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Life of the Buddha  
by Ashva·ghoṣa



Translated by  
**PATRICK OLIVELLE**

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# LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

BY AŚVAGHOṢA

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2008

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CANTO 5  
THE DEPARTURE

5.1

SA TATHĀ VIṢAYAIR vilobhyamānaḥ  
param'ārhair api Śākya|rāja|sūnuḥ  
na jagāma dhṛtiṃ na śarma lebhe,  
hr̥daye siṃha iv' āti|digdha|viddhaḥ.

atha mantri|sutaiḥ kṣamaiḥ kadā cit  
sakhibhiś citra|kathaiḥ kṛt'ānuyātraḥ  
vana|bhūmi|didṛkṣayā śam'ēpsur  
nara|dev'ānumato bahiḥ pratasthe.

nava|rukma|khalīna|kiṅkiṇīkaṃ  
pracalac|cāmara|cāru|hema|bhāṇḍam  
abhiruhya sa Kanthakaṃ sad|śvaṃ  
prayayau ketum iva drum'ābja|ketuḥ.

sa vikṛṣṭatarāṃ van'ānta|bhūmiṃ  
vana|lobhāc ca yayau mahī|guṇāc ca;  
salil'ōrmi|vikāra|sīra|mārgāṃ  
vasu|dhām c' āiva dadarśa kṛṣyamāṇām.

5.5

hala|bhinna|vikīrṇa|śaṣpa|darbhām  
hata|sūkṣma|krimi|kīṭa|jantu|kīrṇām  
samavekṣya rasām tathā|vidhām tām  
sva|janasy' ēva vadhe bhṛṣaṃ śuśoca.

ALTHOUGH, IN this way, the Shakya king's son  
was enticed with priceless objects of sense,  
yet he got no content, found no relief,  
like a lion shot in the heart  
with a poison-tipped arrow.

5.1

Then one day, with the consent of the king,  
he went outside to see the wooded groves,  
along with able sons of ministers  
and friends good at narrating vivid tales,  
yearning to find peace.

He set out mounted on the good horse Kánthaka—  
the bells hanging from its bit were made of new gold,  
its gold trappings made charming with  
    flowing chowries—  
like the glint of *drumábja* mounted on a flag.\*

Love of the woods and the exquisite land  
drew him deep into the distant forest;  
there he saw the earth being plowed, with furrows  
resembling the rippling waves on water.

Clumps of grass dug up by the plow littered the earth,  
covered with tiny dead creatures, insects and worms;  
as he beheld the earth with all these strewn about,  
he grieved greatly, as if a kinsman had been killed.

5.5

kṛṣataḥ puruṣāṃś ca vīkṣamāṇaḥ  
pavan'ârk'âṃśu|rajo|vibhinna|varṇān  
vahana|klama|viklavāṃś ca dhuryān  
param'āryaḥ paramāṃ kṛpāṃ cakāra.

avatīrya tatas turaṅga|pṛṣṭāc  
chanakair gāṃ vyacarac chucā parītaḥ  
jagato janana|vyayaṃ vicinvan  
«kṛpaṇaṃ khalv idam» ity uvāca c' ārtaḥ.

manasā ca viviktatām abhīpsuḥ  
su|hṛdas tān anuyāyino nivārya  
abhitaś cala|cāru|parṇavatya  
vijane mūlam upeyivān sa jambvāḥ.

niṣasāda sa yatra śaucavatyāṃ  
bhuvi vaidūrya|nikāśa|śādvalāyām  
jagataḥ prabhava|vyayau vicinvan  
manasaś ca sthiti|mārgam ālalambe.

5.10 samavāpta|manaḥ|sthitiś ca sadyo  
viṣay'êcch"ādibhir ādhibhiś ca muktaḥ  
sa|vitarka|vicāram āpa śāntaṃ  
prathamam dhyānam an|āsrava|prakāram.

## THE DEPARTURE

Seeing the men plowing the fields,  
their bodies discolored  
by the wind, the dust, the scorching  
rays of the sun,  
oxen wearied by the toil of pulling the plows,  
great compassion overwhelmed that great noble man.

Getting down from the horse, then, he began to pace  
slowly across that land, deeply engulfed by grief,  
reflecting on the birth and death of all creatures;  
and deeply anguished, he cried out:

“How wretched, indeed, is this world!”

Getting rid of those friends who accompanied him,  
wishing to reach some clarity in his own mind,  
he reached the foot of a rose apple tree in a  
lonely spot with charming leaves rustling all around.

On that pure ground with grass the color of beryl,  
he sat down, and as he began to contemplate  
the origin and destruction of all creatures,  
he embarked upon the path of mental stillness.

