

The Divine Messengers

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The present article offers a comparative study of the notion of the divine messengers (*devadūta*), based on a few selected instances from the Pāli *Nikāyas* and their counterparts in the Chinese *Āgamas*.

The divine messengers are the theme of the *Devadūta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*,¹ the second of the four Pāli *Nikāyas*. These four Pāli *Nikāyas* have their counterparts in the four Chinese *Āgamas*, discourse collections that, just like the Pāli *Nikāyas*, are the final product of a prolonged oral transmission.

While the Pāli discourses were transmitted from India to Ceylon, where they were eventually written down during the later part of the first century before our era, the discourses now found in the Chinese *Āgamas* were transmitted from India to China, partly by monks who had memorized them, partly in the form of manuscripts, and were then translated into Chinese during the fourth to fifth century of our era. In the case of the *Devadūta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, versions of the same discourse can be found in the Chinese *Madhyama-āgama* and in the Chinese *Ekottarika-āgama*.²

¹ MN 130 at MN III 178-187.

² The parallels are MĀ 64 at T I 503a-506a and EĀ 32.4 at T II 674b-676b (T stands for the Taishō edition). In addition to these two *Āgama* parallels, other parallels preserved in Chinese translation are T 42 at T

In the *Devadūta-sutta* and its parallels, the divine messengers occur in the context of an account of the fate that awaits an evil-doer after death. According to their descriptions, someone who has performed evil will, on arrival in hell, be brought to the presence of King Yama, who questions the culprit if he never saw the five divine messengers. When the culprit denies, King Yama draws his attention to the fact that, though he had actually seen the divine messengers, he did not realize their significance.

The five divine messengers to whom King Yama draws the culprit's attention are a baby lying in its excrement, an old person, a sick person, a robber caught and punished for his deeds, and a dead person. These are five "divine messengers" in the sense that they exemplify the inevitability of birth, old age, disease, karmic retribution and death.

In regard to the description of these five messengers, the *Devadūta-sutta* and its two parallels show some minor variations. According to the description given in the *Devadūta-sutta*, the first divine messenger is a small infant that lies in its own excrement and urine.³ The *Madhyama-āgama* version draws out this imagery in more detail, as it explains that the infant is not able to call its parents and ask them to wash it,⁴ a point made also in the Pāli commen-

I 826c-828b; T 43 at T I 828b-829b; and the later part of T 86 at T I 909b-910c (a discourse whose first part parallels MN 129).

³ MN 130 at MN III 179,22 speaks of seeing a *daharaṃ kumāraṃ mandaṃ uttānaseyyakaṃ sake muttakarīse palipannaṃ semānaṃ*.

⁴ According to MĀ 64 at T I 504a3, the child lying in its own excrement "is not able to call [its] mother and father, [asking]: 'mother and father, [please] take me up out of this dirty spot and wash this body [of mine]!'", 不能語 父母, 父母抱移離不淨處, 澡浴其身.

tary.⁵ In addition to the infant's need to be fed and washed by others, the *Ekottarika-āgama* also draws attention to the suffering experienced while still being in the womb.⁶

In relation to the divine messenger that manifests through the sight of an old person, the Pāli and *Madhyama-āgama* versions agree in describing various physical manifestations of old age. The *Ekottarika-āgama* version additionally also points out that the mind of elderly people will no longer be as strong and vigorous as it had been in their youth.⁷

The *Ekottarika-āgama* version also makes an additional point in regard to the divine messenger of death. While the Pāli and *Madhyama-āgama* versions describe the vision of a corpse in various stages of decay,⁸ the *Ekottarika-āgama* version also draws attention to the sorrow experienced by the relatives of the deceased.⁹

Another difference between the Pāli and Chinese versions is a matter of sequence, as the Chinese *Āgama* discourses list the robber as the last of the divine messengers, while the *Devadūta-sutta* presents the robber as its fourth divine messenger and death as its last.¹⁰ The se-

⁵ Ps IV 231 depicts the thought of the child in the following terms: "I have fallen into my own urine and faeces, I am not able to properly get up and wash myself ... I am not able to say 'wash me!'", *sake pan' amhi muttakarīse palipanno, attano dhammatāya uṭṭhahitvā nhāyitum na sakkomi* ... 'nhāpetha man'ti vattum pi na sakkomi.

