
An Analytical Study of the Metaphor Method in Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra

Trinh Thi Thu Thao¹ Phramaha Anon Anando² Ven. Nguyen Anh Tuan³

International Buddhist Studies Colleges, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University^{1,2,3}

Corresponding author email: trinthithuthao@ibsc.mcu.ac.th¹

Received 19/06/2025; Revised 30/07/2025; Accepted 07/08/2025

Abstract

This study employs qualitative document analysis to investigate the metaphorical method in Buddhist scriptures, with particular emphasis on the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra (Chinese version). The research pursues three objectives: (1) to examine the use of metaphor in Buddhist scriptures; (2) to explore the historical and textual background of the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra; and (3) to analyze the application of metaphorical methods within this text.

The findings indicate that metaphors are widely employed across Theravāda, Sctarian, and Mahāyāna traditions as pedagogical tools that enhance the persuasiveness, memorability, and accessibility of Buddhist teachings. By framing abstract philosophical concepts in familiar images, metaphors function as an effective means of communication, fostering both intellectual understanding and spiritual engagement among listeners and practitioners. Regarding the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra, the study highlights its historical and cultural context, including its transmission, linguistic background, and the intellectual exchange between Bhikṣu Nāgasena and King Milinda. This dialogue not only demonstrates the philosophical depth of Buddhist reasoning but also reveals the sūtra's reliance on metaphor as a didactic device. The analysis further shows that metaphors in the text are organized thematically and doctrinally, serving to simplify intricate doctrines, reinforce memory, and stimulate reflection. Beyond their rhetorical function, these metaphors provide insight into Buddhist hermeneutics and teaching strategies, underscoring the enduring role of metaphor in bridging philosophical abstraction with experiential understanding.

This study affirms that the metaphor method in the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra represents a distinctive mode of Buddhist pedagogy, one that integrates

philosophical rigor with accessible communication, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on Buddhist literary and educational traditions.

Keywords: Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra, Metaphor method, Mahāyana, Theravāda, Sarvastivāda.

Introduction

The metaphor has long been recognized as a central device in religious discourse, functioning not merely as ornament but as a cognitive and pedagogical resource that renders abstract doctrines intelligible and experientially salient (Gibbs, 1994; Kövecses, 2010). In Buddhist literature, metaphorical and simile-based exposition (Pāli upamā, Sanskrit upamāna) is prominent across traditions, from early Pāli discourses to later Mahāyāna exegesis, where teachers repeatedly rely on everyday images to convey notions such as non-self (anattā), dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda), and liberation (Nirvāṇa) (Hecker, 2009; Pye, 2003). This study examines that pedagogical dynamic by focusing on the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra (NBS), the Chinese counterpart to the Milindapañha. Theoretical frameworks from cognitive linguistics and rhetoric inform the present inquiry. Gibbs' typology: (a) the inexpressibility function, (b) the compactness hypothesis, and (c) the vividness hypothesis, provides a useful lens for understanding why metaphors repeatedly appear in doctrinal dialogues: they allow speakers to articulate otherwise inarticulable insights, to compress complex claims into memorable formulations, and to enliven propositional content so it invites affective as well as intellectual uptake (Gibbs, 1994). Complementing this, Kövecses' account situates metaphors as entrenched conceptual mappings that structure thought and learning; from this vantage, metaphor in Buddhist teaching is not merely rhetorical flourish but a cognitive tool that shapes how adherents conceptualize and internalize doctrinal material (Kövecses, 2010). Classical treatments of metaphor (e.g., Richards' reading of Aristotle) and lexicographic definitions (Hornby, 2010) further clarify the linguistic mechanics by which metaphor affects a transfer of meaning from familiar domains to unfamiliar or abstract targets (Richards, 1965).

Textually, the Milindapañha tradition, both in its Indic Pāli witnesses and in the Chinese recension preserved in the Taishō Tripiṭaka, provides a paradigmatic setting for exploring metaphor-as-pedagogy because its dialogical form explicitly

stages question-and-answer exchanges in which Nāgasena repeatedly uses similes and metaphors to elucidate doctrine (Rhys Davids, 1890; Takakusu & Watanabe, 1924–1934). Recent scholarship has renewed attention to the Chinese recension: annotated translations and philological studies (Xing, 2007; Anālayo Bhikkhu, 2021) map textual variants and highlight how rhetorical strategies, including metaphor, are shaped by transmission history, linguistic choice, and audience expectations. Comparative analyses, chiefly Thích Minh Châu’s contrastive study of the Pāli and Chinese texts, demonstrate that differences in wording and metaphor deployment often reflect divergent pedagogical emphases and cultural adaptation rather than simple mistranslation (Minh Chau, 1999).

