

ཚུལ་གྱི་འཁོར་ལོའི་མདོ།

The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma

Dharmacakrasūtra

ཚས་ཀྱི་འཁོར་ལོ་འཛོམས་དོ།

chos kyi 'khor lo'i mdo



Toh 337
Degé Kangyur, vol. 72, (mdo sde, sa), folios 275.a–277.a.

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co.

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SUMMARY

- s.1 *The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma* contains the Buddha's teaching to his five former spiritual companions on the four truths that he had discovered as part of his awakening: (1) suffering, (2) the origin of suffering, (3) the cessation of suffering, and (4) the path leading to the cessation of suffering. According to all the Buddhist traditions, this is the first teaching the Buddha gave to explain his awakened insight to others.

ac.

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i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma contains one of the most well-known teachings of Buddhism: the four truths of the noble ones. These four truths are: (1) the truth of suffering, (2) the truth of the origin of suffering, (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering, and (4) the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. According to traditional accounts, this is the first teaching taught by the Buddha following his attainment of awakening. The Buddha is said to have journeyed from the seat of awakening in Bodhgaya to the Deer Park outside Varanasi, where he delivered this teaching to his five former spiritual companions. Since this was the first time the Buddha turned the wheel of Dharma, this discourse also became known as *The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma*, or, more commonly, *The Sūtra of the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma*.

i.2

Although very brief, this classical presentation of the four truths has remained central to the Buddhist tradition since its very early days. As such, this teaching is included in all the major canons of Buddhism, so that versions in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan are found.¹ As far as translations into Tibetan are concerned, we find the classical presentation of the four truths embedded in no fewer than seven individual works in the Kangyur. Of these, the following four contain accounts of this first teaching in passages that are clearly closely related, being almost verbatim identical.²

- *The Chapter on Schism in the Sangha (Saṅghabhedavastu)*. This very long text forms the 17th chapter of the Mūlasarvāstivādin vinaya scripture *Chapters on Monastic Discipline (Vinayavastu, Toh 1)*, and includes, interspersed with all sorts of other material, passages recounting the life and deeds of the Buddha.³

- *Foundations of the Minor Monastic Discipline (Vinayaṣudrakavastu, Toh 6)*. Another Mūlasarvāstivādin vinaya scripture that includes episodes from the life and deeds of the Buddha as well as other material amplifying the history and rules of the monastic community.⁴

- *The Sūtra on Going Forth (Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra, Toh 301)*. In this text all the passages in *The Chapter on Schism in the Sangha* recounting the Buddha's life have been extracted verbatim to form a continuous narrative, including the passage on this teaching.⁵
- *The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma (Dharmacakrasūtra, Toh 337)*. This text (translated here) is also a verbatim extract from the account of the teaching as found in Toh 1, but this time only of this particular episode. However, it does add a brief introduction and conclusion to give to the account the form of an independent sūtra.

i.3 In addition, the Kangyur also contains a translation of the *Dhammachakkappavattanasutta* from the Pali canon:

- *The Sūtra of the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma (Dharmacakrapravartanasūtra, Toh 31)*. This is one of only fourteen texts in the Kangyur that were translated into Tibetan from the Pali. It therefore mirrors closely the *Dhammachakkappavattanasutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya*, although some differences exist.⁶

i.4 Another version of this episode in the Kangyur is embedded in one of the long collections of *avadāna*:

- *The Hundred Deeds (Karmaśataka, Toh 340)*. This anthology of stories compiled to illustrate the cause and effect of karmic action from one life to another contains—among several other kinds of narrative—accounts of many of the best known episodes from the life of the Buddha, and many of these are closely related and similarly worded parallels to the same episodes as told in the texts of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. The account of the first turning of the wheel of Dharma is followed by an account of the Buddha's relationship to the five first monks in their previous lives in the distant past, told to explain the karmic reasons underlying the present episode.⁷

i.5 Lastly, the teaching is also found as part of the *Lalitavistarasūtra*:

