

**The Mahāyāna Sūtra  
“The Questions of Bhadrapāla the Merchant”**

Short title in Tibetan: tshong dpon bzang skyong gis zhus pa

Short title in English: The Questions of Bhadrapāla the Merchant

Short title in transliterated Sanskrit: Bhadrapālaśreṣṭhipariṣcchā

Long title in Tibetan: 'phags pa tshong dpon bzang skyong gis zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen  
po'i mdo

Long title in English: the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra named The Questions of Bhadrapāla the Merchant

Long title in Transliterated Sanskrit: Āryabhadrapālaśreṣṭhipariṣcchānāmamahāyānasūtra

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## Summary

In *The Questions of Bhadrupāla the Merchant*, the Buddha's principal interlocutor is a wealthy merchant who asks him to explain what consciousness is, and what happens to it when one dies and is reborn. In its characterization of consciousness, the discourse relies heavily on the use of analogies drawn from observation of nature. The sūtra also reflects beliefs drawn from the common cultural background of ancient India, such as, for example, in spirit possession. In addition, it presents graphic and vividly contrasting descriptions of rebirth in the realms of the gods for those who have lived meritorious lives and, for those who lack merit, in the realms of hell.

## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

*The Questions of Bhadrupāla the Merchant (Bhadrupālasreṣṭhipariṣcchā)* is the thirty-ninth sūtra among the forty-nine that comprise the *Mahāratnakūṭasūtra*, one of the most important compilations of Mahāyāna scriptures.

The early history of this collection is obscure, but it seems largely to have been compiled in China and perhaps Central Asia between the third to sixth centuries of the Common Era. The sūtras comprising it, however, date back in some cases as far as the first to second centuries. Their Tibetan translation, in the early to mid ninth century, followed on from earlier Chinese ones, but was based for the most part on (now lost) Sanskrit originals.

Apart from the Tibetan version, *The Questions of Bhadrupāla the Merchant* is extant in a Chinese translation by Divākara, who flourished in the seventh century CE. The Chinese version of the sutra forms the basis of a partial English translation by Garma C.C. Chang, included in his *Treasury of Mahāyāna Sūtras*.

The Tibetan Kangyur translation of the sūtra is attributed in its colophon to the Indian scholars Jinamitra and Surendrabodhi, under the editorship of the Tibetan monk Yeshe De. This would date its Tibetan translation to the early ninth century. Unfortunately, no Sanskrit original has come down to us.

In its present form, the sūtra consists of the questions of two interlocutors in addition to Bhadrupāla: Candrabhuti the merchant, and prince Mahauṣadhi. The second section of the text, in which Mahauṣadhi features, reads in its opening passages rather like the beginning of a new sūtra, and may have begun as a separate text.

The sūtra focuses on the topic of consciousness: what is its nature, and how does it relate to the physical body? What happens to it after death? In his explanations, the Buddha employs metaphors and examples drawn from observation of the natural world, as well as from the Indian cultural background.

The Buddha declares that consciousness is formless or immaterial, but manifests through volition, feelings, and the domain of mental objects, or “element of dharmas” (*chos kyi khams/dharmadhātu*). In a similar way to a seed producing a sprout, consciousness generates a body for itself, and then controls that body just as a puppeteer controls a puppet.

In a statement that could be read as foreshadowing the Cittamātra conception of an immaculate substratum consciousness, and the Tathāgatagarbha or Buddha-essence doctrine, the Buddha says: “the element of consciousness is completely purified; it encompasses all things, but it is not tainted by anything.” Consciousness acquires merit and non-merit in a similar way to a jewel taking on the colour of whichever light to which it is exposed.

The sūtra nonetheless underscores the benefits of meritorious action: the marvellous wealth and comforts enjoyed by Bhadrupāla, described in sumptuous detail, are the result of virtuous conduct in his former lives. Furthermore, the suffering of beings whose negative actions cause them to be reborn in the hell-realms is vividly contrasted with the pleasures of those whose merit results in a higher rebirth, such as in the realms of the gods.



## The Translation

### *The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra named The Questions of Bhadrapāla the Merchant*

[F. 71a]

Homage to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Thus have I heard at one time: the Blessed One was staying at Rājagṛha in the Bamboo Grove, the home of flying squirrels<sup>1</sup>, together with Śariputra and a great sangha of twelve hundred and fifty monks, who had accomplished all that needed to be done.

At that time, the monks seated in the presence of the Blessed One were free from the physical impurities and sluggishness that derive from physical lassitude and torpor.

When the Blessed One's facial expression beamed like a blossoming lotus flower, the monks thought:

"The Blessed One's facial expression is beaming like a blossoming lotus flower; what kind of teaching does he intend to give?"

Then the head merchant named Bhadrapāla and his entourage of sixty thousand merchants approached the Blessed One. Bhadrapāla was youthful, well-built, with a nice skin tone and an open face. After arriving in the place where the Blessed One was, he saw that he dwelt in samādhi, and that he was composed, a repository of good qualities connected to discipline, and as resplendent as a golden tree. Then Bhadrapāla felt faith, and, in a state of composure, thought:

"Oh! Those renowned in the world as 'omniscient tathāgatas, arhats, completely and perfectly enlightened buddhas' are rightly famous!"

Then Bhadrapāla [F. 71b] prostrated himself before the Blessed One, before taking a place facing towards him. When the Blessed one regarded Bhadrapāla, light streamed out from his body. The light made Bhadrapāla fearless, and he circumambulated the Blessed One three times. He prostrated himself again before the Blessed One, and said:

"Please, Blessed One, have compassion for me. Only now have I acquired faith in the Blessed One. Therefore, please explain to me the amazing variety of thought that leads some to place their hopes in certain things; some to search for the Dharma, and some to be afflicted by the ills of Saṃsāra. Blessed One, I have harboured doubt. Sugāta, because I was doubtful, I was deluded and did not seek liberation from Saṃsāra. The Blessed One is omniscient and, as he provides all the tools to achieve happiness, his unprecedented presence in the world is like that of a wish-fulfilling jewel. Because the Blessed One is affectionate towards all sentient beings, he is like their father and mother."

The Blessed One then spoke to Bhadrapāla:

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<sup>1</sup> This place was probably a popular park or garden near Rājagṛha. The Tibetan text [*'od ma'i tshal*] *bya ka lan da ka* makes it clear that the Tibetans considered the *kalandaka* to be a kind of bird (*bya*), while Sanskrit and Pali sources generally agree that it is a kind of squirrel. It is therefore likely that this word refers to the Indian flying squirrel, *Petaurista philippensis*.

“That is correct, Bhadrāpāla; ask whatever you wish, and I shall delight you with my explanations in response.”

Wanting to ask his questions, Bhadrāpāla stood to one side.

As Bhadrāpāla stood to one side, resplendent and perfectly handsome, the Venerable Ānanda looked at him and said to the Blessed One:

“Blessed One, the fine, prosperous looks of Bhadrāpāla surpass even the splendour of a king. He is astonishingly beautiful.”

Then the Blessed One replied to the Venerable Ānanda:

“Ānanda, [F. 72a] apart from the young head merchant Candrabhuti, neither the lord of the gods Indra, nor the most noble ones of this world, possess the requisites for happiness, pleasure and sensual enjoyments which Bhadrāpāla commands.”

The Venerable Ānanda replied:

“Blessed One, what are the riches of Bhadrāpāla?”

The Blessed One said:

“Since you ask, Ānanda, please hear what I have to say about the riches and vast resources of this merchant who has created the roots of virtue. Ānanda, he is attended by sixty thousand merchants holding an abundance of wealth and gold. Their beds are beautified with combinations of various colours. Their seats are on woven bamboo mats strewn with cushions, with sixty thousand red cushions arranged to their left and right.

“They are attended by sixty thousand women attired in silk dresses and silken fabrics, silk cloth and raw silks, garments purified with fire, and spangled upper garments and fine woollen cloth of red and various other colours. They are adorned with beautiful radiant ornaments. The touch of their hands is soft and very gentle in various ways. Laughing and happy, they arouse excitement through the pleasure and delight that they create with their alluring, charming, and pleasant conversation. Through honouring their husbands, they praise their bodies. They have given up thoughts of desire for other men. They bow gracefully, and wear fine shawls. They do not quarrel out of jealousy, scowl with hostility, or vie with each other. Their limbs, fingers and toes are very soft; the joints of their limbs do not protrude; their limbs are fleshy; their hair is of even length and styled, wound to the right and beautiful. They are full of attachment and affection. Coming as they do from esteemed lineages and families, they bring fame and fortune. [F. 72b]

“These sixty thousand tender-fleshed, high-caste women lounge on sumptuous bedding in their houses fit for entertainment. Their sixty thousand bronze cauldrons are filled with fine cooked rice and vegetables, each with its own uniquely delicious aroma; as well as different types of fragrant and delightful food and drink, such as fine pulped rice or water with the eight good qualities. Because they hold merit and are free from defilements, they do not smell badly, are not unclean, nor do they have physical flaws.



