



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research
Vol. 13, Issue, 07, pp. 63183-63185, July, 2023
<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.26906.07.2023>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

BUDDHA AND NATURE AS DEPICTED IN AŚVAGHOṢA'S BUDDHACARITA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 17th April, 2023
Received in revised form
26th May, 2023
Accepted 14th June, 2023
Published online 28th July, 2023

KeyWords:

Buddhism, Nature, environment, Buddhacarita, Aśvaghōṣa, biography, and ecosystem.

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ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the deep interdependence of nature and the Buddha as depicted in *Buddhacarita of Aśvaghōṣa Bodhisattva*. The text contends that the Buddha was inextricably linked with the natural world throughout his life. Nature is the Buddha's ally in the path to enlightenment, cultivating a deep regard for nature's extraordinary beauty and diversity. The accounts of the Buddha's life in *Buddhacarita* are difficult to divide between stories, facts, and myths. Many plants, flowers, animals, and trees are linked to Buddha's life story. Animals affected the Buddha's yearning for *Nibbāna*; observing the suffering of both mankind and animals motivated him to seek enlightenment. Furthermore, the Buddha's relationship with natural events is portrayed as one of the Buddha's vast and amazing traits. This paper employs the literary analysis method on three well-known English translations. The first is *The Buddhacarita, or Acts of the Buddha*, which E.H. Johnson translated from *Sanskrit* and augmented with the Tibetan version. The second is E.B. Cowell's translation from *Sanskrit* titled *The Buddhacarita of Aśvaghōṣa*. The last is Samuel Beal's translation from Chinese of *The Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King*. According to the findings, Buddha's life is a remarkable example of the close relationship between humans and nature. It serves as a reminder that human and nonhuman ecosystems are intrinsically linked and intertwined.

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Citation: **Bhikkhuni Thanh Nha (Nguyen Thi Minh Phuong)**. 2023. "Buddha and nature as depicted in aśvaghōṣa's buddhacarita". *International Journal of Development Research*, 13, (07), 63183-63185.

INTRODUCTION

Despite this, the ultimate goal of Buddha's Teachings is the cessation of suffering and the path to it. However, there is enough material in Buddhist literature to describe the Buddhist attitude toward nature. The Buddha's life story and teachings emphasize the importance of coexisting peacefully with nature rather than conquering it, and they advocate for a preserving lifestyle rather than a degraded one. In reality, nature always aided the Buddha on his path to Buddhahood. Throughout his many previous lives, nature assisted the *bodhisattva* in fulfilling his *paramitas*. It also helped the Buddha achieve his goal during his final earthly existence. This paper will focus on the close relationship between Buddha and Nature that was manifested in some events throughout his life, using information recorded in the epic *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa, which is regarded as one of the traditional biographies of the Buddha in Buddhist *Sanskrit* literature, to support Gautam Buddha's intimate relationship with the natural world. It serves as a reminder that human and nonhuman ecosystems are fundamentally linked and united. The *Buddhacarita* is a detailed biography of Buddha, detailing his life from birth to *Nirvāna* and the division of the holy relics. Aśvaghōṣa wrote the text in the early second century C.E. The *Buddhacarita's Sanskrit* text was published in 1893 in the *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, and Samuel Beal's English translation was included in the series "Sacred Books of the East." The Tibetan and Chinese translations of the text contain twenty-eight cantos, but only fourteen are known today as the original *Sanskrit*

text. Dharmaraksha, an Indian priest, translated the book into Chinese in the fourth century A.D. In the 7th or 8th century A.D., it was translated into Tibetan. (Charles Willemsen, 2009:xiii) In this paper, three well-known English translations are subjected to the literary analysis method. The first is *The Buddhacarita or The Acts of the Buddha*, which E.H. Johnson translated from *Sanskrit* and supplemented with the Tibetan version. The second is E.B. Cowell's translation of *The Buddhacarita of Aśvaghōṣa* from *Sanskrit*. The last is the Chinese translation of *The Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King* by Samuel Beal. The translation of E. H. Johnston, based on the original work, extends to canto 14. And Johnston composed cantos 14 through 28 based on Samuel Beal & Weller's English translations of *Buddhacarita* from Chinese and Tibetan sources. Cowell's work extends to canto 17. It details the Buddha's life up until his enlightenment. Amritananda, a Nepalese Pandit and copyist, added four extra cantos. (F. Max Muller, 1894:x) *Buddhacarita* contains difficult-to-distinguish legends, facts, and myths regarding the Buddha's life. When discussing the Buddha and Nature, it is appropriate to follow the Buddha's life from birth to death, as described in the epic *Buddhacarita*.