- *The Play in Full (Lalitavistara, Toh 95)*. In this lengthy account of the Buddha's deeds the teaching on the four truths has many similarities with the other texts, yet clearly belongs to another manuscript tradition as there are a number of significant differences as well. Here the teaching is found in the penultimate chapter (ch. 26), entitled "Turning the Wheel of Dharma."⁸

i.6 In general, the plethora of versions that exist of this teaching in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan are very similar, yet all of them contain a number of idiosyncrasies—some minor, others significant—that set them

apart from the rest. These differences have been studied in great detail over the last two centuries and a rich body of scholarship on the philological and theoretical aspects of this teaching has emerged.⁹ As a result, we now know that the teaching on the four truths as we today find it included in the various canons is the product of several editorial revisions over the centuries. The “original” version of this teaching consequently remains elusive, as does the role played by this teaching in the earliest days of the Buddhist tradition.¹⁰

i.7

As these scriptures became the focus of scholarly attention, a number of translations both from the Pali¹¹ and Sanskrit¹² have been produced. The translation presented here has been made on the basis of the Tibetan translation of *The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma* (Toh 337). As mentioned above, this text is with minor exceptions identical to the corresponding sections in Toh 1, Toh 6, and Toh 331. Toh 337 contains no mention of the translators, but the translator of Toh 1 is listed as the Tibetan Kawa Paltseg (*ka ba dpal brtsegs*), who was a prolific translator during the early period of Tibetan translations, which took place at the beginning of the ninth century. Unfortunately, the Sanskrit version that formed the basis for Kawa Paltseg’s translation of Toh 1 is no longer extant. The Sanskrit manuscript of the *Saṅghabhedavastu* that is available to us today (Gnoli 1977) has enough differences from the Tibetan translation for us to conclude that it was not the text that was used to produce the Tibetan translation. Nevertheless, it does represent an important witness of the Sanskrit, and our translation benefitted greatly from comparing it with the Tibetan. Our main sources were the Degé prints of Toh 1, Toh 301, and Toh 337, taking into account the variants noted in the Pedurma comparative edition of each.

The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma

1.

The Translation

1.1 [F.275.a] Homage to the Omniscient One!

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One, the Buddha, was residing in the Deer Park at R̥ṣivadana by Vārāṇasī. ¹³At that time the Blessed One spoke to the group of five monks:¹⁴

1.3 “Monks, regarding things¹⁵ that I had not previously heard,¹⁶ [F.275.b] as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization¹⁷ arose: ‘This is suffering, the truth of noble beings.’

1.4 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘This is the origin of suffering,¹⁸ this is the cessation of suffering, and this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.’

1.5 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I should comprehend suffering, that truth of noble beings.’

1.6 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I should relinquish the origin of suffering, that truth of noble beings.’

1.7 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I should actualize¹⁹ the cessation of suffering, that truth of noble beings.’

1.8 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I should cultivate the path leading to the cessation of suffering, that truth of noble beings.’

1.9

- “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I have comprehended suffering, that truth of noble beings.’
- 1.10 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I have relinquished the origin of suffering, that truth of noble beings.’ [F.276.a]
- 1.11 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I have actualized²⁰ the cessation of suffering, that truth of noble beings.’
- 1.12 “Monks, regarding things that I had not previously heard, as I reflected thoroughly, the vision arose, and the insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization arose: ‘With higher knowledge I have cultivated the path leading to the cessation of suffering, that truth of noble beings.’
- 1.13 “Monks, until I had achieved the vision, insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization of these four truths of noble beings that are turned in three phases and comprise twelve aspects,²¹ I had not been freed from this world with its devas, from its living beings including māras and brahmās as well as mendicants and brahmins, from its gods and humans. I had not escaped from it, severed ties with it, or been delivered from it. Nor did I dwell extensively with a mind free from error. Monks, I did not have the knowledge that I had fully awakened to unsurpassed and perfect buddhahood.
- 1.14 “Monks, once I had achieved the vision, insight, knowledge, understanding, and realization of turning these four truths of noble beings in three phases with twelve aspects, I was freed from this world with its devas, from its living beings including māras and brahmās as well as mendicants and brahmins, from its gods and humans. I had escaped from it, severed ties with it, and been delivered from it. I dwelled extensively with a mind free from error. [F.276.b] Monks, I then had the knowledge that I had fully awakened to unsurpassed and perfect buddhahood.”²²
- 1.15 When the Blessed One had given this Dharma discourse, venerable Kauṇḍinya, along with eighty thousand gods, achieved the Dharma vision that is free from dust and stainless with regard to phenomena.
- 1.16 The Blessed One now asked venerable Kauṇḍinya, “Kauṇḍinya, did you understand the Dharma?”
- “Blessed One,” he replied, “I understood.”
- “Kauṇḍinya, did you understand? Did you understand?”
- “Blissful One,” he replied, “I understood. I understood.”