Building on these theoretical and textual foundations, this paper argues that a focused analysis of the metaphor method in the Chinese NBS contributes both to Buddhist philology and to contemporary pedagogical reflection. By (a) situating metaphors within the dialogical structure of the text, (b) classifying recurrent metaphor types, and (c) interpreting their doctrinal and pragmatic functions, the study seeks to show how Nāgasena’s image-based expositions operate as *upāya*, skillful means, that bridge doctrinal abstraction and lived experience (Pye, 2003). In doing so, the research not only illuminates a distinctive instance of Buddhist pedagogy but also supplies conceptual tools for translating these ancient teaching strategies into modern educational and therapeutic contexts where accessible, image-based instruction fosters comprehension and ethical practice.

Research Objectives

1. To study the metaphor method in Buddhist Scriptures.
2. To study the background and origin of the *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra*.
3. To analyze the metaphor method in the *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra*.

Literature Review

Scholarship on the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra (NBS) and the broader Milindapañha corpus has primarily focused on four key, interrelated domains. These include: (1) the dialogical exchange between King Milinda and Nāgasena; (2) the origin and textual history of the Chinese NBS; (3) the provenance and editorial status of the Taishō Tripiṭaka witness; and (4) the rhetorical and pedagogical use of metaphor within the dialogue (Anālayo Bhikkhu, 2021; Xing, 2007). Historical and

philological studies have highlighted the Milinda material as a significant site for reconstructing cross-cultural Buddhist exchange. For example, Tarn's (1938) classic study situates the figure of Milinda within the broader Hellenistic milieu of Bactria and explores the possible historical contexts for the dialogues. In a similar vein, Rhys Davids' (1890) authoritative Pāli translations remain the principal reference for the classical Milindapañha. David's work demonstrates how Nāgasena consistently employs similes and metaphors to render abstruse doctrines, such as anattā (non-self) and karma, into concrete, everyday images.

Comparative and annotated translations of the Chinese NBS also emphasize both continuities and divergences from the Pāli witnesses. Xing's (2007) annotated English translation of the Chinese recension elucidates textual variants and highlights recurrent metaphorical strategies. In a similar, Anālayo Bhikkhu's (2021) recent edition and commentary consolidate philological parallels and divergences, arguing that metaphor functions centrally as a means of doctrinal communication in the Chinese text. Thích Minh Châu's (1999) comparative study explicitly contrasts Pāli and Chinese renderings, drawing attention to differences in rhetorical emphasis and simile deployment that reflect cultural and linguistic adaptation.

The pedagogical significance of metaphor in Buddhist discourse, particularly in their investigations of upāya (skillful means) and the use of similes. Pye's (2003) analysis of upāya in Mahāyāna contexts shows how teachers tailor rhetorical devices to diverse audiences, which helps explain why metaphor recurs as a didactic tool across traditions. This is further supported by Hecker's (2009) survey of similes in the Pāli Canon, which underscores the role of figurative language in making doctrinal teaching affectively and cognitively salient. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, Kövecses' (2010) model of conceptual metaphor supports this functional view by demonstrating that metaphors structure thought and learning rather than merely ornamenting speech.

Existing research on the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra has primarily focused on the Pāli and Sanskrit versions, largely overlooking the Chinese Taishō recension as a unique text for studying teaching methods. Key gaps remain: there's no systematic classification or functional analysis of the metaphors within the Chinese version, and there's a lack of empirical research on how effective these metaphors are for teaching and learning. This study will fill these gaps by analyzing the metaphorical strategies

in the Chinese NBS to better understand how figurative language is used as a teaching tool in this important Mahayana text.