Achieving at once the state of mental stillness, 5.10  
and freedom from worries, such as sensual desire,  
he attained the first trance—  
with thought and reflection,  
tranquil, uninfluenced by the evil inflows.\*

adhigamya tato viveka|jaṃ tu  
parama|prīti|sukhaṃ manah|samādhim  
idam eva tataḥ paraṃ pradadhyau  
manasā loka|gatiṃ niśāmya samyak:

«kr̥paṇaṃ, bata, yaj|janaḥ svayaṃ sann  
a|vaśo vyādhi|jarā|vināśa|dharmā  
jaray” ārditam āturaṃ mṛtaṃ vā  
param a|jño vijugupsate mad’|āndhaḥ.

iha ced aham īdṛśaḥ svayaṃ san  
vijugupseya paraṃ tathā|svabhāvam,  
na bhavet sa|dṛśaṃ hi tat kṣamaṃ vā  
paramaṃ dharmam imaṃ vijānato me.»

iti tasya vipaśyato yathāvaj  
jagato vyādhi|jarā|vipatti|doṣān  
bala|yauvana|jīvita|pravṛtto  
vijagām’ ātma|gato madaḥ kṣaṇena.

- 5.15 na jaharṣa na c’ āpi c’ ānutepe;  
vicikitsāṃ na yayau na tandri|nidre;  
na ca kāma|guṇeṣu saṃrarañje;  
na vididveṣa paraṃ na c’ āvamene.

## THE DEPARTURE

Thereupon, he attained absorption of the mind,  
born of discernment, with the joy of supreme bliss;  
knowing rightly in his mind the course of the world,  
thereafter he pondered over this very thing:

“How wretched that ignorant man,  
blinded by pride,  
who, though himself powerless  
and subject to the law  
Of disease, old age, and death,  
should treat with contempt\*  
another who’s sick, dead, or oppressed by old age!

If I, being myself like that,  
should treat with contempt\*  
another man here with a nature just like that,  
It would not befit me, and it would not be right,  
I who have come to fathom  
this supreme dharma.”

As he thus saw rightly the evils of the world,  
the evils of disease, old age, and death,  
pride of self in an instant departed from him,  
pride resulting from his strength, youth, and life.

He did not give in to dejection or delight;  
he did not give in to doubt, or to sloth or sleep;  
he felt no attachment to sensual delights;  
he did not hate others or treat them with contempt.

5.15

iti buddhir iyam ca nī|rajaskā  
vavṛdhe tasya mah”|ātmano viśuddhā  
puruṣair a|parair a|dr̥ṣyamānaḥ  
puruṣas c’ ôpasasarpa bhikṣu|veṣaḥ.

nara|deva|sutas tam abhyapṛcchad:  
«vada, ko ’s’ îti?» śaśamaṣa so ’tha tasmai:  
«nara|puṁgava, janma|mṛtyu|bhītaḥ  
śramaṇaḥ pravrajito ’smi mokṣa|hetoḥ.

jagati kṣaya|dharmake mumukṣur  
mṛgaye ’ham śivam a|kṣayaṁ padaṁ tat  
sva|jane ’nya|jane ca tulya|buddhir  
viṣayebhyo vinivṛtta|rāga|doṣaḥ.

nivasan kva cid eva vṛkṣa|mūle  
vijane v” āyatane girau vane vā  
vicarāmy a|parigraho nir|āśaḥ  
param’|ârthāya yath”|ôpapanna|bhaikṣaḥ.»

5.20 iti paśyata eva rāja|sūnor  
idam ukvā sa nabhaḥ samutpapāta;  
sa hi tad|vapur anya|buddha|darśī  
smṛtaye tasya sameyivān div’|âukāḥ.

## THE DEPARTURE

As this awareness, stainless and free of passion,  
began to wax strong in that noble man,  
a man approached him wearing a mendicant's garb,  
unseen by any of the other men.

The son of the king then questioned that man:

“Tell me. Who are you?”

And the man gave him this reply:

“Frightened by birth and death, bull among men,  
I have gone forth as a recluse,  
for the sake of release.

I seek release within this perishable world,  
I seek that holy and imperishable state,  
I regard my own people and others alike,  
love and hate of sensual things  
have been extinguished in me.

Dwelling anywhere at all—under trees,  
a deserted temple, forest or hill—  
I wander without possessions or wants,  
living on almsfood I happen to get,  
in search of the supreme goal.”

Having said this, he flew into the sky,  
even as the son of the king looked on;  
for he was a deity who in that form  
had seen other Buddhas and had come down  
to arouse the attention of the prince.

