

BUDDHACARITA

Asvaghosa

(c. 100-150 CE)

Reading

Life of the Buddha, translated by Patrick Olivelle, 2008

Cultural significance

The *Buddhacarita* has a special place in Indian literary culture. It is not only the first substantial biography of the Buddha (the earlier *Jataka* tales contain snippets and single incidents), but it is also the first biography of anyone in an Indian language. Dating from around 100-150 CE, the text by Asvaghosa is composed in the refined Sanskrit of the court (by then, most people would be speaking in one of the many Prakrits, or dialects, that evolved from Vedic Sanskrit). As such, it is much admired by scholars and readers as a highly skilled and beautiful work of poetry. The story summarised and analysed here is taken predominately from Asvaghosa's Sanskrit text, although the final eight chapters are borrowed from later Tibetan texts that we believe are translations of those original and now missing chapters. The author, a Hindu who converted to Buddhism, has written a story that achieves the difficult goal of explaining philosophy in non-technical language. He also brings the reader in by describing people, cities and landscapes in realistic terms. Like the Bible, the *Buddhacarita* is a user's guide to the religion, which became widespread in India during the early centuries of the Christian Era. There can be little doubt that this text contributed in large measure to that success. We can say this with some assurance because many of the stone sculptures on Buddhist stupas (dated from the 1st c. BCE to 3rd c. CE) depict scenes as narrated in Asvaghosa's text. While the *Buddhacarita* is not quite in the same league as the two great epics (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), we can say that it runs a close second. And, if Buddhism had not declined in India, then the biography of the Buddha (and not the Hindu epics) would surely be the as popular as those Hindu epics.

Story

This is the earliest biography of the historical Buddha, written six or seven centuries after he is thought to have lived. The story begins with the auspicious birth of Gautama from his venerable parents, a king and queen of the Shakya kingdom. It is an immaculate conception as well as a miraculous birth, with the queen having dreamed that a white elephant entered 'her side' and then giving birth ten months later. When the boy is born, he shines with great beauty that 'extinguished the light of the lamps.' Standing up, the child takes seven steps and declare, 'I am born for enlightenment and the welfare of mankind. This is my final birth.' There are many natural signs of his impending greatness— flowers everywhere bloomed, birds sang and mountains shook. The great sage Asita inspects the child and discovers 56 marks of greatness. Then he declares that Gautama will achieve great deeds as a renouncer. This prophesy, however, makes the king, the father of the little boy, sad because it means he will lose him and the kingdom will have no heir to the throne.

The father then arranges Gautama's life in the palace: he will be brought up as a prince and kept away from ascetics and any sign of human suffering. This way he hopes to prevent Gautama from renouncing the world. At age sixteen, Gautama is married and later has a son, Rahula. Prince Gautama is given every pleasure a young man could enjoy, including dancing girls and sporting events. These years of pleasure, however, do not satisfy the young prince and at about age 30, he finally leaves the palace and goes out into the world. Driven by his charioteer, he sees what is called the 'Four Great Sights'. First, he observes an old man for the first time. Next, on succeeding days, he discovers a diseased man, a dead man and finally an ascetic. Distressed by these sights, the prince wants to learn more but he is taken, on his father's orders, to a festival in the forest, where women dance for him and offer him their bodies. He, however, rejects them and returns to the palace

profoundly disturbed by the suffering he had witnessed. Then he goes to his father and tells him he wants to become an ascetic. His father will not agree, telling him his duty was to remain a householder and later to rule the kingdom. But Gautama is so upset that he announces he must leave the palace; the only way he will not leave is if the king can guarantee these things: that he, Gautama, will not die, that he will not suffer disease or old age. His father is bewildered by these words and repeats his wish that his son remain. 'Dear father,' Gautama says, 'I cannot remain in a house that is on fire [with death and disease].'

Now his father virtually locks him in the palace, setting guards everywhere, and trying again to tempt him with sensual pleasure. But Gautama will not be deterred. Firm in his resolve, he leaves the palace in order to end the suffering of mankind by seeking enlightenment. Muffling the hoofs of his horses, he departs silently in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye to his wife and son. Outside the city, he then dismisses his loyal charioteer and horse in a tearful scene. He exchanges dress with a hunter and enters a forest where ascetics are deep in penance.