Conceptual Framework

The researcher defines the study's conceptual framework based on the theory of metaphor used as a tool in explaining the complex ideas of the Buddha's teachings in NBS. The details are as follows:

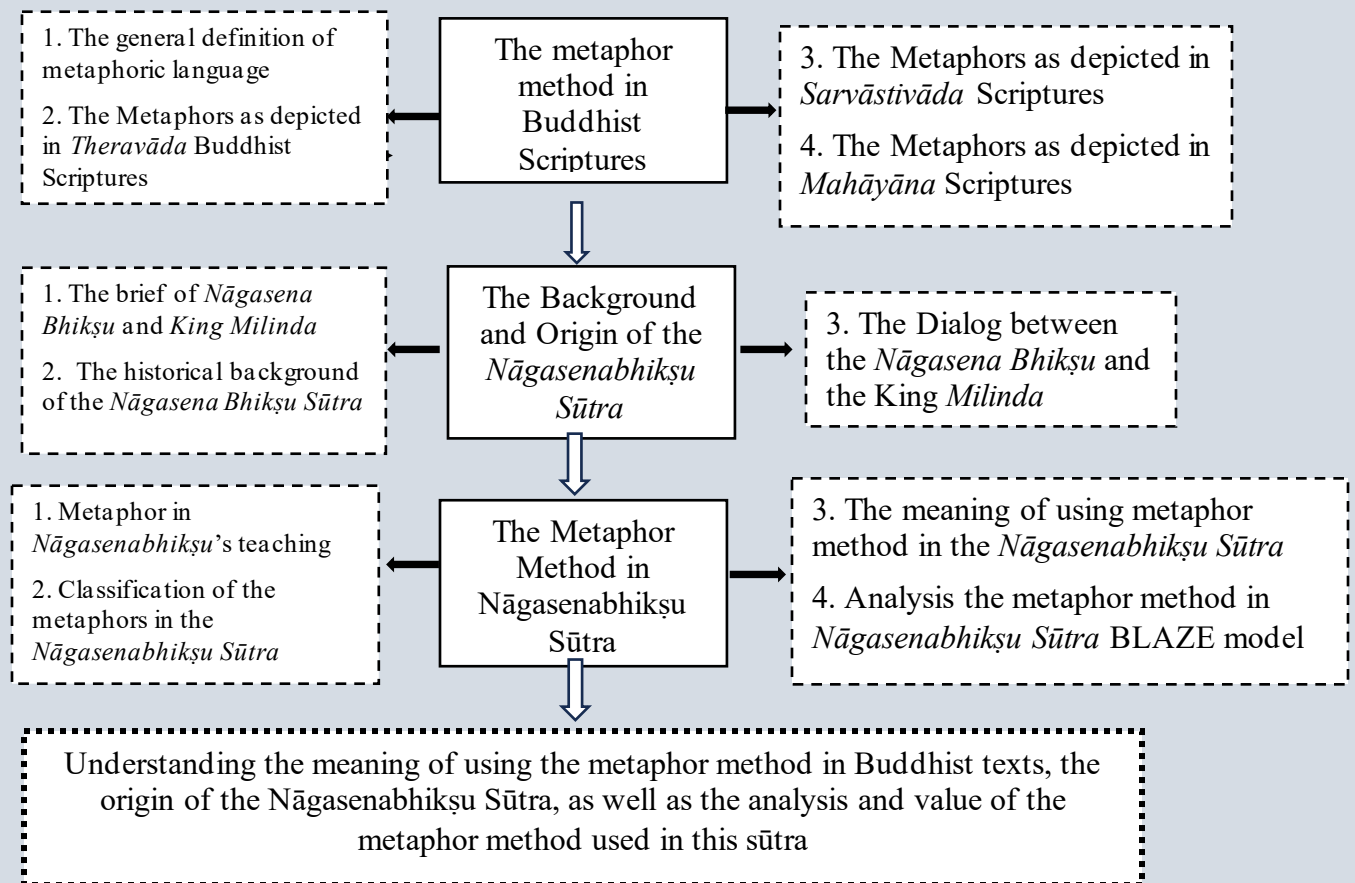


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative and employs documentary research to achieve the following objectives: (1) studying the metaphor method in Buddhist scriptures; (2) examining the background and origin of the *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra*; and (3) analyzing the metaphor method in the *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra*. The research methodology can be divided into four stages as follows:

Step 1: Data Collection and Analysis

The *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra* (NBS) is the primary source, existing in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (大正新脩大藏經; *Taishō Tripiṭaka*), Volume 32, text number 1670B, consisting of three fascicles. The text was accessed through the digital database of the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA). Other sources include *Theravāda* texts, *Sarvāstivāda* literature, *Mahāyāna* scriptures, commentaries, textbooks, theses, dissertations, scholarly books, journal articles, and online resources.

