

ཚེས་བཞི་བསྟན་པའི་མདོ།

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## The Sūtra Teaching the Four Factors

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*Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra*

འཕགས་པ་ཚོས་བཞི་བསྟན་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོའི་མདོ།

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*'phags pa chos bzhi bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*

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The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “Teaching the Four Factors”

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*Āryacaturdharmanirdeśanāmamahāyānasūtra*



Toh 249  
Degé Kangyur, vol.66 (mdo sde, za), folios 59.a–59.b.

Translated by Adam Pearcey  
under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha

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co.

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## SUMMARY

s.

- s.1 While Buddha Śākyamuni is residing in the Sudharmā assembly hall in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, he explains to the great bodhisattva Maitreya four factors that make it possible to overcome the effects of any negative deeds one has committed. These four are: the action of repentance, which involves feeling remorse; antidotal action, which is to practice virtue as a remedy to non-virtue; the power of restraint, which involves vowing not to repeat a negative act; and the power of support, which means taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, and never forsaking the mind of awakening. The Buddha concludes by recommending that bodhisattvas regularly recite this sūtra and reflect on its meaning as an antidote to any further wrongdoing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ac.

- ac.1 Translated by Adam Pearcey, with the assistance of Alak Zenkar Rinpoche. An earlier draft of this translation was published on Lotsawa House (<https://www.lotsawahouse.org/>) in 2013. The present updated version was then completed in 2017 under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

## INTRODUCTION

i.

i.1 As its name suggests, the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* (*Sūtra Teaching the Four Factors*) is an explanation of four *dharmas*, here meaning factors or qualities.<sup>1</sup> These factors relate to the practice of confession (even though no equivalent of that word occurs in the *sūtra* itself) and the purification of misdeeds or negative, harmful actions (*pāpa*). The four are: (1) the action (or correct approach) of repentance or self-reproach (*vidūṣaṇāsamudācāra*; *rnam par sun 'byin pa kun tu spyod pa*), which involves feeling remorse for past negative actions; (2) antidotal or remedial action (*pratipaśasamudācāra*; *gnyen po kun tu spyod pa*), which means cultivating virtuous actions as an antidote to misdeeds; (3) the power of restraint (*pratyāpattibala*; *sor chud par byed pa'i stobs*), which means vowing not to repeat a negative action; and (4) the power of support (*āśrayabala*; *rten gyi stobs*), which means taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, and never forsaking the mind of awakening. Through employing these four factors, the *sūtra* says, any negative act, no matter how grave, can be “overcome” in the sense that its karmic consequences can be transformed. This became a crucial idea for Mahāyāna ethics, both in theory and in practice.

i.2 The importance of the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* is evident from the numerous references to it that appear in Indian Mahāyāna literature. The *Bodhyāpattideśanāvṛtti* (*Commentary on the Confession of Bodhisattva Downfalls*), for example, which is attributed to Nāgārjuna, cites the *sūtra* and elaborates on the four powers (*stobs bzhi*), as the four factors came to be known, despite the fact that only the final two are labeled “power” (*stobs; bala*) in the *sūtra* itself. Bhāviveka's *Tarkajvālā*, too, refers to the *sūtra* in support of the view that even the very gravest of negative actions can be purified. And chapter eight of Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (*Compendium of Training*), on the purification of misdeeds (*pāpaśodhana*; *sdig pa sbyong ba*), not only quotes from the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra*, but even takes the four factors as its central theme.

i.3 Tibetan authors, too, make it clear that the four powers are the key elements of confessional practice (*bshags pa*). In his famous *Ornament of Precious Liberation* (*dwags po thar rgyan*), Gampopa Sönam Rinchen (*sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen*,

1079–1153) relates the powers to episodes in the lives of the Buddha’s contemporaries Nanda, Aṅgulimāla, Ajātaśatru, and Udayana, in order to demonstrate the necessity of each factor. Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419) draws on both the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* itself and Śāntideva’s discussion in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* to explain the powers in some detail in his magnum opus, the *Lamrim Chenmo*.<sup>2</sup> It is also common to find reference to the four powers in Tibetan purificatory rites and commentaries on them.<sup>3</sup> There are slight variations in the spelling of the names and the sequence of these powers, and not all Tibetan works cite the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* as their source, but the derivation is clear enough.<sup>4</sup>

