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In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī

དཔལ་ལྷ་མོ་སྐྱེད་བྱངས་ལ་བསྟོད་པ།

dpal lha mo sgra dbyangs la bstod pa

· Toh 738 ·

Degé Kangyur, vol. 94 (rgyud 'bum, tsha), folios 229.b–230.a



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co.

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SUMMARY

- s.1 *In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī* presents a series of lyrical verses in praise of the deity Sarasvatī, the patron goddess of spoken and written eloquence. With evocative imagery and inspiring language, the praise pays tribute to Sarasvatī's unimpeded speech, memory, and knowledge, and to her physical majesty and compassionate nature. The praise includes petitions requesting Sarasvatī to grant the devotee a level of eloquence and learning equal to that of the goddess herself. In the tradition of the Great Vehicle, the praise aligns the attainments of eloquent speech, strong memory, and great learning with the intention to use them for the benefit of other beings.

ac.

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- ac.1 Translated, edited, and finalized by the Subhashita Translation Group. The translation was produced by Lowell Cook, who also wrote the introduction. Benjamin Ewing and Ryan Damron checked the translation against the Tibetan and edited the text and introduction.
- ac.2 The translation was completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

i.

INTRODUCTION

i.1

Sarasvatī is a female deity prominent in the pantheons of South Asia's diverse religious communities, including those of the Buddhist, Brahmanical, and Jain traditions.¹ *In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī* extols the qualities for which the goddess is widely renowned in those communities: unimpeded mastery of speech, memory, and knowledge, physical majesty, and a compassionate nature. While praising Sarasvatī for these qualities, the text also petitions Sarasvatī to grant her devotee a level of eloquence and learning equal to that of the goddess herself. The praises and petitions articulated in the text are situated in the broader context of the Mahāyāna, which is apparent from its sustained orientation toward the benefit of all beings.

i.2

Among the praises to Sarasvatī preserved in Buddhist literature, *In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī* is unique for being classified by the compilers of the Tibetan canon as the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) and thus included in the Kangyur, rather than as the work of human authors such as are compiled in the Tengyur. The other praises to Sarasvatī in the Tibetan canon are all preserved in the Tengyur, and include Śrīdhara's *Vajrasarasvatī-stotra* (Toh 1925) and the *Sarasvatīstotra* attributed to Kālidāsa (Toh 3704). Sarasvatī is also the subject of a substantial collection of Indic practice manuals (*sādhana*), which are preserved in the Tengyur as well. In the Tibetan tradition, Sarasvatī holds a position of importance as a patron goddess of both spoken and written eloquence, as is exemplified in Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa's (1357–1419) celebrated *Verses in Praise of the Goddess Sarasvatī* (*sgra dbyangs lha mo dbyangs can ma la bstod pa'i tshigs su bcad pa*). Despite Sarasvatī's popularity in Tibet, *In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī* does not appear to have been widely studied or quoted in Tibetan literature.

i.3 *In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī* lacks a Sanskrit title and is not otherwise available in a Sanskrit witness, making it challenging to determine the history of the text in India. The Tibetan translation of the text is preserved twice in the Kangyur—in the Action Tantra (Skt. *kriyātantra*; Tib. *bya ba'i rgyud*) section and in the Compendium of Dhāraṇīs² (Tib. *gzungs 'dus*)—with only minor variations between the two versions.³ The translation is not recorded in the Denkarma or Phangthangma catalogs, the two extant records of texts translated during the Imperial Period (*btsan po'i skabs*; 629–842), nor does it appear in the Dunhuang collections, suggesting that the praise was either translated or compiled in the Period of Fragmentation (*sil bu'i dus*; ca. mid-eighth to late-tenth centuries) or during the subsequent period of Buddhism's spread in Tibet (*bstan pa'i phyi dar*). With no colophon that includes information about the team of translators, it is difficult to precisely determine the history of the text's transmission and translation in Tibet.

i.4 The English translation offered here is based on the version preserved in the Degé Kangyur with reference to variant readings from eight Kangyurs as noted in the Comparative Edition Kangyur (*dpe bsdur ma*), as well as the version preserved in the Stok Palace Kangyur.

In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī

1.

The Translation

[F.229.b]

1.1

In the path that leads to awakening,
The victors and their heirs, masters of the Dharma,
And the multitudes of wisdom maṇḍalas
Arranged in successive levels of knowing—in these we seek refuge.

1.2

Homage to you, glorious goddess Sarasvatī.
Your mastery over speech is renowned throughout the world
And you have transcended the three knowledges⁴ of the sages.
All of this is the result of your vast conduct.

1.3

You take up the burden of immense activities
And joyfully endure every hardship for the benefit of beings.
Coursing through the levels and the ten perfections,
And standing steadfast in stores of virtue, you take whatever form is needed.

1.4

Your rounded face is the flawless moon in full.
Your lustrous⁵ eyes of compassion open the eyes of others
As you gaze at length upon every last universe, effortlessly.
It is before you that the likes of⁶ Devendra and Brahmā bow down.