- “Because venerable Kauṇḍinya has understood the Dharma, venerable Kauṇḍinya shall now be known as Ājñātakauṇḍinya.”²³
- 1.17 At that point the terrestrial yakṣas called out, “Venerable Kauṇḍinya has understood the Dharma!” And they continued, “Friends, in the Deer Park at Ṛṣivadana by Vārāṇasī, the Blessed One has turned the wheel of Dharma in three phases with twelve aspects. He has turned the wheel of Dharma in a way that no mendicant or brahmin, and no god, māra, or Brahmā in the world could ever do in accord with the Dharma. He has done so for the benefit of many beings, for the happiness of many beings, out of love for the world, and for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of gods and humans. Hence, the gods will flourish and the demigods will be on the wane.”
- 1.18 As the voices of the terrestrial yakṣas rang out—at that very moment, in that very instant, and at that very time—the news passed to the celestial yakṣas, as well as to the gods in the Heaven of the Four Great Kings, the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, the Heaven Free from Strife, the Heaven of Joy, the Heaven of Delighting in Emanations, the Heaven of Making Use of Others’ Emanations, and all the way to the Brahmā realm. Thus, also the gods in the Brahmā realm announced, “Friends, in the Deer Park at Ṛṣivadana by Vārāṇasī, [F.277.a] the Blessed One has turned the wheel of Dharma in three phases with twelve aspects. He has turned the wheel of Dharma in a way that no mendicant or brahmin, and no god, māra, or Brahmā in the world could ever do in accord with the Dharma. He has done so for the benefit of many beings, for the happiness of many beings, out of love for the world, and for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of gods and humans. Hence, the gods will flourish and the demigods will be on the wane.”
- 1.19 In the Deer Park at Ṛṣivadana by Vārāṇasī, the Blessed One turned the wheel of Dharma in three phases with twelve aspects. Therefore, this Dharma teaching was named *Turning the Wheel of Dharma*.²⁴
- 1.20 *This completes “The Sūtra of the Wheel of Dharma.”*

n.

NOTES

- n.1 For a summary of the Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese sources of this teaching, see Chung 2006, pp. 76–78, and Anderson 1999, pp. 15–16. See also Bronkhorst 1993, p. 80, n. 200.
- n.2 Although the precise historical relationship between these four texts has not been fully confirmed, it is highly likely that the episode in Toh 1 and Toh 6 share the same source; that Toh 301 is a compilation of extracts from Toh 1 relating the Buddha’s life as a whole (naturally including this episode); and that Toh 337 is a very short extract of this episode alone.
- n.3 The section corresponding to the present sūtra is found in the Degé Kangyur vol. 4 (*dul ba, nga*), folios 42.b.3-44.a.5
- n.4 The section corresponding to the present sūtra is found in the Degé Kangyur vol. 10 (*dul ba, tha*), folios 247.b.3-294.a.2.
- n.5 The corresponding section is found in *mdo sde, sa*, 60.a.1-61.b.3
- n.6 This text is found in the Degé Kangyur, vol. 34 (shes phyin, ka), folios 180.b.1-183.a.6, in the section of “Thirteen Late Translated Texts.” This group of works is traditionally placed in the Perfection of Wisdom section but is not, in fact, related to that genre. The texts were translated from Pali in the fourteenth century at the monastery of Tharpa Ling by a Sri Lankan monk, Ānandaśrī, and the Tibetan translator Nyima Gyaltsen Pel Zangpo. According to Skilling (1993, p. 97), this was during the first decade of the fourteenth century; Skilling has compared this particular text against the extant Pali *Dhammachakkappavattanasutta* (1993, pp. 103-106), and concludes that the Tibetan follows the Pali version but contains some significant omissions that he attributes to an erroneous manuscript or translation errors.
- n.7 This text is found in the Degé Kangyur, vol. 73 (mdo sde, ha), and the episode in question begins on folio 97.b. The translation (Jamspal and Fischer, 2020, 2.385 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh340.html#UT22084-073-001-1125>)) is

