

Poetry with a Purpose: Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* and Buddhist Propagation

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Abstract

The *Buddhacarita*, a Sanskrit epic written by poet Aśvaghoṣa, is one of the most significant pieces of Buddhist literature. This book, which narrates the Buddha's life story and offers a wealth of biographical details, is crucial to the spread of Buddhism across national and cultural barriers. It examines how key Buddhist principles such as impermanence, suffering, renunciation, compassion, and liberation are expressed in a few key moments from the Buddha's life, including his birth, royal life, renunciation, enlightenment, and teachings. The study also looks at how Buddhist teachings might be presented in an approachable and engaging way through the use of conversation, descriptions, imagery, and characterisation. By fusing aspects of ancient Sanskrit literature with Buddhist teachings, the *Buddhacarita* was instrumental in bringing Buddhist concepts to a larger audience. Through its narrative style, appeal to both lay and scholarly audiences, and its influence on the development of Buddhist art and thought, this article explores how the *Buddhacarita* functioned as both a literary and theological instrument in the dissemination of Buddhist philosophy. This research highlights the poem's dual function: as a cultural artefact that has shaped the portrayal of Buddhism in India and beyond, and as a medium for conveying core Buddhist values.

Keywords: aśvaghoṣa, *buddhacarita*, sanskrit epic, life of buddha, buddhist propagation, dharma.

Objectives of The Study

1. To understand the essential Buddhist concepts found in the *Buddhacarita* by Aśvaghoṣa.
2. To investigate how Aśvaghoṣa explains and disseminates Buddhist teachings through poetry.
3. To examine how narration and characters convey Buddhist principles.
4. To comprehend how *Buddhacarita* blends Buddhist teachings with literary beauty.
5. To consider the *Buddhacarita* as a text that helped spread Buddhism.

Methodology

A qualitative and textual analytic approach is used in this study. The main source is the *Buddhacarita* by Aśvaghoṣa. To comprehend Buddhist teachings and their dissemination, a few texts are examined. The study also looks at how Buddhist concepts are presented through narration, poetry, and characters. Secondary sources include books, research papers, and other academic publications.

Introduction

Aśvaghoṣa is not so much a philosopher as he is a poet. His Buddhacarita is an extremely beautiful piece of poetry, as evidenced by every word or line. Nonetheless, it should also be regarded as a significant philosophical book since it elegantly and succinctly presents the central ideas of Buddhism to all. In truth, Aśvaghoṣa's main goal was to spread Sad-Dharma (Goodness Religion) and Kalyāṇa Dharma (Auspiciousness Religion), about which Lord Buddha himself provided an eternally wonderful injunction for the benefit of all mankind:¹ (p. 29)

Caratha Bhikṣave Cārīkam-Bahu-Jana-hitāya Bahu-jana-sukhāya

Lokānukampāya Athāya Hitāya Sukhāya Deva-manusyānām.¹ (p. 29)

Oh, Bhikṣu, go forth for the good of many, for the happiness of many, for global compassion, for the good of gods and mankind, for their profit, for their happiness. And this is the essential principle immortalised by Lord Buddha's captivating, enlivening, and ennobling instruction:

Tasmātihānanda: Atta-dīpā Viharatha, Atta-śaraṇā Ananya-śaraṇa.

Dhamma-dīpā Viharatha: Dhamma-śaraṇā, Ananya-śaraṇa.¹ (p. 29)

"As a result, O, Nanda!" Move forward like a light unto yourself, wholly reliant on yourself and unaffected by anything else.

"Leave with Dhamma as your light, as dependent on Dhamma as you are on anything else."

I don't plan to go into depth on Buddhist doctrines as described by the great eloquent

bādhātmakaṁ duḥkham idam prasaktaṁ duḥkhasya hetuḥ prabhāvatmako'yaṁ /

duḥkhakṣayo niḥsaraṇātmako'yaṁ, trāṇatmako'yaṁ praśamāya margaḥ //⁷ (16.4)

There is continual suffering, the essence of which is anguish; there is suffering's source, the essence of which is origination; there is suffering's destruction, the essence of which is escape; and there is the route to calm, the essence of which is protection.

The four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, and the dependent origination idea are the three categories into which the Buddha's methods can be separated.

