ཤེར་ཕྱིན་ཡི་གེ་གཅིག་མ།

The Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable

Ekākṣarī Prajñāpāramitā

དེ་བཞིན་གཤེགས་པ་ཐམས་ཅད་ཀྱི་ཡུམ་ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་ཕ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་མ་ཡི་གེ་གཅིག་མ་ཞེས་བྱ་བ།

de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi yum shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma yi ge gcig ma zhes bya ba

The Mother of All Thus-Gone Ones, the Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable

Ekākṣarīmātānāmasarvatathāgataprajñāpāramitā

· Toh 23 ·

Degé Kangyur, vol. 34 (shes rab sna tshogs, ka), folio 147.b
For referencing Tibetan sources, please see our Scholar's Edition

First published 2025

Current version v 1.0.1

84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha is a global non-profit initiative to translate all the Buddha's words into modern languages, and to make them available to everyone.

This work is provided under the protection of a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution - Non-commercial - No-derivatives) 4.0 copyright. It may be copied or printed for fair use, but only with full attribution, and not for commercial advantage or personal compensation. For full details, see the Creative Commons license.

This print version was generated at 4.54pm on monday, 12 october 2026 from the online version of the text available on that date. If some time has elapsed since then, this version may have been superseded, as most of 84000's published translations undergo significant updates from time to time. For the latest online version, with bilingual display, interactive glossary entries and notes, and a variety of further download options, please see https://84000.co/translation/toh23.

Contents

s.	**Summary**	**6**
ac.	**Acknowledgments**	**6**
i.	**Introduction**	**7**
tr.	**The Translation**	**10**
n.	**Notes**	**11**
b.	**Bibliography**	**13**
g.	**Glossary**	**15**

Summary

s.1 In *The Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable*, the shortest of all the works of the Prajñāpāramitā literary corpus, the Buddha Śākyamuni conveys to Ānanda and a large group of monks and bodhisattvas the entirety of the perfection of wisdom encapsulated in the single syllable *a*.

Acknowledgments

ac.1 This publication was completed under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

ac.2 The text was translated, edited, and introduced by the 84000 translation team. Lowell Cook produced the translation and wrote the introduction. David Fiordalis edited the translation and the introduction, and Ibby Caputo copyedited the text. Martina Cotter was in charge of the digital publication process.

Introduction

i.1 In *The Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable*, the shortest of all the works of the Prajñāpāramitā literary corpus, the Buddha Śākyamuni teaches Ānanda and a large assembly of monks and bodhisattvas the entirety of the perfection of wisdom encapsulated in the single syllable *a*.

i.2 This sūtra holds a place of honor in the Tibetan tradition. Counted as one of the eleven "child" Prajñāpāramitā scriptures (*sras bcu gcig*), among the seventeen "mother and children" scriptures (*yum sras bcu bdun*),[1] it is also classified in Orgyen Lingpa's (b. 1323) revealed treasure text (*gter ma*) *The Chronicles of Padma* (*pad+ma bka' thang*) as the ninth of ten "royal sūtras" (*rgyal po'i mdo bcu*), a set of scriptures said to have been recommended to King Tri Songdetsen (*khri srong lde btsan*, r. 756–800 CE) by master Padmasambhava.[2] Among the ten, *The Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable* is called the sūtra of the essence (*snying po'i mdo*).[3]

i.3 The syllable *a* has various levels of meaning and significance in Sanskrit grammar and Indian philosophy of language. It is the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, and it accompanies all the consonants of the base Sanskrit phonetic syllabary.[4] It is thus sometimes said to be generative of all sound and to pervade all language. Relatedly, the idea that the Buddha spoke only a single syllable and yet the many beings assembled understood, in their various languages, the entirety of his manifold teaching is a notion that can be traced back to the time of the early Buddhist schools or monastic lineages.[5] In his survey of the doctrines of these early schools, the second-century CE Buddhist scholar-monk Vasumitra notes that this idea was asserted by the Mahāsaṅghikas and rejected by the Sarvāstivādins.[6] The notion that the Buddha taught by means of a single sound is also found throughout Mahāyāna literature.[7]

