



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-VI, Issue-IV, April 2018, Page No. 260-266

UGC Approved Journal Serial No. 47694/48666

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Life of Buddha in the Light of Asvaghosa's Saundarananda

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Abstract

Asvaghosa considered as the father of Sanskrit drama, is attributed with first using the word Kavya. Saundarananda was his unique creation. The Saundarananda Mahakavya consists of 18 cantos with three Śabdālaṅkāra and sixteen Arthālaṅkāra, The language style of Saundarananda is close to Vaidarbha's style. There are six Rasa in this poem. In Saundarananda, the first half of the work describes Nanda's life, and the second half of the work describes Buddhist doctrines and ascetic practices. The epic has both poetic and philosophical values as the poet has named the kavya 'Saundarananda' by combining both the names i.e. Nanda the step brother of Buddha and Nanda's wife Sundari. In other sense when the two names combined together indicate perfect or divine beauty i.e., Saundarananda.

The present article wants to highlight the life sketch of Buddha in the light of Asvaghosa's Saundarananda.

Keywords: Life, Eightfold path, Buddha, Saundarananda.

Introduction: Asvaghosa, a philosopher and poet considered India's greatest poet before Kalidasa (5th century) and the father of Sanskrit drama. He is undoubtedly, first and foremost a poet of versatile genius- a Buddhist monk, a poet of high calibre, a scholar and a devotee, a poet of deep thought, wonderful novelty and wide outlook. He has expressed in his works the dry philosophical and ethical theories in a very beautiful manner. Asvaghosa has been credited with a large number of works but out of these only three are taken to be absolutely authentic. These are Buddhacarita, Saundarananda and Sariputtaprakarana. The first two are Mahakavyas and the third is a Prakarana. Some other ornate works are also attributed to Asvaghosa and the works are – Sraddhotpadasastra, Vajrasuci, and Sutralamkara etc. The Saundarananda Mahakavya consists of 18 cantos with three Śabdālaṅkāra and sixteen Arthālaṅkāra, The language style of *Saundarananda* is close to Vaidarbha's style. There are six Rasa in this poem, i.e. Śāntarasa, Śṛṅgārarasa, Karuṇarasa, Bībhatsarasa, Adbhutarasa and Vīrarasa, with Śāntarasa being dominant and others subordinate (Wang, Bangwei). In Saundarananda, the first half of the work describes

Nanda's life, and the second half of the work describes Buddhist doctrines and ascetic practices. The epic has both poetic and philosophical values as the poet has named the *kavya* 'Saundarananda' by combining both the names i.e. Nanda the step brother of Buddha and Nanda's wife Sundari. In other sense when the two names combined together indicate perfect or divine beauty (Saundarananda-Canto IV, Verse-7).

tām sundarīm cen na labheta nandaḥ sā vā niṣeveta na taṁ nata-bhrūḥ /
dvandvaṁ dhruvaṁ tad vikalaṁ na śobhetānyonya-hīnāv iva rātri-candrau // 4.7 //

Life of Buddha in Asvaghosa's Saundarananda: The Saundarananda Mahakavya starts with a beautiful description of the city Kapilavastu. The city was known as Kapilavastu because it was built into the hermitage of Sage Kapila. Asvaghosa describes eulogistically the life and attainment of sage Kapila and the descendent of Ikṣvaku dynasty. The epic describes how some princes of Ikṣvaku race came to the beautiful and peaceful hermitage of Kapila and lead a forest life and afterwards built a city there and begun to rule by common consent. Then in course of time the kingdom passes to the King Suddhodana (Father of Gautam Buddha).

The Saundarananda has for its subject the conversion of the Buddha's half-brother, Nanda, in the course of which the opportunity is taken to set out at length of the Path to Enlightenment. The 12th canto of the Saundarananda contains a remarkable eulogy of Sraddha, for which the only complete parallel is in an early Mahayana sutra; faith is not merely desire for the Buddha's dharma (Johnston, 1936).