- to be found in the section *The Story of Wealth's Delight*, the twelfth story in Part Two.
- n.8 The relevant section is found in Degé Kangyur, vol. 46 (mdo sde, kha), folios 200b.1-201a.4. For the translation, see Dharmachakra Translation Committee (2013), 26.60 - 26.78 (<http://read.84000.co/translation/UT22084-046-001.html#UT22084-046-001-2121>).
- n.9 For a summary of modern scholarship on the four truths, see Anderson 1999, pp. 168-211. Chung 2006 provides a detailed comparison of the Chinese Sarvāstivāda, Sanskrit Mūlasarvāstivāda, and Sanskrit *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra* versions (the latter being from a manuscript found in Turfan, see Kloppenborg 1973), followed by another juxtaposition of the Sanskrit Saṃyuktāgama version with the Tibetan of the present Tibetan text—which Chung takes as representing a “separate tradition” without assuming, as we tentatively have, that it is an extract from the Tibetan translation of the *Saṅghabhedavastu*.
- n.10 See Bronkhorst 1993, pp. 71-85. See also Anderson 1999, pp. 15-23.
- n.11 E.g. Anderson 1999, pp. 64-67, and Bodhi 2000.
- n.12 E.g. Sastri 1938, pp. 479-480, and Kloppenborg 1973, pp. 24-27.
- n.13 The equivalent section in Toh 1 begins at this point (p. 42b.3) and in Toh 301 (p. 60a.1).
- n.14 At this point, the corresponding passage in the *Lalitavistarasūtra* begins (Lefmann, p. 417; Dharmachakra Translation Group, 26.65).
- n.15 Here “things” translates the Sanskrit *dharma* (Pali: *dhamma*, Tibetan: *chos*). Some commentaries suggest that *dharma* is used here in the sense of “truth.” For example, the *Puggalapaññattipakaraṇa-mūlaṭīkā* (<https://www.tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/abh03t.tik1.xml>) says: *ananussutesu dhammesūti ca ananussutesu saccesūti attho*. However, teachings on the four truths also present them not so much as general statements of what is “true,” but more as four categories into which *all* phenomena can be classified and distinguished in terms of their function with regard to suffering, i.e. in constituting it, causing it, being beyond it, or being the means to end it, respectively.
- n.16 The Tibetan here and in most other versions of this repeated passage places the first person pronoun *nga* with this phrase. However, in the various Sanskrit versions (typically *pūrvam ananuśruteṣu dharmeṣu*) there is no indication of whether the phrase means the Buddha had not himself previously heard these *dharmas* or whether they had more generally never been heard before by anyone.

- n.17 The *Saṅghabhedavastu* does not include “realization” (Tibetan: *rtogs pa*) in this or the following several repetitions of this phrase. Instead the list only includes “insight (*jñāna*), knowledge (*vidyā*), and understanding (*buddhi*)” (Gnoli 1977, p. 135). Skilling (1993), pp. 105 and 194, discusses the significance of the four to seven “epithets of insight” found in the parallel versions of this passage in Sanskrit, Pali, and Tibetan but his notes do not include this difference between the Sanskrit of the *Saṅghabhedavastu* and its Tibetan translation, nor the version in the *Karmaśataka* (see Introduction i.4).
- n.18 Before the phrase “This is the origin of suffering,” Toh 337 in the Degé Kangyur includes the phrase “This is suffering.” However, here we have omitted it, as it is absent in all other versions of this passage, including the recensions of this sūtra in the Yongle, Lithang, Coné, Narthang, and Peking Kangyurs; the Sanskrit of the *Saṅghabhedavastu*; and the Tibetan of both Toh 1 and Toh 301 in D and other Kangyurs.
- n.19 At this point Toh 337 includes the words “the knowledge of...” However, we have omitted this, since the phrase is absent in Toh 1 and Toh 301, as well as the *Saṅghabhedavastu*.
- n.20 At this point Toh 337 includes the words “the knowledge of...” However, we have omitted this, since the phrase is absent in Toh 1 and Toh 301, as well as the *Saṅghabhedavastu*.
- n.21 The three phases refer to the three stages of (1) identifying the four truths, (2) understanding how to relate to each of the four truths, and (3) knowing that the respective goals of the four truths have been accomplished. When these three stages are applied to each of the four truths, there are twelve aspects in all. For a classical explanation of this enumeration by Haribhadra (eighth cent.), see Sparham 2008, p. 264. See also Anderson 1999, p. 70. Note that these twelve aspects are unrelated to the alternative enumeration of sixteen aspects associated with the four truths (four for each truth). The sixteen aspects counteract sixteen incorrect views associated with the four truths. On the sixteen aspects, see Buswell 2013, p. 304-305. For a classical account by Candrakīrti (c. 570-650 CE), see May 1959, p. 212-216.
- n.22 At this point, the corresponding passage in the *Lalitavistarasūtra* ends (Lefmann, p. 418).
- n.23 This name means “Kaundinya who has understood.”
- n.24 Toh 1 (p. 44a.5) and Toh 301 (p. 61b.3) end at this point.

