé Dé

ye shes sde

ཡེ་ཤེས་སྡེ།

—

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

Yeshé Dé (late eighth to early ninth century) was the most prolific translator of sūtras into Tibetan. Altogether he is credited with the translation of more than one hundred sixty sūtra translations and more than one hundred additional translations, mostly on tantric topics. In spite of Yeshé Dé's great importance for the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet during the imperial era, only a few biographical details about this figure are known. Later sources describe him as a student of the Indian teacher Padmasambhava, and he is also credited with teaching both sūtra and tantra widely to students of his own. He was also known as Nanam Yeshé Dé, from the Nanam (*sna nam*) clan.