

# THE NOBLE MAHAYANA SŪTRA

## “THE RICE SEEDLING”

[Skt. *āryasālistambhanāmamahāyanasūtra*]

[Tib. *'phags pa sa lu'i ljang pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*]

Homage to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas!

Thus have I heard at one time. The Bhagavan was residing on Vulture Peak mountain in Rajagriha with a large sangha of 1,250 bhiksus and with a great many Bodhisattva Mahasattvas. At that time, Venerable Shariputra went to the place frequented by the Bodhisattva Mahasattva Maitreya and, after they had exchanged courtesies upon meeting each other, they both sat down on a flat rock.

Venerable Shariputra then said to the Bodhisattva Mahasattva Maitreya, “Maitreya, here today, the Bhagavan, gazing at a rice seedling, spoke this *aphorism*<sup>69</sup> to the bhiksus: ‘Bhiksus, whoever sees dependent arising sees the *Dharma*.<sup>70</sup> Whoever sees the Dharma sees the Buddha.’ Having said this, the Bhagavan fell silent. Maitreya, what is the meaning of this aphorism spoken by the Sugata? What is dependent arising? What is the Dharma? What is the Buddha? How does one see the Dharma by seeing dependent arising? How does one see the Buddha by seeing the Dharma?”

The Bodhisattva Mahasattva Maitreya then replied to the Venerable *Sharadvatiputra*,<sup>71</sup> “Venerable Shariputra, you want to know what dependent arising is in the statement made by the Bhagavan, the Lord of Dharma, the Omniscient One: ‘Bhiksus, whoever sees dependent arising sees the Dharma. Whoever sees the Dharma sees the Buddha?’ Well, the phrase dependent arising means that because this exists, that exists; because this is produced, that is produced. That is to say, ignorance causes formations. *Formations*<sup>72</sup> cause consciousness. Consciousness causes name and form. Name and form cause the six sense sources. The six sense sources cause contact. Contact

causes feeling. Feeling causes craving. Craving causes *appropriation*.<sup>73</sup> Appropriation causes becoming. Becoming causes birth. And birth causes ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, despair, and bewilderment. Thus does this entire great heap of suffering arise.”

“When ignorance ceases, formations cease. When formations cease, consciousness ceases. When consciousness ceases, name and form cease. When name and form cease, the six sense sources cease. When the six sense sources cease, contact ceases. When contact ceases, feeling ceases. When feeling ceases, craving ceases. When craving ceases, appropriation ceases. When appropriation ceases, becoming ceases. When becoming ceases, birth ceases. And when birth ceases, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, suffering, despair, and bewilderment cease. Thus does this entire great heap of suffering cease. This is what the Bhagavan has called dependent arising.”

“What is the Dharma? The Dharma is the eightfold path of the noble ones: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This eightfold path of the noble ones, combined with the attainment of its results and nirvana, is what the Bhagavan has called the Dharma.”

“Who is the Bhagavan Buddha? A Buddha, so-called because of comprehending *all dharmas*,<sup>74</sup> is endowed with the wisdom eye of the noble ones and the *body of Dharma*,<sup>75</sup> and thus perceives the *dharmas*<sup>76</sup> of those still in training and those beyond training.”

“How does one see dependent arising? On this point the Bhagavan said, ‘One who sees dependent arising as *constant*,<sup>77</sup> without life force, devoid of life force, true, unmistaken, unborn, not arisen, uncreated, uncompounded, unobstructed, imperceptible, *tranquil*,<sup>78</sup> fearless, incontrovertible, not exhaustible, and by nature never *stilled*,<sup>79</sup> and who likewise sees the Dharma to

also be constant, without life force, devoid of life force, true, unmistaken, unborn, not arisen, uncreated, uncompounded, unobstructed, imperceptible, tranquil, fearless, incontrovertible, inexhaustible, and never stilled, clearly understands the Dharma of the nobles ones, and by thus acquiring such right knowledge, sees the Buddha, the body of the unsurpassable Dharma.”<sup>80</sup>

