

Introduction

1.1

This sūtra, brief though it is, addresses central Mahāyāna concepts in relation to practices to be carried out at the hour of death. When the Buddha is asked how one is to consider the mind (or mindset) of a bodhisattva who is about to die, he replies by giving pith instructions on the nature of phenomena and the mind, and instructs that a bodhisattva should accordingly engender specific **clear understandings**. The Buddha points out that all phenomena are pure, **subsumed** within the mind of enlightenment, and naturally **luminous**. Entities are impermanent, and the realization of mind is wisdom. Consequently, a bodhisattva should arouse a clear understanding that no entities truly exist, a clear understanding of great compassion, a clear understanding of **non-apprehension**, a clear understanding of non-attachment, and a clear understanding that the Buddha should not be sought elsewhere than in one's own mind. Although he refers to these instructions as the **wisdom of the hour of death**, the implication is that these teachings can be cultivated and realized throughout a bodhisattva's lifetime in order to prepare for death and attain liberation.

1.2

The Sanskrit title of the sūtra is found transcribed in all Kangyurs as *Ārya-ātajñāna-nāmamahāyānasūtra*.¹ This transcription, however, appears to have been truncated; as Sanskrit, it is not readily comprehensible, and certainly not equivalent to the Tibetan *'da' ka ye shes*. Another version of the Sanskrit title occasionally given is *Atijñānasūtra*,² which, although certainly understandable, yields a meaning quite different from that of the Tibetan. The more likely Sanskrit phrase that would capture *'da' ka ye shes* is *atyayajñāna* ("wisdom at the time of passing away"), and this has been proposed as a revision of the Sanskrit title in several modern catalogues.³

1.3

There is no extant Sanskrit text to our knowledge, although it is clear that there was such an original at one time—the Tibetan colophon to Śāntideva's commentary mentions that the Indian abbot Dharmarāja collaborated with Pakpa Sherab (‘phags pa shes rab) in the translation of the commentarial text. The sūtra translation preserved in the Kangyur, however, has no colophon with the usual mention of the Tibetan translators and Indian pandits, and was most likely made not from the Sanskrit but from an earlier Chinese translation, as the early 9th century Denkarma (*ldan dkar ma*) catalogue explicitly includes the *Atyayajñāna* in a list of sūtras translated into Tibetan from Chinese. Its inclusion in the Denkarma allows it to be dated to the first decades of the 9th century at the latest, and possibly earlier if it was indeed known to King Trisong Detsen (see below). The putative Chinese version, however, does not seem to have survived and the sūtra does not

seem to figure in the Chinese canon.

1.4

There are two commentaries on this text written by Indian authors in the *Degé Tengyur*, one attributed to Śāntideva (c. 8th century) and the other to Prajñāsamudra (dates unknown).⁴ There are also six known Tibetan commentaries, four of which were written by 17th-19th century Gelukpa (*dge lugs pa*) scholars, the longest and most detailed being one by the seventh Dalai Lama, Kelsang Gyatso.⁵ Our translation mainly follows the commentary of Prajñāsamudra and, to a lesser degree, that of Cone Drakpa Shedrub (*co ne grags pa bshad sgrub*, 1675-1748).

1.5

The *Atyayajñāna* is included in lists of sūtras known as the Five Royal Sūtras and Ten Royal Sūtras, two sets of profound, relatively short, and pithy works⁶ traditionally said to have been translated on Padmasambhava's recommendation and used for daily practice by the 8th century Tibetan king Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde btsan*). Their use is said to have contributed (along with other practices) to the king's life being prolonged by thirteen years beyond the limit predicted by astrological reckoning. The texts recounting this incident list the applications or uses of each of these texts; in the case of the *Atyayajñāna*, this is meditation or cultivation (*sgom pa*). In the same accounts the sūtra is described as being of definitive meaning.⁷ Another Tibetan tradition explains that the Five Royal Sūtras each present the condensed, essentialized meaning of five of the major canonical texts, all much longer, known as the Five Sets of One Hundred Thousand.⁸ From this viewpoint, the *Atyayajñāna* represents the essence of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (Toh 119-120). Yet another, more prosaic, explanation sometimes found for the epithet "royal" being applied to these works is simply that each of them, compared to other works on similar themes, is of paramount importance.