(Gautama leaves the palace on his horse, Swat Valley, Pakistan, c. 300 CE)

Meanwhile, back in the palace, the king and Gautama's wife are overcome with sorrow at the departed prince. The king sends out two ministers to find his son and bring him back. But when they find him and deliver the king's message, the son is unmoved and says, 'I will not return until I have found a solution to the suffering that afflicts us all, princes and paupers.'

Gautama continues to wander in search of answers and is invited to the court of the Maghada kingdom. That palace, too, he rejects and leaves, but promises to visit it first after he gains enlightenment. Next Gautama visits several hermitages and learns various forms of yoga and meditation, although none of them satisfy him as being the answer. At one, he trains with some extreme ascetics, whose 'path of pain' Gautama rejects because it is no different to the path of pleasure.

Then he makes his final decision. Sitting down under a tree, he says that he will not rise until he has reached enlightenment. After long days and nights of struggle, he is weak and emaciated until he is offered milk by a local girl. His courageous fight for wisdom is only achieved by defeating the demon Mara, who embodies pleasure and ignorance. After 49 days, he reaches his goal and preaches his first sermon, which includes the famous 'Four Noble Truths,' to an audience of gods and other celestials. Thereafter, the Buddha ('The Awakened One') gathers more and more disciples, including the daughters of Mara, sent to delude him, a rich merchant named Anathapindika and the historical king Bimbisara of Maghada. After displaying his wisdom (by defeating Brahmins in theological debates) and physical power (when he subdues a wild elephant), he revisits his family in the palace. He is reconciled with his father and converts his son, Rahula, to the 'path.'

Themes

Suffering The predominant theme of this early biography of the historical Buddha is that of human suffering (*dukkha*). As the Buddha explains even before he leaves the palace to search for enlightenment, suffering is the basic condition of human life. This is what the young prince learns when he ventures outside the palace walls and which his father, king, wishes him not to experience. He explains to his charioteer, 'As one sees that fire is hot in the past, so it will be hot in the present; as one sees that life is suffering in the past, so will it be suffering in the present.' When the king asks him not to leave the palace, Gautama agrees on the (impossible to fulfil) condition that the king must guarantee that he (Gautama) will not suffer disease, old age and death. And suffering is the essence of the first sermon he gives after his enlightenment: 'The first noble truth is...birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering.' The second truth is an explication of the cause of suffering, which is desire. The third truth is that desire and suffering can be eliminated, and the last truth is that enlightenment is that elimination. This is the radical but simple doctrine of Buddhism, which the poem dramatises through the experiences of Gautama. As a prince, he does not suffer in the ordinary sense; on the contrary, he knows no want, no deprivation of any kind. But he has the innate compassion to feel the suffering of others and to extrapolate from that to a general understanding that everything, including palatial wealth and vast kingdoms, indeed, especially those things, involves suffering. The more we have, the more dependent we become on those things, which are transient, thus leaving us wanting it again. Even the desire for life itself is a cause of suffering: if we try to cling on to life, to extend it in a search for immortality, we will be defeated and depressed. Accepting death is indeed a challenge for everyone, in all cultures in all historical periods.

