

THE QUESTIONS OF AN OLD LADY

བགྲེས་མོས་ལྷུས་པ།

The Questions of an Old Lady

Mahallikāparipṛcchā

འཕགས་པ་བགྲེས་མོས་ལྷུས་པ་ཞེས་བྱ་ཐེག་པ་ཆེན་པོ་འི་མདོ།

'phags pa bgres mos zhus pa zhes bya theg pa chen po'i mdo

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Questions of an Old Lady”

Āryamahallikāparipṛcchānāmamahāyānasūtra

Toh. 171, Degé Kangyur Vol. 59 (mdo sde, Ba), folios 310b4–
314a7

Translated by the Sakya Pandita Translation Group
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Summary

This sūtra contains teachings given by the Buddha to a 120-year-old woman in the city of Vaiśālī. Upon meeting the Buddha, she asks him questions concerning the four stages of life, the aggregates, the elements and the faculties. In response, the Buddha gives her a profound teaching on emptiness, using beautifully crafted examples to illustrate his point.

After hearing these teachings, her doubts are dispelled and she is freed from clinging to the perception of a self. Ānanda asks the Buddha why he has given such profound teachings to this woman. The Buddha reveals that the woman has been his mother five hundred times in previous lifetimes and that he had generated the root of virtue for her to become enlightened. Because of her own strong aspirations, after her death she will be born in the buddhafiield of Sukhāvātī; and after sixty-eight thousand eons, she will finally become the buddha Bodhyaṅgapuṣpakara.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Considering the cultural norms of the time, the fact that the teaching contained in this sūtra was given entirely to a lay woman and, moreover, to a very old and impoverished lay woman, makes it stand apart. The setting of this text is Vaiśālī, the ancient capital of the Licchavis and of the Vṛji/Vaji confederacy of which the Licchavi republic was a member. The old lady, whose name we are never told, asks the Buddha such profound questions that Ānanda realises this is no ordinary lady but one whose wisdom comes from merit collected in past lifetimes. As it turns out, the Buddha reveals that she has been his mother for five hundred lifetimes.

The main body of the text, which consists of the Buddha's teachings in answer to the old lady's questions, is an explanation of emptiness. To put it briefly, the Buddha says no phenomenon arises of its own accord. Neither does any phenomenon give rise to any other phenomenon. All phenomena arise owing to their dependence upon collections of causes and conditions. Hence, there is no independent phenomenon, though we may use terms to indicate various phenomena as if they were independent. After the Buddha's teaching the old lady realizes this profound truth. The Buddha prophesies that she herself will one day become a buddha. In earlier lifetimes he had planted roots of virtue and made strong aspirations for her to do so.

The following modern works should be mentioned. Frye (1979) provides us with an English translation from the Mongolian version of the sūtra. Research on the date and translator attributions of the Chinese versions is to be found in

Nattier (2007). Durt (2005) discusses the theme of the *mahallikā* (old lady) and the three Chinese versions (Taishō 559, 560, 561) of the *Mahallikāparipṛcchā*.

There is no Sanskrit version extant. The primary Tibetan text used for the present translation was the Degé (*sde dge*) edition, the other editions being also compared. The colophon of the sūtra states that it was translated under the guidance of the abbots Jinamitra and Dānaśīla by the Tibetan translator Yeshé Dé (*ye shes sde*), from which we can conclude that this text must have been translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan in the early ninth century C.E. during the first phase of translations of Buddhist texts into Tibetan.

THE TRANSLATION

The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra

The Questions of an Old Lady

[F.310.b] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Thus did I hear at one time. When the Bhagavān was travelling in the land of Vṛjī,¹ he went to the great city of Vaiśālī, together with a large saṅgha of one thousand two hundred and fifty bhikṣus and a vast number of bodhisattva mahāsattvas. At that time, he came across an old woman from the city gathering grass in the countryside. She was decrepit and had reached the end of her life-span, being one hundred and twenty years old.