i.4 At least two Sanskrit editions of the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* exist today.<sup>5</sup> One is a manuscript from a collection held in the Potala library in Lhasa, which recently became available in a critical edition.<sup>6</sup> It exhibits several variations from the versions in the Tibetan canon, most notably in its inclusion, near the end, of a four-line verse that it attributes to the Buddha himself:

i.5 “Even minor transgressions prove the downfall of the foolish,  
Whereas even serious transgressions do not affect the wise.  
A lump of iron, though small, sinks in water;  
But even a great mass of iron, when made into a vessel, floats.”<sup>7</sup>

i.6 Some other minor differences are also noted below. The following translation was made primarily on the basis of the Degé block print and the Comparative Edition (*dpe bsdur ma*), although it follows the Peking Yongle and Kangxi recensions on one significant point, for reasons that are explained in a note. Otherwise, since the various Tibetan canonical versions vary among themselves only slightly in matters of orthography, such instances have not been specified here.



tr.

## THE TRANSLATION

# The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra Entitled **Teaching the Four Factors**

- 1.1 [F.59.a] Homage to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas!
- 1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was dwelling in the Sudharmā assembly hall in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, together with a great gathering of five hundred monks,<sup>8</sup> and very many bodhisattva mahāsattvas, including Maitreya and Mañjuśrī.
- 1.3 At that time the Blessed One said to the bodhisattva mahāsattva Maitreya, [F.59.b] “O Maitreya, bodhisattva mahāsattva, if you possess four factors, the misdeeds you have committed and accumulated will be overcome.
- 1.4 “What are these four? The action of repentance, antidotal action, the power of restraint, and the power of support.
- 1.5 “The action of repentance is to feel intense remorse for any non-virtuous action you have committed.
- 1.6 “Antidotal action is to put great effort into virtuous actions once you have committed a non-virtuous action.
- 1.7 “The power of restraint is to make a pledge and thereby refrain from any similar action.<sup>9</sup>
- 1.8 “The power of support is to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, and not to forsake the mind of awakening. By relying on such powerful forces, you will be immune to misdeeds.
- 1.9 “O Maitreya, bodhisattva mahāsattva, if you possess these four factors, you will overcome any misdeeds that you have committed and accumulated. The bodhisattva mahāsattva should continually read this sūtra, recite it aloud, and reflect and meditate on it, doing so many times. Through this, the effects of negative conduct will not come about.”

1.10 Once the Blessed One had said this, the whole assembly, including the bodhisattva mahāsattva Maitreya, the monks, the bodhisattvas, and the ranks of the gods, such as Śakra, were overjoyed and full of praise for what the Blessed One had taught.

1.11 This concludes the noble Mahāyāna sūtra entitled *Teaching the Four Factors*.

c.

## COLOPHON

c.1 Translated, edited, and corrected by the Indian preceptor Surendrabodhi and the principal editor and translator venerable Yeshe Dé.

## NOTES

n.

- 1 The *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* is placed in the Degé and other Kangyurs of predominantly Tshalpa (*tshal pa*) origin as the second of a group of five short sūtras (Toh 248–52) all with titles and themes involving four topics. It is followed by two very similarly titled sūtras: the *Caturdharmaka* (*chos bzhi pa'i mdo*, Toh 250), which lists four concerns (for sexual partners, the royal court, attractiveness, and wealth) to be avoided at all costs; and another with the same short-form title, *Caturdharmaka* (Toh 251) but also, as a Mahāyāna sūtra, the more elaborate long-form title that Toh 250 lacks, *Āryacaturdharmakanāmahāyāna-sūtra*, which describes four dharmas (the mind of awakening, spiritual guides, patience, and living in solitude) that bodhisattvas must never relinquish throughout their lives.
- 2 See Tsong-kha-pa 2000 vol. 1, 251–4. Dza Patrul Rinpoche's (*rdza dpal sprul*, 1808–87) famous nineteenth century work *kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* and its commentary by Khenpo Ngawang Pelzang (*ngag dbang dpal bzang*, 1879–1941) discuss the four powers in relation to meditation on the deity Vajrasattva. See Patrul Rinpoche 1998, 265–7 and Ngawang Pelzang 2004, 226–7.
- 3 One such text, entitled *stobs bzhi'i bshags bsdoms bya tshul*, was composed by the First (or Fourth according to some methods of counting) Pañchen Lama, Losang Chökyi Gyaltsen (*blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*, 1570–1662). The same author also wrote another rite incorporating the four powers that focuses on the thirty-five buddhas of confession. See *stobs bzhi tshang ba sangs rgyas so lnga'i bya tshul*.
- 4 Patrul Rinpoche's *kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, for example, makes no reference to the sūtra and discusses the four powers in a different sequence, beginning with the power of support. See Patrul Rinpoche 1998, 265–7.
- 5 Besides the Potala manuscript, there is also a Sanskrit edition included in Samten and Pandey 2003, 45–52.
- 6 See Tseng 2010.