Step 2: Data Compilation and Organization

The process involves collecting references on the concept of metaphors from *Theravāda*, *Sarvāstivāda*, and *Mahāyāna* texts. Then, documents are gathered to present the historical and context of NBS, with a focus on the NBS from the *Taishō Tripiṭaka*. Lastly, the metaphor method in NBS is analyzed, counting all metaphors and identifying key examples.

Step 3: Analysis of the Metaphor Method in the NBS

This process analyzes how *Nāgasenabhikṣu* employs metaphor to explain the Buddhist concepts such as *karma*, *ānatta*, and impermanence, at the same time identifying and describing key metaphorical examples in the NBS, such as the “chariot” for non-self, to explore their symbolic meanings and contextual relevance. Counting the metaphors and classifying them by Buddhist doctrines and thematic groups. This study analyzes how metaphors explain the Buddhist’s teaching within the debate between *Nāgasenabhikṣu* and King *Milinda* and analyzes the dialogue structure of the NBS as a pedagogical model.

Step 4: Conclusion, Discussion, and Suggestions

The research findings are summarized, highlighted, and suggested for future research and pedagogical application of metaphors in Buddhist studies.

Research Results

Objective 1: The study demonstrates that metaphor is a vital pedagogical and rhetorical tool across Buddhist traditions. Drawing from classical theories of metaphor (Aristotle; Kövecses, 2010) and the Pāli term *upamā*, the findings show that metaphors clarify complex concepts such as *dukkha* (suffering), *anattā* (non-

self), karma, and nirvāṇa. Within Theravāda, Sectarian, and Mahāyāna Buddhism, metaphors enhance persuasiveness, relatability, and memorability, engaging both listeners and practitioners. Illustrative examples include the simile of the “dirty cloth” (Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995) and “purifying gold” (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012), which convey mental purification, and parables in the Lotus Sūtra, which articulate Buddha-nature and upāya. However, metaphors appear less frequently in Sarvāstivāda texts, which emphasize analytical and technical exposition.

Objective 2: The background of the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra (NBS) situates its compilation around the late 2nd to 1st century BCE, shortly after King Menander’s reign (Rhys Davids, 1890/1894; Guang, 2007; Bodhi, 2012; Bat, 1997). Traditionally linked to the Sarvāstivāda school, it was originally composed in Sanskrit before being translated into multiple languages. The Chinese canon preserves two authoritative versions, NBS-1670A and NBS-1670B, in the Taishō Tripitaka (大正新脩大藏經), with translation dated to the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420 CE) (Bat, 1997; Nanjio, 1883; Law, 2000). Though the translator’s identity remains uncertain, the Taishō Edition records both versions, and this study employs NBS-1670B, consisting of two fascicles.

Objective 3: Metaphors identified in Fascicles I–III of the NBS reveal systematic organization by doctrinal themes. These metaphors illuminate core Buddhist teachings, including non-self (*anatta*), the Four Marks of Existence, Skillful Means (*upāya*), liberation (*vimutti*), and the Bodhisattva path, across Theravāda, Sectarian, and Mahāyāna contexts. By translating abstract doctrines into vivid imagery, they guide practitioners toward cognitive clarity, ethical transformation, and spiritual realization.

Table 1: Metaphor Counts by Buddhist Doctrines

Buddhist Doctrine	Fascicle 1	Fascicle 2	Fascicle 3	Total
Reincarnation (<i>Samsāra</i>)	4	4	0	8
Threefold Training	10	0	0	10
Four Marks of Existence	4	4	1	8
Four Means of Embracing Others	1	0	0	1
Four Right Efforts	5	0	0	5

Buddhist Doctrine	Fascicle 1	Fascicle 2	Fascicle 3	Total
Six <i>Pāramitās</i>	1	0	0	1
Eightfold Path	7	0	0	7
Four Noble Truths	0	1	2	3
Law of Karma and Its Results	0	15	0	15
Dependent Origination	0	14	0	14
Five Aggregates	0	2	0	2
Five Spiritual Faculties	0	2	0	2
Seven Factors of Enlightenment	0	1	1	2
The Body in Buddhism	0	0	3	3
Karma and Rebirth	0	0	10	10
<i>Anattā</i> (Non-Self)	0	0	1	1
<i>Upāya-kauśalya</i> (Skillful Means)	0	0	1	1
Liberation (<i>Vimutti</i>)	0	0	1	1
TOTAL METAPHORS	32	43	20	95
TOTAL DOCTRINES				18

