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The Stairway of Correct Conventional Reality: Significant Variant Readings in Candrakīrti's
Madhyamakāvātāra (6.79)

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The seventh-century Indian Buddhist master Candrakīrti is well-known for his influence upon Madhyamaka thought and practice in the history of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, particularly through his *Madhyamakāvātāra* (*Entrance to the Middle Way*). This paper outlines significant variant readings of a verse found in the sixth chapter of Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvātāra* (6.79) and discusses the relevance and repercussions of this reading for Indian Buddhist Madhyamaka thought. The paper initially locates two different Indian Buddhist commentaries where variant readings of the same verse are found, one commentary by the early eleventh century Indonesian scholar Dharmakīrtiśrī, also known as Suvarṇadvīpa, and another in a recently recovered manuscript preserved in Tibetan attributed to the Bengali *mahāpaṇḍita* Atiśa Dīpaṅkaraśrījñāna (982-1054 CE). In citing Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvātāra* (6.79), these authors give the significant variant reading "They have fallen from correct conventional reality" (Tib. *de ni kun rdzob yang dag bden las nyams*) rather than "They have fallen from conventional reality [and the reality of] suchness" (*de dag kun rdzob de nyid bden las nyams*). The variant reading preserved in Tibetan of *kun rdzob yang dag* instead of *de dag kun rdzob* suggests that the third *pāda* of the extant Sanskrit verse would read *bhraṣṭā hi te saṃvṛtitathyasatyāt* instead of *bhraṣṭā hi te saṃvṛtitattvasatyāt* which fits the *triṣṭubh* meter. The paper then discusses the philosophical implications of this reading, the primary one being that some Indian Buddhist commentators read Candrakīrti as positing a form of correct conventional reality, a previously unknown position in the Indian Buddhist commentarial record of Madhyamaka exegesis. In attention to the fact that Candrakīrti was followed in the early eleventh century as far east as Indonesia, the paper concludes that the reading "correct conventional reality" offers the Mādhyamika exegete an avenue for conventional practices to lead toward realizing ultimate reality.