Struggle The other great theme of this biography is that freedom from suffering is a hard struggle. Enlightenment arrives only at the end of a fierce determination to renounce desires. Again, the poet skilfully dramatises this difficult message through the experiences of the historical Buddha. As a young prince, Gautama is shielded from any evidence of death and disease; he is imprisoned in the palace by his father, who acts only with the best intentions. Gautama must therefore defy his father's explicit wishes, not once but twice in the story. Mustering the courage to disobey his father is not easy for the polite, loving son, but he feels it is unavoidable. Then he must take the more difficult decision, because it is permanent, to abandon his father, wife and infant son. Even saying goodbye to his loyal charioteer and horse is not easy for the young prince. Once he is on his own, Gautama faces more challenges. Where will he find the answer to his question: how can I rescue mankind from suffering? He visits various sages and learns from them but is not convinced by their methods. Finally, he makes a clear and simple decision: I will not rise from sitting until I reach enlightenment. Now, the battle is waged, between this ardent man and the forces of ignorance, desire and delusion, who appear as a horde of ugly and deceptive demons. The battle lasts 49 days and nights. It is, again, a brilliant narrative touch to depict Gautama's inner struggle in terms of an external battle with demonic figures already well-known in Indian mythology. And it is significant that the chief demon is Mara, whose is the demon of death (*mara* is cognate with English word 'mortal' and other words associated with dying.) One would expect that the demon would be Kama, god of desire, but, upon reflection, the god of death is more appropriate because enlightenment means the end of the life-death-rebirth cycle. If death is defeated, there will also be no birth and therefore no suffering. This is a clever (albeit unstated) argument because we would ordinarily think of defeating death as resulting in immortality, the prolongation of life. Although that is what most of us mortals desire, it is, in fact, the

very thing that produces suffering. By appealing to our confused sense of what is good for us, the story of the Buddha's life manages to teach us a difficult lesson.

Characters

Gautama Gautama is the young prince born to fulfil his destiny as an 'enlightened one,' or a Buddha.

Sudhodana Sudhodana is the king, Gautama's father, who attempts to prevent his son from the leaving the palace and forsaking his duty as a warrior.

Mara Mara is the demon king who attempts to divert Gautama when he sits down and declares that he will not get up until he achieves enlightenment.

Rahula Rahula is Gautama's son, who is left by his father but who is then converted by him when he returns.

Yashodara Yashodara is Gautama's wife, a beautiful woman who grieves when Gautama leaves her on his quest.

Chanda Chanda is Gautama's charioteer and loyal friend.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Gautama (Determined)

Character Gautama, the prince of the Sakya kingdom, is both an ordinary and an extraordinary man. That dual identity is the key to understanding his character as portrayed in this biography, or hagiography, composed several centuries after the time of the historical Buddha. It is also important to realise that the biography is focused almost entirely on the life of the prince before he achieves enlightenment and becomes the Buddha. We see him growing up as a young man, pampered by his father, who wishes to isolate him from the real world beyond the palace walls. He is brought up to be a prince, he marries and has a son. But this is no ordinary prince. At his birth, the sages examined his body and found the 'marks of a great man' who would either rule the world or become a 'mighty renouncer.' This is the destiny that his father is fighting against by virtually locking him within the palace and smothering him with pleasures. And it is the dual identity of Gautama himself: he is destined to become the Buddha, but, until then, he is an ordinary prince. Thus, the young man is restless to see life beyond the palace. And he is compassionate when he goes out and sees old and diseased men. Most telling, he is determined to eliminate that suffering. His double-track character has invited comparisons with Christ and with Rama, the gods who became men. One key difference, however, is that the Buddha, while assisted by gods, was not seen as a manifestation of a god; in fact, Buddhism teaches atheism. Another contrast is that whereas Christ was born to reconcile men and God, Gautama's mission was to end human suffering.

Activities As a young prince, Gautama receives instructions in the arts of war and of statesmanship. He is also taught Hindu philosophy by Brahmins (which comes in handy when, after his enlightenment, he has to debate with Brahmins about how his message differs from theirs). Among the pleasures of the palace, he particularly enjoys listening to the singing of women, although 'he did not give in to sensual pleasures.' Also significant, is the comment that while learning the arts of war, 'he did not take instruction in techniques designed to bring suffering,' which is a possible reference to torture. Once married and a father, he carries out the 'normal duties of a householder,' including giving gifts to visitors, especially to Brahmins.