This table shows the number of metaphors for each of the 18 Buddhist doctrines and the number of doctrines per fascicle

The total of 95 metaphors is concerned with 18 Buddhist doctrines. The first fascicle has 32 metaphors, emphasizing the Threefold Training and the Noble Eightfold Path. The second fascicle has 43 metaphors, focusing on the Law of Cause and Effect and Dependent Origination. The third fascicle has 20 metaphors, focusing on Karma and Rebirth, the Body in Buddhism, and Skillful Means. Besides, the 95 metaphors from three fascicles are divided into five distinct groups. The categories follow the definitions in the document: Human relates to individuals, actions, or social roles; Plant refers to flowers, seeds, or plants; Animal refers to animal behavior or characteristics; and objects related to man-made tools. Natural phenomena describe earth, fire, or water.

Table 2 shows the number of metaphors in each thematic group across fascicles. These metaphors are explored across the three fascicles in NBS in relation to activities in everyday experiences, clarifying complex doctrines and inspiring practitioners to engage deeply with the spiritual path.

Table 2: Metaphor Counts by Thematic Groups

Thematic Group	Fascicle 1	Fascicle 2	Fascicle 3	Total
Human	17	15	9	41
Plant	2	5	2	9
Animal	1	3	2	6
Object	8	14	6	28
Natural Phenomenon	4	6	1	11
TOTAL	32	43	20	95

Discussion

This analysis of metaphor in the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra (Taishō recension) within existing philological, hermeneutical, and cognitive-linguistic scholarship clarifies the study’s novel contributions. Previous work has established the textual contours and comparative value of the Milindapañha tradition: classical Pāli treatments and English translations provide the canonical dialogical frame (Davids, 1890, 1894), while the Taishō Tripiṭaka (大正新脩大藏經; Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō) remains the standard East Asian witness for comparative work (Takakusu & Watanabe, 1924). Annotated translations and philological studies of the Chinese recension elucidate textual variants and rhetorical patterns that shape how metaphor functions in that milieu (Xing, 2007; Anālayo Bhikkhu, 2021). Comparative studies (Minh Chau, 1999) further demonstrate that shifts in wording and simile deployment often reflect deliberate pedagogical adaptation rather than mere mistranslation.

Building on these foundations, the present study advances two interlocking contributions. First, it provides a systematic typology of metaphors in the Chinese NBS, classifying recurrent image types (e.g., chariot, raft, lamp) and mapping them against doctrinal targets such as anattā, pratītyasamutpāda, and Nirvāṇa. Second, it interprets these metaphors as functional upāya (skillful means), showing how image-based exposition bridges cognitive distance, scaffolds memory, and orients ethical behavior (Pye, 2003). This pragmatic emphasis complements descriptive philology

(Rhys Davids, 1890; Xing, 2007; Anālayo Bhikkhu, 2021) and enriches rhetorical readings of simile in the Pāli corpus (Hecker, 2009) by integrating insights from cognitive metaphor theory (Gibbs, 1994; Kövecses, 2010).

Methodologically, cross-witness comparison reveals both continuity—shared metaphors that serve consistent didactic aims, and local adaptation, instances where metaphors are reworked or omitted in the Chinese text, reflecting different pedagogical priorities (Anālayo Bhikkhu, 2021). Interpreting these patterns as editorial and pedagogical signals allows the study to move beyond cataloguing toward reconstructing how communities shaped doctrinal communication.

The pedagogical implications are twofold. Textually emergent models (here described as the BLAZE sequence: questioning, image-based exposition, analysis, application) show how structured dialogue leverages metaphors to elicit inquiry, concretize doctrine, and foster practice processes resonant with embodied and experiential learning theories. Practically, this suggests viable applications in contemporary education and therapy, where metaphor-driven dialogue can promote conceptual grasp and ethical transformation.

Knowledge from the Research

The research provides a concept of metaphor that is examined from multiple scholarly perspectives, including those of Aristotle and Kövecses, as well as the notion of *upamā*, which originates from the Pāli term. These definitions are presented to provide a comprehensive understanding of this language. From this foundation, the study assesses its significant role within Buddhism in conveying the complex ideas of Buddha’s teachings through examples from the *Theravāda*, *Sarvastivada*, and *Mahāyāna* schools. They help individuals transcend dualistic thinking and focus on the experiential and transformative aspects of the Buddhist path.