“Their tall houses are made fair and beautiful in distinctive ways; they are embellished with gems, pearls, lapis lazuli, and jewels; with clean fabrics that swirl in the breeze; and are strewn with scattered flowers. They are cooled by the pleasant sprinkling of water cool to the touch and graced by the sweet murmur sounding from gongs, single and multiple-stringed lutes, flutes, kettle drums, as well as the delightful, attractive cooing of pigeons. Bees buzz pleasantly on the coiling tips of flowering vines. They live as if nestled between the the abode of the gods and the slopes of Mount Meru, with the splendour of shining lamps screened from the wind, and medicinal torches, in villages graced with sixty thousand courtyards, crossroads, parapets and street corners.

“There is a profusion of languages, customs, and merchandise of different countries, and a variety of shops; with seething throngs of thousands of merchants; and an abundance of thousands of groves and trees of different types and flawless blossoming lotus flowers. There is a whirl of sixty thousand of the finest horses, elephants, and chariots.

“Ānanda, in those villages the head merchants, merchants, local people and foreign traders who have settled there sing the praises of the young head merchant Bhadrāpāla, and speak well of him. [F. 73a] Daily they join the palms of their hands and bow to him. Even Prasenajit, King of Kosala, were he to see Bhadrāpāla’s power, wealth and prosperity, would regard himself as a pauper.

“Ānanda, the following is the wealth of the young head merchant Candrabhuti: he is surrounded by an entourage that includes cooks equipped with a hundred thousand cauldrons. Ānanda, he also has five thousand women serving him. Ānanda, even the requisites for happiness of Indra, lord of the gods, do not compare in the slightest with those of Candrabhuti. Ānanda, the fine form and rich complexion, the power and requisites for happiness of Bhadrāpāla do not compare to a hundredth part of those of Candrabhuti. Nevertheless, Ānanda, Bhadrāpāla possesses heavenly chariots adorned with as many celestial gems and brilliant jewels as the sky is adorned with stars; gilded with celestial, glittering, gold; and beautified with diamonds, precious stones and various kinds of crystal. These chariots are as fast as the wind and fly like the eagle in the sky. Once mounted, they take him to jewel-islands, and after he has amused himself in those happy places, the ravishingly beautiful chariots take him back home.”

Then Ānanda prostrated himself before the Blessed One and asked:

“Blessed One, how did this young head merchant, Bhadrāpāla, amass his roots of virtue?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Ānanda, his roots of virtue here will come to maturation in buddhahood. Ānanda, previously the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the completely and perfectly enlightened Buddha called Sukhābha lived in this world. Ānanda, Bhadrāpāla was a disciple of his called Cūḍabhadra. He had not transgressed his basic precepts, and resolutely maintained ethical behaviour. [F. 73b] He was a proponent of Dharma, a repository of the teachings that he had studied, and a holder of the Vinaya. Every day he delivered to the people teachings that were eloquent and agreeable; profound and reliable; loud and accessible. Whoever heard and comprehended his teachings would, from that point on, never lapse into perverse views. Ānanda, his gift of the Dharma gladdened the hearts of gods and men for ninety-one aeons.

“Ānanda, let me also explain Bhadrāpāla’s celestial chariot. Ānanda, Bhadrāpāla offered alms devotedly to a monk who lived a humble life of purity and ethical conduct; he even gave him a pair

of shoes. The maturation of that merit produced the fine celestial chariot. Ānanda, the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the completely and perfectly enlightened Buddha Kāśyapa also said:

‘In the future, the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the completely and perfectly enlightened Buddha Śākyamuni will be born; he will give you a prediction’. Ānanda, Bhadrāpāla here is mine to train.”

Then the Venerable Ānanda spoke to the Blessed One:

“Blessed One, it is wonderful that abundant wealth, gold, and desirable objects have not made this head merchant arrogant.”

The Blessed One replied:

“The extensive enjoyment of sensual desires does not make wise people arrogant. Ānanda, this head merchant, who possesses virtuous qualities, is reaping the roots of virtue.”

Then, encouraged by the Blessed One, Bhadrāpāla understood that this was his opportunity. He joined the palms of his hands, prostrated before the Blessed One, and asked:

“If the Blessed One, who is good for, and compassionate towards, all beings, would give me the opportunity, [F.74a] may I please ask him some questions on a few subjects?”

The Blessed One said:

“Bhadrāpāla, it is now time for you to pose your questions, so ask whatever you wish; I shall answer them.”

Bhadrāpāla said:

“Blessed One, sentient beings in this world do not know their consciousness. If not understanding consciousness is akin to not knowing of a jewel hidden in a box, what then, Blessed One, is consciousness? Why is it called consciousness? Blessed One, a dying person’s limbs and eyes fail; when, at the moment of death, his faculties cease and he loses his constituent elements, how does this consciousness transfer from the body and what type of form does it have? What is its nature? How does it separate from the body? How does consciousness, after abandoning a body, assume another body? After abandoning the elements and casting off the sensory fields, how does it leave this world and go on to the next? How does it assume different bodies? Blessed One, how do a dying person’s sensory fields follow him? Blessed One, how does one experience in another world the roots of virtue accumulated in this world? How is it that the roots of virtue accumulated by the current aggregates are experienced later on by another set of aggregates? How does consciousness follow the body? How do the sensory fields follow the body?”

The Blessed One said to Bhadrāpāla:

“Excellent, Bhadrāpāla! It is good that you prompt me so. Listen then, Bhadrāpāla, to my explanation of how consciousness comes and goes, transfers and [F. 74b] ceases.

“Bhadrāpāla, even though the wind element, for example, is formless, it manifests in the form of things that are both demonstrable and tangible. It is demonstrable in the shaking and waving of

trees; in the howling sound wind makes; in the feelings of warmth and cold that it creates, even though it has no perceptible limbs, eyes, or face. nor is it seen to have any colour, such as blue or white. Similarly, Bhadrapāla, the element of consciousness, too, is not observed in, or manifest as, form, and thus you must know the element of consciousness through specific causes.

“So, what are its causes? They are volition, feeling, and the element of dharmas. So, how does the element of consciousness, after abandoning a body, assume feeling and volition? To illustrate: the wind element absorbs a flower’s scent and carries it along; from its movement we know the smell of divine flowers wafting through the air. Yet the wind element neither picks up the flowers’ scent nor is the scent of the different flowers perceived in the wind element’s absence. Neither the scent nor the wind element possesses form. The sense of smell possesses no form, either.

“Bhadrapāla, just so the consciousness of a dead person assumes feelings, volition, and the element of dharmas on its way to the next world, and consciousness arises with the intercourse of parents. Once consciousness arises, feelings and volitions begin to form. To illustrate: the nose smells on account of the flower; one perceives scent on account of the nose. Furthermore, just as one perceives the natural sensation of the wind’s on account of the body, and the scent of a flower arises on account of the wind, feelings arise because of consciousness, and volition arises on account of feelings. The element of dharmas, which knows what is virtuous or non-virtuous, arises on account of volition.

“To illustrate: an artist can paint whatever he likes on a wall or panel that he has thoroughly prepared. [F. 75a] His mind, trained to the work, makes manifest whatever forms he wishes despite the fact that his consciousness lacks form. Though his consciousness lacks form, it makes various kinds of forms manifest. Just so, the element of consciousness, which lacks form, makes manifest the six types of form bodies.

“That is to say: the eyes are the condition for forms to be seen, but the consciousness that depends on the eyes has no form. The ears are the condition for sounds, but the auditory consciousness has no form. The nose is the condition for smell, but the olfactory consciousness has no form. The tongue is the condition for taste, but the gustatory consciousness has no form. The body is the conditioning factor for touch, but the tactile consciousness has no form. Neither the sphere of mental objects nor knowledge have form. Hence, the objects of cognition should also be considered to have no form. In the same way, also, the element of consciousness should be regarded as formless.

“How does the element of consciousness abandon the body and then go to the next world? Bhadrapāla, when life ceases in this world due to the exhaustion of karma at the time of death, the element of consciousness transfers under the direction of karmic obscurations. Just as, for example, the element of consciousness of an arhat who has reached the attainment of cessation remains cognizant after it has ceased internally, the element of consciousness, too, retains the capacity for memory after it has abandoned the body of the deceased and cast aside the elements. That is how one knows ‘I have made these votive offerings’; both the two types of feelings, physical and mental, recognise this. At the time of death, it acquires physical feelings; once death has taken place, it acquires mental feelings.

“Furthermore, what does ‘consciousness’ mean? [F. 75b] Since it acts as the seed that makes the sprout of a body manifest, and one acquires awareness and recollection through volition, the seed and awareness are referred to as ‘consciousness’. Furthermore, it is called consciousness because it

comprehends awareness through feelings of pleasure and pain. Furthermore, it is called consciousness because it is cognizant of virtue and non-virtue, and is aware of the fields of virtuous and non-virtuous conduct. It is also called consciousness because it forms a body just as a seed produces a sprout.

“Furthermore, Bhadrapāla, you asked how the element of consciousness abandons the body and then transfers. To illustrate: it is like a reflection in a mirror or the imprint of a seal in clay. Take, for example, the sun. When it rises, dimness and darkness vanish, and when the sun vanishes, darkness sets in. But darkness is neither solid nor ethereal; just as neither form nor feeling is visible in the dark, the element of consciousness, once the body is born, resides in the body as if in the dark. That is to say, although no-one sees consciousness, the element of consciousness maintains its hold on the body.