The woman saw the Bhagavān coming from afar—handsome, inspiring, with senses tamed, mind tamed, endowed with supreme discipline and serenity, guarded, faultless, senses controlled, pure and clear like the sea, unclouded, rising up like a golden stūpa, radiant with splendor clear and distinct, wonderfully adorned with the thirty-two signs of a great being. When she saw him, faith grew in her mind. Then, full of devotion, she approached [F.311.a] the Bhagavān, bowed her head at his feet, circumambulated the Bhagavān three times, and sat to one side. The woman, bowing with folded hands in the direction of the Bhagavān, asked him thus:

“O Bhagavān, where does birth come from? Where does ageing come from? Where do they go? O Bhagavān, where does sickness come from? Where does death come from? Where do they go? O Bhagavān, where does form come from? Where do sensation, notions, formative factors and consciousness come from? Where do they go? O Bhagavān, where does the earth element come from? Where do the water element, the fire element, the wind element, the space element and the element of consciousness come from? Where do they go? O Bhagavān, where does the eye come from? Where do the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind come from? Where do they go?”

The Bhagavān said, “Sister, birth does not come from anywhere. Ageing does not come from anywhere. They do not go anywhere. Sister, sickness does not come from anywhere. Death does not come from anywhere. They do not go anywhere. Sister, form does not come from anywhere. Sensation, notions, formative factors and consciousness do not come from anywhere. They do not go anywhere. Sister, the earth element does not come from anywhere. The water element, the fire element, the wind element, the space element and the element of consciousness do not come from anywhere. They do not go anywhere. Sister, the eye does not come from anywhere. The ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind do not come from anywhere. They do not go anywhere.

“Sister, it is as follows: for example, a fire arises based on a stick to rub with, a stick to rub on, and also a person’s effort to generate it. That fire, moreover, after it has burnt the grass and wood, will have no more causes and will die. Sister, where do you think the fire comes from and where does it go?”

She answered, “O Bhagavān, that fire comes into being owing to the power of a collection of causes. It ceases and dies when it lacks the collection of causes.”

The Bhagavān said, “Sister, likewise, all phenomena [F.311.b] come into being owing to the power of a collection. They cease and die when they lack the collection. Whatever the phenomena, they do not come from anywhere, nor do they go anywhere. Sister, it is thus: Although the eye consciousness

arises based upon the eye and form, the eye consciousness does not have a producer, nor anything that makes it cease. Nowhere is it brought together at all. The aggregates do not come from anywhere, nor do they go anywhere. When one has accumulated karma through the conditions of the consciousnesses, the fruits manifest as the three types of results² in the three realms.³ That fruit is empty too. It has no coming. It has no going. No one makes it arise. It is not stopped by anybody. Sister, all phenomena have stopped due to their very natures.

“Likewise, although the mental consciousness⁴ arises based upon the ear and sound, the nose and smell, the tongue and taste, the body and touch, and the mind and phenomena, the mental consciousness does not have a producer nor has it anything that makes it cease. Nowhere is it brought together at all.⁵ The aggregates do not come from anywhere, nor do they go anywhere either. When one has accumulated karma through the condition of mental consciousness, the fruits manifest as the three types of results in the three realms. That fruit is empty too. It has no coming. It has no going. No one makes it arise. It is not stopped by anybody. Sister, all phenomena have stopped due to their very natures.

“Sister, it is as follows: for example, the sound of a drum arises based on wood, hide and a stick, and also on a person’s effort to make it arise. The past sound of that drum was empty, the future sound will be empty and the sound that arises at present is empty. The sound does not dwell in the wood, neither does it dwell in the hide, nor does it dwell in the stick, nor does it dwell in the person’s hand. However, because of these conditions, it is termed ‘sound.’ That which is termed ‘sound’ is also empty. It has no coming. It has no going. No one makes it arise. It is not stopped by anybody. Sister, all phenomena have stopped due to their very natures.