“Why is it called dependent arising? It is called dependent arising because it is causal and conditional, not non-causal and non-conditional. In this connection, the Bhagavan concisely taught the characteristics of dependent arising as follows: ‘Results come from their own specific conditions. Whether Tathagatas appear or not, this true nature of *things*<sup>81</sup> will remain. It is the true nature; the constancy of *Dharma*<sup>82</sup>; the immutability of *Dharma*,<sup>83</sup> consistent with dependent arising, suchness, unmistaken suchness, not partial suchness, actuality, and truth; unmistaken; and unerring.’”

“Moreover, dependent arising emerges from two principles. From what two principles? From a causal relation and a conditional relation. Furthermore, it should be understood as twofold: outer and inner.”

“What is the causal relation in outer dependent arising? It is as follows. From a seed comes a sprout, from a sprout a leaf, from a leaf a stem, from a stem a pedicel, from a pedicel a pistil, from a pistil a flower, and from a flower comes a fruit. If there is no seed, the sprout cannot arise and so on, until finally, without the flower, the fruit cannot arise. If there is a seed, the sprout will form and so on, until finally, if there is a flower, then the fruit will form.”

“In that process, the seed does not think, ‘I form the sprout.’ Nor does the sprout think, ‘I am formed by the seed.’ Likewise, the flower does not think, ‘I form the fruit.’ Nor does the fruit think, ‘I am formed by the flower.’ Yet, if there is a seed, the sprout will take form and arise, and so on, until finally, likewise, if there is a flower, the fruit will take form and arise. Thus is the causal relation in outer dependent arising to be seen.”

“So how is the conditional relation in outer dependent arising to be seen? As due to the coming together of six elements. As due to the coming together of which six elements? Namely, conditional dependent arising is to be seen as due to the coming together of the elements of earth, water, fire, air, space, and *season*.<sup>84</sup> The earth element functions as the support for the seed. The water element moistens the seed. The fire element ripens the seed. The air element opens the seed. The space element performs the function of not obstructing the seed. And season transforms the seed. Without these conditions a sprout cannot form from a seed. But when the outer element of earth is not deficient, and likewise water, fire, air, space, and season are not deficient, then from the coming together of all these factors, a sprout forms as the seed is ceasing.”

“The earth element does not think, ‘I support the seed.’ Nor does the water element think, ‘I moisten the seed.’ Nor does the fire element think, ‘I ripen the seed.’ Nor does the air element think, ‘I open the seed.’ Nor does the space element think, ‘I make sure the seed is not obstructed.’ Nor does the season think, ‘I transform the seed.’ Nor does the seed think, ‘I form the sprout.’ Nor does the sprout think, ‘I am formed by these conditions.’ Yet when these conditions are present and the seed is ceasing, the sprout forms. Likewise, when finally there is a flower, the fruit forms.”

“The sprout is not created by itself, not created by another, not created by both, not created by *Isvara*,<sup>85</sup> not transformed by *time*,<sup>86</sup> not derived from *prakṛti*,<sup>87</sup> and not born without any cause. Nevertheless, through the coming together of the elements of earth, water, fire, air, space, and season, the sprout forms as the seed is ceasing.”

“Thus is the conditional relation in outer dependent arising to be seen.”

“Here, outer dependent arising is to be seen in terms of five aspects. Which five? As not permanent, as not discontinuous, as not

involving transmigration, as the formation of a large result from a small cause, and as a continuity of similar type.”

“How is it not permanent? It is not permanent because the sprout and the seed are different. The sprout is not the seed. The sprout does not come from the seed after it has ceased, nor does it come from the seed while it has not yet ceased.<sup>88</sup> Rather, the sprout is born precisely as the seed ceases.”