Illustrative moments

Restless How did an ordinary prince become the Buddha? That is the question the *Buddhacarita* sets out to explore, and one answer is that Gautama, like most young men, is restless. Ever since his birth, when the sages declare that he would become a great renouncer, the prince has been swamped with the pleasures of the palace. But the young man is not satisfied. A good illustration of that question spirit occurs early in the story when he is listening to women singing. The idea, from his father, is to make him attached to the world of the senses, but the songs about the forest and fields outside the palace only make him restless to explore beyond its walls. The poet describes him this

way: 'He set his heart on an expedition outside, like an elephant confined in a house.' Once outside the palace, even though the king has cleared the royal highway of poor and sick people and decorated the buildings to hide any blemishes, the Buddha-to-be sees disturbing signs of the suffering that he will then commit himself to eradicate. This is the catalyst to his eventual enlightenment, not a deep philosophical stirring in his mind, but rather a restlessness, a desire to see things beyond his immediate family. And this is one reason why the story is so compelling. Everyone can understand how a teenager, cooped up in his parents' house, would want to get out and see the world. Without that little niggle of dissatisfaction, the young prince would never have gone on to become one of the most famous people in world history.

Compassionate Restlessness, however, was only the trigger and would not, in the life of an ordinary man, lead to the deep analysis of the human condition that underlies the Buddha's enlightenment. That insight required something more, and for Gautama it is his compassion. We have said that his father had 'whitewashed' the world outside the palace, in order to protect his son from discovering poverty and disease, but the gods have a trick up their sleeve. While Gautama is riding about in his chariot, the gods fashion an illusion of an old man, a sick man and then a corpse. The gods know, from his birth, that Gautama possesses compassion but he has not yet had experienced anything for which he might feel empathy. Now, seeing the reality of human life—that we age, get ill and die—Gautama is overcome with compassion and 'felt perturbed, like the mind of a bull on hearing a crashing thunderbolt.' It is a striking image, a thunderbolt that crashes through our complacency and makes us sit up and see reality. And yet, even after such a shake-up, not everyone would have responded as Gautama does by committing himself to the elimination of suffering. Not everyone has his capacity to feel so deeply for others. When he sees the corpse lying on the road (another one of the gods' illusions), the prince is shocked. 'This suffering is the end of all life,' he says to himself, 'and yet no one attempts to stop it. But I will.' And so, for the next four decades Gautama dedicates himself to putting an end to suffering, a compassion extends beyond philosophy to include a broader belief in non-violence, which his followers will use to argue against war and animal sacrifice.

Determined Again, however, compassion would not have been enough to achieve enlightenment without the requisite determination. This is the other impressive element in the character of Gautama, who is still a prince. He has gone beyond the palace and seen the world as it is; he has felt the suffering of people and pledged himself to eradicate it. But how? Transforming the reality of humankind is a colossal undertaking. Throughout the story, the poet uses words like 'steadfast', 'bull-like' and 'undeterred' to describe the effort that Gautama puts into his project. He visits various hermitages and learns from several sages, but none has the answer he needs. And so, in a final attempt to discover the secret of suffering, he sits down beneath the famous fig tree and stubbornly declares, 'I will not rise until I have achieved my goal [enlightenment].' For the next 49 days and nights, Gautama adheres to his vow. For all this time, the demon Mara tries to lure him into rising, reminding him that he is a warrior whose *dharma* [duty] is to fight and not to sit. When that doesn't work, Mara threatens him: 'Rise up, rise up now, or I will shoot my fire arrows into your soft body.' But Gautama ignores all these tricks and remains firm in his resolve. He does not stir, until at the end, he achieves enlightenment. Standing firm against the demons is an extended metaphor to describe the mental battle that Gautama must fight in order to cut through the tangled misconceptions and deep-rooted habits of thought that prevent us from truly understanding our lives. It is a supreme effort, which culminates in a sophisticated analysis of the human condition.

Sudhodana (Protective)

Character Sudhodana is the father of Gautama and king of the Sakhyas. He is presented as a kind but less than intelligent father, who only seeks to shield his son from the world beyond the palace walls. While this can be seen as admirable paternal protectiveness, within the story it functions as representative of the world that Gautama must overcome in order to fulfil his destiny. This tension is essential to understanding Sudhodana's character. On the one hand, he is a typical father (albeit a king), trying to protect his son from harm, whereas he is actually an obstacle to the prince achieving enlightenment and becoming the Buddha. Certainly, he is a compassionate man, and a 'good' king, who is generous and impartial in judgement. And he loves his son deeply and wishes him to succeed him on the throne. But he lacks insight into his son's character and never understands what he really wants. That is the tragedy of Sudhodana. If he has a flaw, it is loving his son so much that he blindly stands in the way of his own happiness.

