



The Noble Mahayana Sutra on Dependent Arising

Introduction

I.1

The topic of this sūtra, as is evident from its title, is the Buddhist doctrine of the dependent arising of conditioned phenomena. This concept is considered by many Buddhists to be the essence of the teaching, the Dharma. Dependent arising is often presented as a series of twelve links (nidāna) of causes and effects that begins with ignorance and ends with death. This schema is found in many canonical texts, and is the principal topic of the two works that precede the present sūtra in the Degé Kangyur, the Śālistambha-sūtra (Rice Seedling Sūtra, Toh 210), and the Pratītya-samutpādādi-vibhaṅga-nirdeśa-sūtra (Sūtra Teaching Dependent Arising with Its Beginning and Divisions, Toh 211).¹

I.2

The teaching on dependent arising is epitomized by the famous “creed” (dhāraṇī) in verse-form, stating that the Buddha teaches the causes for the arising of phenomena as well as that which is their cessation. This verse formula is perhaps best known from a narrative in the Vinaya recounting Śāriputra’s life. The story tells of Upaṭiṣya (as Śāriputra was called before he met the Buddha) first hearing about the Buddha from Aśvajit, one of the Buddha’s five erstwhile companions and earliest disciples. When Upaṭiṣya asks Aśvajit to summarize the very essence of the Buddha’s teaching, Aśvajit answers him by reciting this verse. As soon as he hears it, Upaṭiṣya immediately attains a preliminary state of realization.²

I.3

In the sūtra translated here, however, these same lines are taught to Avalokiteśvara by the Buddha himself.³ The Buddha then instructs his followers to insert them into stūpas in order to generate the merit of Brahmā, an extraordinary type of merit.⁴ The practice of inserting these verses, as well as impressing or inscribing them on religious images, appears to have become popular during the second half of the first millennium,⁵ and was observed by Xuanzang in the seventh century.⁶ The creed can be found inscribed on, or inserted within, miniature caityas or stūpas at holy sites throughout the Buddhist world such as Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, and Rājagṛha, as far east as Kedah and Java, and as far west as Afghanistan.⁷ This practice was continued by the Tibetans into the second millennium and to this day it is considered by Buddhists to be a meritorious act.⁸

I.4

Xuanzang mentions that these objects were considered relics of the Dharma (dharmaśarīra). Buddhist scripture came to be identified as a type of relic of the Buddha from the time of early Mahāyāna discourse, according to which worshipping the words of the Buddha was considered to be equivalent, if not superior, to worshipping the Buddha himself.⁹ Canonical sources, such as the Śālistambasūtra (Toh 210), have furthermore equated dependent arising with the Dharma itself.¹⁰ Thus, inserting or inscribing the verse of dependent arising empowers an object just as a fragment of the Buddha’s remains would.¹¹ Included in the Tibetan text of this sūtra is the Sanskrit transliteration of the verse, implying that they were used like a mantra or dhāraṇī;¹² the Sanskrit syllables are considered potent in their own right as a manifestation of the Dharma and thus of the Buddha himself.

I.5

The sūtra is found in three places within the Kangyur, as well as in an abridged version in two locations.¹³ To date we do not know of any extant Sanskrit original version, and although there appear to be a few minor spelling mistakes and inconsistencies found in some versions, there are no significant variations among the available Tibetan texts.

THE TRANSLATION

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on Dependent Arising

1.1

[F.125a] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2

Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was in the Realm of the Thirty-Three Gods, seated on the throne of Indra. With him were great hearers such as the venerable Aśvajit; bodhisattva mahāsattvas such as noble Maitreya, noble Avalokiteśvara, and Vajrapāṇi, who were adorned with immeasurable precious qualities; as well as various gods such as the great Brahmā, who is the lord of the Sahā world, Nārāyaṇa, the great Īśvara, Śakra, who is the chief of the gods, and Pañcaśikha, who is the king of the gandharvas.

1.3

On that occasion, the bodhisattva mahāsattva Avalokiteśvara rose from his seat and, having draped his upper robe over one shoulder, knelt down with his right knee on the peak of Mount Meru. His palms together, he then bowed toward the Blessed One and addressed to him these words:

1.4

“Blessed One, these gods all really wish to build a stūpa. Now that they are present in this entourage, please teach them the Dharma in such a way so that their merit of Brahmā [F.125b] will increase, and the merit of the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen will increase much more than that of all types of beings in the world of gods, māras, and Brahmā, including renunciants and brahmins.”

1.5

At this, the Blessed One spoke the verses of dependent arising:

*ye dharmā hetuṃprabhavā hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato hy avadat
teṣāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃvādī mahāśramaṇah* ¹⁴

“All phenomena that arise from causes,
The Tathāgata has taught their cause,
And that which is their cessation;
Thus has proclaimed the Great Renunciant.