1.5

Compassionate mother, replete with love and patience,⁷
It is your delight, noble goddess, to nurture every single being.
Your eloquence is lofty and your top-knot rivals mountain peaks.
Your wisdom runs deep as you act in support of knowledge. [F.230.a]

1.6

Wielding mastery over fields of knowledge, you are the patroness of words.
As you are the god of all gods in the universe,
And a supreme companion who endeavors to dispel our suffering,
Even extremist scholars bow down before you.

- 1.7 Your limbs are well proportioned, and your voice is ever sweet.
Poised with majesty, you glow with flawless qualities and merit.
As it is you who grants the accomplishments of the highest knowledge,
Grant us swift intellect, retention of words, and eloquence most supreme!
- 1.8 With the welfare of every being always in your heart,
Eminent and unfailing goddess, you dwell in liberation.
Firm in your promises, you consider with grace
Those who call upon you, and you fulfill their every wish.
- 1.9 As the master of sound, you capture in words
Everything that appears in the universe.
You are understood by all and skilled in expression.
O Sarasvatī, your capabilities are inconceivable.
- 1.10 Wielding mastery over the might of dhāraṇī and Dharma,
You, a capable ṛṣi, have genuinely mastered the samaya.
Bestowing your blessing on our bodies, minds, and speech,
You work to satisfy the world with your ever-pleasing voice.
- 1.11 You are admired by all for your conduct of supreme awakening.
Blessed Lady, please continue always to grant the supreme purpose
To those who desire the boon of pure body, speech, and mind
With which to bring about the perfect benefit of beings.
- 1.12 Help us to be brave as we strive along the path to awakening.
Let our tongues be quick and our words be righteous.
Endow us with treasures of knowledge and speech unobstructed.
Allow us to achieve the full eloquence of all the well-gone ones.
- 1.13 Mother of knowledge, your nature is devoid of conceptuality.
The flag of your reputation flutters in the winds of joy.
Like wanting to draw a picture in the sky,
Your attributes are hard to comprehend, your qualities are boundless.
- 1.14 *namo bhagavate brahmaṇe | namaḥ sarasvatyai devi siddhyantu mantrapādam
brahmānumantra svāhā.*⁸
- 1.15 *This concludes "In Praise of the Glorious Goddess Sarasvatī."*

ab.

ABBREVIATIONS

- C Choné (*co ne*) Kangyur
- H Lhasa (*zhol*) Kangyur
- J Lithang (*'jang sa tham*) Kangyur
- K Peking (*pe cin*) Kangxi Kangyur
- N Narthang (*snar thang*) Kangyur
- S Stok Palace (*stog pho brang*) Manuscript Kangyur
- Y Peking Yongle (*g.yung lo*) Kangyur

n.

NOTES

- n.1 Sarasvatī's history and status in South Asia's diverse religious communities have been studied in Ludvik 2007.
- n.2 Note that there is a discrepancy among various databases for cataloging the Toh 1092 version of this text within vol. 101 or 102 of the Degé Kangyur. See Toh 1092, note 3 (<https://read.84000.co/translation/toh1092.html#end-note-UT22084-094-015-76>), for details.
- n.3 Among the Action Tantras, this text is grouped within the Lotus Family, where Sarasvatī is positioned as a female attendant (Tib. *bka' nyan mo*) of that family.
- n.4 The phrase "three knowledges" (Tib. *rig gsum*) is enigmatic. It could be an abbreviated form of *rig byed gsum*, "the three Vedas," which is supported by the reference to "sages," (Tib. *drang srong*), a translation of the Sanskrit term *ṛṣi*, a title often applied to realized teachers of the Vedic tradition. This interpretation is not conclusive, however, thus *rig gsum* has been translated here as "three knowledges" to preserve the ambiguity and polyvalence of the Tibetan term.
- n.5 "Lustrous" (Tib. *gsal*) is omitted in H, N, and S. It is replaced with the instrumental particle *gyis* in those versions.
- n.6 This translation follows H, N, and S in reading *sogs* ("the likes of") where D reads *tshogs* ("host"). S reads *dbang po* ("Indra") where D and other versions of the translation read *lha dbang* ("Devendra"). This amounts to the same reading, however, as Devendra is an epithet of Indra.
- n.7 C, K, Y, and J instead read *bsod ldan* ("meritorious"), in which case this line would read, "Compassionate mother, replete with love and merit."

- n.8 This mantra follows the Degé with minor orthographic emendation. It can be tentatively translated as, “Homage to the lord Brahmā. Homage to Sarasvatī. Goddess! May this mantra formula be accomplished. Let it be consecrated by Brahmā, svāhā.” A similar passage is found in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* (p. 57): *namo bhagavatyai brāhmaṇyai namaḥ sarasvatyai devyai sidhyantu mantrapadās taṃ brahma namasyantu svāhā.*

b.