“How is it not discontinuous? It is not discontinuous because a sprout is not born from a seed that has already ceased, nor from a seed that has not yet ceased. Rather, like the beam of a scale tilting from up to down, a sprout is born precisely when the seed has ceased.”

“How does it not involve transmigration? It does not involve transmigration because the sprout and the seed are different; that which is the sprout is not the seed.”

“How does it entail the formation of a large result from a small cause? A large fruit forms from planting a small seed. Therefore, it entails the formation of a large result from a small cause.”

“Lastly, fruit forms precisely according to the type of seed planted. Therefore, it involves a continuity of similar type.”

“Thus is outer dependent arising to be seen in terms of five aspects.”

“Similarly, inner dependent arising also arises from two principles. From what two principles? From a causal relation and a conditional relation.”

“What, then, is the causal relation in inner dependent arising? It starts with ignorance causing formations and so on, until finally, birth causes ageing and death. If ignorance does not arise, then formations do not manifest and so on, until finally, if birth does not arise, then ageing and death do not manifest. Likewise, from the existence of ignorance, formations occur and so on, until finally, from the existence of birth, comes ageing and death.”

“Ignorance does not think, ‘I produce formations.’ Nor do formations think, ‘We are produced by ignorance,’ and so on. Finally, birth does not think, ‘I produce ageing and death.’ Nor do ageing and death think, ‘I am produced by birth.’ Nevertheless, formations take form and arise through the existence of ignorance and so on, until finally ageing and death take form and arise through the existence of birth.”

“Thus is the causal relation in inner dependent arising to be seen.”

“How is the conditional relation in inner dependent arising to be seen? As due to the coming together of six elements. As due to the coming together of which six elements? Namely, the conditional relation in inner dependent arising is to be seen as due to the coming together of the elements of earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness.”

“Here, what is the earth element in inner dependent arising? That which assembles to form the solidity of the body is called the earth element. That which provides cohesion in the body is called the water element. That which digests whatever the body eats, drinks, chews, and tastes is called the fire element. That which performs the function of the body’s inhalation and exhalation is called the air element. That which allows the body to have hollow spaces inside is called the space element. That which produces the *sprouts*<sup>89</sup> of name and form like reeds in a sheaf—the combination of the five collections of consciousness, together with the defiled mental consciousness — is called the consciousness element. Without these conditions the body cannot be born. But when the inner earth element is not deficient, and likewise the elements of water, fire, air, space, and consciousness are not deficient, then from the coming together of all these factors, the body forms.”

“In this process, the earth element does not think, ‘I provide the solidity of the body by assembling.’ Nor does the water element think, ‘I provide cohesion for the body.’ Nor does the fire element think, ‘I digest whatever the body eats, drinks, chews, or tastes.’

Nor does the air element think, ‘I perform the function of the body’s inhalation and exhalation.’ Nor does the space element think, ‘I create hollow spaces inside the body.’ Nor does the element of consciousness think, ‘I produce the name and form of the body.’ Nor does the body think, ‘I am produced by these conditions.’ Yet, when these conditions are present, the body is born.”

“The earth element is not a self, not a being, not a life force, not a creature, not a human, not a person, not female, not male, not neuter, not I, not mine, and not anybody else’s.”

“Similarly, the water element, the fire element, the air element, the space element, and the consciousness element are also not a self, not a being, not a life force, not a creature, not a human, not a person, not female, not male, not neuter, not I, not mine, and not anybody else’s.”

