

Four Etymologies for *Bhagavān* in a First-Century Gāndhārī Commentary

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Abstract: A first-century-CE manuscript of an otherwise unknown commentary on the Saṃgītisūtra, written in Gāndhārī language and Kharoṣṭhī script, provides in its section on the Four Limbs of Stream Entry multiple etymologies of the title *bhagavān*. Some of these can be traced back to the earliest layers of Buddhist exegesis, while others have parallels in later Pali and Sanskrit literature, illustrating the central position of Gāndhārī texts like this in the development of Buddhist thought and literature. Buddhaghosa’s discussion of a related set of etymologies for *bhagavā* in addition shows an interesting connection to the Sanskrit grammatical tradition.

Keywords: Gāndhārī, Saṃgītisūtra, *bhagavān*, etymology, grammar

When preparing my very first Buddhological publication (Baums 2002), I remember that I was sitting down with Paul Harrison, one of the editors of the big blue books of the Schøyen series, discussing the proper translation of the Buddha’s epithet *bhagavān*. We settled on “Lord.”¹ That the interpretation of this title was far from simple already in antiquity is brought home by the passage discussed in this article.

The collection of first-century-CE Gāndhārī manuscripts currently held at the British Library, whose findspot is unknown, contains one mostly intact scroll with a commentary on a version of the Saṃgītisūtra (CKM 17). The order of items in this commentary agrees with that in the Chinese translation of the Dīrghāgama attributed to the Dharmaguptaka school (cf. Salomon 1999, 171–173). Section 4.20 of the Gāndhārī commentary explains the four *soṭavatiāga* “limbs of stream entry.” The corresponding section in the Chinese translation of the root text is called “limbs (支) of the stream-enterer” (須陀洹, ONWC *suodaṣuan, reflecting a Prakrit and probably Gāndhārī pronunciation), while

¹ Finding a suitable translation equivalent is particularly difficult in English. Among standard translations into modern European languages, French “le Bienheureux” always struck me as the most felicitous.

there are two corresponding sections each in the Saṃgītisūtras in Pali (4.13 *sotāpattiyaṅgāni*, 4.14 *sotāpannassa aṅgāni*) and Sanskrit (4.11 *srotaāpattiyaṅgāni*, 4.12 *caturbhir aṅgaiḥ samanvāgataḥ srotaāpannaḥ*).

The first of these four “limbs” concerns faith in the Buddha, and the Gāndhārī and Pali versions of the root text insert here the well-known formula of epithets that in Pali runs as follows:

iti pi so bhagavā arahaṃ sammāsambuddho vijjācaraṇasampanno
sugato lokavidū anuttaro purisadammasārathi satthā devamanussā-
naṃ buddho bhagavā ti.

And so this Lord is “the Lord, the Saint, endowed with knowledge and conduct, well-gone, knower of the world, supreme charioteer of men to be tamed, teacher of gods and men, the Buddha, the Lord.”

The Chinese and Sanskrit versions do not have this formula in their root texts, but the Sanskrit Saṃgītiparyāya commentary uses it in its explanation. In his commentary on the Pali version of the sūtra (Sv 1021), Buddhaghosa refers to his discussion of the formula in the Visuddhimagga (see below). In the Gāndhārī commentary, the parts of the formula in the root text are interspersed with explanatory matter. The topic of the present article is the explanation of its beginning (line 182 of the manuscript; images 1–2):

iti vi so bhakava ti bhagaraḥo va bhai va imdriabalabojaṃga⟨ṇa⟩ bhai
va civarapiḍavaṭasa bhaa va avaṇeti ti .am + + + + +

The word *bhakava* is here subjected to the procedure of *nirvacana* or “etymology.” At least four etymologies, joined by the particle *va*, are given and will, in the following, be discussed in turn. It is unclear whether the damaged end of the passage contained a fifth etymology or another exegetical element.

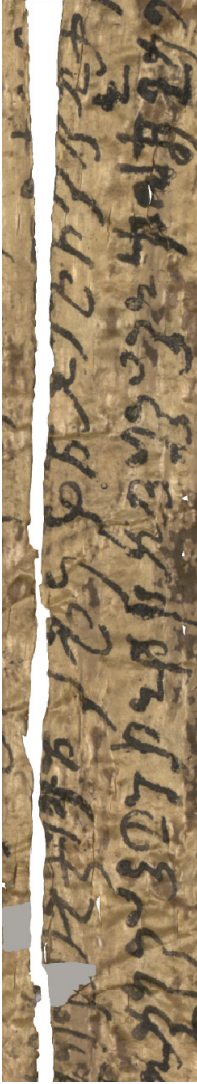


Image 1: Saṅgītisūtra Commentary, line 182 (right)



Image 2: Saṅgītisūtra Commentary, line 182 (left)

Bhagarako

The first etymology – *bhagarako* – presents no problem of interpretation. It has a precise parallel in the Pali Suttaniddesa (Nidd I 142) where it occurs at the very beginning of this text’s explanation of the word *bhagavā*:

bhagavā ti gāravādhivacanaṃ. api ca bhaggarāgo ti bhagavā, bhaggadoso ti bhagavā, bhaggamoho ti bhagavā.