⁶ EĀ 32.4 at T II 674c7.

⁷ EĀ 32.4 at T II 674c19: 無復少壯之心.

⁸ MĀ 64 at T I 504b13 also notes that the corpse might be cremated, a possibility not explicitly mentioned in MN 130.

⁹ EĀ 32.4 at T II 675a8.

¹⁰ In MN 130, the five divine messengers are a baby (1st), an old per-

quence adopted in the *Madhyama-āgama* and *Ekottarika-āgama* discourses fits the context well, since the punishment for evil deeds takes place after death, when the evil-doer has to face King Yama and the suffering of rebirth in hell. To mirror this, it would be opportune for the divine messenger that depicts such punishment - a robber caught by the king and punished for his deeds - to be placed after the divine messenger of death.

Notwithstanding such minor variations, the three discourses agree that King Yama made it clear after each inquiry that the culprit had performed the evil deed, not anyone else, wherefore the culprit will also have to experience the retribution for these deeds.¹¹ That is, the main point of the presentation in the *Devadūta-sutta* and its parallels is to inculcate awareness of the inevitability of karmic retribution in particular, and bring home the importance of reflecting on the ethical quality of one's deeds against the *saṃsāric* perspective of birth, old age, disease and death. The importance of this topic for preaching purposes is reflected in an account given in the *Mahāvamsa*, according to which a delivery of the *Devadūta-sutta* in Sri Lanka by Mahinda was the occasion for a thousand people to attain stream-entry.¹²

son (2nd), a sick person (3rd), a robber (4th), and a dead person (5th); while in the Chinese versions these five divine messengers come in the sequence a baby (1st), an old person (2nd), a sick person (3rd), a dead person (4th), and a robber (5th).

¹¹ MN 130 at MN III 179,33; MĀ 64 at T I 504a10 and EĀ 32.4 at T II 674c13.

¹² *Mahāvamsa* 14:63 in Mhv 79 (Burmese ed.), translated in W. Geiger 1912: *The Mahāvamsa*, Oxford: Pali Text Society, p. 96; cf. also G. P. Malalasekera 1995: *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, Delhi:

The interrogation by King Yama, described in the *Devadūta-sutta* and its parallels, recurs again in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, and in a parallel to this discourse preserved in the Chinese *Dīrgha-āgama*.¹³ These two discourses differ from the *Devadūta-sutta* in as much as they only describe three divine messengers: old age, disease and death.¹⁴

The impact caused by the sight of others afflicted by old age, disease and death recurs also in the traditional account of the experiences that were instrumental in stirring the bodhisattva to go forth and eventually become a Buddha. The Pāli version of this account is found in the *Jāta-ka-nidānakathā*, which has counterparts in the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* (preserved in Chinese translation), in the *Mahāvastu* (a *Vinaya* text of the Mahāsāṅghika Lokottaravāda tradition), and in the *Saṅghabhedavastu* (a section of the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*).¹⁵ According to these various

Munshiram Manoharlal, vol. 1, p. 1113.

¹³ AN 3:35 at AN I 138-142 and DĀ 30.4 at T I 126b-127a (the section corresponding to AN 3:35 is part of a longer discourse). The interrogation by King Yama can also be found in T 24 at T I 331a5; T 25 at T I 386a1; T 212 at T IV 668c3 and T 741 at T XVII 547a10; for references to Yama's messengers cf. also DhP 235 and 237.

¹⁴ AN 3:35 at AN I 138,7 and DĀ 30.4 at T I 126b20. T 24 at T I 330c 25 and T 25 at T I 385c22 also mention only three divine messengers.

