

The Prophecy about Nāgārjuna in the *Mahāmeghasūtra*:

A Perspective Based on the Sanskrit Manuscript Preserved in the Potala Palace

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1. Prophecies about Nāgārjuna

Unique to Nāgārjuna's legend, a number of prophecies about him appear in Mahāyāna sūtras. The earliest and most well-known of such prophecies can be located in two verses in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (*LAS*):

In Vedali of the Deccan, there will emerge an eminent bhikṣu of great fame named Nāga(-āhvaya), who is the destroyer of the propositions of existence and nonexistence.

Having propagated in this world my vehicle, namely, the unexcelled great vehicle, and having reached the first stage of the bodhisattva, he will go to the land of Sukhāvātī.¹⁾

The word *nāgāhvaya* can denote either a single name or a person whose appellation (*āhvaya*) is Nāga. Bodhiruci and Sikṣānanda both identify this name with Nāgārjuna 龍樹 in their Chinese translations. There have been different opinions in the Tibetan tradition,²⁾ but the portrayal of the protagonist as “the destroyer of the propositions of existence and nonexistence” in the verse suggests that whoever composed this passage must have had the philosopher Nāgārjuna in mind.

In the *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* (*MABh*), after citing the prophecy in the *LAS*, Candrakīrti relates a prophecy in the *Mahāmeghasūtra* (*MMS*) with Nāgārjuna:

Moreover, he is mentioned in the *Mahāmegha* of 12,000 [verses]. “Ānanda, this Licchavi youth named Sarvasattvapriyadarśana, when four hundred years [have elapsed] after I attained nirvāṇa, having become a bhikṣu named Nāga(-āhvaya), and having propagated widely my teaching, in due course he will become, in the world realm of Prasādaprabha, an arhat, a samyak sambuddha named Jñānākaraprabha.” [...] ³⁾

Had Nāgārjuna's advent been indeed mentioned or implicated in the *MMS*, it could have been another early source of his prophecy. While the passages related to the story of a

Licchavi youth can be located in the Chinese and Tibetan translations of the *MMS*, the specific wording of *nagāhvayo bhikṣuḥ* has no equivalents in both translations. Such absence raises doubts, already expressed by Bu ston (See Obermiller 1932, 129–130), as to whether the prophecy in the *MMS* really refers to Nāgārjuna.

2. Sanskrit manuscript of the *Mahāmeghasūtra*

The only known Sanskrit manuscript of the *MMS*, first described by Luo Zhao in 1980s and not yet edited, is currently preserved in the Potala Palace.⁴⁾ Kazuo Kano (2012, 2015) has provided a survey of the transmission of these manuscripts, showing that they were inherited by 'Brom ston from his teacher Atiśa and later preserved in Retreng Monastery, where they suffered fire damage during an attack by Mongolian forces in 1240 CE.

This *MMS* manuscript has 39 folios, written in an Eastern Nāgarī Script of the 11th century by a professional hand probably from Nepal. The manuscript would be otherwise complete if the left one fifth were not burnt away.

There is a Chinese translation of the *MMS* by Dharmakṣema in the 5th century (T no. 387), and a Tibetan translation by Ye Shes sde in the 9th century (D no. 232, P no. 898).

3. Excerpts from the story of Licchavi youth in the *MMS* manuscript

()	restored <i>akṣara</i> (s)	[]	uncertain reading(s)
{ }	superfluous <i>akṣara</i> (s)	{ { }	deleted <i>akṣara</i> (s)
< >	omitted (part of) <i>akṣara</i> (s)	« »	inserted <i>akṣara</i> (s)

§ 1 (Ms. 29a8–b1; cf. D no. 232, 187a5–b1; T 12, no. 387, 1099c22–25): bhagavān āha | mamātyayena devaputrāḥ (bahuvarṣaśatasya dakṣiṇāpathe **sātavāhano** nāma koṭṭarājo bhaviṣyati |) [ta]smin kāle aśtivarṣa saddharmasyāntardhānakālasamaye śeṣe < > tasmin kāle mama śrāvako bhaviṣyati | sadharmaṃ coddhāriṣyati | dharmacakram pravarttayiṣyati | mahāyānaṃ pi pareṣān | { } vistareṇa deśayiṣyati |

§ 2 (Ms. 29b4–5; cf. D 187b5–7; T 1100a2–7): (bhagavān ā) [ha |] śṛṇohi priyadarśana-gandharvarāja [...] sarvalokapriyadarśanalicchavikumāro putro mama dharmoddharaṇā{ {ya } }rthāya dakṣiṇāpathe muṇḍarṣi nāma rāṣṭre mahāvallin nāma puṇyagrāmo bhaviṣyati supra (yogā nāma nadī bhaviṣyati | tasyām uttarakūle ma) [hā]vaiśyaviśuddha-kulaṃ | kajjorikā nāma pṛthivīprakāśaṃ(→°pradeśaṃ) bhaviṣyati | tasmin mahākule sarvalokapriyadarśano licchaviputro utpadyiṣyati | mahābodhisatvanarakumjaraḥ < > **tasya**