From Conception to Palace Departure: Numerous pieces of evidence are readily available for the close relationship between Buddha and Nature during his early life. When the *Bodhisattva* was conceived in the womb, he descended in the form of a white elephant and appeared in the May queen's dream: dream: "Before he

conceived, she saw in her sleep a white lord of elephants entering her body, yet she felt thereby no pain" (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto I. v. 4, p.2). E.B. Cowell's translation provides a more in-depth description of the elephant that "Assuming the form of a huge elephant white like Himālaya, armed with six tusks, with his face perfumed with flowing ichor, entered the womb of the queen of king Suddhodana to destroy the evils of the world." (E.B. Cowell, 1894, Book I, v. 20, p. 4). The prince was born beneath the *Asoka* tree in the beautiful Lumbinī grove, a tranquil forest retreat with trickling fountains, blooming flowers and fruits, and a natural setting (Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 1.5, p.2). At that instant, the cloudless sky rained sandalwood-scented, blue and pink lotuses (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto I, volume 21, page 5). Even though it was out of season, trees bearing flowers and fragrances eagerly offered him worship (Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 1. 31, p.6). The world became an oasis of peace. The rivers flowed with calm water, and the birds and deer did not make loud noises; the sky was cloudless, and poisonous creatures congregated without harming one another (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto I, vv.24-26, p.7).

The earth trembled when the prince was born, and divine beings descended to worship the newborn (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto I, v. 21, p. 6; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 1.26, p.5). The golden color emanating from his body and the gleaming radiance of his limbs filled all areas. Canto I, v.13, p. 4 (E. H. Johnson, 1936). To refresh his body, two streams of water, one hot and one cold, poured down from the sky. Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 1.19, p.4; E. B. Cowell, 1894, Book I.35, p.7). The sun shone brighter, and the fire burned with beautiful flames without being agitated. Canto I, v.22, p.5 (E. H. Johnson, 1936). In the northeastern corner of the royal quarters, a clear water well appeared. (1936, E. H. Johnson, Canto I.v.23, p.5) Due to the newborn prince's influence on his immediate environment, the kingdom's wealth, elephants, and horses grew daily after his birth. Numerous hidden treasures spontaneously emerged from the earth. And in his kingdom, horses gathered in great numbers in his city. Many fertile cows with tall calves were gathered, all of which were well-fed, content, gentle, fearless, and excellent milk producers. Heaven rained in the kingdom at the proper time and place, accompanied by the sound of gentle winds and clouds, adorned with wreaths of lightning, and devoid of stone or thunderbolt showers. Even without the labor of plowing, a crop grew according to the season, and the old plants grew stronger in juice and substance (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto II, vv.1-8, p.20-21; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 2. 128-138, p.20-22).

It is said that animals and insects contributed to the Buddha's desire for enlightenment; witnessing the suffering of animals and humans prompted the Buddha to seek liberation. The *Buddhacarita* states, "The Prince desired to see the forest and went out with his friends to the forest with the king's permission. He noticed a plot of land being ploughed and saw the earth broken, eggs broken, and insects killed. Moreover, beholding the men as they were ploughing, their complexions spoiled by the dust, the sun's rays, and the wind, and their cattle bewildered with the burden of drawing, the noble one felt extreme compassion." (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto V, vv.4-6, pp. 62-63; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 5. 330-334, pp. 47-48). The prince understood the suffering of worldly life, as well as the origin and demise of this world. Then He dismounted, sat at the base of a *Jambū* tree or a rose-apple tree whose beautiful leaves were fluttering in all directions, and began to meditate. After achieving perfect concentration and insight, he determined to leave his home. (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto V, vv.8-11, pp. 63-64; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 5. 335-342, pp.48-49). It has been observed that the base of a *Jambū* tree marked the location of his first spiritual realization. When the prince decided to leave his home in search of salvation, the horse Kanthaka assisted him in making his way to the forest without making any noise. Canto. V, v. 68, p.74 (E. H. Johnson, 1936; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 5.417, p.58). He rode his horse with his charioteer Chandaka for many leagues before arriving in the forest at sunrise. When he saw the deer all asleep in quiet trust, and the birds' tranquility resting, he too became restful, and he felt as if his ultimate goal had been achieved. Canto VI, vv.1-2, p. 81 (E. H. Johnson, 1936;

Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 6. 419, p. 59). Kanthaka horse also cried when his master was firm in his determination to live an ascetic life. Kanthaka's grief was released when the Buddha stroked him. Canto VI, Vv. 53-55, p. 88 (E. H. Johnson, 1936). Kanthaka returned to the royal dwelling and, as he looked around with teary eyes, yelled out loudly, as if telling the people of his plight. Canto VIII, vv.17-18, p. 107 (E. H. Johnson, 1936). The decision to leave the palace and live ascetic in the forest honors and emphasizes the value of nature. Despite the fact that it was beautiful, splendid, and well-equipped, the young prince abandoned his palace, which humans built for their benefit, and chose to live in nature instead. This is regarded as genuine admiration for nature's admirable qualities. And the Buddha did not simply think; he did it himself.

