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**The Sūtra on Reliance upon a Virtuous
Spiritual Friend**

Kalyāṇamitrāsevanasūtra

འཕགས་པ་དགེ་བའི་བཤེས་གཉེན་བསྟན་པའི་མདོ།

'phags pa dge ba'i bshes gnyen bsten pa'i mdo

The Noble Sūtra on Reliance upon a Virtuous Spiritual Friend

Āryakalyāṇamitrāsevanasūtra

· Toh 300 ·

Degé Kangyur, vol 71 (mdo sde, sha), folios 304.b–305.a.

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co.

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SUMMARY

- s.1 Just prior to his passing away, the Buddha Śākyamuni reminds his disciples of the importance of living with a qualified spiritual teacher. Ānanda, the Blessed One's attendant, attempts to confirm his teacher's statement, saying that a virtuous spiritual friend is indeed half of one's spiritual life. Correcting his disciple's understanding, the Buddha explains that a qualified guide is the whole of, rather than half of, the holy life, and that by relying upon a spiritual friend beings will be released from birth and attain liberation from all types of suffering.

ac.

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ac.1 This sūtra was translated from Tibetan into English by Khenpo Ngawang Jordan and Christian Bernert, members of the Sakya Pandita Translation Group (International Buddhist Academy Division), Kathmandu.

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i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

The setting for this sūtra is a grove near Kuśinagara, the capital of the Malla kingdom, where the Buddha Śākyamuni spent his last hours before passing into parinirvāṇa, the final state of release from the suffering of worldly existence. Kuśinagara, situated in what is now the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, is venerated by Buddhists as one of the four holiest shrines. The other three are Lumbini, his birthplace in what is now southern Nepal; Bodhgaya in modern Bihar, where he attained enlightenment; and Sarnath, near modern Varanasi, where he delivered his first sermon.

i.2

In this sūtra, the Buddha discusses the importance of following a qualified spiritual teacher as a support for one's spiritual development. As it was delivered just prior to his passing away, we can see how highly the Buddha esteemed the role of a teacher on the path. Correcting his disciple Ānanda's understanding, the Buddha explains that one's spiritual development depends entirely on reliance upon a qualified guide or virtuous spiritual friend.

i.3

Indeed, teachers play an eminent role in all Buddhist traditions, and are respected and venerated accordingly in traditional Buddhist cultures. In different sūtras, the Buddha taught the four reliances;¹ as one of which he advised his followers to rely on the teaching, rather than on the person. In Buddhism, no person—no teacher, that is—functions as an ultimate refuge. Even the Buddha's physical form was subject to decay and thus not an ultimate object of refuge.

i.4

However, as the Buddha explains in this sūtra, without the help of a spiritual friend, progress on the path is very difficult, if not impossible. The teacher functions as a qualified and experienced guide, capable of guiding others along the arduous path to liberation. A teacher inspires students by embodying the results of the practice, guides them by pointing out the right direction, and supports their development by removing doubts and confusion. While genuine progress is impossible without a teacher,

misguided advice could, even if well intended, be detrimental to one's whole path. Consequently, the Buddha stresses the importance of a qualified spiritual friend, but counsels caution in choosing the teacher.

i.5 This sūtra is quoted at the end of two avadāna stories, which, like the jātakas, are accounts of the great deeds of the Buddha and bodhisattvas in previous lives.² The translators of the Tibetan version are not recorded in the Tibetan colophon, but the Degé Kangyur catalog states that the text was translated by the (Indian) paṇḍita Dharmākara and the (Tibetan) translator Zangkyong (*lo tsA ba bzang skyong*). Dharmākara contributed to several Vinaya translations and, as a team, this pair was responsible for several other translations in this part of the Kangyur as well as two commentaries in the Tengyur (Toh 4015 and 4038). There is evidence that both were contemporaries of Kawa Paltsek (*ska ba dpal brtsegs*), a major translator of the early period and active in at last part of the eighth century. However, unlike two other works by the same translators (Toh 285 and 295), the translation of this text is not listed in the early ninth-century Denkarma (*ldan dkar ma*) or Pangthangma (*'phang thang ma*) inventories, which means either that it was completed only later in the ninth century, or that it existed already but was listed as a canonical text only in later compilations.

i.6 In the Pāli canon, we find a corresponding sutta in the Mahāvagga section of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, namely the *Upaḍḍha Sutta* (SN 45.2), where the Buddha further mentions the eightfold path of the noble ones, which those who are supported by a spiritual friend should follow.