i.4 Another idea prevalent in Indian philosophy of language is that all existence arises from the sounds of the Sanskrit syllabary.[8] In Sanskrit and other Indic

languages, however, the syllable *a* is also added as a prefix of negation to many nouns, not unlike how the letter "a" can be used in English, as in the word *atypical*. Thus, on a deeper level, the syllable *a* is said to be representative of the negation of existence or the birthlessness (*anutpāda*) of all phenomena. As such, it is the embodiment of the emptiness of all things—all teachings commonly understood to be central to the Prajñāpāramitā literature.[9] The idea that the syllable *a* simultaneously represents both the fullness of everything and its emptiness could be said to culminate in the assertion that the Buddha did not utter a single sound, but nonetheless, beings understood his teaching in ways appropriate to each individual. This assertion was expressed perhaps most famously in *The Secrets of the Realized Ones*.[10]

i.5 The use of the syllable *a* as a mantra or dhāraṇī also appears in other sūtras, such as in chapter 12 of *The Sūtra of the Meeting of Father and Son* (*Pitāputrasamāgamasūtra*, Toh 60), as well as in tantras like *Reciting the Names of Mañjuśrī* (*Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*, Toh 360).[11] The syllable *a* is also the first letter of the *arapacana* alphabet, which has been employed throughout Buddhist literature, often in an acrostic form, to present key Buddhist teachings and principles.[12] One example of this occurs in *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eighteen Thousand Lines*, which says of the syllable *a*, "The letter *a* is the gateway to all dharmas because they are unproduced from the very beginning *(ādyanutpannatvād)*."[13] Similar presentations of the syllable *a* in a sequence can be found in *The Teaching on the Great Compassion of the Tathāgata* and *The Play in Full*.[14]

i.6 In short, *The Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable* represents one instance in a long tradition of Buddhist scriptures using the syllable *a* (or other syllables) to reveal the intersection of language and causation, and to express the otherwise ineffable nature of ultimate reality.

i.7 There is no extant Sanskrit version of *The Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable* and it was not translated into Chinese until recently.[15] Though there are no Ind-

ic commentaries on this work found in the Tengyur, it has been the subject of a number of Tibetan commentaries.[16] These commentaries primarily offer practical instructions for combining the sūtra's recitation with practices like formless meditation, visualization, and ablution, among other techniques.

The Translation

1.

The Mother of All Thus-Gone Ones

The Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable

1.1 Homage to the Great Mother, the Perfection of Wisdom.

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was staying in Rājagṛha on Vulture Peak Mountain with a great saṅgha of 1,250 monks and many quintillions of bodhisattvas. At that time, the Blessed One said to the venerable Ānanda:

1.3 “For the benefit and happiness of beings, Ānanda, you shall receive *the perfection of wisdom in one syllable*. It is thus:

1.4 *a* |

1.5 When the Blessed One had said this, the venerable Ānanda and all the monks and the bodhisattva great beings realized the perfection of wisdom. They rejoiced and praised what the Blessed One had taught.

1.6 *This concludes “The Mother of All Thus-Gone Ones, the Perfection of Wisdom in One Syllable.”*

Notes

1. In his *bde gshegs bstan pa'i gsal byed chos kyi 'byung gnas*, Butön Rinchen Drup (*bu ston rin chen grub*, 1290–1364) presents these categories, yet he notes they were not necessarily accepted by all Tibetan scholars at the time. See Butön 1988, pp. 216–17.

2. Orgyen Lingpa 2001, folio 207.b.

3. See, for instance, Mipham Rinpoche, "Outline of the Ten Royal Sūtras." Translated by Adam Pearcey, Lotsawa House, 2021. Accessed May 22nd, 2024.

4. For an audio demonstration of the Sanskrit syllabary, see The Matheson Trust Sacred Audio Collection.

5. The classic work on these schools is Bareau 1955. It is not clear precisely when the different lineages of monastic ordination coalesced into discrete groups with distinct doctrines, but there is inscriptional evidence of their existence from the early centuries around the turn of the Common Era.

