

THE QUESTIONS OF THE NĀGA KING SĀGARA

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Sāgaranāgarājapariprcchā

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*'phags pa klu'i rgyal po rgya mtshos zhus pa zhes bya ba theg
pa chen po'i mdo*

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara”

Āryasāgaranāgarājapariprcchānāmamahāyanasūtra

Toh. 155, Degé Kangyur Vol. 58 (mdo sde, Pha), folios 205a-
205b.

Translated by the Sakya Pandita Translation Group
(Tsechen Kunchab Ling Division)



Published by 84000 (2011)
www.84000.co



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Summary

In this very short sūtra, the Buddha explains to a nāga king and an assembly of monks that reciting the four seals is equivalent to recitation of all of the 84,000 articles of the Dharma. He urges them to make diligent efforts to engage in understanding the four seals, which are the defining philosophical tenets of the Buddhist doctrine: 1) all compounded phenomena are impermanent; 2) all contaminated phenomena are suffering; 3) all phenomena are without self; 4) nirvāṇa is peace.

Acknowledgments

Translated by the Sakya Pandita Translation Group (Tsechen Kunchab Ling Division), Venerable Khenpo Kalsang Gyaltzen and Reverend Dr. Chodrung Kunga Chodron, in 2011.

Introduction

In the Tibetan canon there are three sūtras entitled *Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara* (*Sāgaranāgarājapariprcchā*), viz., a long version (Toh. 153),¹ one of middle length (Toh. 154) and a short sūtra (Toh. 155). They have quite different contents and are all to be found in a group of sūtras in the Kangyur entitled “Questions of” (...*pariprcchā*) including the *Questions of Brahmā*, *Questions of Mañjuśrī*, *Questions of an Old Lady*, and several others. There is also another nāga king whose questions were the occasion for another sūtra entitled the *Questions of the Nāga King Anavatapta* (*Anavataptanāgarājapariprcchā*), Toh. 156.

This is a translation of the short *Sāgaranāgarājapariprcchā*. The Buddha taught this very short sūtra to an assembly of monks in response to a king of supernatural beings known as *nāgas*, serpents who guard the Dharma. The Buddha explains that recitation of the four seals (*phyag rgya*) is equivalent to recitation of the entire 84,000 articles of the Dharma, and that they constitute the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattvas. The four are:

All compounded phenomena are impermanent (*anitya*);
all contaminated phenomena are suffering (*duḥkha*);
all phenomena are without self (*anātman*);
nirvāṇa is peaceful/peace (*sānta/sānti*).

These four seals, or tenets, are central to Buddhist philosophy and characterize the Buddhist view of the nature of reality. The Buddha stated that any doctrine characterized by these four seals

is genuinely in accord with the philosophical view of Buddhism, just as a document purportedly written by a king that has the proper seals is known as genuine. Because the concepts of *anitya(tva)*, *duḥkha*, *anātman*, and *nirvāṇa* are central to the Buddhist philosophical view, over the centuries, countless commentaries and elaborations on these concepts have been written by scholars from every Buddhist tradition. Various sūtras and commentaries focus on one, two, three or all four of the concepts.²

Indian texts speak of the four “summaries of the teaching” (*dharmaḍāna*) as well as the four seals. The Sanskrit of the four summaries can be extracted from Vasubandhu’s commentary to verse XVIII.80 of the *Mahāyāṇasūtrālaṁkara* of Asaṅga (fifth century C.E.): *sarvasaṁskārā anityāḥ* (All compounded phenomena are impermanent); *sarvasaṁskārā duḥkhāḥ* (all compounded phenomena are suffering); *sarvadharmaṁ anātmānaḥ* (all phenomena are without self); *śāntam nirvāṇam* (peaceful is *nirvāṇa*).³ The only minor difference from the four seals is that the second does not speak of “all contaminated phenomena,” but simply “all compounded phenomena.”⁴

Although this sūtra’s Sanskrit original is no longer extant, the colophon to the Tibetan translation of the sūtra tells us that it was translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan by the Indian abbot Surendrabodhi and the Tibetan revisor-translator Yeshé Dé (*ye shes sde*). We can thus infer that this sūtra was translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan sometime during the late eighth to early ninth century.

