

*The “Virtually Unknown” Benedictive Middle
in Classical Sanskrit: Two Occurrences
in the Buddhist Abhisamayālaṅkāra*

The benedictive or precative is one of the ten *lakāras* or verb tenses/modes of Pāṇini’s system of Sanskrit grammar, where it is termed *āśīr-liṅ*. Yet it is extremely rare in classical Sanskrit in its active, or *parasmaipada* form, and is thought to be nonexistent there in its middle, or *ātmanepada* form. W. D. Whitney in his still standard *Sanskrit Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1879, 2nd ed. 1889) states: “The precative active is a form of very rare occurrence in the classical language. . . . The precative middle is virtually unknown in the whole later literature, not a single occurrence of it having been brought to light.” (paragraph 925).

The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, a Buddhist work attributed to Maitreya (or Maitreyanātha), though written down by Aśaṅga, circa fourth century C.E., was first edited and published in 1929 by Th. Stcherbatsky and E. Obermiller, in the Bibliotheca Buddhica series, Leningrad. Its opening two verses include two occurrences of the benedictive middle. Here are these two verses, with the benedictive middle verbs in italics.

sarvākārajñatā-mārgaḥ śāsitrā yo ’tra deśitaḥ |
dhīmanto *vikṣiṣīraṃs* tam anālīḍhaṃ parair iti || 1 ||
smṛtau cādhāya sūtrārthaṃ dharma-caryāṃ daśātmikām |
sukhena *pratipatsīran* ity ārambha-prayojanam || 2 ||

Because of the rarity of the benedictive, it will be useful to review its formation for the two examples cited. After resolving *sandhi*, these stand as *vikṣiṣīran* and *pratipatsīran*. The conjugational ending, *-īran*, is recognizable as that of the optative or

potential (*vidhi-liṅ*) middle (*ātmanepada*) third person (according to Western usage; but in Sanskrit, *prathama-puruṣa*, “first person”) plural. However, the stems (*aṅgas*) are wrong for optatives. Leaving off the prefixes (*upasargas*), *vi-* and *prati-*, we have the stems *īkṣiṣ* (from the root *īkṣ*, “see”) and *pats* (from the root *pad*, “go”) respectively. The optative, being in the so-called present system (but called in Sanskrit grammars *sārvadhātuka*), builds its stems according to the ten conjugation classes (*gaṇas*) of roots. So from the root *īkṣ*, being a class one (or *bhū gaṇa*) root, we would get the stem *īkṣa*; and from the root *pad*, being a class four (or *div gaṇa*) root, we would get the stem *padya*. The only other *lakāra* (tense/mode) taking the distinctive optative ending *-īran* is the benedictive, which is also thought of as the optative of the aorist system. In the aorist system the stem is made directly from the root, without regard to the conjugation class or *gaṇa*, and has seven varieties of formation. Of these the “simple aorist” stems are used for the benedictive active (*parasmaipada*), and the “sibilant aorist” stems are used for the benedictive middle (*ātmanepada*). Since *-īran* is a middle ending, we are looking for sibilant aorist stems, formed by adding “s” to the root, with or without interposed “i” according to whether the root is classified in Pāṇinian grammar as *seṭ*, “with i,” or *aniṭ*, “without i.” So from the root *īkṣ*, being a *seṭ* root which interposes “i,” we would get the stem *īkṣiṣ* (change of “s” to “ṣ” after “i” due to *sandhi*); and from the root *pad*, being an *aniṭ* root which does not interpose “i,” we would get the stem *pats* (change of “d” to “t” before “s” due to *sandhi*). These are exactly the stems we have. As to why we have middle instead of active endings, again according to the *Pāṇinīya Dhātupāṭha*, both these roots should take only the middle (*ātmanepada*) endings. Thus we have in *vīkṣiṣīran* and *pratipatsīran* two perfectly formed benedictive middle verbs, following all the rules of the Pāṇinian system of grammar.