5.20

gaganam̐ kha|gavad gate ca tasmin  
 nṛ|varaḥ saṃjahr̥ṣe visismiye ca;  
 upalabhya tataś ca dharmā|saṃjñām\*  
 abhiniryāṇa|vidhau matiṃ cakāra.

tata Indra|samo jit'êndriy'âśvaḥ  
 pravivikṣuḥ puram aśvam āruroha;  
 parivāra|janaṃ tv avekṣamāṇas  
 tata ev' âbhimataṃ vanaṃ na bheje.

sa jarā|maraṇa|kṣayaṃ cikīrṣur  
 vana|vāsāya matiṃ smṛtau nidhāya  
 praviveśa punaḥ puraṃ na kāmād  
 vana|bhūmer iva maṇḍalaṃ dvip'êndraḥ.

«sukhitā, bata, nirvṛtā ca sâ strī  
 patir īdr̥kṣa ih' āyat'âkṣa yasyāḥ!»  
 iti taṃ samudīkṣya rāja|kanyā  
 praviśantaṃ pathi s'âñjalir jagāda.

5.25 atha ghoṣam imaṃ mah"âbhra|ghoṣaḥ  
 pariśuśrāva śamaṃ paraṃ ca lebhe;  
 śrutavān sa hi «nirvṛt" êti» śabdaṃ  
 parinirvāṇa|vidhau matiṃ cakāra.

THE DEPARTURE

When he had flown to the sky like a bird,  
that foremost of men was thrilled and amazed;  
then, perceiving that emblem of dharma,\*  
he set his mind on how he might leave home.

Then, that Indra's equal,  
who had controlled the horses of senses,  
    mounted his horse to enter the city;  
out of concern for his men he did not  
go directly to the forest he loved.

Intending to destroy old age and death,  
his mind set on living the forest life,  
    he entered the city again  
unwillingly, like an elephant king  
from the forest entering a corral.

On seeing him entering along the road,  
a royal maiden, her palms joined, exclaimed:

    “Happy, indeed, and fulfilled is the wife,  
    O Long-eyed One,  
    Who has for her husband here such a man!”

Then, as he heard this voice,  
    he obtained supreme calm,  
he whose voice was like that of a great thunder cloud;  
for, as he heard the word “fulfilled,” he set his mind  
on the means to final Nirvanic fulfillment.

5.25

atha kāñcana|śaila|śṛṅga|varṣmā  
 gaja|megha|rṣabha|bāhu|nisvan'|ākṣaḥ  
 kṣayam a|kṣaya|dharma|jāta|rāgaḥ  
 śaśi|siṃh'|ānana|vikramaḥ prapede.

mṛga|rāja|gatis tato 'bhyagacchan  
 nṛ|patiṃ mantri|gaṇair upāsyamānam  
 samitau Marutām iva jvalantaṃ  
 Maghavantaṃ tri|dive Sanatkumāraḥ.

praṇipatya ca s'|āñjalir babhāṣe:  
 «diśa mahyaṃ, nara|deva, sādhu anujñām;  
 parivivrajiṣāmi mokṣa|hetor,  
 niyato hy asya janasya viprayogaḥ.»

iti tasya vaco niśamya rājā  
 kariṇ' ēv' ābhīhato drumas cacāla  
 kamala|pratime 'ñjalau grhītvā  
 vacanaṃ c' ēdam uvāca bāṣpa|kaṇṭhaḥ:

5.30 «pratisaṃhara, tāta, buddhim etāṃ,  
 na hi kālas tava dharmas|saṃśrayasya;  
 vayasi prathame matau calāyāṃ  
 bahu|doṣāṃ hi vadanti dharmas|caryām.

## THE DEPARTURE

Then, in stature like the peak of the golden mount,  
arms of an elephant, voice of a thunder cloud,  
eyes of a bull, gait of a lion, face like the moon,  
he reached the dwelling place  
    with his yearning aroused  
for the dharma that's imperishable.

Then he, with the gait of the king of beasts, approached  
the king attended by the group of ministers,  
as Sanat-kumára in the third heaven approached  
Indra shining in the council of the Maruts.

He prostrated himself with his palms joined and said:

“Kindly grant me permission, O god among men;  
    to gain release, I desire the wandering life,  
For separation is appointed for this man.”

Hearing his words, the king began to shake,  
like a tree struck down by an elephant;  
grasping his hands that looked like lotus buds,  
the king uttered these words, choking with tears:

“Turn back, my son, from this resolution,  
    for it's not the time for you  
    to give yourself to dharma;  
For, when you're young and your mind is fickle,  
    there're many dangers, they say,  
    in the practice of dharma.