mātāpitṛ{ }vargā mama nāmadheyam nāmaṃ kārāpayiṣyanti |

§ 3 (Ms. 30a3–5; cf. D 188b6–189a3; T 1100a24–b6): aho anāgatakāḥ (satvāḥ sarva-buddhotpādapratilābhakā bhaviṣyanti | ku) [to] < > bahubuddhaparigrhīto **tathāga-tanāgāhvayo bhikṣuḥ** suviśuddhaparivāraḥ sabhikṣuganaḥ sabhikṣuṇīgaṇaḥ < > [...] so **mahāvīryanāgarājā**{ {h} } imo adya sarvalokapriyadarśano licchivikumāro imo licchaviputro **tathāgatanāgāhvayo bhikṣur** bhaviṣyatīti veditavyam ||

§ 4 (Ms. 30b7; cf. D 190b2–3; T 1101a9–11): abhiprasādāyaṃ lokadhātuyaṃ tasya bhagavato jñānākaraṇaḥ nāma tathāgato bhaviṣyaty [...]

4. Observations and Conclusions

The outline of the Licchavi youth's story in the *MMS* manuscript is: It is taught by the Buddha to a Gandharvarāja that in a certain time after the Buddha's Nirvāṇa, there will be a Licchavi youth named Sarvalokapriyadarśana, who will become a bhikṣu named Tathāgatanāgāhvaya, and will become a buddha in future. Here is a comparison table of keywords in different versions.

	<i>MMS</i> (Skt ms. / Tib trans.)	<i>MMS</i> (Ch trans.)	Candrakīrti's summary (<i>MABh</i> , Skt ms. /Tib trans.)
1. Interlocutor	priyadarśanagandharvarāja (devaputra) (lha'i bu) mthong na dga' ba dri za'i rgyal po	樂見乾闥 婆王	ānanda kun dga' bo
2. Time	mamātyayena [...] (bahuvarṣasatasya) nga 'das pa'i 'og lo brgya phrag mang po 'das pa na	我涅槃後 千二百年	mayi varṣacatuḥśate parinirvṛte nga mya ngan las 'das nas lo bzhi brgya lon pa na
3. Protagonist	sarvalokapriyadarśano licchavikumāraḥ lid tsa bi('i bu) gzhon nu 'jig rten thams cad kyis mthong na dga' ba	一切眾生 樂見梨車子	sarvasatvapriyadarśano nāma licchavikumāraḥ li tsa byi gzhon nu sems can thams cad kyis mthong na dga' ba zhes bya ba
4. Epithet	tathāgatanāgāhvayo bhikṣuḥ de bzhiṅ gshegs pa dang ming 'thun pa 'i dge slong	—	nāgāhvayo bhikṣuḥ klu zhes bya ba'i dge slong
5. World realm where he will become a buddha	abhiprasādā mngon par dang ba	喜光	prasādaprabhaḥ rab tu dang ba'i 'od
6. Name of the buddha that he will become	jñānākaraṇaḥ ye shes 'byung gnas 'od	智聚光	jñānākaraṇaḥ ye shes 'byung gnas 'od

Textual discrepancies are seen among different versions of the same phrase. Except for Row 4, the epithet, which I will treat separately, and Row 6, the buddha's name, where all three sources agree and need no further explanation, other discrepancies can be divided into

two groups.

The first group includes Rows 1 and 2, of which I found no good explanations. Candrakīrti gives Ānanda as the interlocutor addressed by the Buddha, different from the other two versions. And all three sources claim differently about the time of the future bhikṣu's advent. Here the Sanskrit manuscript is damaged, and the phrase **bahuvarṣasatasya* (Excerpt 1) is reconstructed from Tibetan translation *lo brgya phrag mang po* “many hundreds of years.” Candrakīrti speaks of *varṣacatuḥśate* “four hundred years.” This might have been due to a confusion between *bahu* and *catur*. I have no good reason why the Chinese translation reads “1200 years.”

The second group of discrepancies, as in Rows 3 and 5, indicates that there once existed more than one Sanskrit recension of the *MMS*. In both cases the readings in Candrakīrti's summary of the story are supported by the Chinese version of the *MMS* and differ from the Sanskrit manuscript and the Tibetan translation.

The situation of the protagonist's epithet is more complicated and curious. Sanskrit manuscript reads *tathāgatanāgāhvayo bhikṣuḥ* “a bhikṣu named Tathāgatanāga (-āhvaya),” which appears repeatedly and cannot be attributed as a mere scribal error. This reading sits nicely with Candrakīrti's paraphrase *nāgāhvayo bhikṣuḥ* “a bhikṣu named Nāga (-āhvaya),” only with *tathāgata* dropped. The corresponding phrase is absent in the Chinese version, and in Tibetan it reads *de bzhin gshegs pa dang ming 'thun pa'i dge slong* “a bhikṣu with the name same as the Tathāgata.” This reading, however, is justified by the context of the story, as indicated by the sentence in bold in Excerpt 2, where the Buddha said, “his mother, father and relatives will name him after my name.” Since *akṣaras gā* and *mā* are similar in shape, the original Sanskrit reading might be *tathāgatanāmāhvaya*- “with a name [the same as] the name of the tathāgata” in agreement with the Tibetan translation, and in some later recension it was corrupted into *tathāgatanāgāhvaya*-.