“To illustrate: when a woman carries a child in her womb, she does not know whether the child in her belly is a boy or a girl; whether it is dark, fair or sallow; whether its faculties are impaired or not; or whether its limbs are well-proportioned. But she feels the child in her womb stir at the touch of especially hot food and drink. Just so, sentient beings do not understand this element of consciousness, wondering at the nature of this consciousness that abides in their body, whose nature causes it to come and go, to stretch and bend, to close and open their eyes, and to perform all kinds of actions, such as laughing, speaking, and thinking.

[F. 76a] “Furthermore, Bhadrapāla, the element of consciousness is completely purified; it encompasses everything,<sup>2</sup> yet it is not tainted by anything.

“Bhadrapāla, consciousness commands the following constituents: the six sense organs, the objects of the six sense organs, the four elements, and the five aggregates of grasping. Bhadrapāla, consider all these to be things to be consciousness's to command. To illustrate: a wooden puppet connected to a rod can be made to do anything. How, Bhadrapāla, do you think it runs, jumps, dances or does any other of a number of things? What animates the puppet?”

Bhadrapāla replied:

“Blessed One, I do not grasp the reason for your question.”

The Blessed One said:

“Bhadrapāla, the puppet is animated by action; and yet while the action is formless, consciousness makes it manifest. In the same way, this body puppet of ours arises through the influence of consciousness, and the element of consciousness animates different bodies. The element of consciousness, because it generates a body, is also its creator. The element of consciousness, because it adheres to the bodily elements, is also inexhaustible. The element of consciousness, because it recollects its previous bodily state, is also intelligent. Consider the element of consciousness to be similar to the rays of the sun. For example, the sun's rays fall on foul-smelling things, dirty things and corpses; yet, they do not become tainted by the odour. The sun deflects the foul smell, but does not depart. In the same way, the element of consciousness may take rebirth among dogs or pigs that eat dirt and refuse, [F. 76b] but the element of consciousness is not tainted by their bad behaviour.

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<sup>2</sup> Here the text uses the two words that together make up the Tibetan term for ‘enlightenment’, ‘purified’ (*s/byang*) and ‘comprehensive’ (*chub*), to describe consciousness.

“Furthermore, Bhadrāpāla, once the element of consciousness abandons the body, it is imbued with virtue and non-virtue. How so? Once the formless element of consciousness has abandoned this body, it retains its merit and demerit. For example, the element of wind, emerging from a rocky ravine, encounters a campaka tree, and carries away its fragrant scent as it passes; it also carries the odour of the foul-smelling, dirty things and corpses it passes. Bhadrāpāla, it assumes whatever scent is predominant. Just as the wind element carries both kinds of smell as it passes, even though that wind element itself, as well as the two kinds of smell, are formless, just so the element of consciousness transfers from the body, carrying with it virtue and non-virtue as it transfers. This is how you should conceive of its transfer.

“For example, although a person in a dream may recognise every object, he does not know that his body is lying in bed. Similarly, sentient beings that have encountered merit transfer and pass on as if they were dreaming a dream, but the element of consciousness does not emerge from their throat, or any other orifice, for it does not seek out holes or egress.”

Bhadrāpāla prostrated before the Blessed One, and said:

“Blessed One, how do chicks die and transfer and pass on from inside unpecked chicken or duck eggs, when the shell has not been pricked? How does their consciousness transfer, without any hole pricked?”

The Blessed One replied:

“To illustrate, the sesame oil you get from infusing sesame seeds with Campaka flowers before pounding and pressing them well is called ‘Campaka sesame oil.’ In this way, a pleasant scent infuses, that is, passes and goes to, the sesame seeds even though the scent neither ruptures the seed nor does it affect the flavor of the oil. [F. 77a] The encounter of the seed, as the condition, with the flower functions to mingle the scent and the sesame oil. However, it is not that the flower’s scent enters into the body of the sesame seed. It is rather that those conditions cause the scent to transfer and pass on. Similarly, the element of consciousness, just like the flower’s scent, transfers through an unruptured eggshell. That is also how you should view its transference.

“You should also view its transference as similar to that of the sun, a crystal, and fuel. Alternatively, its transfer is like a seed. Wherever a seed is sown, out of the elements of earth, water, fire and air, it is earth alone that nurtures it to form a stem and green leaves, to produce flowers of white, blue, red, or multi-coloured appearance, and to ripen into different flavours. Just so, with the element of consciousness, the body reborn in every life, be it grey, white, sallow, mottled, black or naturally flexible, is reborn solely from the element of dharmas.

“Furthermore, Bhadrāpāla, when the element of consciousness abandons the body at the time of death, it becomes a seed that perceives that it possesses arms and legs. Yet, it possesses no limbs or any other body parts. As the element of earth is relinquished, the element of dharmas is taken up. What’s more, the element of dharmas is accompanied by attention, and that attention has the capacity for a range of actions. Consciousness is what causes the link between the element of dharmas and attention. For no element of dharmas is observed apart from consciousness; nor is there any element of consciousness apart from the element of dharmas. The air element follows in the wake of consciousness. The same applies to the earth element; all other elements of form, be they of attention, feeling, or dharmas, follow in its wake.”[F.77b]

Bhadrapāla asked:

“Blessed One, how is it that the element of consciousness possesses form?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Bhadrapāla, in this context, we speak of an inner form and an outer form. What is inner form? The eye that perceives is outer form, while visual consciousness is inner form. The ear is outer form, while auditory consciousness is inner form. The nose is outer form, while olfactory consciousness is inner form. The tongue is outer form, while gustatory consciousness is inner form. The body is outer form, while feelings collected by the body that result from touch are inner form.

“Bhadrapāla, suppose a man born blind, overcome by sleep at night, were to see divine forms, with well-proportioned limbs and very attractive overall. After seeing them, he is overjoyed, but when he wakes up from his sleep, he does not see those forms. He gets up, and says: ‘Listen! Last night in my dream I saw the form of a very attractive woman, together with pleasure groves filled with a thousand people. There I saw beautiful youths; their arms were as long as the trunk of a fine elephant, of imposing stature, with wide shoulders and broad, firm chests.’ He relates all of the beautiful physical attributes of those people. However, the blind man never saw the actual forms of those people. What do you make of this, Bhadrapāla? How could the blind man see their forms in a dream?”

Bhadrapāla replied: “Blessed One, please tell me.”

[F. 78a] The Blessed One said:

“Although a blind man sees forms in his dreams it is not with his physical eyes but because he possesses inner visual awareness. Just as a man upon waking fleetingly remembers his dream, the memory of the dead arises in a similar way. You should regard internal form, also, in this way.

“Furthermore, Bhadrapāla, I shall explain how a dead person’s element of consciousness transfers and passes on in a similar way to the element of a seed. To illustrate: if one sows the element of a seed in the ground, it absorbs the four elements. In the same way, too, the element of consciousness takes on attention and assumes feeling. Gathering up virtue and non-virtue, too, it abandons the body, transfers and passes on.”

“Blessed One, how does consciousness assume virtue and non-virtue?”

“Bhadrapāla, for example, a precious ruby captures dim or bright light; light, according to its nature, appears in the precious gem, and it is that very nature that glows within the gem. It glows with the colours of any place to which it is transferred. In a similar way, consciousness assumes virtue and non-virtue, before transferring and passing on.”

Then again Bhadrapāla asked:

“Blessed One, how should we understand the presence of consciousness in the body?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Bhadrapāla, do not imagine consciousness as a composite or aggregate. Why? Because the element of consciousness arises and ceases. For example, Bhadrapāla, although a sprout emerges from a seed, a sprout will not emerge from a seed that is rotten, or from a seed that is damaged. And if, Bhadrapāla, a sprout is produced, what do you think? Where is the seed of that sprout [F. 78b] located? Is it in the stem, the leaves, or the buds? The seed is not located even in the treetop. In the same way, consciousness is not located anywhere in the body; not in the faculties of the eye, or the ear, or the nose.

“The germination of a sprout from a seed corresponds to an early stage of mental activity. At conception in the womb there is an early stage of feeling. For example, a sprout arises and, when it is the right season, it produces flowers; and when it has flowered, the fruit is formed. In the same way, the element of consciousness produces a body.

“Once a body has been formed, consciousness is not located in the limbs or any other body part, but if consciousness is absent, a body cannot develop. For example, just as a seed emerges from mature trees, but not from immature ones, so, at the time of death, consciousness radiates from the body. Accompanied by feeling, constrained by craving, and in full possession of attention, attended by a focus on virtue and a focus on non-virtue; it is carried by the air element and is saturated with awareness. Consciousness, contingent on conditions, arises when the parents come together.

“To illustrate: a face is reflected on the surface of a very clean mirror, but if there is no face, a reflection does not occur; and if there is no mirror, a reflection does not occur either. A reflection emerges from the encounter between face and mirror; that reflection has no form, no feeling, or awareness, either. However the body shifts, the reflection in a mirror moves, and however the face speaks, shouts, moves, contracts or stretches, the reflected face appears to do likewise. Bhadrapāla, what do you think? By what [F.79a] impetus does the reflection become observable?”

Bhadrapāla replied:

“The person is the impetus <sup>3</sup> for the presence of the reflection. Furthermore, the mirror acts as a condition for the presence of the face’s reflection. A reflection of the face arises; of its exact complexion, and the exact state of its faculties, whether impaired or not.”

“Bhadrapāla, just as a reflection is produced through the impetus of the body and the condition of the mirror’s surface, so does consciousness provide the impetus by which the body experiences feelings and produces perceptions, formative predispositions, and mental processes. In this analogy, the mirror can be viewed as the encounter between the parents.