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GLOSSARY

· Types of attestation for names and terms of the corresponding ·
source language

AS	<i>Attested in source text</i> This term is attested in a manuscript used as a source for this translation.
AO	<i>Attested in other text</i> This term is attested in other manuscripts with a parallel or similar context.
AD	<i>Attested in dictionary</i> This term is attested in dictionaries matching Tibetan to the corresponding language.
AA	<i>Approximate attestation</i> The attestation of this name is approximate. It is based on other names where the relationship between the Tibetan and source language is attested in dictionaries or other manuscripts.
RP	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan phonetic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the Tibetan phonetic rendering of the term.
RS	<i>Reconstruction from Tibetan semantic rendering</i> This term is a reconstruction based on the semantics of the Tibetan translation.
SU	<i>Source unspecified</i> This term has been supplied from an unspecified source, which most often is a widely trusted dictionary.

g.1 Brahmā

tshangs pa

ཐངས་པ།

brahmā

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

A high-ranking deity presiding over a divine world; he is also considered to be the lord of the Sahā world (our universe). Though not considered a creator god in Buddhism, Brahmā occupies an important place as one of two gods (the other being Indra/Śakra) said to have first exhorted the Buddha Śākyamuni to teach the Dharma. The particular heavens found in the form realm over which Brahmā rules are often some of the most sought-after realms of higher rebirth in Buddhist literature. Since there are many universes or world systems, there are also multiple Brahmās presiding over them. His most frequent epithets are “Lord of the Sahā World” (*sahāṃpati*) and Great Brahmā (*mahābrahman*).

g.2 Devendra

lha dbang

ལྷ་དབང་།

devendra

Another name for Śakra, also known as Indra.

g.3 dhāraṇī

gzungs

གཟུངས།

dhāraṇī

The term *dhāraṇī* has the sense of something that “holds” or “retains,” and as such can refer to the special capacity of practitioners to memorize and recall detailed teachings. It can also refer to a verbal expression of the teachings—an incantation, spell, or mnemonic formula—that distills and “holds” essential points of the Dharma and is used by practitioners to attain mundane and supramundane goals. The same term is also used to denote texts that contain such formulae.

g.4 Kālidāsa

nag mo khol

ནག་མོ་ཁོ།

kālidāsa

Kālidāsa (c. fourth–fifth century CE) was one of India’s greatest poets. He is the author of *Cloud Messenger* (Skt. *Meghadūta*, Tib. *sprin gyi pho nya*), a work that exerted a major influence on Tibet’s poetic tradition, and a praise to Sarasvatī called *Sarasvatīstotra* (Toh 3704).

g.5 level

sa

ས།

bhūmi

The level of realization of a bodhisattva, typically ten in number.

g.6 **perfections**

pha rol phyin pa

པ་རོལ་ཕྱིན་པ།

pāramitā

The ten perfections are generosity (Skt. *dāna*, Tib. *sbyin pa*), discipline (Skt. *śīla*, Tib. *tshul khrims*), patience (Skt. *kṣānti*, Tib. *bzod pa*), diligence (Skt. *vīrya*, Tib. *brtson 'grus*), concentration (Skt. *dhyāna*, Tib. *bsam gtan*), insight (Skt. *prajñā*, Tib. *shes rab*), skillful means (*upāyakauśala*, Tib. *thabs la mkhas pa*), might (Skt. *bala*, Tib. *stobs*), aspiration (Skt. *praṇidhāna*, Tib. *smon lam*), and wisdom (Skt. *jñāna*, Tib. *ye shes*).

g.7 **samaya**

dam tshig

དམ་ཚིག་

samaya

Literally “coming together,” *samaya*, refers to precepts given by the teacher, the corresponding commitment by the pupil, and the bond that results, which can also be the bond between the practitioner and the deity or a spirit. It can also mean a special juncture or circumstance, or an ordinary time or season.

g.8 **Sarasvatī**

dbyangs can ma · lha mo sgra dbyangs

དབྱངས་ཅན་མ། · ལྷ་མོ་སྒྲ་དབྱངས།

sarasvatī

The goddess of eloquence, learning, and music.

g.9 **Śrīdhara**

dpal 'dzin

དཔལ་འཛིན།

śrīdhara

Śrīdhara (ca. 870 CE–ca. 930 CE) was a renowned Indian scholar who composed the *Vajrasarasvatīstotra* (Toh 1925), a praise to Sarasvatī.

g.10 Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa

tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa

ཙོང་ཁ་པ་བློ་བཟང་གྲགས་པ།

—

Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (1357–1419 CE) was the founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, a polymathic scholar, and a prolific author.

g.11 well-gone ones

bde bar gshegs pa

བདེ་བར་གཤེགས་པ།

sugata

Definition from the 84000 Glossary of Terms:

One of the standard epithets of the buddhas. A recurrent explanation offers three different meanings for *su-* that are meant to show the special qualities of “accomplishment of one’s own purpose” (*svārthasampad*) for a complete buddha. Thus, the Sugata is “well” gone, as in the expression *su-rūpa* (“having a good form”); he is gone “in a way that he shall not come back,” as in the expression *su-naṣṭa-jvara* (“a fever that has utterly gone”); and he has gone “without any remainder” as in the expression *su-pūrṇa-ghaṭa* (“a pot that is completely full”). According to Buddhaghosa, the term means that the way the Buddha went (Skt. *gata*) is good (Skt. *su*) and where he went (Skt. *gata*) is good (Skt. *su*).