“Here, what is ignorance? That which perceives these same six elements to be unitary, solidified, permanent, constant, eternal, pleasurable, a self, sentient, a life force, a creature, a *soul*,<sup>90</sup> a man, an individual, a human, a person, I, and mine, along with the many other such variations of misapprehension, is called ignorance. The presence of such ignorance brings desire, aversion, and delusion toward objects. Such desire, aversion, and delusion towards objects are the formations caused by ignorance. That which distinguishes between individual objects is consciousness. The four aggregates for appropriation that emerge in conjunction with consciousness, are name and *form*.<sup>91</sup> The faculties based on name and form are the six sense sources. The conjunction of the *three factors*<sup>92</sup> is contact. The experience of contact is feeling. Attachment to feeling is craving. The intensification of craving is appropriation. Action that comes from appropriation and causes rebirth is becoming. The emergence of the aggregates from such a cause is birth. The maturation of the aggregates after birth is ageing. The perishing of the decrepit aggregates is death. The inner torment of the deluded, attached, dying person is sorrow. The utterance that comes from sorrow is

lamentation. The experience of discomfort associated with the collection of the five consciousnesses is suffering. The mental suffering due to such reminiscence is despair. Moreover, any other secondary afflictions of this kind are called bewilderment.”

“They are called ignorance in the sense of obscuring, formations in the sense of forming, consciousness in the sense of causing to know, name and form in the sense of mutual support, the six sense sources in the sense of *entryways*,<sup>93</sup> contact in the sense of mingling, feeling in the sense of experience, craving in the sense of thirst, appropriation in the sense of appropriating, becoming in the sense of giving birth to repeated becoming, birth in the sense of the emergence of the aggregates, ageing in the sense of the maturation of the aggregates, death in the sense of perishing, sorrow in the sense of grieving, lamentation in the sense of wailing, suffering in the sense of bodily torment, despair in the sense of mental torment, and bewilderment in the sense of secondary afflictions.”

“Furthermore, not knowing reality, in the sense of not apprehending it and misapprehending it, is ignorance.”

“If such an ignorance is present, three types of formations develop: those that lead to meritorious states, those that lead to unmeritorious states, and those that lead to unwavering states. This is what is meant by ‘ignorance causes formations.’”

“From formations that lead to meritorious states comes consciousness that leads to meritorious states. From formations that lead to unmeritorious states comes consciousness that leads to unmeritorious states. And from formations that lead to unwavering states comes consciousness that leads to immovable states. This is what is meant by ‘formations cause consciousness.’”

“The four immaterial aggregates emerging together with consciousness, along with physical form, is what is meant by ‘consciousness causes name and form.’”



“Due to the development of name and form, the performance of actions through the entryways of the six sense sources occurs. This is what is meant by ‘name and form cause the six sense sources.’”

“From the six sense sources arise the six collections of contact. This is what is meant by ‘the six sense sources cause contact.’”

“Feelings occur precisely according to the type of contact that occurs. This is what is meant by ‘contact causes feeling.’”

“Relishing those different kinds of feelings, taking delight in them, clinging to them, and having that clinging remain is what is meant by ‘feeling causes craving.’”

“From relishing, taking delight, clinging, and having that clinging remain comes an unwillingness to let go, with the repeated wish: ‘May I never part from these dear and delightful forms!’ This is what is meant by ‘craving causes appropriation.’”

“Such wishing gives rise to rebirth-producing actions by means of body, speech, and mind. This is what is meant by ‘appropriation causes becoming.’”

“The formation of the five aggregates born from such actions is what is meant by ‘becoming causes birth.’”

“The maturation of the development of the aggregates formed from birth, and their disintegration, is what is meant by ‘birth causes ageing and death.’”

“Thus, this twelvefold dependent arising—which comes from several different causes and from several different conditions, is neither permanent nor impermanent, is neither compounded nor un-compounded, is not without any cause or condition, is without an experiencer, and is not something exhaustible, something destructible, or something that ceases—has proceeded from time immemorial, without interruption, like the flow of a river.”

“This twelfold dependent arising—which comes from several different causes and from several different conditions, is neither permanent nor impermanent, is neither compounded nor un-compounded, is not without any cause or condition, is without an experiencer, and is not something exhaustible, something destructible, or something that ceases—has indeed proceeded from time immemorial, without interruption, like the flow of a river. Nevertheless, there are four links that serve as the cause for assembling this twelfold dependent arising. Which four? Namely, ignorance, craving, karma, and consciousness.”