“A reflection will not appear unless a body appears. For example, even after the reflection on a mirror’s surface has been dispensed with, that reflection can still appear in water. In the same way, too, the element of consciousness abandons the body and, after relinquishing its corporal essence, attains other aggregates. For example, the element of a seed, although it is tiny, produces the great bulk of a tree such as a nyagrodha or udumbara, before abandoning it. When the seed element is relinquished in sustaining another tree, the elemental sap of the tree vanishes with the change of seasons. Because its elemental sap vanishes, the tree becomes old and withered. In the same way,

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<sup>3</sup> We follow the variant reading *dbang gis* in preference to *dbang po’i* here.

the element of consciousness, although subtle and invisible, generates bodies and then abandons them again before producing other bodies.

“To illustrate: something small, like a mind, resides wherever there are a few grains of barley, sesame seed, wheat, soya bean or mung bean. In the same way, the element of consciousness also brings mentation to any type of sentient being into which it transfers, along with an early stage of feeling, [F. 79b] and retains merit as well as non-merit as it transfers from this world to the next.

“To illustrate: a bee stays for a long while on a flower because it craves its taste; but once it has partaken of it, it abandons the flower and transfers to another. The bee may go, after partaking of an unpleasant-smelling flower, to one with a pleasant smell. Just as it becomes attached to whichever flower on which it settles, and whose taste it enjoys, the element of consciousness, too, takes on a god’s body in the heavens, where it fully partakes of its roots of virtue, before assuming a body among the hell-beings, or the animals, or hungry ghosts, where it fully experiences its roots of non-virtue, before assuming another set of five aggregates.

“How, in this context, should one view the element of consciousness? To illustrate: the seeds of saffron or poppy are naturally white, and neither their sprouts nor their flowers are apparent within the body of the seed. Although it evinces no colour, sowing a seed in the earth element and then saturating it with the water element will cause the sprout to be produced. After the production of the sprout, red, white, or blue flowers occur. However, that colour was not present within the body of the seed. Yet, without the seed, neither colour nor sprout will emerge.

“In a similar way, too, the element of consciousness, after it abandons the body, although it is in human shape, does not possess the sense-fields which emerge from flesh-and-blood faculties. Possessing a divine eye and ear, it becomes an entity with perfect knowledge of the sense-fields of sound, scent, taste, and mental objects. It also becomes aware that ‘whatever actions I have done determine what I am.’

“Consciousness acts as a condition for the formation of the body. To illustrate: a silk-worm makes a dwelling from strands of yarn that emerge from its own body, where it spends its time until death. In a similar way, the element of consciousness [F.80a] produces a body and then, just like a silk-worm, abandons it and disappears.

“To illustrate: a lotus grows in water, and despite the divine scent and colour the white lotus makes manifest, they do not appear in it where the element of water is not to be seen; where its seed resides, there its colour, scent and taste reside. In a similar way, wherever the element of consciousness transfers and passes, there go the operations of the senses; there, too, the elements of feeling, mentation, and dharmas transfer and pass.

“To illustrate: wherever a precious wish-fulfilling jewel goes, there all amenities accompany it. Or, for example, the rays that are connected to the sun follow exactly wherever the sun may go. In a similar way, wherever the element of consciousness transfers, just there the elements of feeling, perception and dharmas transfer and pass on.

“Furthermore, the element of consciousness, after it has abandoned the body, retains contact with all its faculties, and creates a body without flesh and blood. Form is what causes it to take hold of a body. Feeling experiences the objects of the faculties. Recollection sees with divine sight, and takes up virtue and non-virtue. To illustrate: the fruits of the juniper, date, amra, pear, pomegranate,



bael, and gum tree produce many flavours. Each ripens into its own flavour: pungent, bitter, sour, salty, astringent, and so on. Some become pungent in flavour, others sour, and others again sweet. Whatever place seeds without fruit transfer to, the flavour transfers even there. In a similar way, whatever place the element of consciousness [F. 80b] transfers to, that is where feeling transfers. Merit, non-merit, and attention transfer to that place as well.

“Furthermore, the element of consciousness, after it has abandoned its body, becomes conscious of this, thinking: ‘I have abandoned this body of mine.’ That is why it is called ‘element of consciousness’. It is also conscious of both its virtuous and non-virtuous actions, thinking: ‘These actions follow me just as I follow them.’ That is why it is called ‘consciousness’. Furthermore, it is conscious of all the activities of the body. That is why it is called ‘consciousness.’

“For example, the element of air can be cold and can be hot; it can carry pleasant smells and can carry bad smells. Although all of these activities occur due to the conditional cause of the air element, the air element possesses no form. It is perceived through what it causes to stir, for the air element is recognised because it shakes trees and acts as a condition to register heat or cold. In the same way, too, the element of consciousness, despite possessing no form, experiences feeling through the conditions of taking hold of form, desire, and view, as well as through the condition of considering moral conduct and discipline to be paramount. Because it generates and completes a body as well as its appearance through the condition of feeling, it is called ‘consciousness.’”

Then Candrabhuti arose from his seat, joined his palms in a bow, and said:

“Blessed One, how should one view form? How is it acquired? How should one view the acquisition of action? How is view acquired? How should one view the acquisition of the opinion that moral conduct and discipline are paramount?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Excellent, Candrabhuti! [F. 81a] The wise person knows this to be a sign of wisdom. Regardless of whether one’s appearance is good or bad, it is still based on many unpleasant and dirty things: a piece of flesh; veins; sinews; head; brain; bones; legs; guts; colon; kidneys; heart; belly; lungs; excrement; urine; bladder; stomach; entrails; fat; lymph; pus; blood; bile; phlegm; nasal mucus; hair; beard; nails; body hair; completely covered in skin. All corporal forms of any kind whatsoever are produced from, or caused by, the four great elements. They are also accomplished through the conditional cause of their parents’ contact. Therefore they are explained as the ‘cause for the acquisition of form’. Candrabhuti, the body’s solidity constitutes the earth element. Its fluidity constitutes the water element. Its warmth and digestive action constitute the fire element. Its movement, contraction and expansion constitute the air element. The body’s awareness, and its elements of taste, smell, sound, and touch, as well as recollection, constitute ‘the element of consciousness.’”

Then Candrabhuti asked the Blessed One:

“Blessed One, how does consciousness abandon the element of form at the time of death? How does consciousness emerge from the body? After it has abandoned the body, how does it come to know and think: ‘This is my torso?’”

The Blessed One replied:

“Candrabhuti, after the body has lived its life, when its time has come, [F. 81b] its elements are relinquished. Suppose milk and water have been mixed, and simultaneously set in contact with fire. The milk and the water will both separate, but the milk’s creamy constituent does not possess form.<sup>4</sup> Candrabhuti, in a similar way, also, the torso of a dying person separates from its elements and consciousness. After consciousness has taken up the support of the elements, it then takes up the element of dharmas. Its recollection becomes linked to the element of dharmas. Once its recollection is linked with the element of dharmas and it has taken up virtue and non-virtue, consciousness transfers to its next life.

“Take, for example, the medicinal butter called ‘great virtue’. After the butter has absorbed the many powers and attributes of pungent, bitter, sour, salty and astringent flavoured medicines, they enter the body. As they enter, the potent flavour and attributes of the virtuous medicinal butter generate colour, scent and flavour in the body. Abandoning the butter element, they transfer into the body. In the same way, the element of consciousness abandons the body. Then, after assuming virtue and non-virtue, as well as the element of dharmas, consciousness transfers.

“The butter element resembles the body. The medicines that come together resemble the faculties that come together. The medicines’ colour, smell, flavour and consistency resemble consciousness. The transfer should be considered to resemble the transfer of consciousness of the deceased.

“The person’s improved colour, fine complexion and return to well-being are explained as resembling virtue. What became a poor, pale complexion through the action of the great virtuous medicinal butter is explained as resembling non-virtue. [F. 82a] The element of consciousness should be regarded as resembling the precious medicinal butter of great virtue. The great virtuous medicinal butter, even though it possesses no limbs or eyes, enters the colour of the medicines, as well as their flavour and smell. In the same way, the element of consciousness, once it has abandoned the body and cast off the elements, assumes the element of dharmas, feeling, and virtue and non-virtue.

“Candrabhuti, also a deceased person acquires divine recollection. He sees the six levels of gods of the realm of desire, as well as the beings in the sixteen hell realms. He even sees his own body, with well-proportioned limbs, and thinks: ‘This is my torso’, and is aware of it. Through recollection at the time of his death, his divine gaze will also see multi-storied beautiful buildings, surrounded by trees with many branches, creepers and a variety of plants, ornamented with different kinds of vines the colour of newly-refined gold. At the sight of this, he becomes overjoyed. Through generating that joy, he comes to possess the attributes that portend a death of happy outcome.

“One should view the deceased person’s consciousness as resembling a rider mounted on a horse. For example, when setting off to battle, a rider contacts no one else in the army, but grabs his saddle and rides off very fast. In the same way, the element of consciousness connects with the focus on virtue and, with an excited gasp, assumes the element of dharmas, at which point the sensory fields cease to exist. After it casts aside its body, consciousness takes up a place among the heavenly pure realms all the way up to Akaniṣṭha.”

