CHAPTER SEVEN

SUTRA OF GOLDEN LIGHT

1. THE SUTRA

1.1 Growth of the Text

The *Sutra of Golden Light* would have existed in some form already in the first century C.E. Johannes Nobel (1887–1960), who spent much of his life unravelling the intricacies of its passages in its numerous translations and renditions, demonstrated that the text evolved from the chapter on confession (chapter 3). In Nobel’s edition of the Sanskrit text that has come down to us, we read:

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\text{atha khalu ruciraketur bodhisattvah suptah /\ svapnântaragatah suvarnâm suvarnamayikām bherim adâkṣit / \ samanāvabhāsamanām / tadyathāpī nāma sûryamaṇḍalam ... tatra ca brāhmaṇarūpēṇa puruṣam adâkṣit / tām bherim parāhanantam tatra bheriśabdād īmā evamrūpā deśanāgāthā niścaramānā āśrausīt // atha khalu ruciraketur bodhisattvah prativibuddhāḥ samānās tā dharmadeśanāgāthā anusmaratī sma /}
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Then indeed the Bodhisattva Ruciraketu slept. In the middle of his sleep he saw a golden drum, made of gold, shining everywhere just like the orb of the sun ... And there he saw a man with the form of a brahmin, beating that drum. There from the sound of the drum he heard these (and) similar confessional verses coming forth. (21) Then indeed the Bodhisattva Ruciraketu, as soon as he awoke, recollected these verses of confession of the Law.

The practice of confession of sins in Buddhism can be traced back to the earliest period, within the lifetime of the Buddha. During the *posadha* (Pali *uposatha*), held every fortnight, monks would recite the *Vinaya* rules (the *prātimokṣa*) and confess their transgressions. Confessions were

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also made throughout the rainy season (*varṣa*), but especially on the final day of this three-month retreat period. Rites of confession gradually developed into much more than acknowledgment of breach of monastic rules. Even the above passage refers to something more than confession, as expressed in what follows it: the verses coming forth from the golden drum are first and foremost a wishful prayer for the removal of suffering of all sentient beings, and only afterwards do they turn into a confession. This confession is then identified as the ‘splendid, excellent Golden Light’ (*suvarṇabhāsottamā śubhā*), after which the sutra is named.

To this confession, Nobel explains, chapter 6 was then added, where the Four Great Kings (*caturmahārāja*) prophesy the continued reign and prosperity of the ruler who upholds the sutra. The great importance acquired by this sutra for the protection of the state derives from this prognostication. Then came chapters 7–11, where various deities, including our Sarasvatī (chapter 7), promise, following the Four Great Kings in chapter 6, to uphold the sutra, its preachers, and their audiences, listing the great many benefits that will accrue to them. Chapter 13 about king Susambhava’s visit to a monk to hear an exposition of the sutra and to have his wishes fulfilled was later still. Chapter 14 is a conclusion to chapters 1–13, advising people to listen to the preaching of the text and enumerating the merits thereof. In its older version, the *Sutra of Golden Light* would have ended here. Another five, rather differently composed chapters (15–19) were gradually added to form the text as it has come down to us. This surviving Sanskrit version, according to Nobel, cannot be dated earlier than the middle of the fifth century.

### 1.2 Extant Text and Translations

The extant Sanskrit text of the *Suvarṇabhāsottama Sūtra* was edited by Johannes Nobel in 1937 and translated into English by Ronald E. Emmerick in 1970, who then corrected and revised his translation in 1990, 1992, and 1996. A new edition of the Sanskrit is being prepared

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6. For a detailed discussion of the growth of the text, see Nobel’s introduction to his 1937 edition of the Sanskrit, pp.XLIff.
7. Sanskrit, pp.64ff. (Emmerick 1996, pp.24ff.).
8. All references to Emmerick herein are to the third (revised) translation of 1996.