“Consciousness functions as a cause by having the nature of a seed. Karma functions as a cause by having the nature of a field. Ignorance and craving function as causes by having the nature of afflictions.”

“Karma and afflictions cause the seed of consciousness to grow. Here, karma functions as the field for the seed of consciousness. Craving moistens the seed of consciousness. Ignorance sows the seed of consciousness. Without these conditions, the seed of consciousness does not develop.”

“In this process, karma does not think, ‘I function as the field for the seed of consciousness.’ Nor does craving think, ‘I moisten the seed of consciousness.’ Nor does ignorance think, ‘I sow the seed of consciousness.’”

“Nor does the seed of consciousness think, ‘I am produced by these conditions.’ Yet when the seed of consciousness grows, planted in the field of karma, moistened by the water of craving, and strewn with the manure of ignorance, the sprout of name and form manifests within whichever mother’s womb one will take rebirth through.”

“And this sprout of name and form is not created by itself, not created by another, not created by both, not created by Isvara, not transformed by time, not derived from prakṛti, not dependent on a single factor, and not born without any cause. Nonetheless, from the

combination of the union of the parents, the period of ovulation, and other conditions, the seed of consciousness, filled with appetite, produces the sprout of name and form within whichever mother’s womb one will take rebirth through. For although things are not the owner, devoid of ownership, ungraspable, space-like, and their nature is the mark of illusion, there is no deficiency of requisite causes and conditions.”

“For instance, the eye consciousness arises by way of five principles. Which five? Namely, the eye consciousness arises based on the eye on which it depends, form, light, space, and the appropriate attention. Here, the eye functions as the basis for the eye consciousness. Form functions as the object of perception for the eye consciousness. Light functions as visibility. Space functions by not obstructing. Appropriate attention functions as mental reflection. Without these conditions, the eye consciousness cannot arise. But when the inner sense source, the eye, is not deficient, and likewise, when form, light, space, and appropriate attention are not deficient, then from the coming together of all these factors, the eye consciousness arises.”

“The eye does not think, ‘I serve as the basis for the eye consciousness.’ Nor does form think, ‘I serve as the object of perception for the eye consciousness.’ Nor does light think, ‘I function as the visibility for the eye consciousness.’ Nor does space think, ‘I do not obstruct the eye consciousness.’ Nor does appropriate attention think, ‘I provide mental reflection for the eye consciousness.’ Nor does the eye consciousness think, ‘I am produced by these conditions.’ Yet, the eye consciousness is born from the presence of these conditions. Similarly, a corresponding analysis should be applied to the rest of the faculties.”

“Here, there is nothing whatsoever that transmigrates from this existence to the next. And yet, because there is no deficiency of requisite causes and conditions, the result of karma nonetheless manifests. It is like the appearance of the reflection of a face on the

surface of a well-polished mirror. The face has not shifted onto the surface of the mirror, but because there is no deficiency of requisite causes and conditions, the face nonetheless appears there.”

“Similarly, there is nobody at all who transmigrates from here after death and is born elsewhere. And yet, because there is no deficiency of requisite causes and conditions, the result of karma nonetheless manifests. It is like how the orb of the moon travels at a distance of forty-two thousand yojanas above earth, and yet its reflection nonetheless appears in small vessels filled with water. It is not that the moon moves from its position and enters the small vessels filled with water. Yet, because there is no deficiency of requisite causes and conditions, the orb of the moon nonetheless appears there.”

“Likewise, that there is nobody at all who transmigrates from here after death and is born elsewhere, and yet, because there is no deficiency of requisite causes and conditions, the result of karma nonetheless manifests, is like how a fire ignites from the assemblage of its requisite causes and conditions, and not when deficient of its requisite causes and conditions.”