Activities As the ruler of a kingdom, Sudhodana has many responsibilities. He is constantly receiving visitors, sages and Brahmins, poets and musicians who seek his patronage. Since the birth

of his son, it is said that the king grew richer and richer, his enemies became his allies and his city streets were crowded with merchants and traders. In order to administer such a large and prosperous kingdom, he spends hours each day in his public chamber, meeting guests and listening to petitioners. In addition, the king oversees large-scale public ceremonies and festivals, celebrated in the capital city. An equal amount of time is spent privately, in meditation and prayer.

Illustrative moments

Generous One of the defining traits of Sudhodana's character is generosity. It could not be otherwise, since magnanimity is an essential quality in a king. A ruler's *dharma* (duty) is to patronise Brahmins, poets and artisans. That is what he does. A good example of Sudhodana's generosity is found in the opening chapter, when he invites the great sage, Asita, to the palace to bless the birth of his son, Gautama. When Asita enters the king's chamber, Sudhodana displays his largesse: 'In full gratification for his visit, the king gives him 'rich gifts of gold and jewels, as befits a sovereign.' It is a key scene, and one underlined with irony because Asita will soon predict that the son will renounce becoming a king and become an ascetic. Kingly generosity has been lavished on the very person who announces that a son will defy his father and leave for the forest.

Protective Another key component of Sudhodana's character is his patriarchal desire to protect his son from what he believes will lead him away from his birth-right to become king. As the poet comments, 'Because the great king had heard from the sages that his son would become a renouncer, he feared that he would go to the forest [and become an ascetic] and so he tried to turn him to the pleasures of the palace.' The king, it is said, appealed to the gods, who created a beautiful woman (Yashoda), who becomes Gautama's wife and bears his child. Surely, the king thinks, this will tie my son to the palace. But Gautama expresses a wish to see the outside world and this is the moment we see how desperately the king wants to shield his son. The king agrees to let him go on an expedition, but he carefully stage-manages the event. He banishes all poor and old people from the public highway, and he orders all buildings to be repaired and repainted. Nothing should disturb his son's mind; he should see only beautiful, young people and new buildings. Although exaggerated (after all, it is an epic), the king's plan is easily understood as a desperate move to protect a child from unpleasant experiences. 'He is too young, too fragile,' the king says to himself, just as today any parent might justify measures to restrict what their children see and hear. And, just as is usually the case today, those measures prove ineffective.

Loving The protective, or perhaps the over-protective, father is also a loving father. From the very beginning of the story, his affection for his son is evident, worrying about the destiny predicted for him by the sages and then concerned for his welfare while growing up a prince. But the moment when his love is most movingly illustrated occurs after it has been discovered the prince has fled the palace and gone into the forest to become an ascetic. The scene opens early in the morning after Gautama's nocturnal flight when Gautama's charioteer, Chanda, comes back to the palace alone. Seeing that Gautama is not with him, the whole palace descends into sorrow, wailing and crying, which alerts the king. Sensing that something is amiss, he emerges from his private chamber, where he has been deep in prayer. And when he is told what has happened, he 'swooned with grief and was held up lest he drop to the ground.' The king is placed in a chair, but his mind is so disturbed that he nearly goes mad and begins to babble. Then, hurt and angry that his son has left him, he begins to blame the charioteer for his son's disappearance, 'like a mother bird grieving for the loss of its young.' It is a distressing scene. So great is the sorrow that the usually kind and mild king lashes out at anyone near him. Once again, the poet utilises commonplace human emotions to draw the reader into the story. A father has lost his son. It doesn't matter, on one level, that the son in question is on a quest to become the Buddha. For Sudhodana, he is just a son whom he dearly loves.