6. Masuda 1925, p. 19, quoted in Lamotte 1988, p. 551.

7. Other examples of Mahāyāna sūtras that refer to the Buddha teaching through a single utterance include stanzas 1.24–1.26 of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the stanzas uttered by Vairocana in chapter 4 of the *Pitāputrasamāgamasūtra*.

8. For a study of Indian philosophy of language and its connections to cosmology, see Padoux 1990. Chapter 5, "The Phonematic Emanation," is particularly relevant.

9. For more on the central teachings and themes of the Prajñāpāramitā literature, see the 84000 Knowledge Base article, "Perfection of Wisdom (Kangyur Section)." An overview of the literature can be found in Conze 1978.

10. See *The Secrets of the Realized Ones* (*Tathāgataguhya*, Toh 47), 8.1. Another similar statement, attributed to Nāgārjuna, can be found in the *Nirupamastava*, as stated in Lamotte 1988, p. 552.

11. The often cited, seminal passage from this tantra is stanza 28.

12. For more on the arapacana syllabary, see Salomon 1990.

13. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eighteen Thousand Lines* (*Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, Toh 10), 16.99.

14. At 2.561 of *The Teaching on the Great Compassion of the Tathāgata* (*Tathāgatamahākaruṇānirdeśa*, Toh 147), the syllable *a* of the arapacana alphabet is used whereas at 10.16–10.23 of *The Play in Full* (*Lalitavistara*, Toh 95) the syllable *a* of the Sanskrit alphabet is used.

15. 一切如來母一字般若波羅蜜多經 (*Ekākṣarīmātāprajñāpāramitā*, Toh 23), *The Kumarajiva Project*.

16. Some of the Tibetan authors who have penned commentaries on this sūtra include Chomden Rikpé Reldri (*bcom ldan rigs pa'i ral gri*, 1227–1305), Khenpo Karma Ratna (*mkhan po kar+ma rat+na*, d.u.), Jangsem Bairo (*byang sems bai ro*, d.u.), Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (*sa chen kun dga' snying po*, 1092–1158), Tashi Pel of Taklung (*stag lung pa bkra shis dpal*, 1142–1209/1210), Trophu Lotsāwa Jampé Pel

(*khro phu lo tsA ba byams pa'i dpal*, 1172–1236), and Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (*'jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po*, 1820–92).

Bibliography

de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi yum shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma yi ge gcig ma zhes bya ba (*Ekākṣarīmātānāmasarvatathāgataprajñāpāramitā*). Toh 23, Degé Kangyur vol. 34 (shes rab sna tshogs, ka), folio 147.b.

de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi yum shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma yi ge gcig ma zhes bya ba. bka' 'gyur (dpe bsdur ma) [Comparative Edition of the Kangyur], krung go'i bod rig pa zhib 'jug ste gnas kyi bka' bstan dpe sdur khang (The Tibetan Tripitaka Collation Bureau of the China Tibetology Research Center). 108 volumes. Beijing: krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang (China Tibetology Publishing House), 2006–9, vol. 34, pp. 414–15.

bcom ldan 'das ma shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi yum yi ge gcig ma zhes bya ba. Stok Palace Kangyur vol. 51 (sna tshogs, ka), folios 269.b–270.a.

一切如來母一字般若波羅蜜多經 (*Ekākṣarīmātāprajñāpāramitā*, Toh 23), *The Kumarajiva Project*.

84000. "Perfection of Wisdom (Kangyur Section)." Online Knowledge Base. 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2024.

84000. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eighteen Thousand Lines* (*Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā, shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa khri brgyad stong pa*, Toh 10). Translated by Gareth Sparham. Online Publication. 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2022.

84000. *The Play in Full* (*Lalitavistara, rgya cher rol pa*, Toh 95). Translated by Dharmachakra Translation Committee. Online publication. 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2013. Version 4 (2025).

84000. *The Secrets of the Realized Ones* (*Tathāgataguhya, de bzhin gshegs pa'i gsang ba*, Toh 47). Translated by David Fiordalis and the Dharmachakra Translation Committee. Online publication. 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2023.