“Sister, all phenomena, in the same way, depend solely on conditions. It is so for ignorance, craving, karma and consciousness; when these phenomena are present, the terms ‘death’ and ‘birth’ are applied, but [F.312.a] what is designated ‘death’ and what is designated ‘birth’ are also empty. They have

no coming. They have no going. No one makes them arise. They are not stopped by anybody. Sister, all phenomena have stopped due to their very natures.

“Sister, in this way, one who understands the nature of a drum’s sound also understands emptiness. One who understands emptiness, understands nirvāṇa. One who understands nirvāṇa, though he designates conventional things with all sorts of terms, has no attachment to any entity. ‘This is mine,’ ‘that is me,’ ‘sentient being,’ or ‘life force,’ ‘living being,’ ‘man,’ ‘person,’ ‘born of Manu,’ ‘son of Manu,’⁶ ‘agent,’ ‘inciter of action,’ ‘appropriator,’ or ‘discarder’—he teaches Dharma without attachment to these. He teaches Dharma well. He teaches the final reality. He teaches the final reality well.

“Sister, it is as follows: an artist, or an artist’s apprentice, spreads various paints on a canvas that has been thoroughly cleaned, or on a flat piece of wood, or on the surface of a wall that has been wiped clean. He paints with ease whatever bodily shape he might wish, such as the features of a man’s physical form, the features of a woman’s physical form, the features of an elephant’s physical form, the features of a horse’s physical form, or the features of a donkey’s physical form, complete with all their limbs, appendages, and sense organs. However well it is executed, no phenomenon at all is transferred in such a case from the artist’s hand or mind to the physical form. However, we designate this a ‘form’ because of those conditions. That which is designated a ‘form’ is also empty. It has no coming. It has no going. No one makes it arise. It is not stopped by anybody. Sister, all phenomena have stopped due to their very natures.

“Sister, it is likewise when there are meritorious formative factors.⁷ That is to say, although meritorious bodies will result amongst gods and humans, in that case not even an atom is transferred from this world to the world beyond. However, due to the formative factors [F.312.b], there are various kinds of rebirths. They are understood to be physical bodies with bases for cognition.⁸

“It is likewise when there are demeritorious formative factors. That is to say, although bodies that are not meritorious result amongst hell beings, or in the animal state, or in the world of the Lord of Death, or among the demigods,⁹ not even an atom is transferred in such a case from this world to the world beyond. However, due to the formative factors there are various kinds of rebirths. They are understood to be physical forms with bases for cognition.

“Sister, it is as follows: for example, a vast gathering of clouds arises because of the nāga-power of the nāgas,¹⁰ and when those huge nets of clouds cover the earth, they let fall a heavy deluge of rain. After the heavy deluge of rain has fallen, the hills and the valleys are quenched. When the hills and valleys are quenched, the rain later subsides. But these things do not originate from the nāgas’ bodies or minds. The nāgas produce the vast gathering of clouds, rather, by virtue of the nāga-powers of nāgas alone.

“Sister, it is likewise when there are meritorious formative factors, that is to say, when meritorious bodies result amongst gods or humans. It is likewise, too, when there are demeritorious formative factors. That is to say, although bodies that are not meritorious result amongst hells beings or in the animal state or the world of the Lord of Death or among the demigods, in such cases the activity of the formative factor is empty, the agent of the formative factor is empty and the fruits of the formative factor are also empty. Sister, when there are formative factors for remaining static, consciousness will reincarnate amongst the beings of the formless realms. That on account of which the consciousness reincarnates amongst beings of the formless realms is empty, and the consciousness which reincarnates amongst the beings of the formless realms is empty too. Why is this so? Sister, it is because all phenomena are empty of essence. Even so phenomena are designated. The learned are not attached to them. As they have no attachment they do not dispute. Having no disputes is the supreme quality of the religious mendicant.”