“Lord” is a designation of respect. And also “Lord” (*bhagavā*) because he has broken (*bhagga*) lust, “Lord” because he has broken hate, “Lord” because he has broken delusion.

Here a sound and meaning relationship is established between the first part of *bhagavā* and the word *bhagga* “broken.” I demonstrated previously (Baums 2014, 23–24) that some of the early Buddhist exegetical material reflected in the Suttaniddesa likewise found its way into Gāndhārī commentaries of the first century CE. One example given there was the word *gāravādhivacana* that also occurs in the passage just cited. The explanation of *bhagavā* (G *bhaka*) as *bhaggarāgo* (G *bhagarako*) can now be added to this, and equivalents of P *bhaggadoso* and *bhaggamoho* are presumably implied in the Gāndhārī text.

Bhāi imdriabalabojaṃga

In the second (and third) etymology, G *bhāi* can, in the orthography of this scribe, correspond either to P *bhāgī* “partaking of” or to P *bhājī* “dispensing” or “resorting to.”² The former is construed with the genitive case, the latter with the accusative. In the manuscript, the following word *imdriabalabojaṃga* would seem to be a direct-case form (corresponding to the Pali accusative) and thus suggest an interpretation as P *bhājī*, but this does not yield a satisfactory meaning, and a glance further down the Suttaniddesa passage (Nidd I 143) provides another parallel and shows that G *bhāi* has to be interpreted as equivalent of P *bhāgī*:

² For etymological connections made between the noun *bhaga* and the verbal root *bhaj-* “to dispense” cf. also Deeg 1995, 132.

bhāgī vā bhagavā catunnaṃ satipaṭṭhānānaṃ, catunnaṃ sammapadhānānaṃ, catunnaṃ iddhippādānaṃ, pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ, pañcannaṃ balānaṃ, sattannaṃ bojjaṅgānaṃ, ariyassa aṭṭhaṅgikassa maggassa ti bhagavā.

“Lord” because the Lord (*bhagavā*) partakes (*bhāgī*) of the four presences of mindfulness, of the four right efforts, of the four bases of supernormal power, of the five powers, of the seven limbs of awakening, of the noble eightfold path.

The P expression *pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ, pañcannaṃ balānaṃ, sattannaṃ bojjaṅgānaṃ* is in our manuscript telescoped into a compound that we should then read as *īṃdriabalabojaṃga⟨ṇa⟩* with accidentally omitted genitive ending. It is not certain whether the presence of these three terms in the Gāndhārī passage implies, as in Pali, the larger set of the *bodhipakkiyadhamma* “factors on the side of awakening.”

Bhāi civarapiḍavaṭasa

The third etymology in the Gāndhārī commentary also has a parallel in the Suttaniddesa explanation, preceding the parallel of the second etymology at the very beginning of the Suttaniddesa’s string of *bhāgī* explanations (Nidd I 142–143):

bhāgī vā bhagavā civarapiṇḍapātasenāsanagilānapaccayabhesajja-parikkhārānaṃ ti bhagavā.

“Lord” because the Lord (*bhagavā*) partakes (*bhāgī*) of the requisites robe, begging bowl, bed and seat, and medicine as support for the sick.

Here the Gāndhārī does have the expected ending on *civarapiḍavaṭasa*, supporting its reconstruction in *īṃdriabalabojaṃga⟨ṇa⟩*. Also, as in the case of that preceding item, the Suttaniddesa’s formulation here is more comprehensive, and again it is possible, but not certain, that the Gāndhārī version implies the longer expression of the Pali.

Visuddhimagga Interlude

Four centuries later than the Gāndhārī commentary, Buddhaghosa provided an elaborate exegesis of the word *bhagavā* as part of his explanation of the *iti pi so bhagavā* formula in the Visuddhimagga under the heading *buddhānussati* “recollection of the Buddha” (Vism 173–175). He refers to this Visuddhimagga passage from his Nikāya commentaries (e.g., *so visuddhimagge buddhānussatiniddese vutto yeva* Ps I 10). Similarly to the Suttaniddesa, the passage begins with the statement

bhagavā ti idaṃ panassa guṇavisitṭhasabbasattuttamagarugāravādhi-
vacanaṃ.