84000. *The Teaching on the Great Compassion of the Tathāgata* (*Tathāgatamahākaruṇānirdeśa, de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying rje chen po nges par bstan pa*, Toh 147). Translated by Anne Burchardi and team. Online publication. 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2020.

Bareau, André. *Les Sectes Bouddhigque du Petit Véhicule*. Saigon: École Française D'Extrême-Orient, 1955.

Butön Rinchen Drup (bu ston rin chen grub). *bde gshegs bstan pa'i gsal byed chos kyi 'byung gnas*. gangs can shes rig gi nying bcud. Beijing: krung go bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1988. BDRC W1923.

Buswell, Robert E., Jr., and Donald S. Lopez, Jr. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

Conze, Edward, trans. *Perfect Wisdom: The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts*. Buddhist Publishing Group, 1973.

Conze, Edward. *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*. 2nd ed. Tokyo: Reiyukai, 1978.

Jamlo ('jam blo), ed. *rgyal po mdo bcu'i rtsa 'grel phyogs bsgrigs*. Vol. 6. Chengdu: si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2014.

Lamotte, Étienne. *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śaka Era*. Translated from the French by Sara Webb-Boin. Edited by Jean Dantinne. Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 1988.

Masuda, Jiro. *Origin and Doctrines of Early Indian Buddhist Schools: A Translation of the Hsüan-Chwang Version of Vasumitra's Treatise*. Verlag der Asia Major, 1925.

Mipham Rinpoche. "Outline of the Ten Royal Sūtras." Translated by Adam Pearcey, Lotsawa House, 2021. Accessed May 22nd, 2024.

Orgyen Lingpa (o rgyan gling pa). *o rgyan gu ru pad+ma 'byung gnas kyi skyes rabs rnam par thar pa rgyas pa bkod pa pad+ma bka'i thang yig*. Xining: sku 'bum byams pa ling par khang, 2001. English translation in Douglas and Bays, *The Life & Liberation of Padmasambhava*. Dharma Publishing, 2020.

Padoux, André. *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*. State University of New York Press, 1990.

Salomon, Richard. "New Evidence for a Gāndhārī Origin of the Arapacana Syllabary." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110 (April–June 1990): 255–73.

Samye Translations, trans. "One-Syllable Prajñāpāramitā." Lotsawa House, 2019. Accessed May 22nd, 2024.

Schaeffer, Kurtis R., and Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp. *An Early Tibetan Survey of Buddhist Literature: The Bstan pa rgyas pa rgyan gyi nyi 'od of Bcom ldan ral gri*. Harvard Oriental Series 64. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Glossary

Ānanda

kun dga’ bo

ཀུན་དགའ་བོ།

ānanda

arapacana alphabet

a ra pa tsa na

ཨ་ར་པ་ཙ་ན།

arapacana

The alphabet of the Kharoṣṭhī script, forming an important mnemonic incantation.

Blessed One

bcom ldan ’das

བཅོམ་ལྡན་འདས།

bhagavān

bodhisattva

byang chub sems dpa’

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའ།

bodhisattva

bodhisattva great being

byang chub sems dpa’ sems dpa’ chen po

བྱང་ཆུབ་སེམས་དཔའ་སེམས་དཔའ་ཆེན་པོ།

bodhisattvamahāsattva

Those “great beings” who have the intention to achieve the complete enlightenment of a buddha in order to liberate all sentient beings from cyclic existence. An epithet of a bodhisattva.

monk

dge slong

དགེ་སློང་།

bhikṣu

perfection of wisdom

shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma, shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa

ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་ཕ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་མ།, ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་ཕ་རོལ་ཏུ་ཕྱིན་པ།

prajñāpāramitā

Rājagṛha

rgyal po’i khab

རྒྱལ་པོའི་ཁབ།

rājagṛha

saṅgha

dge ’dun

དགེ་འདུན།

saṅgha

Vulture Peak Mountain

bya rgod phung po

བྱ་རྒོད་ཕུང་པོ།

gṛdhrakūṭa