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<sup>4</sup> Because no creamy curds are initially visible in a milk and water mixture, the belief when the sūtra was written was presumably that they had no form. Similar thinking is shown in a later metaphor for the latent state of enlightenment within the mind: like butter that can be churned from milk.

[Second volume: the end]

Then, Mahauṣadhi bowed at the feet of the Blessed One and addressed him as follows: “What is the nature of consciousness that transfers from the body?” [F. 82b]

The Blessed One replied:

“Just so, Mahauṣadhi; what you ask me now is excellent. This is an extremely profound question. It is a question for the Tathāgata to explain. There is no-one other than the Tathāgata who can explain consciousness.”

Then Bhadrupāla said:

“Blessed One, young prince Mahauṣadhi is good at asking such profound questions. He has a subtle mind and is well-versed in learning.”

The Blessed One replied:

“Quite right, Bhadrupāla. Young prince Mahauṣadhi generated the roots of virtue in the presence the Blessed Vipasyin. Bhadrupāla, Mahauṣadhi, after he had belonged to heterodox sects for five hundred lifetimes, formulated the following thought: ‘What is the element of consciousness? Whose is the element of consciousness? What is the nature of the element of consciousness?’ Even so, Bhadrupāla, he does not completely understand the comings and goings of consciousness. So I shall dispel his doubts.”

Then Bhadrupāla said to Mahauṣadhi:

“Excellent, Mahauṣadhi! Your wisdom is immense and far-reaching, and you are good at requesting profound teachings. Mahauṣadhi, address your questions to the Blessed One; he is the gateway to wisdom and the source of pure intelligence. Candrabhuti is foolish; because he is attached to things, he did not pose questions to the Blessed One, the Tathāgata, which have hitherto not been posed. Since a Tathāgata is hard to find, and it is difficult to encounter the excellent Dharma, ask the Blessed One about the most profound subjects within his purview.”

At that point, Mahauṣadhi noted that the face of the Blessed One had become radiant like a garden of lotus flowers in the autumn. At this sight, [F. 83a] Mahauṣadhi felt faith, and asked the Blessed One:

“Blessed One, if I were to seek instructions, would the Sugata please teach me the Dharma? You are someone who has transcended suffering until the end of time; however, those who come after you do not understand the maturation of virtuous and non-virtuous action; they will become wanderers through cyclic existence.”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahauṣadhi, for the sake of even half a verse of Dharma I have thrown my body from rocky peaks, and have endured countless hardships. Mahauṣadhi, ask whatever questions you wish, and I shall answer them.”

Then Mahauṣadhi said:

“Blessed One, what is the nature of consciousness?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahauṣadhi, it resembles the nature of a person conjured up by an illusionist; the hazy shadow of a person that appears on water, indistinct by nature; the nature of the eye and the sky; and the nature of craving.”

Mahauṣadhi asked:

“Blessed One, what is the nature of craving?”

The Blessed One said:

“As soon as it sees an attractive person, the eye faculty moves towards him. Just as a person sees his own face reflected in a mirror, and does not see his face reflected when the mirror is drawn aside, in the same way, when the element of consciousness has transferred, it sees its own merit and non-merit. For example, just as a blind man, even though he is present, cannot see whether it is dawn or noon, or, at night, whether the moon is rising or setting, so the element of consciousness is not perceptible in the body. [F. 83b] Even so, Mahauṣadhi, physical craving, feeling, perception and awareness constitute the element of consciousness. Consciousness is also what coordinates the body’s elements, its sensory fields, and aggregates. Its components that possess form include the eyes, ears, nose, as well as taste and sound, while the components that are formless include feeling, pain, pleasure, and intellect.

“Mahauṣadhi, the tip of a person’s tongue senses bitter, pungent, sour, sweet, and salty tastes. It possesses form, and the substances that are tasted also possess form. In the same way, also, the bones, marrow, flesh, and blood of the body possess form; but feeling is formless. That which experiences maturation, merit, and demerit, is consciousness.”

Bhadrapāla bowed at the feet of the Blessed One, and asked:

“Blessed One, what is it to experience merit and demerit?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Bhadrapāla, listen to what I say about this. Unless one sees truth, one cannot see consciousness. It is not like seeing this amla fruit that I hold in my hand. It is not located in the eyes, nor is it visible as springing from the eyes. Bhadrapāla, I, like all the Tathāgatas as numerous as the sands of the river Ganges, see the element of consciousness as it truly is, and realise that it is without form. Nonetheless, for the sake of foolish people who do not understand this, I have explained the element of consciousness through similes. Bhadrapāla, the element of consciousness knows both merit and [F. 84a] demerit as they truly are.

“Suppose some people were to be seized by evil spirits that cause emaciation or forgetfulness, or by gandharvas or gods. Do you think, Bhadrapāla, that the emaciating spirits, gandharvas, or gods that possess those people would be visible?”

“No, Blessed One. The spirits would not show up inside or even outside those people. Those spirits do not exist as forms.”

“Bhadrapāla, to illustrate: a great celestial spirit accepts offerings of fragrant flowers, perfumes, incense, and flower garlands. In the same way, too, the element of consciousness, through possessing merit, assumes a body that then allows it royal power, or the status of a head merchant, or a god. That is how the element of consciousness experiences merit. Just as a celestial spirit delights in the offering of celestial flower garlands, and is satisfied with the body of the person it possesses, so the element of consciousness, too, is gladdened by the status of royal sovereignty, and is satisfied with its body as well. That is how the element of consciousness experiences merit.

“Suppose, Bhadrapāla, a repulsive, putrefying spirit of invisible form were to possess a human body, desiring dirty, putrid, defiled things; things thrown into gutters, and strewn-offerings. Those offerings would bring it joy. That person, too, under the control of the spirit, would desire faeces-food from foul-smelling, dirty things, and delight in it. In the same way, the element of consciousness, through actions that lean towards demerit, produces bad rebirths. It is attached to and delights in poverty, evil hungry ghosts, and spirits that eat filth. In this way, the element of consciousness experiences demerit.

“To illustrate: just as a great formless celestial spirit partakes in divine enjoyments, in the same way [F.84b] the formless element of consciousness is seized by formless merit to produce celestial bodies.

“To illustrate: putrefying formless spirits possess human beings and eat excrement and filth. In the same way the element of consciousness, through actions that lean towards demerit, is born into bad rebirths. That is how the element of consciousness that leans towards demerit should be considered. So, Bhadrapāla, you should view spirits, because they are formless, as resembling the element of consciousness. You should view those things, good or bad, enjoyed by the spirits as corresponding to virtue and non-virtue. Regard people as corresponding to the body.”

Then Mahauṣadhi asked the Blessed One:

“Blessed One, how should one view the cause for consciousness to assume the body?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mutually-dependent conditions cause it to cling to objects of desire. For example, just as a fire is produced through a friction base, a rubbing stick and human effort, the objects of sensual desire such as sound, touch, flavour, and form, are produced by the cause that assumes a body and the condition of male and female.”

For example, although fruit is produced from a flower, the fruit is not observable in the flower; nor is the flower observable in the fruit that is produced. In the same way, consciousness arises from this body. However, while consciousness is not visible in the body, when consciousness disengages from it, the body's bones, marrow, liquids, and unclean parts are destroyed.

“The seed, for example, establishes a flower’s colour, scent and taste. In the same way, the element of consciousness, after abandoning the body, establishes virtue and non-virtue, [F 85a] feelings, perceptions and mental processes. Then it passes on to the next life. For example, when a man’s and a woman’s sexual organs meet, they are moistened by pleasure; he embraces the woman tightly, and then emits his passion. After<sup>5</sup> the pair’s passion has passed, they uncouple. The bliss of desire arises in them both, but when their passion is spent, desire vanishes and they no longer desire each other. In the same way, the element of consciousness feels joy and its desire is inflamed when it comes upon bodies in union. Just as a man, conditioned by his body, who sees a woman’s form feels desire, but when they part company, his desire disengages, the element of consciousness assumes a body before casting it off again, transforming and vanishing. Consciousness produces a body on the basis of the contact of the parents, the proximity of a gandharva, and things conceived as actions. Not only are those actions formless, but the essence of the condition of maleness or femaleness is also formless. Desire arises from the condition of grasping. Therefore it is called ‘grasping desire’. Because one grasps desire for form, for that reason, too, it is called ‘grasping desire’.

“Furthermore, Mahauṣadhi, what is the grasping that esteems discipline and ethics above all else? In this context, discipline means the renunciation of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, and intoxication with beer or liquor, which are the source of heedlessness. It is esteemed above all else in that it is held to bring the result of stream-entry and the result of a single rebirth. Grasping this view causes becoming; it generates rebirth and birth among gods and men; it leads to the maturation of virtue, pure and impure. It also moistens the seed of the aggregates, [F 85b] collects virtuous and non-virtuous actions, and connects to<sup>6</sup> consciousness. It also creates attachment<sup>7</sup> towards impurities that one has acquired. Therefore, it is called ‘the grasping that esteems discipline and ethics above all else.’”