The woman said, [F.313.a] “Since the Bhagavān has taught the profound Dharma in this way, O Bhagavān, I, too, have penetrated these teachings with the eye of wisdom and will never be of two minds about them again. I have no doubts. O Bhagavān, earlier, as I hadn’t yet heard these teachings I did have doubts. Now I am old, I am decrepit, I suffer, I am poor, I have no protector, I have no life, and yet I do not die. O Bhagavān, after hearing these teachings I realize that there is no ageing, no poverty, no happiness, no sickness, nor is anyone ever ill, wealthy, or poor at all. I am freed from the notion of a self.”

Then the Venerable Ānanda inquired of the Bhagavān, “Bhagavān, why have you taught such a profound Dharma discourse as this? I wonder whether it is because this woman, who has investigated so well in this way, is meritorious, learned and naturally wise.”

The Bhagavān replied, “Ānanda, so it is. Ānanda, it is indeed just as you say. This woman is meritorious, learned and naturally wise. Ānanda, this woman was my mother for five hundred lifetimes. Ānanda, in each of those lifetimes I also generated the roots of virtue so that she could attain unsurpassable and perfectly complete enlightenment. Ānanda, I cherished, revered and respected this woman greatly. She also thought, ‘I will engage in whatever conduct my son engages in and attain the unsurpassable and perfectly complete enlightenment of the vehicle of happiness.’”

Ānanda inquired, “Bhagavān, why is she poor in this way?”

The Bhagavān answered, “Ānanda, when I took up the conduct of a bodhisattva, I became a renunciate in the doctrine of the bhagavān, the tathāgata, arhat, perfectly complete buddha Krakucchanda.¹¹ At that time, Ānanda, this woman was my mother. Because of her attachment she did not want to let me go, so I stopped eating my one meal per day. Later, she agreed to let me go. Ānanda, because of the ripening [F.313.b] of that karma she is as poor as she is. Ānanda, this is the last time she will be poor. Ānanda, after death, this woman, who no longer

craves a woman’s faculties, will obtain a man’s faculties in the Sukhāvātī buddha field of the bhagavān, the perfectly complete buddha Amitābha. Once born there, she will make offerings to an innumerable, immeasurable, inconceivable number of buddhas; guide an innumerable, immeasurable, inconceivable number of sentient beings to enlightenment; make an innumerable, immeasurable, inconceivable number of sentient beings ripe for enlightenment; bring an innumerable, immeasurable, inconceivable number of sentient beings to enlightenment, and having brought an innumerable, immeasurable, inconceivable number of sentient beings to enlightenment, in sixty-eight hundred thousand *kalpas* she will become the tathāgata, arhat, perfectly complete buddha named Bodhyaṅgapuṣpakara,¹² in the ‘three thousand great thousand world systems.’¹³ Ānanda, the wealth and enjoyments of sentient beings of this buddha field will be like those of the gods of the Thirty-Three.”¹⁴ The Bhagavān spoke thus.

The Sugata having spoken thus, he, the Teacher, also uttered the following:

“Ānanda, behold this old lady,
 Before me with palms joined,
 Who will become a buddha, excellent among humans,
 Named Bodhyaṅgapuṣpakara.
 She, giving up a woman’s form,
 Will go to the realm of Sukhāvātī.
 Venerate the victor Amitāyus,
 And become a peerless buddha, conqueror of the three
 realms.
 Again venerating the guides dwelling in other realms,
 The great sages¹⁵ who benefit those realms,
 She will become a peerless buddha, excellent among
 humans.
 Having also heard the Dharma from them all,
 With a purified mind, she will become accomplished in the
 same fashion. [F.314.a]

Remaining in the immovable, supreme mind of
 enlightenment,
 She will cause countless sentient beings to practice the
 Dharma.

At that time there will be no inferior beings,
 No beings with various bad bodies or bad color,
 None dull, lame, and likewise none blind,
 And no lepers with stumps for arms.