Four Noble Truths:

The first truth is that since everything in life is temporary, dukkha-suffering and discontent occur. According to the second truth, human attachment, ignorance, and craving are the causes of this suffering (samudaya). By demonstrating that suffering can stop (nirodha) if we give up these self-centred desires and achieve inner peace, or nirvana, the third truth gives hope. Lastly, the Noble Eightfold Path, which leads individuals toward wisdom, moral behaviour, and mental discipline, is the practical means by which the fourth truth ends this suffering (magga).

na kāmabhogā hi bhavanti tṛptaye havīmṣi dīptasya vibhāvasor iva/

Noble Eightfold Path

The fourth of the Four Noble Truths is the Noble Eightfold Path, which offers a means of achieving liberation and overcoming suffering. Right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration are its constituent parts. The Eightfold Path leads to the achievement of Nirvāṇa by progressively eliminating attachment, ignorance, and longing. Philosophy of *Buddhacarita* in Aśvaghōṣa's main work, *Buddhacarita*, he has, in a captivating poetic manner, given us as many as fifteen philosophical discourses on Buddhism, mostly very lengthy ones.

First Philosophical Discourse (Third Canto)

Prince Siddhārtha, stepping out of the comfort and luxury of his royal palace for the first time, is deeply shaken when he sees old age, sickness, and death. These experiences awaken in him a deep sense of “Divine Discontent” and raise questions about the true nature of life. Surrounded by beauty for so long, he now faces the harsh realities that all humans must endure. This moment marks the beginning of his inner struggle, as described in the third canto. Realizing that suffering is a universal truth (Sarvam Duḥkham), he chooses to leave behind his palace and royal life to become a recluse and seek the real cause—and solution—of human suffering.

Second Philosophical Discourse (Fourth Canto)

On the king's orders, Siddhārtha is taken to a pleasure garden where beautiful women try to tempt him, despite his clear disinterest. Udāyi, the priest's son, urges him to embrace youth and pleasure, arguing that ignoring such beauty is unkind. In response, the prince delivers a powerful philosophical speech, introducing key Buddhist ideas: the impermanence, suffering, and emptiness of worldly life—captured in the maxims Sarvam Duḥkham, Sarvam Kṣaṇikam, and Sarvam Śūnyam.

Third Philosophical Discourse (Fifth Canto)

After realizing the first great truth of Buddhism, that life is full of suffering (Duḥkha) due to impermanence caused by disease, old age, and death—the prince feels deep sorrow. Seeking peace, he dismounts his horse and meditates under a jambu tree, focusing intensely on the beginning and end of the world. Through reasoning and investigation (Vitarka and Vicāra), his mind becomes calm, free from desires and suffering. He then attains a state of pure love (Prīti) and focused concentration (Ekāgratā).

Fourth Philosophical Discourse (Fifth Canto)

After deciding to embrace Sannyāsa, the prince seeks his father's blessing. The king, distressed, pleads with him to enjoy life as a householder first, placing Bhoga (pleasure) before Tyāga (renunciation). In response, the prince poses four profound conditions: guarantee that I will never face death, illness, old age, or loss of possessions. When the king admits he cannot promise these,

the prince quietly steps away—his resolve deepened by the realization of life's impermanence and suffering.

Fifth Philosophical Discourse (Fifth Canto)

The king sends three women to tempt the prince again, but he feels disgusted by them. The prince explains his sixth philosophical talk as follows: these women only seem beautiful because of fancy clothes and ornaments, but their true nature is ugly. He says foolish men are tricked by their looks, but if they saw the truth, they wouldn't be fooled. This makes the prince realise that being attached to such things is useless and causes pain.

ásucirvikṛtaśca jīvaloke vanitānāmayamīdṛśaḥ svabhāvaḥ |

vasanābharāṇaistu vañcyamānaḥ puruṣaḥ strīviṣayeṣu rāgameti || 5.64 ⁷ (p. 643)

Sixth Philosophical Discourse (Sixth Canto)

In his sixth philosophical discourse, delivered while bidding farewell to Chandaka, the prince reflects on the root of human sorrow. He observes that attachment to bodily pleasures and material possessions inevitably brings pain. "What good is youth when death is at your door?" he asks (6/15–24). Here, he nears a profound realization: that all worldly suffering stems from Avidyā (ignorance), which gives rise to Sakāma-Karma (desire-driven actions), setting off the cycle of Bhoga (enjoyment), Karma, birth, rebirth, and ultimately, suffering.