1.6

The *Atyayajñāna* is considered particularly important in several Tibetan Buddhist traditions, including Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) and Mahāmudrā. Roger Jackson points out that it seems to be the only sūtra from the Kangyur that is included in indigenous Tibetan lists of Indian canonical texts on Mahāmudrā. As a search of the Tibetan Buddhist Research Center (www.tbrc.org) data reveals, the *Atyayajñāna* is quoted by well-known Tibetan authors of all schools—including Gampopa (*sgam po pa*, 1079-1153), Sakya Paṇḍita (*sa skya paN+Di ta*, 1182-1251), Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (*rang byung rdo rje*, 1284-1339), Longchen Rabjampa (*klong chen rab 'byams pa*, 1308-1364), Shākyā Chogden (*shAkya mchog ldan*, 1428-1507), Drukpa Padma Karpo (*'brug pa pad+ma dkar po*, 1527-1592), Tāranātha (*ta ra nA tha*, 1575-1634), and the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang

Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617-1682). The most frequent excerpt quoted is from the final verses on the mind (1.14):

Since the mind is the cause for the arising of wisdom,
Do not look for the Buddha elsewhere.

1.7

Unsurprisingly, this brief yet well known sūtra has been translated into English a number of times. Several translations can be found on the internet, including translations by Ruth Sonam, Erik Tsiknopoulos, and at least one anonymous version. Published translations include those by Roger Jackson (2009), Sherab Raldri (2010), and Tony Duff (2011). A translation of the sūtra together with translations of Prajñāsamudra's and Śāntideva's commentaries has been published online by Lhasey Lotsawa Translations (2015). We hope that our translation will contribute to readers' appreciation of this remarkable and justly celebrated work.

THE TRANSLATION
The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on
Wisdom at the Hour of Death

1.1

[F.153.a] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2

Thus did I hear at one time. While the Blessed One was residing in the palace of the king of the gods in the Akaniṣṭha realm,⁹ he taught the Dharma to the entire assembly.

1.3

The bodhisattva mahāsattva Ākāśagarbha then paid homage to the Blessed One and asked, “Blessed One, how should we think about the mind of a bodhisattva who is about to die?”

1.4

The Blessed One replied, “Ākāśagarbha, when a bodhisattva is about to die, he should cultivate the wisdom of the hour of death. The wisdom of the hour of death is as follows:

1.5

All phenomena are naturally pure. So, one should cultivate the clear

understanding that there are no entities.

1.6

All phenomena are subsumed within the mind of enlightenment. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of great compassion.¹⁰

1.7

All phenomena are naturally luminous. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of non-apprehension.

1.8

All entities are impermanent. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of non-attachment to anything whatsoever.

1.9

When one realizes mind, this is wisdom. So, one should cultivate the clear understanding of not seeking the Buddha elsewhere.”

The Blessed One then spoke the following verses:

1.10

“Since all phenomena are naturally pure,
One should cultivate the clear understanding that there are no entities.

1.11

“Since all phenomena¹¹ are connected with the enlightened mind,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of great compassion.¹²

1.12

“Since all phenomena are naturally luminous,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of non-apprehension.

1.13

“Since all entities are impermanent,
One should cultivate the clear understanding of non-attachment.

1.14

“Since the mind is the cause for the arising of wisdom,
Do not look for the Buddha elsewhere.”

1.15

After the Blessed One had spoken, [F.153.b] the whole assembly, including the bodhisattva Ākāśagarbha and others, were overjoyed and full of praise for the Buddha's words.