There is little question that these are the correct readings. All five later editions of/including the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* I consulted agree with the first edition for these two verbs (I was unable to see the edition by K. Kajiyoshi in *Genshi Hannya-kyo no Kenkyū*, 1944, 274-320, listed in Edward Conze’s *Buddhist*

Scriptures: A Bibliography). None cite any significant variant readings for them. The variant readings cited from the three late paper manuscripts used by Stcherbatsky/Obermiller are apparently the result of scribal error, e.g., *pratīpatmīran*. The five later editions of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* are included in editions of its commentaries: two editions of Haribhadra’s *Abhisamayālaṅkāraḷoka*, by Giuseppe Tucci (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1932), and by Unrai Wogihara (Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 1932-1935), and also a composite edition of these two, by P. L. Vaidya (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), a reconstructed edition of Haribhadra’s *Sphuṭārthā*, by Rāmaśaṅkara Tripāthī (Sāranāthaḷ, Vārāṇasī: Kendriya-Tibbatī-Ucca-Śikṣā-Saṁsthānam, 1977), and an edition of the first *abhisamaya* of Ārya Vimuktisena’s *Abhisamayālaṅkāra-vṛtti*, by Corrado Pensa (Roma: Is.M.E.O., 1967). Of these, Tucci cites from a paper manuscript one variant reading, *vīkṣasīramstaṁ*, while Wogihara and Pensa cite no variants for these verbs.

We have no direct evidence as to how the Indian commentators and the Tibetan translators understood these verbs. Haribhadra in his *Abhisamayālaṅkāraḷoka* and in his *Sphuṭārthā*, Ārya Vimuktisena in his *Abhisamayālaṅkāra-vṛtti* (editions just cited), and Ratnākaraśānti in his *Sāratamā* (ed. Padmanabh S. Jaini, Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1979), do not gloss these verbs. The Tibetan translators, of course, were hampered by the fact that no corresponding verb form exists in Tibetan, so that their translations, *mthong ’gyur* (*phyir*) for *vīkṣīṣīran*, and *rtogs pa* for *pratīpatsīran*, help us little.

The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* has been translated into English by Edward Conze (Roma: Is.M.E.O., 1954). It is not clear to me how he understood these two verbs, as his translation of *vīkṣīṣīran*, “to enable [the wise] to behold,” differs somewhat from his vocabulary entry, “have been able to behold,” and his translation of *pratīpatsīran*, “will be able to make progress,” is given a little differently in his *Materials for a Dictionary of the Prajñāpāramitā Literature* (Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1967), “are able to make progress.” As benedictives, they could be translated “may [they] behold,” and “may [they] progress,” respectively. In any case, this great scholar must be exempted

from any criticism in this regard, as he had far weightier problems to deal with in translating this exceedingly difficult text, so could not be expected to lose time on the opening verses which contain no doctrine. He in this regard only follows his Indian predecessors. Conze’s translation of these two verses is as follows:

1-2. The purpose of my undertaking (in composing the present treatise) is to enable the wise to behold the way to the knowledge of all modes, demonstrated here (in the Prajñāpāramitā) by the Teacher, though others cannot experience it. And when they have in their memory arranged the sense of the Sūtra, they will be able to make quick progress in the tenfold practice of the Dharma.

Employing the benedictive meaning (and also, by the way, accounting more adequately for the two occurrences of *iti*), one might translate:

1. May the wise behold the path to the knowledge of all modes, shown by the Teacher here (in the Prajñāpāramitā), unperceived by others!
2. And having placed in memory the sense of the Sūtra, may they easily progress in the tenfold practice of the Dharma! This is the purpose of my undertaking (this book).

The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, which is written in standard Sanskrit, was not utilized by Franklin Edgerton for his *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, and I find no mention in Edgerton’s work of the benedictive. I have not seen anywhere in the secondary literature, e.g., E. Obermiller’s *Analysis of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (London: Luzac & Co., 1933, 1936, 1943), J. W. de Jong’s review of Conze’s translation of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (*Muséon*, 68, 1955, 394-397), etc., mention of benedictive middle verbs in this text. That these have apparently not been recognized as such is due, perhaps, to two reasons. First is the supposed nonexistence of such forms in classical Sanskrit. It is possible to go through university Sanskrit

programs without ever encountering the benedictive. Such an excellent primer as the *Devavāṇīpraveśikā: An Introduction to the Sanskrit Language*, by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland (Berkeley: University of California, 1980, 2nd ed. 1987), now widely used, has found no need to mention it (though it otherwise retains traditional grammatical classifications such as the ten *gaṇas*, unlike Edward Perry’s *Sanskrit Primer* following Whitney’s *Sanskrit Grammar*). Readings in classical Sanskrit texts typically follow this in the programs, so that unless one specifically takes up Pāṇinian grammar (or Vedic texts, where a few benedictives do occur), one is quite unlikely to encounter the benedictive. This is particularly true for students in Buddhist Studies programs. Contrary to this, Sanskrit study in India now and for ages past, almost certainly including the time the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* was written, has meant study of the traditional classifications such as the ten *lakāras*; and many Indian Buddhist writers such as Maitreya/Asaṅga show full familiarity with classical Sanskrit grammar.

