

The *Prasannakathā*:
A Contribution to Contemporary Sanskrit Poetry

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Numerous original Sanskrit works have been written during the past century.¹ Biographical and hagiographical poems have been particularly popular, describing the lives of figures as diverse as Arjuna, Bhīṣma, Yaśodharā,² Jesus Christ, Swami Vivekānanda and Vladimir Lenin.³ The *Prasannakathā* (story of Prasanna) is a small contribution to this large body of literature. It is a fictional poem narrated within the frameworks of Śrāvakayāna Buddhism and its vocabulary, phrases and ideas are based upon precedents in Sanskrit and Pāli literature. Attempts have been made to incorporate a number of stylistic devices, including alliteration (e.g. 3b–c, 21a–c), assonance (e.g. 3a, 4a), rhyme (e.g. 7, 17a), repetition (e.g. 16b and 16d, 19d and 21d) and simile (9, 16). The metre of verses 1 to 13 and 18 to 23 is the Pathyā form of Śloka, while the metre of verses 14 to 17 is Upajāti.

1. For an overview of Sanskrit literature composed after India's independence in 1947, see Manibhai K. Prajapati, ed., *Post-Independence Sanskrit Literature: A Critical Survey (Professor Dr. A. M. Prajapati Felicitation Volume)* (Patan: Prof. Dr A. M. Prajapati Sanman-nidhi, 2005).

2. One of the names ascribed to the wife of the bodhisattva who became Gautama Buddha.

3. Rabindra K. Panda, *Essays on Modern Sanskrit Poetry* (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2009), 27–42, 92–96.

Sanskrit text of the Prasannakathā⁴

1. *prasanno nāma sambhūtaḥ śīlavān buddhimān khalu
gr̥hī dhanī mahābāhur vārāṇasyām uvāsa saḥ.*
2. *ekaṃ samayam āgacchan nadīm gaṅgām pipāsitaḥ
tatraiva bhikṣusaṅghaṃ so 'paśyad dūre gatepsitaḥ.*
3. *saṅghe dūre 'tha bhūte 'pi prasannaḥ praśāsāka ca
buddhastavaṃ śubhaṃ śrotum bhāṣyamānaṃ priyaṃkaram.*
4. *bhagavan paramaṃ satyaṃ nirvāṇam iha gītavan
sukhāśrupūrṇanetro 'haṃ tvām namāmi punaḥ punaḥ.*
5. *duḥkhaṃ samudayaṃ caiva nirodhaṃ mārgam eva ca
tvam prajajñātha vispaṣṭaṃ tvām namāmi punaḥ punaḥ.*
6. *āryāṣṭāṅgo hi mārgo 'yaṃ mokṣagāmī viniścitam
tvayaiva darśito buddha tvām namāmi punaḥ punaḥ.*
7. *ity evaṃ bhāṣite vidvān bhikṣur anyataro mahān
gambhīram abravīd vākyaṃ karuṇāmṛdughoṣavān.*
8. *yat sarvaṃ jātīdharmaiva mṛtyudharmāpi tat khalu
anityaṃ bhikṣavaḥ satyaṃ śuṣkeva dahane samit.*
9. *maranaṃ prāṇavantaṃ ca śīghraṃ nirnāśayiṣyati
bhītabālamṛgam siṃho 'nupradhāvan mahān iva.*
10. *yady apīcchati rāgena sundaraṃ yad atipriyam
tathāpy evam asaṃdigdhaṃ coritaṃ mārītaṃ ca tat.*
11. *āryaśrāvaka evaṃ tat punaḥ smartuṃ kilārhati
tyajyate tena śoko hi vardhate sukham eva ca.*
12. *yadā kilānupādāno bhikṣur bhavati bhikṣavaḥ
tadāvicalaśāntiś ca mokṣaś ceha mahān mahān.*
13. *iti vākyaṃ idaṃ śrutvā prasannena prabhāṣitam
gacchāmi śaraṇaṃ buddhaṃ śaraṇaṃ dharmam eva ca.*
14. *ity evam uktvā sukhibhikṣusaṅgham apakramantaṃ mṛdu caiva dr̥ṣṭvā
tūṣṇīm śamī saṃsthīta eva gaṅgātīre prasanno jalam āluloke.*
15. *anādradeham talapādam eva mandaṃ pratisrotam anukramantaṃ
āvartanīśrotasi śīghra eva dadarśa kīṭaṃ khalu gītavāṃś ca.*