¹⁵ The *Jātaka Nidānakathā* in Jā I 58, translated in N.A. Jayawickrama 1990: *The Story of Gotama Buddha, The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā*, Oxford: Pali Text Society, p. 78; the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* in T 1421 at T XXII 101b22, translated in André Bareau 1962: "La Légende de la Jeunesse du Buddha dans les Vinayapitaka Anciens", in *Oriens-Extremus*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 16; the *Mahāvastu* in Émile Senart 1890: *Le Mahāvastu*, Paris, vol. 2, p. 150,18, translated in J.J. Jones 1976: *The Mahāvastu*, London: Pali Text Society, vol. 2, p. 145; and

versions, the bodhisattva had been unaware of these predicaments of human existence until during pleasure outings he saw for the first time in his life an old person, a sick person and a dead person, followed by seeing on a fourth occasion a recluse.

Closer inspection brings to light that in each of the three above-mentioned *Vinayas* this account suffers from some degree of internal inconsistency. The Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* reports that the bodhisattva, when still young, already had the desire to go forth.¹⁶ When describing his fourth encounter with a recluse, however, according to the same Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* account the bodhisattva asked his coachman to explain what "going forth" means.¹⁷ Such a question would make little sense if at an earlier point of his life he already had the desire to go forth himself.

In the case of the *Mahāvastu*, the account given in this work precedes the bodhisattva's four encounters with the report that at an earlier point of time, when informing his father of his wish to go forth, the bodhisattva already expressed his insight into the inescapability of old age, disease and death.¹⁸ If at an early point of time he already had such insight and the wish to go forth, the episode of the four encounters would be redundant.

the *Saṅghabhedavastu* in Raniero Gnoli 1977: *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, (*Serie Orientale Roma* vol. 49), Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, vol. 1, p. 65,7.

¹⁶ T 1421 at T XXII 101b20: 菩薩少有出家志。

¹⁷ T 1421 at T XXII 101c17: 何謂出家? Bareau (op. cit.) p. 20 notes this internal inconsistency and concludes that the bodhisattva's desire to go forth belongs to an older textual stratum that escaped editorial erasing when the later account of his four encounters was introduced.

¹⁸ Senart (op. cit.) pp. 141,7 and 146,12.

The *Saṅghabhedavastu* reports that during the first and second encounter the bodhisattva inquired after the implications of being old or sick. In reply to this inquiry, his coachman informed him that to be old or to be sick entails that one might soon be dead.¹⁹ The bodhisattva apparently understood this reply, since, instead of asking about the meaning of "being dead", he asked if he was also subject to the same predicament. When in his next encounter the bodhisattva then saw a corpse, he asked his driver what "death" means, the not knowing of which would have rendered the replies he received during the previous outings meaningless.²⁰

The internal inconsistencies found in each of these three *Vinaya* accounts reveal the relatively late nature of this legend. The same can also be deduced from the circumstance that in the Pāli tradition this legend is not found in the discourse or in the *Vinaya*, but only in the *Jātaka* commentary.

Weller suggests that the development of this account could have been inspired by early attempts to represent the bodhisattva's insight into these predicaments of human life in art, which needed to create symbolic representations in order to render his insight into these aspects of human suffering visible.²¹ In fact, according to Ray the use of picture recitation was known in ancient India, in the sense that picture scrolls were unrolled in front of the pub-

¹⁹ Gnoli (op. cit) pp. 65,25 and 68,12,

²⁰ Gnoli (op. cit) p. 70,21: *ka eṣa, sāratho, mṛto nāma?*

²¹ Friedrich Weller 1928: "Die Überlieferung des Älteren Buddhistischen Schrifttums", in *Asia Major*, vol. 5, p. 169.

lic during oral performance.²²

The use of such pictorial presentation is in fact referred to in a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya*.²³ The commentary explains that this refers to a canvass with various paintings taken around by wandering Brahmins to illustrate the teachings they delivered on karma and its fruits.²⁴ Thus it seems not too far-fetched to imagine that the development of the traditional account of the bodhisattva's encounters could indeed have been inspired by some pictorial representation.