The second reason for not recognizing these benedictive middle verbs, occurring in a Buddhist text, is perhaps the pervasiveness of the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit concept in modern scholarship, this despite the fact that the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* is not written in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. When Franklin Edgerton’s *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* appeared in 1953, John Brough pointed out in a review article, “The Language of the Buddhist Sanskrit Texts” (BSOAS 16, 1954, 351-75), that Edgerton’s approach may influence editors to see hybrid forms where they do not exist, particularly in the late Nepalese paper manuscripts where scribal errors abound. Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit grammar, after all, according to Edgerton’s own classification (*Grammar*, p. xxv) really pertains to only a minority of the Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Since then J. W. de Jong has more than once called attention to this very problem in his always valuable reviews (e.g., of Isshi Yamada’s edition of the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka*, IJ 13, 1972, pp. 301-313, and of Ratna Handurukande’s edition of the *Mañicūḍāvadāna*, IJ 13, 1971, pp. 140-143). The prevalence of Edgerton’s work has resulted in a widespread tendency to see all Buddhist Sanskrit

texts as hybrid, so that any unusual form is attributed to Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, thereby obviating the need to seek any other explanation.

Another example of this may prove useful. Gadjin Nagao, to whom we are indebted for much pioneering work on texts of the Maitreya/Asaṅga school, cites in his article, “Tranquil Flow of Mind: An Interpretation of *Upekṣā*” (*Indianisme et Bouddhisme: Mélanges offerts à Mgr Étienne Lamotte*, Louvain: 1980, pp. 245-58), a definition of *upekṣā* given by Sthiramati in the *Triṃśikāvijñapti-bhāṣya* as “*praśaṭhatā*.” Nagao proceeds to show that *praśaṭhatā*, whose noun-stem *praśaṭha* is first known to occur in Maitreya’s *Madhyāntavibhāga* (4.5, 5.28), means “tranquil flow” of the mind. He notes that “this word is accompanied by the phrases ‘without volitional effort’ (*anabhisamskāreṇa*) and ‘without special exertion’ (*aprayatnena*),” and states that “among these various terms *praśaṭhatā* is a difficult and curious word.” (p. 251). He then gives the views of several scholars on the meaning of this term, bringing out the problem that words from the root *śaṭh* normally have meanings like “very false or wicked,” as indeed is the case with the word *śaṭhya*, “guile, deceit,” also occurring in these texts, which are obviously inapplicable here. However, the Tibetan and Chinese translations point to the applicable meaning, “tranquil flow” of mind. This has led scholars to suggest etymological theories such as “that *praśaṭha* may be a Prakrit form of Sanskrit *praśratha* ‘relâchement’ (or relaxation),” or to suggest “a relationship between *praśaṭha* and *praśānta* on the basis of its Tibetan equivalents.” (p. 252). This latter scholar later left it as “meaning uncertain,” and Nagao similarly sums up that “its etymology in Sanskrit seems to be problematic,” before moving on to what meaning can be derived from the Tibetan and Chinese translations. Despite the amount of effort expended on this question, it seems that none of these scholars bothered to check the *Pāṇinīya Dhātupāṭha*. This lists and gives meanings for four roots *śaṭh* (numbered X.28, I.363, X.152, X.310, in the convenient and accurate edition by Sumitra M. Katre, included in his *Aṣṭādhyāyī of Pāṇini*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987). These include the well-attested one meaning “deceive, etc.” (“*kaitave ca*” I.363,

p. 1176), another having a related meaning “speak ill of” (“*samyag avabhāṣaṇe*” X.310, p. 1199), while a third, meaning “flatter” (“*ślāghāyām*” X.152, p. 1198), is not relevant to our question. The remaining one (X.28, p. 1196) has two meanings, given in a dual compound which is by convention declined in the seventh case: *asaṃskāra-gatyoh*. The meaning *asaṃskāra*, “unconstructed,” or in reference to the mind, “without conception,” is quite in line with what we are looking for, and indeed is closely related to the gloss of Sthiramati, *anabhisamskāra*. The fact that the *Pāṇinīya Dhātupāṭha* was not consulted can only be attributed to a widespread tendency to view unusual terms in Sanskrit Buddhist texts as anomalies due to Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, rather than to systematically search out the answers in traditional grammatical sources.

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