

THE SŪTRA ON RELIANCE UPON A VIRTUOUS SPIRITUAL FRIEND

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Kalyāṇamitrasevanaśūtra

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

The Noble Sūtra on Reliance upon a Virtuous Spiritual Friend

Āryakalyāṇamitrasevanaśūtra

Toh 300, Degé Kangyur Vol 71 (mdo sde, Sha), folios 304b3-305a7

Translated by the Sakya Pandita Translation Group
(International Buddhist Academy Division)



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Contents

Summary

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Notes on the Translation

THE TRANSLATION

The Sūtra on Reliance upon a Virtuous Spiritual Friend

Bibliography

Notes

Summary

Just prior to his passing away, 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.

Acknowledgments

This sūtra was translated from Tibetan into English by Khenpo Ngawang Jorden and Christian Bernert, members of the Sakya Pandita Translation Group (International Buddhist Academy Division), Kathmandu, 2010.

Introduction

The setting for this sūtra is a grove near Kuśinagara, the capital of the Malla kingdom, where 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.

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 (*kalyāṇamitra*).

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 (*pratisarana*),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.

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 confusions. 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.

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

In the Pāli canon, we find a corresponding *sutta* in the Mahā-vagga section of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, namely the *Upadīha 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 (T 2.99) and the Korean (K 650) canons.

The Degé edition of this *sūtra* was compared to various editions of the Tibetan canon, namely the Narthang, Beijing and Lhasa editions. However there were no differences that required changing a word in the English translation.

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

Notes on the Translation

The terms *virtuous spiritual friend* and *non-virtuous 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 *non-virtuous*), 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 *non-virtuous*.

THE TRANSLATION

The Noble Sūtra on Reliance upon a Virtuous Spiritual Friend

[F.304.b] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavān was dwelling in the Grove of Twin Sāl-Trees in the vicinity⁴ of the Malla town of Kuśinagara⁵ 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 non-virtuous spiritual friend, a non-virtuous companion, a non-virtuous support.’ ”

Then, the venerable Ānanda spoke to the Bhagavān, “Honorable One, having come here alone to a secluded place, I had gone into meditative retreat⁶ when the following thought arose in my mind: ‘A virtuous spiritual friend, a virtuous companion, a virtuous support is half the holy life.⁷ A non-virtuous spiritual friend, a non-virtuous companion, a non-virtuous support, however, is not.’ ”

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 non-virtuous spiritual friend, a non-virtuous evil companion, a non-virtuous 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 non-virtuous spiritual friend, a non-virtuous companion, a non-virtuous support is not.”

“Why is that? Ānanda, it is because, by relying on me as their spiritual friend,⁸ 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 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 non-virtuous spiritual friend, a non-virtuous companion, a non-virtuous support is not. Ānanda, you should train thinking in this way.”

After the Bhagavān proclaimed those words, the bhikṣus rejoiced and highly praised what had been spoken by the Blessed One.

This completes the Noble Sūtra on Reliance upon a Virtuous Spiritual Friend

Notes

- 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 //*).
- 2 For an analysis of those *avadānas* and an edition of the Sanskrit text of this sūtra see Alsdorf 1961.
- 3 DN: *Āryakalyāṇamitrasevanisūtra*; Q: *Āryakalyanemitrasevanaṁsūtra*.
- 4 DQ: *nyen 'khor*; N: *nye 'khor*
- 5 DN: *ku sha na gyad*; Q: *ku shi na gyad*
- 6 *nang du yang dag 'jog*; *pratisamlayana*
- 7 *tshangs par spyod pa, brahmacarya* denotes the conduct of those who have renounced worldly life to devote themselves to spiritual study and practice.
- 8 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: 12) remarks that the Tibetan version is faulty at this point.

Abbreviations: D. Degé edition, N. Narthang edition, Q. Beijing edition

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