

# Buddhist Scriptures

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PENGUIN BOOKS

## WISDOM AND COMPASSION

Modern descriptions of the Mahāyāna sūtras, a huge collection of texts that began to be composed in India around the beginning of the Common Era, often focus on two topics: the wisdom of emptiness (śūnyatā) and the compassion of the bodhisattva. Such descriptions are in some ways misleading. The Mahāyāna sūtras are a heterogeneous collection, dealing with myriad doctrines and practices, and the wisdom and compassion of the bodhisattva are set forth in the literature of the non-Mahāyāna schools of Indian Buddhism as well. However, wisdom and compassion are indeed common themes in many of the most famous Mahāyāna sūtras, including the sūtra quoted here.

It is entitled the Kāśyapa Chapter (Kāśyapaparivarta), and is found now in a large corpus of dozens of Mahāyāna sūtras, known as the 'Great Pile of Jewels' (Mahāratnakūṭa). The Kāśyapa Chapter (so named because the Buddha's interlocutor is his famous disciple Kāśyapa) is regarded by scholars as one of the earliest texts in this larger collection, dating from perhaps the first century CE.

The Kāśyapa Chapter is widely quoted in later Mahāyāna treatises, especially on the topics of the qualities of a bodhisattva and on the nature of emptiness. The qualities of bodhisattvas are outlined in groups of four, two of which appear in the opening passages below, where the false bodhisattva and true bodhisattva are compared. The bodhisattva described in the text is not the celestial saviour known from other sūtras, but is instead the ordinary disciple of the Buddha who has vowed to achieve buddhahood in order to liberate all beings from suffering (see Chapter 43). This vow is indeed quite extraordinary

but in the Kāśyapa Chapter (and other Mahāyāna sūtras) it is presented as the path that all should seek to follow.

The bodhisattva is no longer the rare individual of each age who strives for the welfare of others, while others seek only the cessation of their own suffering. Instead, all who traverse the path to buddhahood must develop extraordinary compassion and extraordinary wisdom, yet there is an apparent contradiction between these two. Compassion leads to a dedication to provide assistance to other persons, yet wisdom brings the understanding that ultimately there are no persons because there is no self. The Kāśyapa Chapter acknowledges this, but proclaims the compatibility of compassion and wisdom, stating that everything is empty, yet actions are efficacious, 'He is firmly convinced of emptiness, yet he has faith in the law of the fruition of acts; he tolerantly accepts non-self, and yet has great compassion towards all beings.'

The next excerpt from the sūtra (sections 56–67) offers one of the more systematic discussions of emptiness in the Mahāyāna sūtras. In this oft-cited passage, the middle way between two extremes is described. In his first sermon, the Buddha had described a middle path between the extremes of self-indulgence and asceticism, both of which he had experienced prior to his enlightenment. Here, and in other Mahāyāna sūtras, especially those of the 'Perfection of Wisdom' (prajñāpāramitā) genre, the notion of the middle way between extremes is given a more philosophical sense, as an inexpressible reality between the extremes of permanence and impermanence, self and no-self. If that reality could be expressed, it might be called emptiness. But emptiness is not an ultimate reality, eternal and autonomous. Emptiness is itself empty, and those who reify emptiness and become attached to it commit a grave error. Emptiness is like a medicine that, having cured the illness, must not be clung to. Yet emptiness is not nothingness, it is not something to be feared. It is the natural state of things, and there is no more reason to fear it than there is to fear the empty space around us. The objects of our experience are falsely imagined to be more real than they in fact are; a false reality is projected on to the world by our ignorant minds, and then we respond to those

projections with desire and hatred. The sūtra describes this as being similar to a painter who paints a picture of a demon and then faints in fear when he looks at his work.

The next excerpt describes the false and the true ascetic. It is noteworthy that, despite the language of emptiness, the sūtra does not in the least discount the proper conduct of monks, who should comport themselves properly and eschew fame. The best of ascetics, however, do this within the understanding of emptiness, knowing that even the Buddha, his teachings and the community of monks, as well as saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, are empty, and thus to be regarded without attachment.