From Finding the Prince to Turning the Wheel of Dharma: Natural phenomena can be a teacher or a supporter of humans in their quest for higher mental levels. It assisted the future Buddha in realizing the erratic nature of all things in this world. It is clearly mentioned in the future Buddha's words when he calmed Chandaka's distress over his separation from him. He stated that change is unavoidable in mortal beings prone to various births, as birds gather on the roosting tree and then depart; clouds gather and then disperse; and trees are divided by the color of their leaves, even if it is connate with them. Canto VI, vv. 46-49, p. 87 (E. H. Johnson, 1936; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 6. 467-468, p.66) After saying his goodbyes to Chandaka, the prince entered the penance grove as an ordinary hermit. However, not only humans, such as farmers and brahmins, but also birds and beasts, were drawn to his beauty and brilliance. Deer abandoned their grazing and ran to him. Peacocks rejoiced by spreading their tails. They greet him warmly (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto VII, Vv. 4-6, p. 93). The future Buddha attested that a simple life in nature, rather than a wealthy life in the royal palace, assisted him in attaining ultimate liberation. He stated that eating herbs in the forest, embracing the highest contentment as if hiding a jewel, is preferable to living with the dangers to which sovereignty is exposed, as if with venomous black snakes. It is commendable for kings to leave their kingdoms and enter the forest in the pursuit of *Dharma*, but it is not appropriate to break one's vow and leave the forest to return home (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto IX, Vv. 43-44, p. 132; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 9.721-724, pp.101-102).

He lived a simple spiritual austerity for six years in the forest. He met and studied with many teachers, but their teachings did not completely satisfy him because they did not lead to perfect happiness. He had lost a lot of weight and appeared to be a living skeleton. He now remembered achieving the first *dhyāna* under the *Jambū* tree. And he understood that physical fitness was necessary for spiritual growth. He realized that extreme austerity had not resulted in enlightenment and that he needed to regain strength in order to pursue his goal. He then left his seat to take a bath in the *Nairāñjanā* River. When he climbed slowly up the riverbank, despite his thinness, the trees on the shore assisted him by devoutly lowering the tips of their branches (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto. XII, v.108, p.185). The ascetic then took a bowl of milk rice offered by Sujata and proceeded to and meditated at the foot of the *bodhi* tree, *asvattha* or *pipal* tree, also known as the tree of enlightenment because it was where the Buddha attained Buddhahood. He sat on matted *kuśa* grass offered to him by a grasscutter, meditating by himself and vowing to stay there until he understood how to live without suffering. When the holy one took his seat, firm in his resolve, the flocks of animals and birds did not cry, nor did the trees swayed by the wind. Canto XII, vv. 115-121, pp.186-187 (E. H. Johnson, 1936). As can be seen, nature has a very close relationship with the Buddha and is an essential part of the spiritual path leading to enlightenment. After all, Buddha and nature are inextricably linked. As mentioned in the early night, during the time of battle raging between *māra* and the *bodhisattva*, the sky lost its glimmer, and the earth shook, the directions blazed forth with a loud sound, the wind violence blew in all directions, stars did not sparkle, the moon did not shine, the deeper darkness night spread around, and all the oceans were agitated (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto. XIII, Vv. Deer and elephants screamed in agony as they ran or lay down, and screaming birds flew around in all directions as if it were day (E. H.

Johnson, 1936, Canto. XIII, v.53, p.198). On the contrary, as the bodhisattva attained enlightenment after conquering *māra* with calm and firmness, all beings became full of great happiness, and a great light illuminated all the various universes. The happy earth shook in six different directions, like a drunken woman. The heaven rained moisture from a cloudless sky, and from the trees, there dropped flowers and fruit out of season as if to do him honor (E. H. Johnson, 1936, Canto. XIV, vv.87-88, p.213-213; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 14. 1169-1176, p. 163-164). The *Nāga* King shielded the Buddha from rain, wind, and darkness by covering his body with his own hood. After seven days, the *Nāga* had paid his respects and left. (E. B. Cowell, 1894, Book XV, pp. 165). The final results show that the Buddha made the correct decision to live in harmony with nature. Nature appeared to play an important role in the Buddha's path to enlightenment. Through nature, he attained enlightenment, freeing himself and all sentient beings from suffering. It reminds us of the fundamental continuity and unity that exists between the human and non-human environments. The Buddha was then set rolling the Wheel of *Dharma* in Rishipatana, Vārāṇasī, where the great seers dwelt among trees resounding with cuckoo calls (E. H. Johnson, 1978, Canto. XV, v.15, p. 30; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 15.1215, p.171). A shower of flowers fell from the cloudless sky when the Wheel of *Dharma* was turned. Canto XV, v.58, p. 35 (E. H. Johnson, 1978; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 15.1275, p. 179)