“Lord”: This is a designation of high respect for this supreme one among all beings distinguished by his qualities.

followed by a verse with the same message attributed to the *porāṇā* “ancient ones.” Buddhaghosa then lays out a classification of four kinds of names, among which *bhagavā* (like his other examples *tevijjo* “having the three knowledges” and *chalaḥhiñño* “having the four recognitions”) belongs to the kind *nemittika*- “indicative (of an inner quality).” The qualities in question he then illustrates with an etymologizing verse:

bhagī bhajī bhāgi vibhattavā iti
akāsi bhaggaṇ ti garū ti bhāgyavā
bahūhi ñāyehi subhāvitattano
bhavantago so bhagavā ti vuccati

Fortunate one, dispenser, partaker of, the one who has arranged,
he made broken ... full of riches,
the one who has developed himself well in many ways,
the one who goes to the end of existence – that one is called “Lord.”

that he says is to be understood in the way set out in the Suttaniddesa (*niddese vuttanayeneva cettha tesam tesam padānaṃ attho daṭṭhabbo*), presumably referring to the passage cited earlier. The middle of pāda b remains obscure and is possibly corrupt. Of the terms used in the Gāndhārī commentary, two re-occur in this verse in the guise of *bhāgi* (with metrically short final for *bhāgi*) and *akāsi bhaggaṇ*.

Only the latter, however, figures in his own detailed exposition, which takes as its point of departure another verse that he may well have composed himself for the purpose (Vism 173):

bhāgyavā bhaggavā yutto bhagehi ca vibhattavā bhattavā vanta-
gamano bhavesu bhagavā tato.

Full of riches, the one who has broken, equipped with fortunes, the one who has arranged, the one who has dispensed, the one who has given up going among existences – hence “Lord.”

Buddhaghosa discusses *bhāgyavā* and *bhaggavā* in parallel as referring to the worldly and supramundane qualities of the Buddha. For both words, he feels the need to justify their imprecise sound relationship to *bhagavā*. He does so by invoking characteristics of pronunciation (*nirutti*) and composition (*pakkhepa*). For the latter he refers to the Pāṇinian sūtra *pisodarādi* (i.e., *prṣodarādīni yathopadiṣtam* “*prṣodara* etc. as shown”; Aṣṭādhyāyī 6.3.109) that allows irregularities at compound boundaries. In Pāṇini’s example word, *prṣodara* is the actually occurring form instead of **prṣadudara* “having a speckled belly.” The applicability of this rule to *bhagavā* in place of *bhāgyavā* or *bhaggavā* is, however, left unclear, and no actual compound analysis is offered for these two words.

As for the characteristic of pronunciation, Buddhaghosa produces the quotation *varṇāgamo varṇavipariyayo*. This is the first part of a verse current in Indian grammatical literature. The earliest attestation of the verse that I have been able to trace is in Candragomin’s *Cāndravṛtti* (ed. Liebich 5.2.127), and is thus both roughly contemporary with Buddhaghosa and also from a Buddhist milieu:

varṇāgamo varṇavipariyayaś ca
dvau cāparau varṇavikāranāśau
dhātos tadarthātiśayena yoga
etac ca tat pañcavidhaṃ niruktam

Addition of a sound and transposition of a sound,
and two others: alteration or loss of a sound,
the connection of a root with an extension of its meaning.
That is that fivefold etymology.

Like Buddhaghosa, Yaśomitra succinctly refers to this verse by its first pāda in the discussion of the word *prātihārya* in his *Abhidharmakośavyākhyā* (ed. Wogihara p. 658):

nairuktaṃ vidhim āsṛityoktaṃ. varṇāgamo varṇaviparyayaś ceti
yojyaṃ.

This is said using the etymological way. “Addition of a sound and transposition of a sound” is applicable.

The verse also occurs (with variants in pādas c and d) in the Kāśikāvṛtti’s (Sharma, Deshpande and Padhye 1970, ७२५) and the Jainendramahāvṛtti’s (त्रिपाठी 1956, ३९४) discussions of the sūtra *prṣṭodarādīni yathopadiṣṭam*, showing that the connection between the sūtra and the verse was made not only by Buddhaghosa.³

Bhaa avaṇeti

Returning to the Gāndhārī Saṃgītisūtra commentary, the fourth and last etymology for *bhaḥkava* – *bhaa avaṇeti* – is of a different nature than the three that have already been discussed. In contrast to those, it is not to my knowledge attested in any Pali or Sanskrit text, and it is the only one of the four etymologies that clearly interprets *bhaḥkava* as the result of combining two independent words, in this case a finite verb *avaṇeti* (Skt *apanayati*) and its direct object *bhaa* (Skt *bhayam*).⁴

The phonetic details of this etymology make it likely that it originated in a Gāndhārī linguistic environment. The Gāndhārī pronunciation of *bhaḥkava* will have been similar to [b^həjəvə] (the underline under *k* indicating a weakened pronunciation in this scribe’s orthography), and that of *bhaa avaṇeti* [b^həjə ʔəvəne:ḍi], providing a very close phonetic link that did not exist in Pali or Sanskrit.