The excerpts conclude with a description of the extraordinary benefits to be received by anyone who would uphold even one verse from this sūtra (called here Ratnakūṭa, 'Pile of Jewels'). Scholars speculate that many of the Mahāyāna sūtras had their own circle of devotees who regarded their text as the supreme teaching of the Buddha. It is common for these sūtras to conclude with a description of the benefits of devotion to the text (see Chapter 5), which here extend even to the moment of death.

'These four, Kāśyapa, are counterfeit *bodhisattvas*. Which four? (1) The one who seeks for material profit and honours, not who seeks for the *dharma*; (2) the one who seeks for fame, renown and celebrity, not who seeks for good qualities; (3) the one who seeks for his own happiness, not who seeks for the removal of the suffering of beings; (4) the one who seeks for a group or company, not who seeks for solitude. These, Kāśyapa, are the four counterfeit *bodhisattvas*. (15)

'These four, Kāśyapa, are the genuine *bodhisattva* good qualities of any *bodhisattva*. Which four? (1) He is firmly convinced of emptiness, yet he has faith in the law of the fruition of acts; (2) he tolerantly accepts non-self, and yet has great compassion towards all beings; (3) his intention is already abiding in *nirvāṇa* and yet his active application abides in *saṃsāra*; (4) he gives gifts in order to mature beings, and yet he has no expectation of any fruition of the act of giving for himself. These, Kāśyapa,

are the four qualities which are the genuine *bodhisattva* good qualities of any *bodhisattva*. (16)

...

'To uphold the idea of permanence – this, Kāśyapa, is one extreme. To uphold the idea of impermanence – this, Kāśyapa, is a second extreme. The middle between these two, permanence and impermanence, is immaterial, cannot be designated, does not appear, is non-informative, unsupported and placeless. This, Kāśyapa, is spoken of as the middle way, as true comprehensive examination of things. (56)

'To uphold the idea of self – this, Kāśyapa, is one extreme. To uphold the idea of non-self – this, Kāśyapa, is a second extreme. The middle between self and non-self . . . is spoken of as the middle way, as true comprehensive examination of things. (57)

'To uphold the idea that the mind is real – this, Kāśyapa, is one extreme. To uphold the idea that the mind is unreal – this, Kāśyapa, is a second extreme. That in which, Kāśyapa, there is no mind, no volition, no mentation, no consciousness, this, Kāśyapa, is spoken of as the middle way. . . . (58)

'To uphold the idea of existence – this, Kāśyapa, is one extreme. To uphold the idea of non-existence – this is a second extreme. . . . (60)

'It is not, Kāśyapa, that emptiness leads to the annihilation of personhood; persons themselves are empty and emptiness itself is empty, absolutely empty, empty in the past, empty in the future, empty in the present. You must rely, Kāśyapa, on emptiness, not on the person. However, those, Kāśyapa, who rely on emptiness with an objectification of emptiness I speak of as lost and vanished from this teaching. The speculation on the existence of the person in which one's reliance has been placed, be it as great as Mount Sumeru, is indeed better than the speculation on emptiness into which the conceited have settled. Why?

Emptiness is the way out for those who engage in items of wrong speculation on the person, but by what means will they find a way out who hold to the speculations on emptiness? (64)

'It is just like this, Kāśyapa. Should some man be sick, and should a physician give medicine to him, and should that medicine, having evacuated all his diseases, not [itself] come to be cleared from his viscera, what do you think, Kāśyapa? Shall that sick man be freed of that sickness if that medicine, having evacuated all the diseases settled in his viscera, would not itself depart his viscera?'

Kāśyapa said: 'No, Blessed One. The disease of that man would be more serious if that medicine, having evacuated all the diseases, was settled in all his viscera and would not depart.'