At that time the radiance of the sun, the moon, Fire,
 lightning and gems will not appear,
 For the power of the light of the guide
 Bodhyaṅgapuṣpakara
 Will illuminate and spread everywhere.

At that time that exceptional buddha field
 Will be filled with types of beings
 Who have the same, height, breadth, signs and color
 Of the supreme gods of the Thirty-Three.

There will be no women belonging to Māra's faction.
 No female māras, no retinue of Māra .
 When the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma there,
 Not even the word *tīrthika* will be known.

When the Tathāgata teaches the Dharma there,
 Not even the words 'lower realms,'
 'Preta,' 'animal birth,' 'beings of hell,'
 Not even the word 'woman' will be heard.

At that time, there will be no classifications of vehicles,
 Like the vehicles of the śrāvakas and the pratyekabuddhas
 in this world.

All will be endowed with a complete mind of
 enlightenment,
 Dwell in loving-kindness and be compassionate.

In this buddha field, as all beings
 Are always born miraculously,
 They will be completely freed from birth in the womb,
 Will remember past lives,
 Be supremely intelligent and learned,
 And able to grasp upon hearing what is well taught.

The configuration of that realm and its qualities,
Though we might have spoken of it for eons here,
Could not be expressed even as a mere illustration,
Like a drop of water from an ocean.

The Bhagavān having said this, the venerable Ānanda and the old lady, those bodhisattvas and those monks, and the world with its gods, humans, demigods and gandharvas¹⁶ rejoiced. They highly praised what had been proclaimed by the Bhagavān.

This completes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Questions of an Old Lady.”

Notes

- 1 *bri dzi na* – the land and people of Vṛji or equivalently Vaji (Pāli Vajji). Vṛji/Vaji was a confederacy of eight or nine countries, including Malla and Licchavi, and was situated on the northern Gangetic plain. Its capital was Vaiśālī. See F. Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), s.v. Vṛji and Vaji.
- 2 The three types of results may refer to three sorts of karmic “ripening” (*vipāka*), i.e., pleasant, unpleasant and neutral.
- 3 The three realms are the desire realm (*kāmadhātu*, ‘*dod kham*s’), form realm (*rūpadhātu*, *gzugs kham*s’) and the formless realm (*ārūpyadhātu*, *gzugs med kham*s’), i.e., the three worlds that make up saṃsāra. See glossary.
- 4 Whereas the previous paragraph spoke of the visual or eye consciousness, the present paragraph now discusses the “mental consciousness” (*manovijñāna*, *yiḍ kyi nam par shes pa*) that is able to grasp all that exists, i.e., all phenomena (*dharmā*). See glossary.
- 5 Narthang (N) *gang yang sogs pa med*: Degé *gang yang sogs pa yang*. N. is probably correct as it is consistent with previous similar passages.
- 6 These two terms ‘born of Manu’ (*shed las skyes*) and ‘son of Manu’ (*shed bu*) refer to all mankind. In the great Indian epic *Mahābhārata* or in the *Purāṇas*, Manu is depicted as the progenitor of mankind.
- 7 This term *mngon par ’du byed* (= *abhisamkāra*) has the same meaning as *’du byed* (= *saṃskāra*), i.e., formative factors or karmic conditioning. See glossary.
- 8 There are twelve bases for cognition (*āyatana*, *skye mched*), which are the five physical sense organs plus the mind and their respective six sorts of objects.
- 9 *lha ma yin, asura*. See glossary.
- 10 See glossary.
- 11 Krakucchanda = Kakutsanda = Kakutsunda, etc. See Edgerton op. cit. s.v. Krakucchanda for the various spellings.
- 12 *byang chub kyi yan lag gi me tog byed*.
- 13 See glossary.
- 14 Celestial abode of the thirty-gods of the desire realm, said to be located on top of Mt. Meru.
- 15 The “great sage”—an epithet for the Buddha.
- 16 *dri za* = *gandharva*. See glossary.

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