

2 The different recensions of the *Bhadrakarātrī-sūtra*

The *Bhadrakarātrī-sūtra*, the *Discourse on an auspicious night*, exists in different versions in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan. These all contain the same four canonical verses, or at least parts of them, but show considerable differences in the narrative frame.¹ Even if some of these versions clearly are important representatives of early Buddhist *rakṣā* literature, it is noteworthy that not all recensions show decisive formal features of *rakṣā* texts. Texts arranged in the same line of the table below share the narrative setting and in part the interlocutor. Texts set in bold represent texts containing *rakṣā mantras* and other linguistic characteristics of early Buddhist apotropaic texts.

Table 5: The different versions of the *Bhadrakarātrī-sūtra*.

	Setting	Interlocutor	Pāli	Sanskrit	Chinese	Tibetan
1)	Śrāvastī	—	MN 131	SHT III 816		
2)	Śrāvastī	Ānanda	MN 132		MĀ 167	
3)	Rājagṛha	P./Ch. ¹ Mahākaccāna Skt. Ānanda Ch. ² /Tib. —	MN 133	SI 2044	¹ MĀ 165 ² Taishō XXI 1362	D 313 Q 979 D 617 Q 599 D 974
4)	Śrāvastī	Lomasakaṅgiya	MN 134		MĀ 166 Taishō I 77	

¹ Peter Skilling drew attention to the parallel between the Pāli *suttas*, the Sanskrit manuscripts, and the Tibetan recension of the *Bhadrakarātrī-sūtra* in his article on the *rakṣā* literature of the Śrāvakayāna (1992: 157 n. 5) and in his investigation of the Tibetan *mahāsūtras* (1997a: 81f.). Bhikkhu Anālayo also mentioned the Sanskrit parallels to the four Pāli *Bhaddekaratta-suttas* in his comparative study of the *Majjhima-nikāya*: “[A] few parts of what appears to be a parallel to the *Bhaddekaratta-sutta* have been preserved in a Sanskrit fragment.” He goes on: “The fragment is SHT III 816 (pp. 32–33). [...] SHT III 816V4–5 has preserved parts of the verses, while the rest of the fragment continues with *dhāraṇīs*.” And finally: “Sanskrit fragments in Minayeff 1983: 242–243 [KH: SI 2044] have also preserved a discourse on the verses on an auspicious night, with Ānanda as the main protagonist” (Anālayo 2011: 755, 755 n. 3, and 755f. n. 4).

The canonical Pāli and Chinese discourses in the *Majjhima-nikāya* and *Madhyama-āgama*, as well as the independent Chinese translation Taishō I 77, which all build upon the interpretation of the verses, do not contain any protective devices, let alone *mantras*. This does, however, not mean that they were never used in protective rituals. What makes a text apotropaic is not its linguistic form but its function and the context in which it was employed. There are four consecutive Pāli *suttas* in the *Vibhaṅga-vagga*, the 14th chapter of the *Majjhima-nikāya* in the *Sutta-piṭaka* with titles giving, if applicable, the name of the interlocutor and ending with the Pāli equivalent *bhaddekaratta-sutta*. This exceptional position of the *Bhaddekaratta-suttas* points to the possibility that they could have been used in protective rituals, thereby developing four middle Indian versions. The titles of the four *suttas* are:

- 1) MN 131 *Bhaddekaratta-sutta*
- 2) MN 132 *Ānandabhaddekaratta-sutta*
- 3) MN 133 *Mahākaccānabhaddekaratta-sutta*
- 4) MN 134 *Lomasakaṅḍiyabhaddekaratta-sutta*

Three of the Pāli *suttas* have counterparts in the Chinese *Madhyama-āgama*. MN 131 alone does not have a Chinese parallel and was possibly a later addition to the *Vibhaṅga-vagga*.² Moreover, there is another, independent Chinese translation of MN 134, Taishō I 77. The Chinese titles, however, significantly differ from the Pāli versions:³

- 1) —
- 2) MĀ 167 阿難說經 (*Discourse spoken by Ānanda*)

² This assumption is supported by the fact that the *Vibhaṅga-vagga* in which the *Bhaddekaratta-suttas* are included has twelve discourses, while all other chapters of the *Majjhima-nikāya* consist of only ten *suttas*. For a more extensive remark on the formation of the *Vibhaṅga-vagga*, see Anālayo 2011: 765f. There he explains this addition with a transmission mistake within the Pāli tradition. He comments: “On this hypothesis, perhaps the *Bhaddekaratta-sutta* (MN 131) was added to the *Vibhaṅga-vagga* after this chapter had already been formed in accordance with the ten discourses per chapter pattern, thereby causing an increase of the number of discourses. The Sanskrit fragments paralleling the *Bhaddekaratta-sutta* do not necessarily contradict this hypothesis, as after the stanzas on an auspicious night the Sanskrit version continues with *dhāraṇīs*, so that the Sanskrit discourse seems to stem from a different line of development.”

³ The Chinese titles and their translations are borrowed from Anālayo 2011: 755–763.