5.30

viṣayeṣu kutūhal'ēndriyasya  
vrata|kheḍeṣv a|samartha|niścayasya  
taruṇasya manaś calaty araṇyād  
an|abhijñasya viśeṣato viveke.

mama tu, priya|dharma, dharma|kālas  
tvayi lakṣmīm avasṛjya lakṣma|bhūte;  
sthira|vikrama, vikrameṇa dharmas  
tava hitvā tu guruṃ bhaved a|dharmaḥ.

tad imaṃ vyavasāyam utsṛja tvam,  
bhava tāvan nirato gṛha|stha|dharme;  
puruṣasya vayah|sukhāni bhuktvā  
ramaṇīyo hi tapo|vana|praveśaḥ.»

iti vākyam idaṃ niśamya rājñāḥ  
kalaviṅka|svara uttaraṃ babhāṣe:  
«yadi me pratibhūś caturṣu rājan  
bhavasi tvam na tapo|vanaṃ śrayiṣye.

5.35 na bhaven maraṇāya jīvitam me,  
viharet svāsthyam idam ca me na rogaḥ,  
na ca yauvanam ākṣipej jarā me,  
na ca saṃpattim imāṃ hared vipattiḥ.»

THE DEPARTURE

As objects of sense tend to excite his senses,  
as he can't be firm facing the hardships of vows,  
A young man's mind turns away  
from the wilderness,  
above all as he is not used to solitude.

But for me it is the time for dharma,  
after conferring on you sovereignty,  
you who possess the marks of sovereignty  
O lover of dharma;

But if you leave your father by violating  
the right order, you whose courage is firm,\*  
your dharma will turn into *adhárma*.

So, give up this resolution of yours,  
give yourself for now to household dharma;  
For, when one goes to the ascetic grove  
after he has enjoyed the joys of youth,  
it's truly a wonderful sight!"

Hearing these words of the king, he gave this reply,  
in a voice like that of a *kalavinka* bird:

"If you will become a surety for me  
in four things, O King,  
I will not go to the ascetic grove.

My life shall never be subject to death,  
disease shall not steal this good health of mine,  
Old age shall never overtake my youth,  
no mishap shall rob this fortune of mine."

5-35

iti dur|labham artham ūcivāṃsam  
 tanayaṃ vākyaṃ uvāca Śākya|rājah:  
 «tyaja buddhim imām ati|pravṛttām  
 avahāsyo 'ti|mano|ratho 'kramaś ca.»

atha Meru|gurur gurum babhāṣe:  
 «yadi n' āsti krama eṣa, n' āsmi vāryaḥ;  
 śaraṇāj jvalanena dahyamānān  
 na hi niścikramiṣuḥ kṣamaṃ grahītum.

jagataś ca yadā dhruvo viyogo,  
 nanu dharmāya varaṃ svayaṃ|vīyogaḥ;  
 a|vaśaṃ nanu viprayojayen mām  
 a|kṛta|sv'ārtham a|triptam eva mṛtyuḥ.»

iti bhūmi|patir niśamya tasya  
 vyavasāyaṃ tanayasya nirmumukṣoḥ  
 abhidhāya «na yāsyat' īti» bhūyo  
 vidadhe rakṣaṇam uttamāṃś ca kāmān.

5.40 sacivais tu nidarśito yathāvad  
 bahu|mānāt praṇayāc ca śāstra|pūrvam  
 guruṇā ca nivārito 'śru|pātaiḥ  
 praviveś' āvasathaṃ tataḥ sa śocan—

THE DEPARTURE

To his son making such a hard request,  
the king of the Shakyas made this response:

“Withdraw this your request, it is inordinate;  
An extravagant wish is improper and extreme.”\*

Then that one, mighty as Meru, told his father:

“If that’s not possible, don’t hold me back;  
for it is not right to obstruct a man,  
Who’s trying to escape from a burning house.

When separation is the fixed rule for this world,  
is it not far better for dharma’s sake  
to make that separation on my own?  
Will death not separate me as I stand  
helpless and unfulfilled,  
without reaching my goal?”

When the king thus ascertained the resolve  
of his son in search of final release,  
he exclaimed, “He shall not leave!”  
and made arrangements for security,  
and provided him with choicest pleasures.