There are corresponding sūtras extant in the Chinese (Taishō 2.99) and the Korean (K 650) canons.

i.7 The version of this sūtra in the Degé Kangyur was compared to those in the Narthang, Peking and Lhasa Kangyurs. However there were no differences that required changing a word in the English translation.

i.8 A French translation of this sūtra from Tibetan by Léon Feer was published in the *Journal Asiatique* in 1866.

· Notes on the Translation ·

i.9 The terms *virtuous spiritual friend* and *nonvirtuous spiritual friend* are used in the translation to render the Tibetan terms *dge ba'i bshes gnyen* and *sdig pa'i bshes gnyen*. While the terms *dge ba* and *sdig pa* are not literal opposites (as opposed to *virtuous* and *nonvirtuous*), we chose this rendering because in this sūtra the Buddha makes the broad distinction between two types of teachers: those worthy of being relied upon, and those who are not. To express this opposition clearly, we therefore opted to translate *sdig pa* as *nonvirtuous*. Strictly speaking, too, the word “spiritual” is an addition to the basic

meaning of both the Tibetan and Sanskrit terms. It seems justified, however, by the connotations in this context—good and bad teachers or spiritual guides are implied, not simply ordinary friends and companions.

**The Noble Sūtra on
Reliance upon a Virtuous Spiritual Friend**

1.

The Translation

[F.304.b]

1.1 Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavān was dwelling in the Grove of Twin Sāl-Trees in the vicinity³ of the Malla town of Kuśinagara,⁴ together with a retinue of śrāvakas. Then, when the Bhagavān was about to pass into parinirvāṇa, he addressed the bhikṣus: “Bhikṣus, you should train in this way. Bhikṣus, you should train thinking, ‘One should live with a virtuous spiritual friend, a virtuous companion, a virtuous support. One should not, however, live with a nonvirtuous spiritual friend, a nonvirtuous companion, a nonvirtuous support.’ ”

1.3 Then, the venerable Ānanda said to the Bhagavān, “Honorable One, having come here alone to a secluded place, I had gone into meditative retreat⁵ when the following thought arose in my mind: ‘A virtuous spiritual friend, a virtuous companion, a virtuous support is half the holy life. A nonvirtuous spiritual friend, a nonvirtuous companion, a nonvirtuous support, however, is not.’ ”

1.4 The Bhagavān replied, “Ānanda, [F.305.a] do not say that a virtuous spiritual friend, a virtuous companion, a virtuous support is half the holy life, but that a nonvirtuous spiritual friend, a nonvirtuous companion, a nonvirtuous support is not.

“Why? Ānanda, the point is that a virtuous spiritual friend, a virtuous companion, a virtuous support is the whole, the unadulterated, the complete, the pure, the totally purified holy life, but a nonvirtuous spiritual friend, a nonvirtuous companion, a nonvirtuous support is not.

1.5 “Why is that? Ānanda, it is because, by relying on me as their spiritual friend,⁶ sentient beings subject to birth will be completely released from being subject to birth, and sentient beings subject to aging, sickness, death,

sorrow, lamentation, suffering, distress, and agitation will be completely released from being subject to aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, distress, and agitation.

“Therefore, Ānanda, you should understand this in the following way alone. A virtuous spiritual friend, a virtuous companion, a virtuous support is the whole, the unadulterated, the complete, the pure, the totally purified holy life, but a nonvirtuous spiritual friend, a nonvirtuous companion, a nonvirtuous support is not. Ānanda, you should train thinking in this way.”

1.6 When the Bhagavān had spoken these words, the bhikṣus rejoiced and highly praised what the Blessed One had taught.

1.7 *This completes “The Noble Sūtra on Reliance upon a Virtuous Spiritual Friend.”⁷*

ab.