- 3) MĀ 165 溫泉林天經 (*Discourse on a deva at the Hot-spring Grove*)⁴
- 4) MĀ 166 釋中禪室尊經 (*Discourse on a venerable one in a meditation-hut among the Sakyas*)
Taishō I 77 佛說尊上經 (*Discourse spoken by the Buddha to a venerable elder*)

The two Sanskrit manuscripts SHT III 816 and SI 2044, the Chinese translation Taishō XXI 1362, and the various Tibetan recensions included in different Kangyurs were expanded by *mantras* and other protective elements and can, therefore, be ascribed to *rakṣā* literature. All of these versions were either supplied with an appendix containing *rakṣā* elements and ritual instructions on the use of the protective formulas, which were added to the core passage of the *sūtra*, or – in the case of SI 2044 – *rakṣā* passages were inserted into the traditional text at several places. The titles are as follows:

- 1) SHT III 816 *bhadrakarātrīya*
- 2) —
- 3) SI 2044 *bhadrakarātrīya sūtra*
Taishō XXI 1362 佛說善夜經 (*Discourse spoken by the Buddha on [the topic of] an auspicious night*)
D 313 'Phags pa mtshan mo bzang po zhes bya ba'i mdo (*Discourse on an auspicious night*)
- 4) —

The Pāli texts⁵

The four consecutive Pāli discourses (MN 131–134), all ending in *–bhaddekarattasutta*, share the same set of four verses, but differ in terms of narrative setting and interlocutor. The main theme of the discourses are the characteristics of the past, present, and future, and already the verses, which represent the summary (P. *uddesa*) of the text, advise to let go of the past and future, but instead one should see with insight presently arisen phenomena and practice diligence today, since death may

⁴ For an extensive study and translation of this text, see Anālayo 2012: 421–448 (originally published in 2008).

⁵ The Pāli texts and their translations can be found in the appendix of the present work.

come at any time. Continuous practice like that is considered as spending an auspicious night.⁶ After the verses, all *suttas* devolve upon the interpretation or commentary (P. *vibhaṅga*) of the verses.⁷

The verses read as follows:

*Atītaṃ nānvāgameyya, nappaṭikaṅkhe anāgataṃ,
Yad atītaṃ pahīnaṃ taṃ, appattañ ca anāgataṃ.*

*Paccuppannañ ca yo dhammaṃ tattha tattha vipassati,
Asaṃhīraṃ asaṅkappaṃ taṃ vidvā manubrūhaye.*

*Ajj' eva kiccaṃ ātappaṃ ko jaññā maraṇaṃ suve?
Na hi no saṅgamaṃ tena mahāsenena maccunā.*

*Evaṃ vihāriṃ ātāpiṃ ahorattam atanditaṃ,
Taṃ ve bhaddekarotto ti santo ācikkhate munīti.*

(MN 131 at MN III 187.21–28)

Don't run back to the past, don't hope for the future.
What's past is left behind; the future has not arrived;

and phenomena in the present are clearly seen in every case.
Knowing this, foster it – unfaltering, unshakable.

Today's the day to keenly work – who knows, tomorrow may bring death!
For there is no bargain to be struck with Death and his mighty hordes.

The peaceful sage explained it's those who keenly meditate like this,
tireless all night and day, who truly have that one fine night.

(tr. Sujato 2018⁸)

⁶ It is, however, important to keep in mind that the term *bhaddekaratta* “one auspicious night” here refers not only to the timespan of one night, but to a period of one night and one day. Cf. Horner (1959: xxvi–xxvii): “But the *Bhaddekaratta Suttas* do not appear to envisage withdrawal from thoughts of the past, future and present for so little as one night. On the contrary, the verses that form the *mātikā* say that the person to be called *bhaddekaratta* is he who abides ardently and unweariedly day and night, that is surely, for some consecutive time lasting longer than ‘one night.’” and Thanissaro (2002: 346 n. 1): “The Pali literally says, ‘an auspicious night,’ but this should be interpreted in light of the custom – common in cultures that follow the lunar calendar – of calling a 24-hour period of day-and-night a ‘night.’”

⁷ For an extensive comparative study of the four Pāli *suttas*, see Anālayo 2011: 755–767.

⁸ <https://suttacentral.net/mn131/en/sujato> (last retrieved on 20.11.2020).

The first of the four *suttas*, the *Bhaddekaratta-sutta* (MN 131), which is situated at the Jetavana near Śrāvastī, is pronounced by the Buddha himself, who teaches the summary (P. *uddesa*) and exposition (P. *vibhaṅga*) of the Discourse on an Auspicious Night. He first recites the verses, which he in turn explains. In the second *sutta*, the *Ānandabhaddekaratta-sutta* (MN 132), also at the Jetavana near Śrāvastī, Ānanda delivers the verses and their explanation to the assembly of the monks. He later relates this story to the Buddha, who gives his approval. The third discourse, the *Mahākaccānabhaddekaratta-sutta* (MN 133) is situated at the Tapodārāma near Rājagṛha. After his conversation with a god, who also does not know the summary and exposition of the Discourse on an Auspicious Night, the monk Samiddhi approaches the Buddha and requests this teaching. Thereupon the Buddha recites the verses, which were then explained by the monk Mahākaccāna. In the fourth text, the *Lomasakaṅgiyabhaddekaratta-sutta* (MN 134), the Buddha is dwelling at Śrāvastī, while the introduction takes place in the Nigrodhārāma in Kapilavastu. There a god called Candana asks the monk Lomasakaṅgiya whether he knows the summary and exposition of the Discourse on an Auspicious Night, and pronounces the verses that he once heard from the Buddha in the Heaven of the Thirty-three. The next day the monk approaches the Buddha, who then teaches the summary and exposition of the Discourse on an Auspicious Night.