Mahauṣadhi then asked the Blessed One:

“Blessed One, how does consciousness assume a body among the gods? How does it assume one among the hell-dwellers?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahauṣadhi, listen then to what I have to say. Here, after the element of consciousness has assumed the element of dharmas, it develops divine vision, but that vision is not based on the physical eyes. Sight through this vision is called ‘grasping’; it is therefore called ‘visual grasping’. That divine vision, accompanied by a focus on merit, sees the divine abode among the gods of the realm of desire. Observing the gods enjoying their divine pastimes there, the consciousness develops attachment to those abodes, and thinks: ‘I shall go there.’ Because of this, it is conscious of coming into a desirable and mindful existence there. It also sees its body lying in a cemetery, and thinks: ‘This is my virtuous friend. It is because of the roots of virtue that it stored that I have been reborn among the gods.’”

Mahauṣadhi then asked the Blessed One:

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<sup>5</sup> Following the variant reading *nas* here.

<sup>6</sup> Here we follow the variant reading *sbyor* rather than sDe dge's *sbyong*.

<sup>7</sup> Following the variant reading *sred*.

“Blessed One, if the consciousness is attached to the body, why does it not stay there? Why does it not base itself in that very body?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Suppose, Mahauṣadhi, that someone were to cut his hair and beard, and then looked at that hair and thought: ‘These hairs are fragrant and black, so I shall make them grow on my head again.’ [F. 86a] What do you think, Mahauṣadhi – would those hairs grow again?”

“No, Blessed One.”

The Blessed One said:

“Similarly, Mahauṣadhi, the element of consciousness, once it has cast off the body, has no opportunity to occupy that same body again.”

Mahauṣadhi asked again:

“How does subtle and intangible consciousness produce the great bulky body of an elephant? How does it pierce a body that is as hard as a diamond? How does it hold onto a person who possesses the strength of nine thousand elephants, or the king of elephants?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahauṣadhi, let us compare consciousness to the formless and invisible air element. The air element stays on mountain tops, but when it rises from the mountain tops it smashes and splinters mountain peaks similar to, and as big as, Mount Meru. Mahauṣadhi, what do you think is the nature of the air element? What is the nature of the mountain?”

Mahauṣadhi replied:

“The air element is considered flimsy and incorporeal.”

The Blessed One said:

“Yes, that is so, Mahauṣadhi. Just as the air element is flimsy and incorporeal, so consciousness, even though it is weak and incorporeal, engenders bodies great and small. The consciousness both of a fly and an elephant are exactly so. For example, just as even a small lamp flame is able to dispel great darkness inside an enclosure or a house, in the same way the element of consciousness, because it grasps at action<sup>8</sup>, produces large and small forms.”

Mahauṣadhi then asked:

Blessed One, why is that? Is that action<sup>9</sup> something that possesses form? Or else, is it something without form? What is its nature? [F. 86b] In what circumstances can action be seen?”

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<sup>8</sup> Two editions (sNar thang and Zhol) read "a body" (*lus*) rather than action (*las*) here.

<sup>9</sup> Here sNar thang specifies the subject, 'action', by supplying *las de'i* where the other versions have just 'it/that' (*de*).

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahauṣadhi, actions come into play when one attains the pleasures, wealth, and foods of the gods. Suppose two poor men were to wander in the wilderness, and one of them finds cooling water, but the other dies of thirst. There is no-one who scoops up the water and gives it to the first man, and no-one who hinders the other man. It is solely by the power of their merit that one finds water and the other does not. The properties of virtue and non-virtue should be viewed in a similar way. Virtue and non-virtue should be viewed as resembling the waxing and waning moon. For example, when an unripe tree-fruit ripens, it changes colour. The change of colour and ripening come about as a result of the strength of the fire element. Similarly, this body, on the strength of its merit, displays its adornments in the affluent and wealthy households of a head merchant. In the realms of the gods, it displays divine adornments. The adornments of mighty rulers are also explained as demonstrations of merit.

“To illustrate: when a seed is sown in the soil, it will eventually manifest in the tree-top. But that seed does not transfer from the tree-trunk to the tree-top; nor is the seed observable inside the tree. There is no-one who takes the seed in his hands and places it into the tree-top, nor is the seed perceptible transferring from the roots. Similarly, although virtue and non-virtue reside in the body, neither is visible in the body.

“For example, a flower is formed from a seed, but the flower does not manifest within the seed. Within the flower, no fruit is perceptible, either. Even so, flower and fruit cannot be separated into two things. Similarly, although action occurs because of the body, and the body occurs because of action, action does not manifest within the body; nor is the body manifest within action.

“For example, at the point when a flower matures, its fruit becomes visible. Similarly, when a body matures, its actions become visible. For example, [F. 87a] just as a flower appears wherever a seed rests, so wherever a body happens to be born, that is where its virtuous and non-virtuous actions appear. However, action possesses no form, and its maturation is formless, too.

“For example, a person’s body casts a shadow that is indistinct and formless, and mimics that person. Although the shadow is not connected to the person’s body, the shadow does not occur when there is no body. In a similar way, virtue and non-virtue stay connected with a body; wherever the body moves, that is where its actions go. It is not because of the body that actions are mimicked; while, without the body, actions are not generated.

“To illustrate: if one applies purifying medicines of different types— such as pungent, bitter, or astringent—to the body, one cures all illness; the body takes on a sublime, vigorous appearance. Pungent or bitter medicines keep the body looking youthful and make it attractive. People then realise: ‘This person has undoubtedly taken medicine’. Despite this, the medicines’ taste and efficacy are formless. Their formless taste and efficacy become manifest through<sup>10</sup> the vigorous appearance of the person. In a similar way, virtuous action is formless. But after it has produced a body, if that is endowed with well-proportioned limbs and well-being because of its particular food, facilities, possessions, and clothing, and if the person becomes rich in jewels, gold and silver, all of these things are the result of virtuous action. Reduction in the prosperity of one’s family, possessions, and wealth; loss of facilities and reliance on others; eating bad food; sleeping on poor bedding; having an ill-formed or disagreeable body—these things are the result of non-virtuous action.

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<sup>10</sup> Following sNar thang and Zhol we omit “*la*” here.



“For example, [F. 87b] a face—either attractive or ugly—becomes visible by the power of a mirror, but the reflection in the mirror possesses no form. Similarly, consciousness is born among the gods, humans, hell-beings, animals, or hungry ghosts by the power of virtuous or non-virtuous action. This, Mahauṣadhi, is how you should view actions. Thus, actions follow in the wake of consciousness.”

Mahauṣadhi asked:

“Blessed One, how does consciousness cast off the sense-faculties? And how does it come to appropriate a large body?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahauṣadhi, it is as follows. Suppose a hunter went into a dense forest and then drew back his bow for his poisoned arrow to strike a big, fully-grown elephant in must. As soon as the poison reaches the blood, it transfers into the limbs and the rest of the body. It cancels out the entire sphere of operation of the sense-faculties; piercing to the quick, it alters the colour of the blood. It transfers to all the limbs as well as the other parts. If the poison were to be extracted from the body after it has rejected it, Mahauṣadhi, how do you think the poison would compare to the body of the elephant in size?”

Mahauṣadhi replied:

“The two are like Mount Meru and a mustard seed.”

The Blessed One said:

“In the same way as the poison transfers, so the element of consciousness gives up the body, rejects the sense faculties, and abandons the elements. Thus, consciousness rejects the sense faculties.

“Furthermore, Mahauṣadhi, you asked how consciousness comes to appropriate a large body. It is the same as the way a person in a bulky, coarse body thinks. To illustrate: Mount Meru, the king of mountains, is eighty four thousand miles in height; for thirty thousand miles it is encircled by the naga kings Nanda and Upānanda. The respiration of those two nāga kings makes the oceans unfit to drink; [F.88a] it even makes Mount Meru quake. Just as this pair spread great poison far and wide, so too do Vāsuki and Takṣaka. Mahauṣadhi, do not think that their consciousness and the consciousness of an insect are any different. Mahauṣadhi, this is how that very consciousness belongs to both an insect and to them. For example, if the nāga kings, Nanda and Upānanda and so on, were to drink but a tiny drop of poisonous aconite or hālāhala, even they would die. What do you think, Mahauṣadhi - which is greater, the poison that Nanda and Upānanda et cetera have at their disposal, or a drop of aconite or hālāhala?”

Mahauṣadhi replied:

“Blessed One, the poison of Nanda and Upānanda is viewed as greater; not so the poison of aconite or hālāhala.”

The Blessed One said:

“Similarly, Mahauṣadhi, even the element of consciousness of large bodies that possess the strength of nine thousand elephants should be viewed as small, indistinct, and formless.

“Consciousness also affects the production of a large body due to the conditioning factor of action. To illustrate, the small seed of a banyan tree produces the tall and enormous king of trees, with its expanse of thousands of branches and twigs. Mahauṣadhi, how do the size of the seed and the size of the tree compare?”

Mahauṣadhi replied:

“Blessed One, they differ as much as the hollow inside a mustard seed and the expanse of space.”

The Blessed One replied:

“Similarly, Mahauṣadhi, the tree is not manifest inside the seed, but without a seed no tree growth will be observed. Just as a large tree grows from a minute seed, so consciousness produces a large form from minute aspects. [F. 88b] And even though consciousness is not visible within the body, without consciousness the growth of the body is not visible.”