1.6

“Avalokiteśvara, it is like this. This dependent arising is the dharmakāya of all the tathāgatas. A person who sees dependent arising sees the Tathāgata. Avalokiteśvara, if a faithful son or daughter of a noble family builds, in a remote place, a stūpa the size of a gooseberry fruit, with a central pillar the size of a needle and a parasol the size of a flower of the bakula tree, and inserts this verse of dependent arising which is the dharmadhātu, he or she will generate the merit of Brahmā. When such persons pass on from here and die, they will be reborn in the world of Brahmā. When they pass on from there and die, they will be reborn with fortunes equaling those of the gods of the Pure Abodes.”¹⁵

1.7

After the Blessed One had thus spoken, the hearers, bodhisattvas, the whole assembly, and the universe of gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas rejoiced and praised his words.

Colophon

C.1

This concludes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra on dependent arising.

Translated and edited by the Indian scholar Surendrabodhi and the principal editor and translator Venerable Yeshe Dé.¹⁶

Notes

1: For the first, see Reat (1993) and Dharmasāgara Translation Group (forthcoming); for the second, see Bien (forthcoming). There is a famous commentary to the Praṭītya-samutpādādi-vibhaṅga-nirdeśa-sūtra entitled the Praṭītya-samutpāda-vyākhyā, attributed to Vasubhandu. For an overview of the content of this sūtra and its commentary, see Mejer (1997a, 1997b).

2: In the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya, the story is told in the *Pravrajyanastu*, the first chapter of the *Vinayavastu* (Toh 1) Degé Kangyur vol. 1 (*dul ba, ka), folios 32b *et seq.* For a translation, see Miller (forthcoming). In the Pāli Canon, the same story is told in the Vinaya-piṭaka: Mahāvagga I.23.1-10). See also Oldenberg (1997, pp 39-41).

3: It would nevertheless seem significant, in view of the story mentioned in the previous paragraph, that this sūtra makes specific mention of Aśvajit, his being the only individual name used (unusually) to represent the group of hearer disciples in the assembly.

4: For a detailed study of the use of the concept of the merit of Brahmā in Buddhist inscriptions and textual sources, see Salomon and Schopen (1984). This article also includes a partial translation of the *Praṭītya-samutpādasūtra* (see p 117).

5: See Boucher (1991), p 1.

6: See Boucher (1991), p 7.

7: See Sykes (1856), pp 40 and 48; and Skilling (2003). Both articles outline some locations in which this “creed” has been discovered and the linguistic variations found among them.

8: Bentor mentions that prominent Tibetan Buddhist figures such as Jetsün Trakpa Gyaltzen (*rje btsun grags pa rgyal mtshan*), the fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*), and Jamgön

Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé (*jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha 'yas*) all list the verses on dependent arising (*rten 'brel snying po*) among the Five Great Dhāraṇīs (*gzungs chen sde lnga*) that are to be inserted into stūpas. See Bentor (1995), p 254.

9: *dge slong dag sus rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba mtshong ba des chos mtshong ngo/ sus chos mtshong ba des sangs rgyas mtshong ngo*, “Bhikṣus, whoever sees dependent arising sees the Dharma. Whoever sees the Dharma sees the Buddha.” (Dharmasāgara Translation Group, forthcoming). For available editions of the relevant passage, see Reat (1993), p 27.

10: The identification of the Dharma with the Buddha himself is expressed in multiple early canonical sources, including the *Samyutta Nikāya* (III, 120), of the Pāli sūtra canon (*Suttapīṭaka*), in which the Buddha states, “He who sees the Dharma, Vikkali, sees me. He who sees me, sees the Dharma.” (*yo kko vakkali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati, yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati*). *Ibid.* p 2.

11: This equivalence is made explicit in another sūtra preserved in Chinese, which may in fact be a slightly longer version of the same sūtra, titled *Sūtra on the Merit of Building a Stūpa by the Buddha*. Boucher (1991), pp 8-9, provides a full translation of this sūtra.

12: This is also attested, of course, by the inclusion of a copy of this work (as Toh 980) in the *gzungs 'dus* (Dhāraṇī) section of the Kangyur.

13: See bibliography.

14: There are multiple variations of this creed found throughout the Buddhist world. See Sykes (1856) and Skilling (2003).

15: This last sentence is omitted in the otherwise identical copies of the work found in the Tantra and Dhāraṇī sections of the Kangyur, Toh 520 and Toh 980, respectively.

16: Mention of the translators is omitted from the colophon in the versions Toh 520 and Toh 980 (see previous note).