4. I would like to thank McComas Taylor for his helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this poem.

16. *yathā krmir gargarasamnikarṣabhayāpayāto laghubhārahetoh
tathaiva bhikṣuḥ khalu janmamrtyubhayāpayāto laghukāmahetoh.*
17. *tasmād agārād anagārikām tām āḥ pravrajāmīha samāptamokṣām
dhīraṃ pratisrotam anukramāmi gacchāmi saṅghaṃ śaraṇaṃ tathā ca.*
18. *bhāṣitvaivaṃ sa utthāya bhikṣūn samanugamya ca
tān vittvā praṇato bhikṣuṃ kṛtadharmakathaṃ kavim.*
19. *tadā ca bhikṣuṇānena śīlasaṅghasamāvṛtaḥ
upasampādito hr̥ṣto mahāhāsaḥ samabravīt.*
20. *gr̥hī dhanī ca bhūto hya idānīm agr̥ho 'dhanah
keśy akeśo 'bhavaṃ muṇḍo duḥkhy aduḥkho 'bhavaṃ tathā.*
21. *iti tasya vacaḥ śrutvā śāntasundarasusvaraḥ
suvarṇavarṇabhikṣuḥ sa mandahāsaḥ samabravīt.*
22. *tvam sukhy eva na nirduḥkho 'nātmānityaṃ sukhaṃ khalu
duḥkhasamvartamānaṃ ca buddhena khyātam īdr̥śam.*
23. *saṅghe niṣīda nidhyāya viharaivāpramattavān
prasanna bhava nirduḥkha idānīm gaccha gaccha bhoḥ.*

Translation of the Prasannakathā

1. Once there was a virtuous, intelligent, wealthy [and] strong-armed householder named Prasanna (Tranquil). He lived in Vārāṇasī.
2. One time, approaching the river Gaṅgā thirsty, he saw a community of monks right there in the distance [and] his was desire was gone.
3. And then, although the community was at a distance, Prasanna was able to hear a beautiful [and] delightful hymn to the Buddha being spoken:
4. ‘O blessed one who proclaimed the highest truth to be nirvāṇa in this world, I whose eyes are filled with tears of joy pay homage to you again and again.
5. ‘You understood clearly suffering and its origin, its cessation and the path. I pay homage to you again and again.
6. ‘For this noble eightfold path certainly leading to liberation was shown by you, O Buddha. I pay homage to you again and again.’
7. When it had thus been spoken, a certain wise [and] eminent monk, possessing a gentle voice with compassion, gave a profound speech:

8. 'Everything which is subject to birth⁵ is also subject to death. Monks, it is truly impermanent, like dry wood in fire.
9. 'And death will quickly destroy the living, like a mighty lion pursuing a terrified young deer.
10. 'Even if one passionately desires what is beautiful [and] very dear, even so, that is thus undoubtedly stolen and killed.
11. 'A noble disciple therefore ought to repeatedly remember thus. For thereby sorrow is abandoned and happiness increases.
12. 'Monks, when a monk is without clinging, he has unshakable peace and very great liberation in this life.'
13. After hearing this speech, Prasanna announced: 'I go to the Buddha as a refuge and to the dharma as a refuge.'
14. And having said thus, watching the community of happy monks slowly leaving, silently sitting on the bank of the Gaṅgā, tranquil, Prasanna looked at the water.
15. In a very swift current leading towards a whirlpool, he saw an insect slowly advancing against the stream, whose body was not wet [and] whose feet were on the surface, and he said:
16. 'As [this] insect has escaped from the danger of contact with the whirlpool on account of his light weight, just so [that] monk has escaped from the danger of birth and death on account of his light passions.
17. 'Ah! therefore today I will go forth from the house to that houseless life by which liberation is obtained. Resolutely I will advance against the stream and I also go to the saṅgha as a refuge.'
18. Having said thus, he stood up, pursued the monks, found them and bowed to the wise monk who had made the dharma talk.
19. And then, surrounded by the community with virtuous conduct, he was ordained by this monk. Thrilled [and] laughing loudly, he said:
20. 'Yesterday [I] was a householder and a wealthy man; now [I] am without a house [and] without wealth. [Formerly] a man with hair, I have become one without hair, bald. Also, [formerly] a man with suffering, I have become free from suffering.'

5. Not to be confused with jātidharma, the 'dharma of castes', jātidharman is the standard Śrāvakayāna Buddhist term used to refer to that which is 'subject to birth'.

21. Having heard his speech, with a gentle and very beautiful voice, softly smiling, that monk with a golden complexion said:
22. 'You are actually happy, not free from suffering. Happiness is not-self and impermanent. And such a thing, the Buddha declared, leads to suffering.
23. 'Sit down amongst the community, meditate [and] remain vigilant. Prasanna, become free from suffering. Now go, friend, go.'