Be that as it may, a less legendary account of the bodhisattva's insight into the basic predicaments of human existence can be found in a discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* and its Chinese parallel in the *Madhyama-āgama*.²⁵ These two discourses record the bodhisattva's reflection that worldlings react with disgust and aversion when they see someone else subject to old age, disease and death, even though they are themselves subject to the same predicaments. The bodhisattva, however, reacted differently, since on realizing that he was himself subject to old age, disease and death, all pride in being endowed with youth, health and life vanished for him.

²² Himanshu Prabha Ray 1994-1995: "The parallel tradition: Early Buddhist narrative sculpture", in *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-graduate and Research Institute*, vol. 54-55, p. 350.

²³ SN 22:100 at SN III 151,²⁴ speaks of the *caraṇaṃ nāma cittaṃ*.

²⁴ Spk II 327.

²⁵ AN 3:38 at AN I 145,²¹ and its parallel MĀ 117 at T I 608a3. Bodhi in Ñāṇamoli 2005 (1995): *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom p. 1342, note 1207, suggests that AN 3:38 could be the nucleus out of which the legendary account of the bodhisattva's encounters developed.

These two discourses make it clear that the narrative account in the *Jātaka-nidānakathā*, the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, the *Mahāvastu* and the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, in spite of some narrative embellishment, rests on a kernel of truth, in the sense that the themes of old age, disease and death did play a decisive role in stirring the bodhisattva to go forth.

That the themes birth, old age, disease and death were instrumental in motivating the bodhisattva to leave the household life and proceed in his quest for awakening can also be seen in the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel, both of which report that the bodhisattva's going forth was inspired by a search for what is beyond birth, old age, disease, and death.²⁶

In fact, not only in his present life, but according to the *Makhadeva-sutta* even in a former life in the far-by-gone past the bodhisattva had been stirred to leave behind the household life on seeing a divine messenger appear. The description of the impact of this divine messenger on the bodhisattva, given in the *Makhadeva-sutta*, has a parallel in the *Madhyama-āgama* and in the *Ekottarika-āgama*,²⁷ and in addition to these two Chinese discourses also

²⁶ MN 26 at MN I 163,15 and MĀ 204 at T I 776a28.

²⁷ MĀ 67 at T I 511c-515b and EĀ 50.4 at T II 806c-810b. Both versions refer to their protagonist as 大天, corresponding to *Mahādeva, instead of Makhādeva, a reading confirmed by the Sanskrit *Bhaiṣajyavastu* and its Tibetan translation, which speak of *Mahādeva* and *Lha chen po*. The *Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa* in Sylvain Lévi 1932: *Mahākarmavibhaṅga et Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa*, Paris: Librairie Ernest Leroux, p. 161,14, similarly speaks of the *Mahādeva-sūtra*. The Bharhut *stūpa*, however, speaks of Maghādeva, cf. Alexander Cunningham 1879: *The Stūpa of Bharhut, a Buddhist Monument Ornamented with Numerous Sculptures Illustrative of Buddhist Legend and History in the Third*

a parallel in the *Bhaiṣajyavastu* of the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, preserved in Tibetan.²⁸

According to the Pāli, Chinese and Tibetan versions of this discourse, King Makhādeva renounced his throne and retired to live a life in seclusion and meditation due to the impact of seeing only one divine messenger, the messenger of old age. Unlike the cases discussed above, in the present instance this divine messenger did not manifest through the sight of another human being afflicted by old age. Rather, it was the sight of the first grey hair on his own head that became a divine messenger for King Makhādeva. In fact, King Makhādeva had instructed his barber to keep a look-out for the first grey hair on his head,²⁹ as he had already anticipated the appearance of this "divine messenger" and was ready to act on it.³⁰

Century B.C., London: Allen and Co, plate 48, and Sylvain Lévi 1912: "Observations sur une Langue Précanonique du Bouddhisme", in *Journal Asiatique*, ser. 10, vol. 20, p. 497.