Through the survey of the background and history of the NBS to gain knowledge of the date and the place and date of its compilation. Furthermore, finding and sorting metaphors in NBS to see clearly the value of using the metaphor method in Buddhist dialogue.

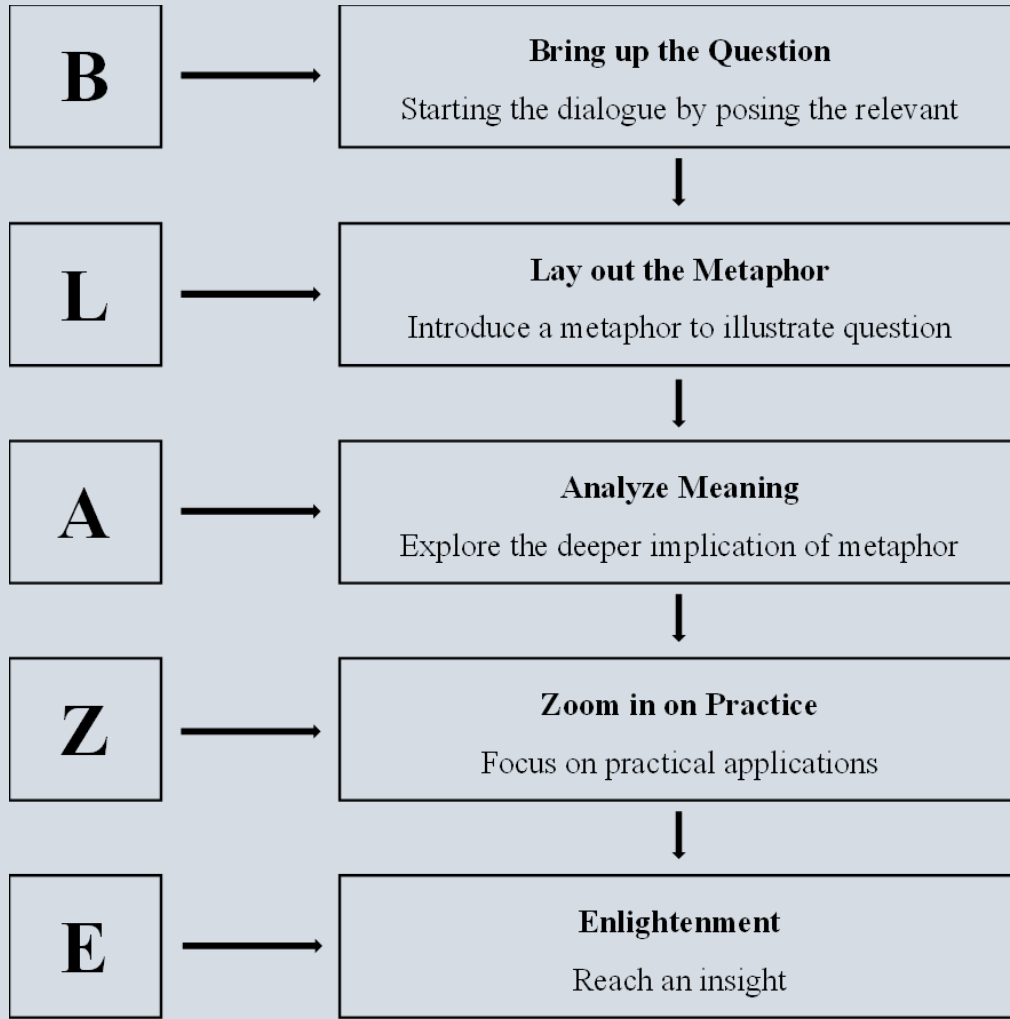


Figure 2: The BLAZE model in *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra*

The BLAZE structure is a pedagogical dialogue analysis model specifically designed for philosophical and religious literature, where the goal ranges from simple communication of knowledge to the transformation of awareness. The dialogue cultivates knowledge, enhances mental processes, and directs the listener towards enlightenment. The term ‘BLAZE’ is a meaningful metaphor, not just an abbreviation. When taken in its literal sense, the word ‘blaze’ refers to a brilliant flame, which evokes powerful, spreading images; when interpreted figuratively, it stands for the light of knowledge, a breakthrough in vision, and deep comprehension, which are symbolized by the light of insight, the inner illumination when the truth is realized. This model reflects the process that occurs during a profound Buddhist discourse and throughout the NBS, which is an acronym representing five steps:

Bring up the Question, Lay Out the Metaphor, Analyze Meaning, Zoom in on Practice, and Enlightenment.