But when the ministers had duly counseled him,  
according to scriptures, with deep respect and love;  
and his father had stopped him,  
shedding copious tears,  
sorrowfully, then, he entered his residence—

5.40

cala|kuṇḍala|cumbit' |ânanābhir  
 ghana|niśvāsa|vikampita|stanībhiḥ  
 vanitābhir a|dhīra|locanābhir  
 mṛga|śāvābhir iv' âbhyudīkṣyamāṇaḥ.

sa hi kāñcana|parvat' |âvadāto  
 hṛday' |ônmāda|karo var' |ânganānām  
 śravaṇ' |ânga|vilocan' |âtma|bhāvān  
 vacana|sparśa|vapur|guṇair jahāra.

vigate divase tato vimānaṃ  
 vapuṣā sūrya iva pradīpyamāṇaḥ  
 timiraṃ vijighāṃsur ātma|bhāsā  
 ravir udyann iva Merum āuroha.

kanak' |ôj्jvala|dīpta|dīpa|vṛkṣaṃ  
 vara|kāl' |âguru|dhūpa|pūrṇa|garbham  
 adhiruhya sa vajra|bhakti|citraṃ  
 pravaraṃ kāñcanam āsanaṃ siṣeve.

5.45 tata uttamam uttam' |ânganās taṃ  
 niśi tūryair upatasthur Indra|kalpam  
 Himavac|chiras' |îva candra|gaure  
 Draviṇ' |êndr' |âtmajam apsaro|gaṇ' |âughāḥ.

## THE DEPARTURE

while young women, their faces kissed by their  
dangling earrings, their breasts throbbing with deep  
and constant sighs, their eyes darting hither  
and thither, gazed up at him like young does.

For he, as bright as the golden mountain  
bewitching the hearts of those peerless girls,  
enthralled their ears and limbs, their eyes and selves,  
with his speech and touch, beauty and virtues.

Then, as the day came to an end,  
his body shining like the sun,  
he climbed up to the high palace,  
like the rising sun Mount Meru,  
so as to dispel the darkness  
with the light of his self.

Going up to his inner chamber  
filled with incense of the best black aloe,  
lit by candelabra glistening with gold,  
he sat on a splendid seat made of gold  
and bespeckled with streaks of diamonds.

Then, during that night, splendid girls  
playing their musical instruments  
entertained that equal of Indra, that splendid man,  
as on the Himalayan peak as white as the moon,  
large throngs of *ápsarases* entertained  
the son of the Lord of Wealth.\*

5.45

paramair api divya|tūrya|kalpaiḥ  
 sa tu tair n' āiva ratiṃ yayau na harṣam;  
 param'ārtha|sukhāya tasya sādhor  
 abhiniścikramiṣā yato na reme.

atha tatra surais tapo|variṣṭhair  
 Akaniṣṭhair vyavasāyam asya buddhvā  
 yugapat pramadā|janasya nidrā  
 vihīt" āsīd vikṛtās ca gātra|ceṣṭāḥ—

abhavac chayitā hi tatra kā cid  
 viniveśya pracale kare kapolam  
 dayitām api rukma|pattra|citrām  
 kupit" ēv' āṅka|gatām vihāya vīṇām;

vibabhau kara|lagna|veṇur anyā  
 stana|visrasta|sit'āṃśukā śayānā  
 rju|ṣaṭ|pada|pañkti|juṣṭa|padmā  
 jala|phena|prahasat|taṭā nad" īva;

5.50 nava|puṣkara|garbha|komalābhyām  
 tapanīy'|ōjjvala|saṃgat'āṅgadābhyām  
 svapiti sma tath" ā|parā bhujābhyām  
 parirabhya priyavan mṛdaṅgam eva;

THE DEPARTURE

But even that music of the finest instruments,  
rivaling those of heaven,  
    did not bring him mirth or joy;  
the sole desire of that good man was to leave his home  
in search of ultimate joy;  
therefore, he did not rejoice.

Then, Akaníshtha deities, who  
practiced the best austerities,  
became aware of his resolve;  
at once they made those young women succumb  
    to sleep,  
and in unsightly postures positioned their limbs—

    one was reclining there resting her cheek  
    on her unsteady hand, tossing her lute  
    adorned with gold leaf resting on her lap  
    as if in anger, though she loved it much;

    another sparkled, a flute in her hand,  
    lying down, her white gown slipping  
    from her breasts,  
    looking like a river, its banks laughing with foam,  
    its lotuses relished by a straight row of bees;\*

    another slept embracing her tambour,  
    as if it were her lover, with her hands  
    tender as the hearts of new lotuses,  
    glistening gold armllets linked to each other;

5.50



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Ashva-ghosha's LIFE OF THE BUDDHA is a masterpiece of poetry in the service of religious teaching. The ravishing bodies of the future Buddha's courtesans are lovingly described only to illustrate the ultimate transience of beauty. In sleep, Siddhārtha's lovers reveal their true physical squalidness, provoking him to leave home and go forth on his ascetic quest.

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