Seventh Philosophical Discourse (Seventh Canto)

When the Prince discovers that Chandaka is upset, he delivers him another philosophical speech in which he reiterates the traditional and frequently stated arguments for the death penalty's unavoidable annihilation.

Eighth Philosophical Discourse (Seventh Canto)

We discover something pretty significant here because it is focused on Svarga (Heaven) and Tapasyā, which are the core principles of all forms of Dharma. The prince challenges this view, recognizing flaws in both their goals and methods. Svarga, achieved through Puṇya-Karmas like Yāga and Yajña, is not eternal; it offers only temporary bliss before one returns to the cycle of rebirth. These actions, being Sakāma-Karmas (desire-driven), do not lead to ultimate liberation. True Mokṣa (Salvation) arises from Niṣkāma-Karma (selfless action) and spiritual discipline. In contrast to extreme asceticism or indulgence, Buddhism advocates the Middle Path (Majjhimā Patipadā), avoiding unnecessary suffering while maintaining physical and mental balance to support the journey toward liberation.

Ninth Philosophical Discourse (Seventh Canto)

After spending some time at the hermitage, the prince makes the decision to depart in order to learn more about tapasyā. The prince is urged to remain by the hermits upon hearing this. "Your Dharma or all your religious practices and ceremonies, rites and rituals, observances and

performances are for attaining “Svarga” or the Heavens, while I have an entirely different end in view, viz. the attainment of Mokṣa,” the prince says in his ninth philosophical discourse, which he uses to comfort them and explain his true reason for leaving the place. In actuality, your Pravṛtti Dharma and our Nivṛtti-Dharma are really different.

ityevamukte sa tapasvimadhye tapasvimukhyena manīṣimukhyaḥ |

bhavapraṇāśāya kṛtapratijñāḥ svaṁ bhāvamantargatamācacakṣe ||² (p. 91)

Tenth Philosophical Discourse (Ninth Canto)

To bring the prince back, the grieving King dispatches his ministers and priest into the forest. The prince declines, of course, and provides them with his tenth intellectual argument in this regard: "I have heard that kings living at homes have attained Salvation." But I say that can't be. Whereas "Rāja-Dharma" is founded on "Danda" (punishing others) and ferocity, Mokṣa Dharma is founded on "Śama," or self-control and calm. However, as water and fire cannot coexist, neither can peace and aggression. I have so severed my ties to my family and house because I don't want to be in that bondage ever again. (9/30-51)

śame ratiścecchithilam ca rājyaṁ rājye matiścecchamaviplavaśca |

śamaśca taiḥkṣṇyaṁ ca hi nopapannaṁ śītoṣṇayoraikyamivodakāgnyoḥ ||² (p. 118)

Eleventh Philosophical Discourse (Ninth Canto)

However, the priests and ministers keep begging him, and the prince calmly responds by saying in his eleventh philosophical discourse: I still have serious doubts about whether or not there is life after death. I have to learn about it on my own through meditation and self-control. Therefore, I will not return home like a fool, full of petty worldly pleasures, even if the sun rises and the Himalayas start to tremble. I would rather go into a raging fire than make an unsuccessful return home.

Twelfth Philosophical Discourse (Eleventh Canto)

While staying on the Pāṇḍava Hills, the prince is visited by King Bimbisāra of Magadha, who urges him to enjoy the four Caturvargas Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa and even offers him half his kingdom in exchange for performing sacrifices to attain Svarga (Heaven). The prince declines, delivering his twelfth philosophical discourse: he has renounced worldly life to seek liberation from disease, old age, and death, realizing that their roots lie in selfish desires (Kāmanā-Vāsanā). Questioning the worth of kingship, he reflects that a king merely bears the burdens of others, while he himself seeks a higher truth beyond the endless cycle of birth and death.