³ I thank Małgorzata Wielńska-Soltwedel for pointing me to the Jainendramahāvṛtti and discussing the intricacies of these grammatical texts with me.

⁴ See Deeg 2004 for the suggestion that another etymology of this type lay behind the Chinese translation 世尊 for *bhagavān*.

A northwestern origin of this etymology is further supported by a survey of the occurrences of the rare syntagm P *bhayam apaneti*, Skt *bhayam apanayati* outside its etymological application. The only occurrence of it in early Pali literature is in the Milindapañha, a text of likely northwestern origin, where it characterizes a tathāgata (Mil 139):

atthavisati kho panime mahārāja paṭisallāṇaguṇā ye guṇe samanupassantā tathāgatā paṭisallāṇaṃ sevanti. idha mahārāja paṭisallāṇaṃ paṭisallīyamānaṃ rakkhati ... ratim upadahati, bhayam apaneti, vesārajjaṃ karoti ...

There are, oh king, also these twenty-eight qualities of withdrawal, seeing which the tathāgatas practice withdrawal. Here, oh king, withdrawing one guards withdrawal ... gives up pleasure, removes fear, makes confidence ...

Turning to Sanskrit Buddhist literature, Śāntideva's Śikṣāsamuccaya (ed. Bendall p. 200) quotes from the Ratnarāśīsūtra a passage that exhorts a worldling (*prthagjana*) who dwells in a deserted place and is approached by wild beasts to tell himself to produce friendliness, avoid hatred, and dispel fear:

api tu maitrīm utpādayitvā doṣaṃ vivarjayiṣyāmi bhayam apanayisyāmi.

But producing friendliness, I will avoid hate, I will remove fear.

Śāntideva also employs the expression in one of the concluding verses of his Bodhicaryāvatāra (ed. Минаевъ 10.13):

āyātāyāta śīghraṃ bhayam apanayata bhrātaro jīvitāḥ smaḥ
saṃprāpto 'smākam eṣa jvaladabhayakaraḥ ko 'pi cīrikumāraḥ
sarvaṃ yasyānubhāvād vyasanam apagataṃ prītivegāḥ pravṛttāḥ
jātaṃ saṃbodhicittaṃ sakalajanaparitrāṇamātā dayā ca

Come, come! Quickly remove fear, brothers. We are alive.

A certain prince in a robe has reached us who creates bright fearlessness,

from whose authority all misfortune has gone away, the forces of happiness have come into being,

the thought of awakening has been born, and also compassion, the mother of protection for all people.

And lastly, in the *Suvarṇavarṇāvadāna* (ed. Rajapatirana 1974, 55) *bhayam apanayāmi* occurs as a variant reading for *apanāmayāmi* in an eleventh-century palm-leaf manuscript from Narthang monastery that was photographed by Rāhula Sāṅkrṭyāyana:

adya tavedam maraṇabhayaṃ sām̐sārikaṅ ca bhayam apanayāmi.

Now I remove your fear of death and your fear of transmigration.

Taking a first-century-CE Gāndhārī commentary as starting point, we have thus been able to trace its etymologies of *bhaḥkava* back into the earliest accessible layer of Buddhist exegesis, forward into medieval Sanskrit and Pali literature, and sideways into the Indian grammatical tradition and the ever-mysterious *Milindapañha*, revealing the central position that the rediscovered Gāndhārī Buddhist literature occupies. May further discoveries of this literature cast ever more light on early Buddhism and ancient India!

Abbreviations

CKM: see Baums and Glass 2002– .

G = Gāndhārī

Mil = *Milindapañha* (ed. Trenckner 1880)

Nidd = *Suttaniddesa* (ed. de La Vallée Poussin and Thomas 1916–17)

ONWC = Old Northwest Chinese (Coblin 1994)

P = Pali

Ps = *Papañcasūdanī* (ed. Woods and Kosambi 1922)

Skt = Sanskrit

Sv = *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (ed. Stede 1971)

Vism = *Visuddhimagga* (ed. Warren and Kosambi 1950)

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Edited by

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