- 7 The Potala Sanskrit edition (Tseng 2010, vol. 1, 404) is as follows: *kṛtvābudho 'lpam api pāpam adhaḥ prayāti kṛtvā budho mahad api prajahāty anarthān | majjaty ayo 'lpam api vāriṇi saṃhataṃ hi pātrikṛtaṃ mahad api plavate tad eva | |*. The verse also appears, without mention of its source, in Vasubandhu's auto-commentary to the *Abhidharmakośa*. For alternative English translations see Tseng 2010, vol. 1, 405, and Pruden 1988, 962.
- 8 The Potala Sanskrit edition (Tseng 2010, vol. 1, 397) reads "one thousand two hundred and fifty monks" (*ardhatrayodaśabhir bhikṣusūatair*).
- 9 Here the translation follows the Peking Kangxi and Yongle Kangyurs, as well as the Potala Sanskrit manuscript and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, in reading *mi phyed pa'i sdom pa* as *mi byed pa'i sdom pa* (*akaraṇasaṃvara*). This reading not only accords with the available Sanskrit, it also follows the definitions of the other powers in providing an instruction rather than a mere description. Moreover, the phrase *mi byed pa'i sdom pa* is also retained in the citations of the *Caturdharmanirdeśasūtra* that appear in several treatises in the Tengyur, including Bhāviveka's *Tarkajvālā*, Prajñākaramati's *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*, and Abhayākaragupta's *Munimatālaṃkāra*. The alternative reading, which is to be found in the other Kangyurs, could be translated as: "The power of restraint is to make a pledge and thereby gain an inviolable vow."

b.

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## GLOSSARY

g.

g.1

Action of repentance

*rnam par sum 'byin pa kun tu spyod pa*

རྣམ་པར་སུན་འབྱིན་པ་ཀུན་ཏུ་སྟོན་པ།

*vidūṣaṅgāsamudācāra*

Feeling remorse for past negative actions.

g.2

Antidotal action

*gnyen po kun tu spyod pa*

གཉེན་པོ་ཀུན་ཏུ་སྟོན་པ།

*pratipakṣasamudācāra*

Carrying out virtuous actions as an antidote to past negative deeds.

g.3

Heaven of the Thirty-Three

*sum cu rtsa gsum*

སུམ་རྩ་ཚ་གསུམ།

*Trāyastriṅśa*

The second heaven of the desire realm located above Mount Meru.

g.4

Maitreya

*byams pa*

བྱམས་པ།

*Maitreya*

Bodhisattva of loving kindness; the next buddha to follow Śakyāmini.

g.5

Mañjuśrī

*'jam dpal*

འཇམ་དཔལ།

*Mañjuśrī*

Bodhisattva of wisdom.

g.6

Power of restraint

*sor chud par byed pa'i stobs*

སོར་ཚུད་པར་བྱེད་པའི་སྟོབས།

*pratyāpattibala*

Pledging not to repeat past negative actions.

g.7 Power of support

*rten gyi stobs*

རྟེན་གྱི་སྟོབས།

*āśrayabala*

Calling upon the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha and vowing not to forsake the mind of awakening as a support in avoiding negative actions.

g.8 Śakra

*brgya byin*

བརྒྱ་ཕྱིན།

*Śakra*

An alternative name for Indra, lord of the gods, who, according to Buddhist cosmology, resides in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three.

g.9 Sudharmā

*chos bzang*

ཚོས་བཟང།

*Sudharmā*

An assembly hall located in the southwest of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three.

g.10 Surendrabodhi

*su ren dra bo dhi*

སུ་རེན་ང་བོ་དྭོ།

*Surendrabodhi*

An Indian paṇḍita resident in Tibet during the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

g.11 Yeshé Dé

*ye shes sde*

ཡེ་ཤེས་སྡེ།

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A prolific Tibetan translator active during the late eighth and early ninth centuries.