This theoretical model allows a process that progresses from questioning to introspection, from visualizing to contemplating, and from logical analysis to intuitive knowledge via the form of conversation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the metaphorical method in the Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra functions as far more than rhetorical ornamentation: it is an integral pedagogical strategy that renders abstruse doctrinal content intelligible, memorable, and practically applicable. By translating abstract principles into concrete, everyday images, the sūtra's metaphors reduce cognitive distance between philosophical propositions and lived experience, thereby facilitating comprehension, recollection, and ethical enactment in daily practice.

The sūtra's dialogical structure, here characterized by the BLAZE model, operates as a staged pedagogical sequence in which critical questioning by the learner prompts expository clarification from the teacher, who employs familiar imagery to scaffold reflection and further analysis. Through iterative explication and examination of these metaphors, listeners gain not only conceptual clarity but also procedural insight into methods of introspection and mindful conduct. In this way, the BLAZE-informed dialogue cultivates capacities for inquiry, attentive listening, reflective practice, and transformative application, with mindfulness positioned as the central vehicle for attaining sustained well-being.

Practical implications extend beyond classical exegesis: the metaphor method and its dialogical enactment are readily adaptable to contemporary educational, communal, and therapeutic contexts. When incorporated into pedagogy, the model encourages students to formulate productive questions, make conceptual-experimental connections, and translate insight into ethical action. In community and therapeutic settings, the same dynamics—deep listening, evocative imagery, and guided reflection—support relational repair, moral cultivation, and collective resilience.

Suggestions

This research has discovered crucial knowledge about the metaphor method in the *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra* (NBS) and the BLAZE model in Buddhist dialogue which is found out from NBS. The important thing is the effective use of metaphors to simplify complex Buddhist concepts, which can be applied to modern educational and therapeutic contexts.

Future research should empirically evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of the BLAZE model across different learning environments and cultural settings, and investigate how specific classes of metaphor function cognitively and affectively in the process of moral and contemplative formation. Overall, the *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra*'s metaphor method exemplifies a robust, tradition-informed pedagogy that bridges philosophical rigor with accessible, practice-oriented instruction.

Future studies exploring the metaphor method in Buddhist dialogue could exploit the following perspectives:

1. Comparison of the Metaphor Method Between the *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra* and *Milindapañha*.
2. Exploring the Knowledge of the Metaphor Method in the Other Treatises of *Sarvāstivāda* Literatures.
3. Applying the Metaphor Method in *Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra* on Buddhist Propagation in Modern Times.

References

- Anālayo Bhikkhu (Trans.). (2021). *The scripture on the monk Nāgasena: A Chinese counterpart to the Milindapañha* (Taishō Vol. 32, No. 1670B). BDK America, Inc.
- Bat, P. V. (1997). *2500 years of Buddhism*. Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
- Bhikkhu Bodhi (Trans.). (2012). *The numerical discourses of the Buddha*. Wisdom Publications.
- Gibbs, R. W. (1994). *The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hecker, H. (2009). *Similes of the Buddha*. Buddhist Publication Society.
- Hornby, A. S. (2010). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English*. Oxford University Press.

- Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Law, B. C. (2000). *A history of Pāli literature*. Indica.
- Minh Chau, Thich. (1999). *A comparative study: Milindapañha & Na-Hsienbhikshusūtra* (Tran Phuong Lan, Trans.). Ho Chi Minh Publishing House.
- Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu & Bodhi Bhikkhu (Trans.). (1995). *The middle length discourses of the Buddha*. Pali Text Society.
- Nanjio, B. (1883). *A catalogue of the Chinese translation of the Buddhist Tripitaka: The sacred canon of the Buddhists in China and Japan*. Clarendon Press.
- Pye, M. (2003). *Skillful means: A concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism*. Routledge.
- Rhys Davids, T. W. (Trans.). (1890). *The questions of King Milinda (Vol. 35)*. Clarendon Press.
- Richards, I. A. (1965). *The philosophy of rhetoric*. Oxford University Press.
- Takakusu, J., & Watanabe, K. (Eds.). (1924). *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* [Taishō Tripiṭaka]. Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai.
- Tarn, W. W. (1938). *Greeks in Bactria and India*. Macmillan Company.
- Xing, G. (2007). The Nāgasenabhikṣu Sūtra: An annotated translation from the Chinese version. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 5, 1–45. Centre for Buddhist Studies.