²⁸ Derge edition 'dul ba kha 53a-56b or Qianlong edition 'dul ba ge 48b-52a (the Sanskrit *Bhaiṣajyavastu* in Nalinaksha Dutt 1984: *Gilgit Manuscripts, Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayavastu*, Delhi: Sri Satguru, vol. 3 part 1 p. 111,²⁰ only briefly refers to the tale of Mahādeva, without giving it in full, as does the Chinese version in T 1448 at T XXIV 58c 1). Versions of the tale of Makhādeva can also be found in *Jātaka* tale no. 9 at Jā I 137-139; and in tale no. 87 in T 152 at T III 48b26-49b23, translated in Edouard Chavannes 1910: *Cinq Cents Contes et Apologues, Extraits du Tripiṭaka Chinois*, Paris: Leroux, vol. 1, p. 321.

²⁹ Benimadhab Barua 1934: *Barhut*, Calcutta: Indian Research Institute, vol. 2, p. 82, describes a Barhut relief that depicts the scene when the barber shows the grey hair to the king.

³⁰ The appearance of the grey (or white) hair is quite explicitly treated as a "divine messenger" in the different versions, cf. MN 83 at MN II 75,17: "the divine messengers have appeared to me", *pātubhūtā kho me ... devadūtā*; MĀ 67 at T I 513c8: "the divine messenger has al-

In sum, then, the function of the divine messengers, be they one or three or five, is to illustrate the importance of being aware of the basic predicaments of human life in *samsāra*. In the case of a person set on evil-doing, even the appearance of altogether five divine messengers may not suffice to bring home to him the importance of living a heedful and moral life. In the case of persons of a more noble character, however, the signal given by only a single divine messenger will not pass unheeded and may even lead to quite radical decisions. Such a radical decision was taken by King Makhādeva, who was ready to abdicate the throne and live the life of a meditating renunciant at the sight of a single grey hair on his head.

The theme of renunciation as the supreme response to insight into the predicaments of human life is also prominent in the account of the bodhisattva's four encounters that stirred him to go forth, since after coming across the sight of an old, a sick and a dead person, the fourth encounter was with a recluse, providing an example for the mode of life the bodhisattva was to adopt in order to find a way out of *samsāra*.

The theme of renunciation also comes to the fore towards the end of the Chinese versions of the *Devadūta-sutta*. After concluding their description of King Yama's

ready come", 天使已來至; and Derge edition 'dul ba kha 53b6 or Qian-long edition 'dul ba ge 49b4: "the divine messenger has appeared", *lha yi pho nya byung gyur pas*. Though EĀ 50.4 at T II 808b1 instead speaks of the "body's messenger", reading: "the body's messenger has come to summon [me]", 身使來召, an alternative account of the same event in an earlier part of the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection, EĀ 1 at T II 551c29, does employ the expression "divine messenger", reading: "the divine messenger has already come", 天使已來至.

interrogation of the evil-doer about the divine messengers, the *Devadūta-sutta* and its Chinese parallels report an aspiration that King Yama was nurturing in his heart. According to the Pāli version of this aspiration, King Yama had the wish to be reborn as a human being so as to be able to come into direct contact with the teachings of a Buddha and understand them.³¹ The Chinese *Āgama* versions go a step further, since according to them King Yama not only wanted to understand the Buddha's teaching, but also had the wish to go forth in order to put these teachings into practice.³²

In this way, these two Chinese discourses draw out what may also be implicit in the Pāli version's presentation, in that to go forth in order to practice the teachings of the Buddha is the supreme response to insight into the predicaments of human life, symbolized by the divine messengers. In this way, then, the divine messengers and their call to a life of morality and, eventually, a life of renunciation,³³ also throw into relief the importance of going forth in order to live a life dedicated to the quest for what is beyond birth, old age, disease and death.

³¹ MN 130 at MN III 186,25.

³² MĀ 64 at T I 506a5 and EĀ 32.4 at T II 676b21.

³³ A.G.S. Kariyawasam 1988: "Devadūta", in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 421, sums up that the *devadūtas* "serve on the one hand as a deterrent from evil ways of life and on the other to usher in the period of religious retirement".