The Blessed One said: 'Just so, Kāśyapa, emptiness is the remedy for all items of wrong speculation, but then, Kāśyapa, one for whom emptiness itself becomes a wrong speculation I speak of as incurable. (65)

'It is just like this, Kāśyapa. Were a man frightened of empty space to howl beating his chest, and were he to say "Get rid of this empty space!" – what do you think, Kāśyapa? Is it possible to get rid of empty space?'

Kāśyapa said: 'No, Blessed One, it is not.'

The Blessed One said: 'Just so, Kāśyapa, I call those ascetics and brahmins who are fearful of emptiness "tremendously mentally confused". Why? Since they, Kāśyapa, live fully in emptiness and yet they are afraid of that very emptiness. (66)

'Suppose a painter were to himself create a terrifying image of a *yakṣa*, and frightened and scared by it falling face down were to lose consciousness. Just so, Kāśyapa, all foolish common people themselves create material form, sound, smell, flavour and tactile objects, and due to those they wander in *samsāra* and they do not understand those things as they truly are. (67)

...

'People use the term "ascetic", Kāśyapa. In how many ways, Kāśyapa, do they use the term "ascetic"? These ascetics, Kāśyapa, are of four types. Which are the four? Namely, (1) the one who is an ascetic by virtue of his figure, outward form, distinguishing marks and appearance; (2) the one who is an ascetic deceitful while guarding good behaviour; (3) the one who is an ascetic interested in fame, renown and celebrity; (4) and the one who is an ascetic engaged in real, correct practice. These, Kāśyapa, are the four ascetics. (121)

'Now, Kāśyapa, who is the one who is an ascetic by virtue of his figure, outward form, distinguishing marks and appearance? Here, Kāśyapa, there will be someone who possesses the figure, outward form, distinguishing marks and appearance of an ascetic. He is clothed in a monastic robe, with shaven head, grasping in his hand a fine begging bowl, yet his conduct is characterized by impure bodily acts, impure vocal acts and impure mental acts. He is unrestrained, unliberated, untamed, unpacified, unguarded, undisciplined, greedy, lazy, of wrong behaviour and he conducts himself in sinful ways. This, Kāśyapa, is called the one who is an ascetic by virtue of his figure, outward form, distinguishing marks and appearance. (122)

'Now, Kāśyapa, who is the ascetic who is deceitful while guarding good behaviour? Here, Kāśyapa, there will be some ascetic who is accomplished in acting well-behaved. He behaves circumspectly in all four modes of deportment, consumes coarse food and drink, is satisfied with the four saintly attitudes, does not mix with householders or renunciants, is one of little speech and few words. But those modes of deportment are feigned with deceit and boasting about his spiritual accomplishments; they are not for the sake of the purification of the mind, nor for calming, nor for tranquillity, nor for training. And he is one who holds to wrong speculations on objectification, and hearing that things are inconceivable because of emptiness he feels as if he has confronted an abyss. And he is displeased by monks who speak about emptiness. This, Kāśyapa, is called the ascetic who is deceitful while guarding good behaviour. (123)

‘Now, Kāśyapa, who is the ascetic interested in fame, renown and celebrity? Here, Kāśyapa, some ascetic upholds the discipline, having calculated “How may others know me to be an upholder of the discipline?” He preserves what he has learned, having calculated “How may others know me to be very learned?” He lives in a wilderness, having calculated “How may others know me to be a wilderness dweller?” Calculatingly, he dwells with few desires, satisfied, apart. But he acts merely to deceive others, not for the sake of cultivating aversion to the world, not for the sake of destruction of lust, not for the sake of cessation, not for the sake of tranquillity, not for the sake of complete awakening, not for the sake of attaining the state of a true ascetic, not for the sake of attaining the state of a true *brahmaṇa*, not for the sake of *nirvāṇa*. This, Kāśyapa, is called the ascetic interested in fame, renown and celebrity. (124)