ABBREVIATIONS

D Degé Kangyur

N Narthang Kangyur

Q Peking (Qianlong) Kangyur

n.

NOTES

- n.1 The teaching on the four reliances reads as follows: “Rely on the teaching, rather than on the person. Rely on the meaning, rather than on the syllables. Rely on the definitive meaning, rather than on the provisional meaning. Rely on wisdom, rather than on consciousness.” (*chos la rton pa bya yi / gang zag la rton pa mi bya bo // don la rton pa bya yi / tshig 'bru la rton pa mi bya bo // nges don la rton pa bya yi / drang don la rton pa mi bya bo // ye shes la rton pa bya yi / rnam shes la rton pa mi bya bo //*). The most detailed canonical statement of the four reliances seems to be that in *The Questions of the Nāga King Anavatapta* (Toh 156), [1.152](#) (Dharmachakra Translation Committee, 2024).
- n.2 For an analysis of those avadānas and an edition of the Sanskrit text of this sūtra see Alsdorf (1961).
- n.3 D, Q: *nyen 'khor*; N: *nye 'khor*.
- n.4 D, N: *ku sha na gyad*; Q: *ku shi na gyad*.
- n.5 *nang du yang dag 'jog; pratisaṃlayana*.
- n.6 This translation is based on the Sanskrit, rather than the Tibetan version of the text, which would have to be rendered “relying on a spiritual friend and on me.” Alsdorf (1961, p. 12) remarks that the Tibetan version is faulty at this point.
- n.7 The colophon makes no mention of who the Tibetan translators were, but the Degé catalog (*dkar chag*, vol. 103, lak+Sh+mI, F.134.a.7) states that the text was translated by the Paṇḍita Dharmākara and the Lotsāwa Zangkyong (*bzang skyong*). See introduction, [i.5](#).

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 Ānanda

kun dga' bo

ཀུན་དགའ་བོ།

ānanda

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

A major śrāvaka disciple and personal attendant of the Buddha Śākyamuni during the last twenty-five years of his life. He was a cousin of the Buddha (according to the *Mahāvastu*, he was a son of Śuklodana, one of the brothers of King Śuddhodana, which means he was a brother of Devadatta; other sources say he was a son of Amṛtodana, another brother of King Śuddhodana, which means he would have been a brother of Aniruddha).

Ānanda, having always been in the Buddha's presence, is said to have memorized all the teachings he heard and is celebrated for having recited all the Buddha's teachings by memory at the first council of the Buddhist saṅgha, thus preserving the teachings after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa. The phrase "Thus did I hear at one time," found at the beginning of the sūtras, usually stands for his recitation of the teachings. He became a patriarch after the passing of Mahākāśyapa.

g.2 bhikṣu

dge slong

དགེ་སློང་།

bhikṣu

A fully ordained monk of the Buddhist saṅgha.

g.3 four reliances

rton pa bzhi

རྟོན་པ་བཞི།

pratisaraṇa

See [n.1](#).

g.4 holy life

tshangs par spyod pa

ཚངས་པར་སྦྱོང་བ།

brahmacarya

Lit. "brahma conduct," this denotes the conduct of those who have renounced worldly life and entered the ordained Buddhist saṅgha to devote themselves to spiritual study and practice.

g.5 Kuśinagara

ku shi na

ཀུ་ཤི་ན།

kuśinagara

The capital of the Malla kingdom, in the vicinity of which the Buddha passed into parinirvāṇa.

g.6 Malla

gyad

མྱལ།

malla

A kingdom of ancient India situated to the north of Magadha.

g.7 parinirvāṇa

yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa

ཡོངས་སུ་སྐྱུ་རྩལ་ལས་འདས་པ།

parinirvāṇa

The name given to the display of the Buddha's passing away in Kuśinagara.

g.8 virtuous spiritual friend

dge ba'i bshes gnyen

དགེ་བའི་བཤེས་གཉེན།

kalyāṇamitra

A general term to denote a qualified spiritual teacher.