From Spreading the *Dharma* to Entering the Great *Parinirvāṇa*:

Nature was never regarded as something outside of the human realm in the *Buddhacarita*, but rather as an extension of human love. These thoughts are related to the Buddhist community's view of nature. The first Buddhist communities were forest dwellers, and the first Buddhist monks lived under trees in the forest. Deer Park was where the Buddha spent his first rainy retreat. He and his disciples wandered at the end of a rainy season to preach the *Dharma* for the welfare and happiness of many. During his forty-five-year ministry, the Buddha walked throughout northern India. During that time, the Buddha and his followers lived under trees in forests and groves, as well as in monasteries donated by the followers. Veļuvana, or the bamboo grove, was the first forest offered by King Bimbisara of Rājagaha (E. H. Johnson, 1978, Canto. XVI, v.1, p. 45; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 17. 1380, p.193). Another well-known location where Buddha and his order stayed was Anathapindika's Jetavana monastery, or Jeta's grove. It is a lovely Prince Jeta's grove (E. H. Johnson, 1978, Canto. XVIII, vv.81-85, p.61-62; also see Canto. XX, pp.92-99; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 20. 1615-1616, p.231). There are also many *amba*, or mango groves where the Buddha preached, such as Pāvārika's mango grove in Nālandā, Cunda's mango grove in Pāvā, Jivaka's mango grove in Rājagaha, Nyagrodha grove, and Amrapali's mango grove. The Buddha's house or residence was the entire natural world, whether space, water, or land, because he demonstrated miraculous power to make king Śuddhodana's mind an appropriate field for instruction. He felt safe and happy to be able to go wherever he wanted. The Buddha took flight, transforming his single body into many and reuniting the many bodies. He descended into the earth as if it were water and walked on the surface of the water as if it were dry land. He passed through the mountain as if it were air (E. H. Johnson, 1978, Canto. XIX, Vv. 13-15, pp.86-87; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 19.1551-1553, p.222). Because of his morality, rocks and animals did not harm the Buddha. Devadatta tried to harm the Buddha out of envy by throwing a stone at him, but the stone broke into two pieces and did not hurt him.

Then he threw a wild elephant in Buddha's path, but Buddha managed to control the elephant. When the elephant approaches the Buddha, he kneels in respect. Canto XXI, vv. 37-59, p. 103-106; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 21. 1714-1717, p. 246). When the Buddha agreed to *Māra's* request to die in three months, a great earthquake that was terrifying and frightening erupted. Firebrands fell from the sky, mountains lost their peaks, and thunder and lightning erupted everywhere, as if the world was coming to an end (E. H. Johnson, 1978, Canto XXIII, Vv. 63-75, p. 237-238; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 23.1842, p.268). Then, when he felt the earthquake, Ananda trembled in fear and asked the Lord Buddha what caused it. The Buddha told him that he would only be in the world for three months before accepting *Nirvāṇa*. Canto XXV, vv.1-3, E. H. Johnson, 1978, p. 238) The Buddha arrived in Kusināra for his *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. He slept between two *Sāla* trees in the Mallas' *Sāla* grove in Kusināra. The *Sāla* trees are said to have bloomed out of season and sprinkled their petals over the Buddha's body in reverence. There were no cries from the birds, and the trees shed discolored flowers as if weeping (E. H. Johnson, 1978, Canto. XXV, vv.55-60, pp. 249-250; Samuel Beal, 1883, Varga 25. 1949-1955, p.286-287). According to the preceding discussion, the Buddha spent nearly his entire life in nature. He was born in Lumbini garden under *Sāla* trees, attained enlightenment under a *Bodhi* tree in Bodhgayā, gave his first discourse at Deer Park in Sārṇāth, followed the Ganges River to teach the *Dharma*, lived with his disciples in a bamboo grove, taught at forest monasteries, interacted with various natural and mythical animals, and attained *Mahāparinibbāna* under twin *Sāla* trees in Kushinagar. These great events in the *Buddhacarita* demonstrate the deep interconnectedness between Buddha and Nature, which leads to the cultivation of a deep respect for nature's beauty and variety. Many trees, flowers, plants, and forests are associated with the life of Buddha. Elephants, bulls, horses, lions, snakes, and other animals are depicted to represent significant events in the Buddha's life. He descended into his mother's womb as a white elephant. When he left his house, the horse assisted him in crossing the city. These incidents also serve as inspiration for teachings and as examples of ethical behavior toward nature. Furthermore, the natural laws of birth, old age, sickness, and death aided him in his search for the truth. Not the wealthy life in the palace, but life in nature, helped him discover the truth. His life is an excellent example of the close relationship that humans have with nature.

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