‘Now, Kāśyapa, who is the ascetic engaged in real, correct practice? He is that monk, Kāśyapa, who is disinterested in his own body and even in his own life, not to mention in profit, reverence or fame. Hearing the teaching of emptiness, the signless and the wishless, he is delighted at heart. He has understood thusness and he lives a life of purity, being disinterested even in *nirvāṇa*, not to mention in the delights of the triple realm. He is disinterested even in wrong speculations on emptiness, not to mention in wrong speculations on a self, living being, life-force, human or person. He takes the teachings as his refuge. He seeks the inward liberation from defilements; he does not run around outwardly. He sees all things as intrinsically extremely pure, undefiled. And he is an island unto himself; he is without any other island. He does not see the *Tathāgata* even as the embodiment of the teachings, not to mention in a physical body. He is not attached to the teachings even as being free from lust, not to mention as being expressible within the scope of speech. And he does not imagine the monastic community of the saints even as unconditioned, not to mention as a gathering of assemblies. He does not exert himself for the removal of anything at all, nor for the cultivation, nor for the realization. He does not grow forth in *saṃsāra*, he does not delight in *nirvāṇa*. He does not

seek liberation, nor the bondage of this world. Knowing that all things are intrinsically in the state of *parinirvāṇa*, he does not circle in rebirth, nor does he enter *parinirvāṇa*. This, Kāśyapa, is called the ascetic engaged in real, correct practice.

‘One should exert oneself towards attaining the state of a true ascetic through real, correct practice. One must not allow oneself to be injured by being called by the name ascetic. These, Kāśyapa, are the four ascetics.’ (125)

...

Then again the reverend Mahākāśyapa said this to the Blessed One: ‘It is wondrous, Blessed One, it is wondrous, Sugata, how beneficial this king of *sūtras* the *Mahāratnakūṭa* is to those gentle sons and gentle daughters who have just set out in the Mahāyāna. How much merit, Blessed One, will that gentle son or gentle daughter produce who would teach even a single verse from this king of *sūtras*, the *Ratnakūṭa*?’ (157)

When thus asked, the Blessed One spoke as follows to the reverend Mahākāśyapa: ‘That gentle son, Kāśyapa, or gentle daughter might smash into atomic dust particles world-realms as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges, and having smashed them might disperse just so many of them. And filling all of the world-realms, so many as those particles of dust, full of the seven jewels he might give them as a gift to the *tathāgatas*, *arhats*, perfect and complete buddhas. And for each one of those *tathāgatas* among the buddhas, blessed ones, as many as the sands of the River Ganges, he might make monasteries as many as the sands of the River Ganges. (158)

‘And he might serve the community of innumerable auditors of each one of those *tathāgatas* among the buddhas, blessed ones, as many as the sands of the River Ganges, with all the requisites for happiness for aeons as many as the sands of the River Ganges. And in order to devoutly serve those buddhas, blessed ones, throughout his whole life with pleasing bodily acts, vocal acts and mental acts he might smash world-realms as numerous

as the sands of the River Ganges into so many atomic dust particles and having smashed them might disperse just so many dust particles. And filling all the world-realms equal to that number full of the seven jewels he might give them as a gift to the buddhas, blessed ones. And in order to devoutly serve them throughout his whole life with pleasing bodily acts, vocal acts and mental acts he might reverence, respect, honour and worship so many buddhas, blessed ones, even as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges. And when they have entered *nirvāna* he might construct *stūpas* for them made of the seven jewels.