This sūtra is also included in the Chinese Buddhist canon (T. 599).⁵ Both the Tibetan and Chinese versions of the sūtra are very similar in their brevity, meaning and story line, although there are a few minor differences between them.⁶ A twelfth-century fragment containing this sūtra in the Tangut, or Xixia,⁷ language was discovered by the British explorer Sir Aurel Stein during his 1913-1916 journey when he discovered pieces of the Tangut canon at Khara-khoto along the ancient Silk Road.⁸ Now in the British Museum, the Tangut version is very close to the

Chinese version, indicating that it was likely translated from the Chinese.⁹

The present translation from Tibetan¹⁰ is based on the version in the Degé (*sde dge*) Kangyur, with reference to the differences between this and various other versions noted in the *dpe sdur ma* (comparative edition) Kangyur.

THE TRANSLATION

The Noble Māhayāna Sūtra

The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara

[F.409.a] Prostrations to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Thus did I hear at one time. The Bhagavān was dwelling at the place of the nāga king Sāgara together with a great assembly of 1,250¹¹ bhikṣus as well as a multitude of bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas. At that time the Bhagavān said to the nāga king Sāgara:

“Lord of the nāgas, if one utters these four aphorisms of the Dharma, in uttering them one is expressing all 84,000 articles of the Dharma. What are the four? They are as follows:

“To fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas that all compounded phenomena are impermanent; to fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas that all contaminated phenomena¹² are suffering; to fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas that all phenomena are without self; to fully engage in understanding the inexhaustible doctrine of the bodhisattvas and mahāsattvas that nirvāṇa is peace.¹³

“Lord of the nāgas, if one utters these four aphorisms of the Dharma, in uttering them one is expressing all 84,000 articles of the Dharma.”

When the Bhagavān had spoken in this way, the bhikṣus and bodhisattvas rejoiced and greatly praised the teachings of the Bhagavān.

This completes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Questions of the Nāga King Sāgara”

Translated and finalized by the Indian abbot Surendrabodhi and the senior revisor-translator, the monk Yeshé Dé.

Notes

- 1 They correspond respectively to the Chinese translations T. 598, 601, 599.
- 2 Stanley 2009, p. 149-154.
- 3 Sanskrit in Lévi 1907, 1911, tome I, p. 149. For an English translation, see Jamspal et al. 2004(The commentary is to verse XVIII.81 in this translation). Note that *samskāra* / 'du byed in these contexts and in the four seals is not being used to mean “formative factors” or “karmic conditioning,” but seems to be used in the same sense as *saṃskṛta* /'dus byas, i.e. “ compounded phenomena .” Edgerton had noticed this usage of *saṃskāra* . See F. Edgerton, Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary. Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1985, s.v. *samskāra* , *saṃskṛta* . Cf. also Jamspal et al., who translate the term as “creations.”
- 4 Note that the Pāli Dhammapada includes the first three concepts in verses 277, 278, and 279: *sabbe saṅkhārā anicca'ti...sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā'ti...sabbe saṅkhārā anattā'ti...*
- 5 The Chinese version was translated during the Tang dynasty by Yijing (635-713). Note that the name is also variously transliterated as I-Tsing, I-Ching, Yi-Tzing. See Keown 2004 on Yijing. An English translation of the Chinese version by an unattributed translator is posted on the internet by Fodian (“The Dharma-Seal Sutra Spoken by the Buddha for Ocean Dragon King”)
- 6 On Yijing, see Keown 2004.
- 7 A Buddhist kingdom (1038-1227) located in what are now the Chinese provinces of Ningxia, Gansu, Eastern Qinghai, Northern Shaanxi as well as parts of Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. It was known as Minyak (*mi nyag*) in Tibetan. The Tanguts adopted Buddhism from both Chinese and Tibetan sources. The language, which has its own very elaborate script, has been partially deciphered by modern scholarship.
- 8 Grinstead 1967.
- 9 Nie 2007.
- 10 In the process of research on this sūtra, another translation from the Tibetan was found; it was done by Geshe Lhakdor in 2010 for a workshop presented at the India Habitat Centre in Delhi under the auspices of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility (see bibliography).
- 11 This number in the Tibetan original could be interpreted in two different ways. Lhakdor translates it as 2050. We have followed the Chinese and Tangut translations in rendering it as 1250.
- 12 *zag pa dang bcas pa, sāsrava* . See glossary.
- 13 DNQ: *zhi ba* (peace/peaceful) C: *zhes bya* (known as).

Abbreviations: C. Cone edition of Kangyur, D. Degé edition of Kangyur, N. Narthang edition of Kangyur, Q. Beijing edition of Kangyur, T. Taishō Tripitaka (Chinese Buddhist canon), Toh. Tōhoku Catalogue of Tibetan Buddhist Canons.

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