“In the same way, although things are devoid of owner, devoid of ownership, ungraspable, space-like, and their nature is the mark of illusion, because there is no deficiency of requisite causes and conditions, the seed of consciousness born of karma and afflictions will nonetheless produce the sprout of name and form within whichever mother’s womb one will take rebirth through.”

“Thus is the conditional relation in inner dependent arising to be seen.”

“Here, inner dependent arising is to be seen in terms of five aspects. Which five? As not permanent, as not discontinuous, as not involving transmigration, as the formation of a large result from a small cause, and as a continuity of similar type.”

“How is it not permanent? It is not permanent because the final aggregates at death are one thing and those at birth are another; that is, the final aggregates at death are not the ones at birth. And yet, only when the final aggregates at death cease do the aggregates at birth arise.”

“How is it not discontinuous? It is not discontinuous because the aggregates at birth do not arise from the final aggregates at death either when they have already ceased, or when they have not yet ceased. Like the beam of a scale tilting from up to down, the aggregates at birth arise precisely when the final aggregates at death have ceased.”

“How does it not involve transmigration? It does not involve transmigration because beings from different classes of existence bring about their rebirth in a common form of birth.”

“How does it entail the formation of a large result from a small cause? The ripening of a large result is experienced from having performed a minor action. Thus, it entails the formation of a large result from a small cause.”

“It involves a continuity of similar type because the ripening of an action is experienced precisely according to the action performed.”

“Venerable Shariputra, whoever sees with perfect wisdom this dependent arising, perfectly taught by the Bhagavan, as it actually is—as always and *forever*<sup>94</sup> without life force, devoid of life force, true, unmistaken, unborn, not arisen, uncreated, uncompounded, unobstructed, imperceptible, tranquil, fearless, incontrovertible, inexhaustible, and by nature never stilled— whoever fully and truly sees it as unreal, vain, hollow, unsubstantial, as a sickness, a boil, a thorn, as miserable, impermanent, painful, empty, and self-less, such a person does not reflect on the past thinking, ‘Did I exist in the past, or not? What was I in the past? How was I in the past?’ Nor does such a person reflect on the future thinking, ‘Will I exist

in the future, or not? What will I be in the future? How will I be in the future?’ Nor does such a person reflect on the present thinking, ‘What is this? How is this? Being what, what will we become? Where does this being come from? Where will it go when transmigrating from here at death?’”

“Whichever dogmas mendicants and brahmins hold throughout the world, whether they involve belief in a self, belief in a being, belief in a life force, belief in a person, or belief in ceremonies and festivities, such dogmas, prone to agitation and dullness, are all abandoned at that time. Fully understood as false, these dogmas are severed at the root and wither like the head of a palm tree,<sup>95</sup> never to arise or cease in the future.”

“Venerable Shariputra, whoever is endowed with such acceptance of the Dharma and thus perfectly understands dependent arising is prophesized for unexcelled, perfect, and complete awakening by the Tathagata, the Arhat, the Perfectly and Completely Awakened One, the One with Perfect Knowledge and Conduct, the Sugata, the Knower of the World, the Incomparable Charioteer of those who need taming, the Teacher of gods and humans, the Bhagavan, the Buddha, in this way: ‘Such a person will become a perfect and complete Buddha!’”

After the Bodhisattva Mahasattva Maitreya had thus spoken, Venerable Shariputra, together with the world of gods, humans, asuras, and gandharvas, rejoiced and praised what the Bodhisattva Mahasattva Maitreya had taught.

This concludes the noble Mahayana sūtra, *The Rice Seedling*.

**Note:** Translated from Tibetan into English with comparison to Sanskrit editions by the Dharmasāgara Translation Group: Raktrul Ngawang Kunga Rinpoche, Rebecca Hufen, Jason Sanche, Arne Schelling and Sonam Spitz, under the patronage and supervision of 84000: *Translating the Words of the Buddha*.

Minor revisions were made to this translation by Geshe Dorji Damdul during the course of a teaching retreat on this sutra held at Deerpark in October 2018.