b.

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g.

GLOSSARY

g.1

Ājñātakauṇḍinya

kun shes kauN Di nya

ཀུན་ཤེས་ཀྱི་ཏྲི་ཉལ།

Ājñātakauṇḍinya

Another name for Kauṇḍinya. As he was the first to understand the Buddha's teaching on the four truths, he received the name Ājñātakauṇḍinya ("Kauṇḍinya who understood").

g.2

Brahmā

tsangs pa

ཙངས་པ།

Brahmā

A high ranking deity, presiding over a divine world where other beings consider him the creator; he is also considered to be the "Lord of the Sahā-world (our universe)."

g.3

Brahmā realm

tshangs ris

ཚངས་རིས།

brahmakāyika

The lowest heaven of the form realm.

g.4

Deer Park

ri dags kyi nags

རི་དགས་ཀྱི་ནགས།

mṛgadāva

The forest, located outside of Varanasi, where the Buddha first taught the Dharma.

g.5

Demigod

lha ma yin

ལྷ་མ་ཡིན།

asura

The traditional adversaries of the devas (gods) who are frequently portrayed in Brahmanical mythology as having a disruptive effect on cosmological and social harmony.

g.6 Heaven Free from Strife

'thab bral

འཐབ་བྲལ།

Yāma

The third lowest of the six heavens of the desire realm.

g.7 Heaven of Delighting in Emanations

'phrul dga'

འཕྱུལ་དགའ།

Nirmāṇarati

The second highest of the six heavens of the desire realm.

g.8 Heaven of Joy

dga' ldan

དགའ་ལྡན།

Tuṣita

The third highest of the six heavens of the desire realm.

g.9 Heaven of Making Use of Others' Emanations

gzhan 'phrul dbang byed pa

གཞན་འཕྱུལ་དབང་བྱེད་པ།

Paranirmitavaśavartin

The highest of the six heavens of the desire realm.

g.10 Heaven of the Four Great Kings

rgyal chen bzhi'i ris

རྒྱལ་ཆེན་བཞིའི་རིས།

Caturmahārājika

The lowest of the six heavens of the desire realm.

g.11 Heaven of the Thirty-Three

sum cu rtsa gsum

སུམ་བུ་ཚ་གསུམ།

Trāyastriṃśa

The second lowest of the six heavens of the desire realm.

g.12 Kauṇḍinya

kauN Di nya

ཀོཏ་དི་ལྷ།

Kauṇḍinya

One of the five former spiritual friends with whom Gautama had practiced meditation before his awakening.

g.13 R̥ṣivadana

drang srong smra ba

རང་སྟོང་སྐྱེ་བ།

r̥ṣivadana

A sacred area located outside of Vārāṇasī where many sages are said to have practiced in the past.

g.14 Truth of noble beings

'phags pa'i bden pa

འཕགས་པའི་བདེན་པ།

āryasatya

The four truths that the Buddha realized: suffering, origin, cessation, and path. They are named “truths of noble beings” since only “noble beings” with knowledge of reality can understand them.

g.15 Vārāṇasī

bA rA Na sI

བ་ར་ཏ་སི།

Vārāṇasī

City in North India where the Buddha first taught the Dharma

g.16 Yakṣa

gnod sbyin

གོད་སྐྱིན།

yakṣa

A class of semidivine beings said to dwell in the north, under the jurisdiction of the Great King Vaiśravaṇa, otherwise known as Kubera.