Mahauṣadhi again asked him:

“Blessed One, how does consciousness, with its diamond-like essence, produce lowly bodies?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahauṣadhi, suppose some poor person were to find a precious, wish-fulfilling jewel. He would pick up the precious, wish-fulfilling jewel and then conjure up celestial realms, pleasure groves and parks, fields, courtyards, and gatehouses surrounded by many-branched trees and various kinds of vines; houses bedecked with flowers; and goods and chattels. All those things, Mahauṣadhi, are unstable and lowly, liable to dissolve quickly and be destroyed. If that man were to lose the precious wish-fulfilling jewel, his pleasant possessions would also vanish. Just as the precious wish-fulfilling jewel cannot be split into pieces even by a thousand diamonds, but its chattels are perishable by nature, so the nature of the element of consciousness is diamond-like in essence, but whatever body it possesses is without essence.”

Mahauṣadhi asked:

“Blessed One, how does the feeble element of consciousness split hard and solid forms into pieces, and transfer from them to die?”

The Blessed One replied:

“To illustrate, Mahauṣadhi: the presence of a gentle flow of water among rocks pierces the very mountain and springs from it. What do you think, Mahauṣadhi? How hard is its interior?”

Mahauṣadhi replied:

“Blessed One, a mountain is naturally solid, firm and hard as a diamond, while water is naturally soft and pleasant to touch.”

The Blessed One said:

“In a similar way, consciousness that is feeble by nature splits into pieces and leaves behind large bodies.”

Mahaṣadhi asked: [F. 89a]

“Blessed One, how do some of the different types of beings pass away and take rebirth among the gods, while others take rebirth among the denizens of the hell-realms?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Listen then, Mahaṣadhi, to what I say. After a sentient being has passed away, when its consciousness is appropriated by formative predispositions that orientate it towards meritorious rebirth, it abandons the body. It then gives up human vision and attains the vision of the gods. With that vision, it sees the gods of the six realms of desire. It also sees the beings in the eight great hell-realms. It sees its body being discarded, too.

“It also sees celestial realms made of divine jewels, pleasure groves and gardens; flowery ear-ornaments, lotus flowers and red lotuses; celestial mansions and dense groves surrounded by frolicking divine maidens. It also sees that the groves are made winsome and beautiful with divine substances, made of ever-blossoming, multicoloured flowers; and the maidens are bedecked with ornaments such as strings of pearls, round bangles, flat bangles, and armlets. It also sees youthful gods and cheerful goddesses seated on thrones.

“Once the being has seen these things, it yearns for them. Through this yearning the being becomes happy. This happiness produces great joy. The body’s complexion is then improved through this great joy, so that its facial complexion takes on a lotus-like appearance. Its vision is not impaired, nor its nose crooked or its mouth smelly. Similarly, its eyes take on the appearance of the petals of a blue lotus. Its vital points do not break down; its blood is not contaminated, and it does not produce excrement. The hairs do not stand on end, its nails do not turn black, or its hands yellowish. [F. 89b] The body does not take on a moribund quality as its limbs shrink.

“Mahaṣadhi, at the time of death the body will acquire divine vision. Thus, it will see tall houses adorned with thousands of columns, threaded with jingling, sweet-sounding celestial bells, and lavish, exquisitely-scented garlands of different heavenly flowers. It also sees youthful gods, their bodies bedecked and beautified with ornaments, the finest gold, strings of pearls, bracelets and armlets. When it sees these youthful gods, it becomes overjoyed.

“This joy generates two signs in the body: its teeth appear as white as evening jasmine and night lotus flowers. Its eyes are neither too closed nor too open. It also issues sweet sounds. Its face, also, assumes the appearance of a lotus. Once dead, the body does not become too hot or too cold. Its relatives and friends do not utter loud wails. It assumes the attributes of death at sunrise. The surrounding area does not appear dark. At the time of death, the surroundings exude an exquisitely fragrant and pure scent. Its eyes do not turn yellow, or its vision distorted. When the body sees the forms of Tathāgatas, it produces confidence and faith. When it sees its near and dear

ones, whether they are returning or remaining seated some distance apart, it hugs them in delight. It encourages the relatives by saying: ‘This is how all the rebirths in the world happen! So, because you are parting from me now, do not long for me, but let go.’

“Mahauṣadhi, suppose a being that is bound for a meritorious rebirth were to become attached to giving [F.90a] at death; he recites a few verses or poetic sayings, and recounts stories or arguments to each person. At that time he does not cling to, or succumb to sleep. He blissfully relinquishes the formative predispositions of this life.

“At death, he shares a throne with the gods and goddesses. A goddess puts his hands, as he sits on the throne, on top of the hands of a god. Flowers spring from his hands, and when the goddess sees these flowers, she says to the god: ‘A happy time is upon us since a young god is born, so rejoice!’ He then rubs and feels the flowers with his hands. As he rubs the flowers, the being acquires the properties of death. His consciousness then discards the sense faculties and lets go of the spheres in which the senses operate. His consciousness abandons the elements, before assuming their function; subtle and formless, it focuses in on virtue, like a rider on his horse; or like the sun focused onto a crystal and tinder; or like the reflection of the moon on water; or like air in a cavity, before emerging, transferring, and passing on.

“At that moment, as a consequence of the flowers, as the parents share a bed and have sexual contact, the consciousness dissolves into the flowers. At that moment, too, a wind called “Desiring nectar” stirs. Through that wind, consciousness, after seven days have passed, produces an earringed young god, immaculate and vibrant.”

Mahauṣadhi then asked:

“Blessed One, how does consciousness, controlled by the circumstance of its lack of form, accomplish the creation of forms? Also, how do these circumstances come about?”

The Blessed One replied:

“To illustrate, [F.90b] Mahauṣadhi: just as wind, controlled by the circumstance of being formless and invisible, brings about the production of the realms of this world - celestial realms, mountains, groves, and so on – in the same way does consciousness, controlled by circumstances, bring about forms.

“Alternatively, Mahauṣadhi, fire is produced through the friction of two sticks in contact, rubbed against each other. Even though fire is not manifest inside the sticks, without the sticks, the fire does not happen. Although fire, controlled by circumstances, is produced through the sticks, without the circumstances, it would not arise. On account of their form, fire does not appear inside the sticks, but without the sticks, no fire is observed. Similarly, Mahauṣadhi, consciousness enters the body due to the parents; although it is not observable inside the body, consciousness does not arise when there is no body.

“To illustrate, Mahauṣadhi: if fire does not arise, its form, warmth and colour shed no light. Similarly, Mahauṣadhi, if no body is produced, no consciousness, feelings, perceptions or formative predispositions manifest.

“For example, Mahauṣadhi, the great globe of the sun shines forth clearly, constantly radiant and vivid; but foolish folk do not see whether its form is black, yellow, white, or orange. Similarly, Mahauṣadhi, consciousness is understood through the constituents of vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch, but no-one observes consciousness to appear as a form in the body, whether black or white. For example, just as the sun manifests through the signs of heat, its yellow colour, as well as its setting and rising, consciousness, too, should be viewed through its signs.”

Mahauṣadhi then asked:

“Blessed One, how should one view the signs of consciousness?”

The Blessed One [F. 91a] replied:

“The signs of formative predispositions, feelings, perceptions, mentation, suffering, longing, and mental pain are held to be signs of consciousness. Furthermore, the habitual dispositions of consciousness should be viewed as deriving from a mind inclined towards virtue or towards non-virtue.”

Mahauṣadhi then asked:

“Blessed One, how does consciousness emerge from the body and quickly take rebirth? How does consciousness that has emerged from its body but not yet been reborn or obtained a new body, come to possess a different body? How should one view this consciousness?”

The Blessed One replied:

“To illustrate, Mahauṣadhi: suppose someone with long, well-developed arms were to put on battle armour, mount a celestial horse swift as the mighty wind, and then depart to battle. After he reaches the battle, his heart is driven wild with all the spears, swords and arrows. During the fight, he falls to the ground from his fine horse. But since he is trained in physical prowess, he very quickly remounts his horse. That man, after he has fallen, would mount his horse again, but a better rider would mount a horse that is standing nearby, and the best horseman would mount a horse while it is running. You should view consciousness in the same way.

“Just as a man, terrified by an opposing army, mounts his horse to escape, in the same way, consciousness, just after it has passed away, is gripped by a mental image of the gods and sees the gods and goddesses seated on thrones. It then very swiftly takes rebirth.

“Moreover, Mahauṣadhi, you asked how one should consider the constituents of a consciousness that has just passed away, but has not yet been reborn. To illustrate: although a man’s shadow that falls on water manifests as a form, it should not be classed as a form.

“To illustrate, Mahauṣadhi: a form reflected in water, even though it possesses shapely limbs, [F. 91b] feels no warmth, cold, or physical weariness; and the reflected body does not possess any fleshy parts. The shadow does not possess anything taken up by the elements. No sounds of pain or pleasure spring from the reflection of a person visible in water. In a similar way, consciousness that has just passed away relinquishes its body and becomes reflection-like. This is how, Mahauṣadhi, consciousness that is bound for a meritorious rebirth comes to be reborn among the gods.”