The structure of the four Pāli *suttas* can be summarized as follows:

MN 131

1. Introduction (*nidāna*): Śrāvastī
2. The Buddha teaches the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on auspicious night*
 - 2.1. The verses
 - 2.2. Exposition of the verses
 - 2.3. Repetition of the verses
3. Conclusion

MN 132

1. Introduction (*nidāna*): Śrāvastī
2. Ānanda teaches the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on auspicious night*
 - 2.1. The verses
 - 2.2. Exposition of the verses

3. The Buddha repeats the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on auspicious night*
 - 3.1. The verses
 - 3.2. Exposition of the verses
4. Conclusion

MN 133

1. Introduction (*nidāna*): Rājagṛha
2. Introductory narration: a god appears before the monk Samiddhi and tells him to learn the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on an auspicious night*
3. Samiddhi approaches the Buddha and requests the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on an auspicious night*
4. The Buddha teaches the verses of the *Discourse on an auspicious night*
5. The Venerable Mahākaccāna teaches the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on an auspicious night*
 - 5.1. The verses
 - 5.2. Exposition of the verses
6. Conclusion

MN 134

1. Introduction (*nidāna*): Śrāvastī
2. Introductory narration (Kapilavastu): the god Candana appears before the Venerable Lomasakaṅgiya and teaches him the verses, that he had once heard from the Buddha in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three and tells him to learn the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on an auspicious night*
3. Lomasakaṅgiya approaches the Buddha and requests the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on an auspicious night*
4. The Buddha teaches the summary and exposition of the *Discourse on auspicious night*
 - 4.1. The verses
 - 4.2. Exposition of the verses
5. Conclusion

The title

The title of the Pāli discourse, *Bhaddekaratta*, is ambiguous and led scholars to interpret it in two different ways. Whereas the first member of the Karmadhāraya compound *bhaddeka* (cf. PTSD 496: *bhadda/bhaddaka* “good, auspicious, fortunate”) is clear, the second part of the compound *ratta* caused difficulties. The Pāli word *ratta* can either be derived from Sanskrit *rātri* “night” or *rakta* “attachment”,⁹ which results in two possible translations: “auspicious night” and “fortunate attachment”.¹⁰

On the basis of the available Sanskrit evidence we are now able to rule out the latter one. Both manuscripts do not have a colophon, yet the title occurs several times in the main text. Thus, the title appears twice in the SHT manuscript as *bhadragarātrīya* (r3) and *bhadragarā(t)r(i)* (fr. 2v2).



Figure 1: The title in SHT III 816.

The title also features in the fourth verse, which is preserved in the SI manuscript as *(*bha)drakarātrīyaḥ* (3v3). Moreover, the title is given in the main text with *bhadrakarātrīya* (4v4) and the conclusion refers to the whole discourse as *bhadrakarātrīyasya sūtrasya* (4v1).



Figure 2: The title in SI 2044.

Both Sanskrit manuscripts, as well as the Indic title at the beginning of the Tibetan translation, read *bhadrakarātrī* and therefore confirm the fact that the Pāli word *ratta* represents Sanskrit *rātra* or *rātri*. Only the change of the ‘e’ in *bhaddeka* to ‘a’ in *bhadraka* remained a puzzle. In a note to his translation of the Pāli discourse,

⁹ Cf. PTSD 562.

¹⁰ Translated elsewhere as “Ideal lover of solitude” (Ñāṇananda 1973) and “Glücksäligeinsam” (Neumann 1922: 427).

Bodhi suggests that this change can be seen as an attempt to render a difficult reading into a more comprehensible one. He notes that:

ratta and *ratti* could be taken to represent respectively either Skt *rātra* and *rātri* (= night) or Skt *rakta* and *rakti* (= attachment). [...] The Central Asian Skt version, the Skt title at the head of the Tibetan version, and the Tibetan translation itself all use *bhadrakarātri*. This confirms the identification of *ratta* with ‘night’; the change from *-e-* to *-a-* can be understood as an attempt to convert a difficult reading into a more familiar one.¹¹

Another, highly plausible, explanation of the change from ‘*e*’ to ‘*a*’ is a Sanskritization of the Pāli word *bhaddeka* or *bhadda-eka* “one auspicious night”, and Pāli *bhadda-eka-ratta* thereby becomes Sanskrit *bhadraka-rātrī*. Regarding all points, we can translate the title *Bhaddekaratta-sutta* or *Bhadrakarātrī-sūtra* as the *Discourse on an auspicious night*.

¹¹ Ñāṇamoli, Bodhi 2001: 1342 n. 1210.