I would like to add three notes on the possible dissemination of this textual variation:

(1) The textual variation in the *MMS* must have been influenced by the prophecy about Nāgārjuna in the *LAS*, and not vice versa. The phrase *tathāgatanāgāhvaya* is neither contextual nor natural in a *MMS* manuscript; an accidental variation as such would be easily abandoned without external backing. Therefore, it is unlikely that the variation occurred spontaneously in the *MMS* and inspired the related passages in the *LAS*. It might first appear as an accidental scribal error in a *MMS* manuscript, which reminded readers of the well-

known *nāgāhvaya bhikṣuḥ* in the *LAS*. The error was then intentionally kept and used to unify readings of other occurrences throughout the text, eventually producing a new textual lineage from which the Potala manuscript was derived. It could well be called the Mādhyamika recension, because the *MMS* prophecy about Nāgārjuna is mainly mentioned in India in the Mādhyamika tradition. This recension was not prevalent enough to affect the Sanskrit manuscript based on which Tibetan translation was made in the 9th century.

(2) Some other elements in the prophecy of the Licchavi youth in the *MMS* might have helped connect the protagonist with Nāgārjuna. Excerpt 1 mentions that the youth will be born in South India under the reign of king named Sātavāhana. This part is burnt up in the Sanskrit manuscript, but can be restored according to Tibetan and Chinese translations (*bde spyod*, 娑多婆呵那). The earliest evidence available about the connection between Nāgārjuna and a Sātavāhana king is in Xuanzang's *Da Tang xiyu ji* of the 7th century. Yamano (2008) argues that this association became a feature of Nāgārjuna's legend from the 7th century onwards. It could be no coincidence that the earliest identification of this prophecy in the *MMS* with Nāgārjuna is by Candrakīrti, likely active in the 7th century. In addition, as in Excerpt 3, in his past life the Licchavi youth was the King Mahāvīryanāga; the word *nāga* might also ring a bell.

(3) A similar story about the Licchavi youth is found in the **Mahābherihārakasūtra*, where the bhikṣu is called 持我名 (T no. 270, 299a17–18) *lga'i ming 'chang ba'i dge slong* (D no. 222, 122b6), “bearing my name.” A Sanskrit reconstruction of this phrase may be **mannāmadhārako bhukṣuḥ*, which could never evolve into the word *nāgāhvaya* to be associated with Nāgārjuna. The Licchavi youth also appears in a passage in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsaśūtra*, usually considered an interpolation of the *MMS*. The *MMS* might in fact have worked as a bridge; when the Licchavi youth in the *MMS* was identified with Nāgārjuna, the similar passages in the other two sūtras began to be read in this perspective and viewed as prophecies about Nāgārjuna. The result is seen in the *Madhyamakaratna-pradīpa* (D no. 3854, 286b4–288a1) and Atiśa's works.⁵⁾

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Notes

1) *dakṣiṇāpathavedalyāṃ bhikṣuḥ śrīmān mahāyaśāḥ | nāgāhvayaḥ sa nāmnā tu sadasatpakṣa-*

dārakaḥ || prakāśya loke madyānaṃ mahāyānaṃ anuttaraṃ | āsādyā bhūmiṃ muditāṃ yāsyate 'sau sukhāvātīṃ || (Nanjio 1923, 286)

2) E.g., Tāranātha says that Nāgāvaya is a disciple of Nāgārjuna whose real name is Tathagatabhadra (Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970, 123, 126).

3) Ms. 19b3-4: *Bhūya[śśūya]ś ca dvādaśasahasrakāryamahāmegha upadiṣṭa eṣa ānanda sarva-satvapriyadarśano nāma licchavikūmāro mayi varṣa«catuḥ»śate parinirvṛte nāgāvayo bhikṣur bhūtvā macchāsanam viṣṭareṇa saṃprakāśyānupūrveṇa prasādaprabhe lokadhātau jñānākaraṇaprabho nāma tathāgato (') rhat samyaksaṃbuddho bhaviṣyātīty [...].* Thanks are due to Prof. Li Xuezhong for providing me the transliteration. For an introduction of the manuscript see Lasic et al. 2022, xi–xxi.

4) Luo Zhao 罗昭, *Budala gong suocang beiyejing mulu* (Ganzhuo) 布达拉宫所藏贝叶经目录 (甘珠尔), unpublished manuscript, 1985, 2–3.

5) E.g., *Ratnakaraṇḍodghaṭamadhyamakopadeśa*, D no. 3930, 111a2–3, 113b6–115a2; ed. Miyazaki 2007, 51, 60–65; trans. Apple 2010, 166, 174–178.

Abbreviations

LAS *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, ed. Nanjio 1923.

MABh *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya*.

MMS *Mahāmeghasūtra*.

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