Mahaṣadhi then asked:

“Blessed One, how does consciousness take rebirth among the hell-beings?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahaṣadhi, listen. I shall tell you how beings that are not bound for a meritorious rebirth are reborn in the hell-realms. Mahaṣadhi, suppose that in this case, from among the different kinds of beings, a person in the grip of non-virtuous actions passes away. The deceased person thinks and remembers: ‘That person is me. A hell-being has passed away from this life. These two are my parents.’ The deceased’s body comes to possess the natural aspects of an ordinary person’s form. Its limbs appear exactly like those of an ordinary person. First, the deceased person, agitated and distressed, sees various hell-beings appear. When the consciousness has just passed away, its actions become connected with beings of the hell-realms. In some direction it sees the blood-spattered land of the denizens of hell, and then develops attachment towards it. After becoming attached, it produces the body of a hell-being. Controlled and conditioned by its actions, its consciousness is reborn in a body in a putrid, foul-smelling water conduit. For example, [F. 92a] it might be born as an insect conditioned by a dirty, loathsome smell. Or it might be born as a creature in order to turn into smelly curd, honey, or beer. Mahaṣadhi, this is how sentient beings emerge in the hell-realms.”

Bhadrapāla then joined his palms in a bow and asked:

“Blessed One, what is the colour of the beings that dwell in hell? How do their physical features come about?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Bhadrapāla, those who are born in hell in blood take on the colour of blood. Those who are born in unfordable rivers take on a cloudy blue appearance. Those who are born in alkaline rivers develop white, leprous flesh. Their bodies become youthful like that of a young prince whose every whim is attended to. In hell, Bhadrapāla, their bodies increase in size. Not counting their heads, they become twelve feet tall. They become lanky, with long nails and beards, and ugly limbs. Suppose a person of this world set eyes on a being born in hell, as soon as he saw him, he would be doomed to die. Furthermore, Bhadrapāla, beings who are born in the realm of hell, although they may indeed eat food, do not derive any the pleasure from it at all.”

Mahaṣadhi then asked:

“Blessed One, what food do those beings seek?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Mahaṣadhi, as beings roam about in hell, red-hot cauldrons of copper and brass appear in the far distance. When they see the cauldrons, the beings call out: ‘Food!’ and yell: ‘Anyone who wants food, come over here!’ They gather from all directions, with their cupped hands held out, and approach the boiling cauldrons. They approach with their hands held out, and because they desire the food boiled in the cauldrons, they open their mouths and swallow the copper and brass. They

[F.92b] are thus scorched by the fieriness of the scalding cauldrons, and their bellies get scorched. Mahauṣadhi, they are deceived by what appears to be food and then experience great suffering.

“Mahauṣadhi, the consciousness of beings who dwell in the realms of hell occupies skeletal bodies and does not depart from these collections of bones. Because these hell-beings do not disconnect from consciousness, they do not reach the point of death. Even though they are tormented by hunger, they are unable to eat in hell.

“In hell they see many hundreds of celestial pleasure groves with trees in full bloom, and areas of broad green meadows. At the sight of these pleasure groves, they become overjoyed and call out: ‘Friends! A refreshing breeze stirs in this pleasure grove, so come along!’ They gather together and then rush towards the pleasure grove. Once they have entered it, they think themselves happy for a moment. But the flowers and the leaves that grow on those trees turn into swords, and those very swords sever their limbs and kill them. As the swords cut into them, they let out great cries of torment, and flee in all directions. Even though they run away, due to their own actions the minions of the Lord of Death emerge, holding saws and cudgels in their hands. They gnash their teeth with distorted faces, their hair and bodies wreathed in fire. They wield weapons below them, and bellow after them: ‘You! Wait! Where are you running off to now? You must experience this situation that is the product of your own actions.’ Mahauṣadhi, that is how the beings in the realms of hell develop remorse.

“Furthermore, Mahauṣadhi, after seven days the beings bound for the realms of hell come to experience their past action. Like a bee that settles onto a flower, due to various things acting as conditions, their consciousness [F. 93a] takes rebirth among the denizens of hell. After it first passes away, it is led along; helpless, suffering and unhappy. It then enters total darkness. As it is led away by half-human savages, it thinks: ‘Alas! Now the beauty of the world is lost to me. I have abandoned my sweet companions and come to live all alone among the denizens of hell. Now I see no way to higher rebirths.’ As if ensnared in the single thread of a silkworm, it instantaneously takes rebirth, and is aware that it is bound by a noose around its own neck.

“Bhadrapāla, that is how beings come to be born in the realms of hell; that is how they are affected by specific kinds of causes.”

Then Bhadrāpāla, in awe, joined his hands in a bow, and took refuge in the Blessed One. Young prince Mahauṣadhi, in turn, uttered the following prayer:

“Through listening to this excellent Dharma, while I go around in” *samsāra*, may I not acquire attributes that bring about descent into the lower destinies. May I not be born among the beings of the realms of hell!”

Then Bhadrāpāla asked the Blessed One:

“May I please ask the Blessed One some more questions?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Bhadrapāla, ask whatever questions you wish.”

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<sup>11</sup> Here we follow the reading in all versions apart from sDe dge, *‘khor ba na*.

Bhadrapāla asked:

“Blessed One, what is an accumulation? What is a heap? What are the aggregates? What is transference?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Bhadrapāla, the four elements produce the body through their contact; the accumulations include wisdom, view, intellect, ignorance, elements, objects, and consciousness.

“The heaps include the six elements themselves, the six objects of the senses, the three natures of the elements, the paired causes for sensory reception, hair, beards, nails, body hair, skin, flesh, [F.93b] pus, bile, phlegm, mucus, fat, lymph, marrow, eyes, limbs, minor body parts, and so on. This is what we call a ‘heap’. Like, for instance, a heap of grain. Just as a pile of barley, sesame, wheat, or lentils is called a ‘heap’, so the accumulation of things belonging to the limbs and other parts of the body is called a ‘heap’.

“What are the six elements? They consist of the elements of earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness.

“What are the six senses? They consist of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

“What are the six objects of the senses? They consist of the sensory objects of form, sound, scent, taste, touch, and mental objects. These are the six objects.

“What are the three natures of the elements? They consist of desire, anger, and delusion. What are their active factors, respectively? They consist of wind, bile and phlegm.

“What are the paired causes for sensory reception? These consist of moral conduct and faith, generosity and wealth, and diligence and meditative absorption.

“Now, what is the meaning of ‘aggregate’? The aggregates consist of feelings, perceptions, formative predispositions, and consciousness. There are four formless aggregates: feeling is experience; perception is knowledge; pleasure and pain are formative predispositions; awareness of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch is consciousness. Because every object is subsumed within consciousness, consciousness is the body’s powerful controller, receptor, and collector.

“What is ‘transfer’? Someone of immaculate moral conduct attains the result of his physical and verbal actions when he reaches the point of death; at that time his consciousness [F. 94a] relinquishes the aggregates, and escapes rebirth in saṃsāra. Because he does not return to saṃsāra, he transfers and passes on to a state of bliss. This is how the transference occurs of someone who, once transferred, will never need to do so again.

Then, both Bhadrapāla and Mahauṣadhi prostrated themselves before the Blessed One, and said to him:

“The Blessed One has spoken well, through his all-pervading knowledge, this collection of teachings that contents everyone.”



The Blessed One replied:

“Bhadrapāla, the pristine cognition of the Tathāgata is uncontrived; those who lack omniscience do not understand its nature. I achieved this light of wisdom by undergoing countless forms of hardship, and it is exactly as I have explained it. This Dharma sun throws light on omniscience and increases the fame of good qualities; it is an immense repository of omniscient pristine cognition that tames the minds of sentient beings. Wherever this discourse on moral conduct is located or taught, the spirits act as its protectors, and the gods, demi-gods and great serpent-spirits approach it to pay reverence. Whoever remembers this Dharma discourse, or carries it on him; who reads it, masters it, or disseminates it among other people, he does not fear weapons, poison, fire, demons, water, or thieves.

“Monks, from now on, you should not expound this discourse to those who lack faith, nor to those who cause disputes; you should not teach it to naked ascetics, or to the disciples of naked ascetics. You should not expound it to those who subscribe to other doctrines. Moreover, you should not explain it unless it is requested. The reason for this is: say you did this, and someone were to become confused, you would then have created confusion about the Tathāgata.[F. 94b]

“Whoever understands this, from among the monks or laymen, becomes worthy of reverence. You should think: ‘I shall develop respect for him just as I should respect the Tathāgata, because this person holds a treasure.’”

Then the Blessed One said to the Venerable Ānanda:

“Ānanda, remember this Dharma discourse and keep it in mind, retrieve it from memory, explain it, and teach it at length to others.”

Ānanda asked:

“Blessed One, what is the name of this Dharma discourse, should we wish to bring it to mind? How should we remember it?”

The Blessed One replied:

“Ānanda, you should remember this Dharma discourse as ‘The Transfer of Consciousness’. You should also remember it as ‘The Questions of Bhadrapāla’. You should apply it and circulate it. Enter into the Buddha’s teachings. Like an elephant in a house of reeds, crush the armies of the Lord of Death! Whoever applies himself conscientiously to this Dharma Vinaya abandons the cycle of birth and puts an end to suffering.”

After the Blessed One had spoken thus, young prince Mahauṣadhi together with the head merchant Bhadrapāla, as well as the worlds of gods, humans, demi-gods, garudas and gandharvas rejoiced and praised the words of the Blessed One.

This concludes chapter thirty-nine, ‘The Questions of the Head Merchant Bhadrapāla’, which belongs to the Dharma discourse of the Noble Mahāratnakūṭa collection in a hundred thousand stanzas.

The Indian scholars Jinamitra and Surendrabodhi, together with the chief editor and translator monk Yeshe De, edited and finalized this text.

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