Thirteenth Philosophical Discourse

After parting with Chandaka and seeking wisdom from various hermitages, the prince arrives at the hermitage of the sage Arāra, still hopeful but unaware that he must ultimately walk his path

alone guided by his own dictum, “Ātmaḍipo Bhava” (“Be a light unto thyself”). Humbly, he asks the sage how one might be freed from illness, old age, and death. Arāra introduces him to a version of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga philosophy, distinct from the later classical Sāṃkhya system by Īśvarakṛṣṇa, and closer to a form of Brahma-vāda. However, still unsatisfied, Siddhārtha delivers his thirteenth philosophical discourse, presenting the Buddhist doctrine of Anāttavāda—the idea that the self is not eternal or unchanging, but constantly in flux, like a flame or a river.

Fourteenth Philosophical Discourse (Twelfth Canto)

This canto contains Siddhārtha's fourteenth philosophical discourse, in which he introduces another well-known Buddhist doctrine known as "Majjhimā-Patipadā": The Middle Path, which is a path of "Healthy mind in a healthy body," which is not a path of unbridled sensuality or of unreasonably strict asceticism. Thus, despite the fact that this may sound odd, it states clearly that a person who is psychologically unhappy and physically weak would never achieve mokṣa. Therefore, in order to achieve mokṣa, the senses must be adequately pleased, which also satisfies the mind. Only then may the states of "Samādhī" and "Dhyāna" be attained. Thus, following six years of near-fasting, Siddhārtha accepts "Pāyasa," or rice pudding, from Nandabāla, Gopādhīpati's daughter.

tasmādāhāramūlo 'yamupāya itiniścayaḥ |

asūrikaraṇe dhīraḥ kṛtvāmitamatīrmatim || ² (p. 161)

Fifteenth and Last Philosophical Discourse (Fourteenth Canto)

Nevertheless, he delivers his fifteenth and final philosophical speech here, which goes as follows: "Deluded into doing works which really can bring no good to them, worldly beings try vainly for worldly pleasures, etc." Buddha-Carita's philosophical speeches unquestionably and unapologetically demonstrate Aśvaghoṣa's unmatched lyrical ability to convey dry philosophical concepts in a most calming and alluring way. As a result, he was definitely a poet first and foremost.

Conclusion

In order to provide readers with aesthetic enjoyment in an amusing manner, Aśvaghoṣa integrates literature, religion, philosophy, and life in his writings. Additionally, he aimed to spread awareness of the Buddha's teachings on Indian culture, ethics, and humanity. Aśvaghoṣa was knowledgeable about Buddhist literature, including the Tripiṭaka and Jātaka stories, as well as the Vedās, Vedāṅgas, Sāṃkhya, Nyāya, and Dharmaśāstra.

The numerous literary works of Aśvaghoṣa show how versatile he is as a writer. Since no other Buddhist poet's works have acquired prominence to this day, with the exception of Aśvaghoṣa's works like *Buddhacarita*, *Saundarananda*, and others, he was able to establish himself and rise above the other poets. People were unaware of the subject matter and literary merits of Aśvaghoṣa's writings, though, because many Indian intellectuals later expressed a reluctance to mention his works, particularly *Buddhacarita*, in their numerous creations. It is hoped that the

present paper will help readers successfully and meaningfully comprehend the life and teachings of Lord Buddha, and that *Buddhacarita* would draw interest and admiration from people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

As everyone is aware, the epic *Buddhacarita* is important for its historical relevance as well as its literary value and Buddhist teachings. Buddhism is characterized by its lofty subject matter, which makes it impossible for even the most creative brains to communicate anything even slightly original. But in my view, the Buddhist teachings and doctrines are still highly applicable in the modern world, when terrorism, murder, famine, and insecurity have all increased to unprecedented levels. This research enables us to understand about Buddhist philosophy in addition to many forms of poetry. This epic *Buddhacarita* has revealed the inner subject of Buddhism, which is to refrain from unnecessary worldly pleasures. It illustrates a way to be in the middle of all earthly delights without going overboard with sensuality. In the modern world, this idea is vital. Buddhism has a lot of attraction in today's environment since it is rational and scientifically grounded. This critical study of *Buddhacarita's* philosophical aspects has briefly described various Buddhist doctrines through various examples, allowing the reader to grasp the complicated concept of Buddhism in straightforward manner.

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