‘Yet, if a gentle son or gentle daughter would take even one verse from this king of *sūtras* preached by all the buddhas, the *Mahāratnakūṭa*, and would uphold it, then the mass of merit of the former activity does not approach even a hundredth part or even a thousandth part or a hundred-thousand billionth part of the mass of merit of this latter act; it is not liable to calculation, or measure, or reckoning or comparison or to likening. And if one might hear it, and having heard it might not reject it, then this would produce a tremendously great mass of merit. And if a woman were to hear it or were to have it written down or were to master it, she would never fall into unlucky existences. Her current existence would be her last as a woman. (159)

‘And when this discourse on the doctrine, the *Ratnakūṭa*, is expounded or taught or written or copied or exists in book form on a certain spot of earth, then that spot of earth becomes a shrine for the world together with its gods. And should one hear or take up or copy or comprehend this discourse on the doctrine from a certain preacher of the teaching, then he must generate such a respectful attitude towards that preacher of the teachings, just like, Kāśyapa, towards the *Tathāgata*. One who will reverence, respect, honour and worship a preacher of the teaching will, at the moment of his death, be able to see the *Tathāgata*. (160)

‘Through seeing the *Tathāgata* he will obtain ten purities of bodily action. What are the ten? They are, namely: (1) he will

die with a mind not overcome by painful feelings; (2) he will not experience quivering of the eyes; (3) he will not undergo trembling of the hands; (4) he will not undergo trembling of the feet; (5) he will not void excrement; (6) he will not void urine; (7) he will not sweat from his chest; (8) he will not clench his fists; (9) he will not clutch at empty space; (10) he will abandon the vital principle in a sitting position. He will obtain those ten purities of bodily action. (161)

‘He will obtain ten purities of vocal action. What are the ten? They are, namely: (1) melodious speech; (2) smooth speech; (3) sweet speech; (4) pleasing speech; (5) gentle speech; (6) uncontradicted speech; (7) agreeable speech; (8) commendable speech; (9) speech deserving of being received by gods and men; (10) speech deserving of being received by the buddha. He will obtain these ten purities of vocal action. (162)

‘He will obtain ten purities of mental action. What are the ten? They are, namely: (1) he will not be angry; (2) he will be free from rancour; (3) he will not conceal his own transgressions; (4) he will not be tormented by regret; (5) he will not be pleased by faults of others; (6) he will not be pleased by being hostile; (7) he will not have perverse ideas; (8) he will be vigilant in exertion; (9) he will grasp the purified buddha-field with an intrepid mind; (10) without pride or arrogance he will obtain the concentration which is the complete realization of all the Buddha’s teachings. He will obtain those ten purities of mental action. . . . (163)

‘Whoever, Kāśyapa, wishes to reverence me with all the requisites for happiness, wishes to worship me with all forms of worship, should take up this discourse on doctrine, the *Mahāratnakūṭa*, should master it, should write it down, should recite it, should explain it. Then, Kāśyapa, this will become the unexcelled worship of the *tathāgatas*, *arhats*, perfect and complete buddhas.’ (165)

Translated by Jonathan Silk from Baron Alexander Wilhelm

## SERENITY AND DISCERNMENT

*Throughout the history of Buddhism in India, expositions of meditation typically grouped practices under two headings: those with the goal of deep concentration and those with the goal of insight into the nature of reality. Although certain practices (such as the 'foundations of mindfulness' set out in Chapter 37) claimed to achieve the two goals through a single process, most expositions considered concentration and insight separately.*

*The practice of concentration involves the selection of an object of concentration, either material or immaterial, that is then used as the focus of sustained attention. A wide variety of such objects are prescribed, including mindfulness on the breath, on the foulness of the human body and on love (in the sense of the wish that others be happy). The process of developing concentration is described in great detail, with various pitfalls, and their antidotes, enumerated. As the mind gains in strength, concentration on the object increases and distraction decreases, until a state called serenity (samatha) is attained. This is regarded as the minimal level of concentration required for the achievement of enlightenment, but it is only the first of many states of ever-deepening mental focus. One may proceed to levels called the concentrations (dhyāna, translated as 'contemplations' below).*

*This practice of concentration is not regarded as an innovation of the Buddha. Various renunciates at the time of the Buddha were said to be adept in the practice; the Buddha himself learned it during his years of yogic training from the teachers Alāra Kālāma and Udrāka Rāmaputra (see Chapter 14). Thus,*