Canto 13: To the Fully Awakened Buddha, by virtue of that confidence, he seemed already to be a success; / And to himself, having been initiated by the Buddha, he felt as though he had arrived already on the better path. // 13.2 //

So that the use of body and voice becomes simple for you, / Make it expansive and open, and guarded, and free from disconnectedness – // 13.11 //

“On the grounds of integrity” is *śaucāt*. *Śauca* is given in the dictionary as 1. cleanness, 2. purity of mind, integrity, honesty (especially in money matters). This verse eludes to the three elements of threefold integrity (*śīla*) within the noble eightfold path. Those three elements are using the voice well, using the body well, and earning a clean living

**prāṇi-dhānya-dhanādīnām varjyānām apratigrahāt /
bhaikṣāṅgānām niṣṭhānām niyatānām pratigrahāt // 13.15 //**

“Repeated practice” is *śīlana*; “the discipline of integrity” is *śīla*. So, *śīla* the discipline of integrity, is so called because it comes from *śīlana*, repeated practice, or constant application.

The meanings of *saṁkalpa* include conception or idea or notion, but also willpower or definite intention, and “an idea or expectation of any advantage.”

Nimittam in the context the Buddha is about to explain means “a woman” or “a man” made into a target. It is necessarily through the senses, each in its own sphere that one must

function in this world. / But not to be seized upon in that realm is an objectified image or any secondary sexual sign // 13.41 //

Canto 14: the epic poem Handsome Nanda, titled “Stepping into Action.”

Canto 15: the epic poem Handsome Nanda, titled “Abandoning Ideas.”

In whatever place of solitude you are, cross the legs in the supreme manner/And align the body so that it tends straight upward thus attended by awareness that is directed...//15.1// So for the giving up, in short, of all these ideas, / Mindfulness of inward and outward breathing my friend, you should make into your own possession. // 15.64 //

Abhijñāsu refers either to five or to six higher powers of knowing. The five powers are called five “mundane” powers – though nowhere in Saundara-nanda does the Buddha himself call them that. The sixth, “supramundane” power, attainable through penetrating insight (Pali: *vipassanā*), is the power of knowing how to eradicate the *āsravas*, those influences that pollute the mind.

Canto 16: Communicating the Noble Truths

**evaṃ mano-dhāraṇayā krameṇa vyapohya kiṃ-cit samupohya kiṃ-cit /
dhyānāni catvāry adhigamya yogī prāpnoty abhijñā niyamena pañca // 16.1 //**

Thus, by methodically taking possession of the mind, getting rid of something and gathering something together, / The practitioner makes the four dhyanas his own, and duly acquires the five powers of knowing // 16.1 //

Ṛddhi-pravekam. The meanings of *ṛddhi* include 1. increase growth, prosperity, success; and 2. Accomplishment, perfection, supernatural power [*abhijñā*]. At the end of a compound, *praveka* means principal or chief.

**ṛddhi-pravekaṃ ca bahu-prakāraṃ parasya cetaś-caritāvabodham /
atīta-janma-smaraṇaṃ ca dīrghaṃ divye viśuddhe śruti-cakṣuṣī ca // 16.2 //**

The principal transcendent power, taking many forms; then being awake to what others are thinking; / And remembering past lives from long ago; and divine lucidity of ear; and of eye. // 16.2 //

The 1st pāda has been translated in such a way as to allow the reading that “taking many forms,” i.e. versatility or adaptability, is the principal transcendent power.

In middle of Canto 16 of Saundarananda, Buddha expounds to Nanda the Eightfold Path as the last constitutes of Four Noble Truths:

**asyābhyupāyo 'dhigamāya mārgaḥ prajñā-trikalpaḥ praśama-dvikalpaḥ /
sa bhāvanīyo vidhivad budhena śīle śucau tripramukhe sthitena // 16.30 //**

A means for gaining that end is the path of threefold wisdom and twofold tranquility. It is to be cultivated by a wakeful person working to principle – abiding in untainted threefold integrity.

The method to attain this (cessation of defilements) is the path which consists of threefold Insight (Prajna) and twofold Quiescence (prasama). It should be practiced appropriately by the wise who abides in the threefold pure discipline (Sila) (Choi, Jin Kyoung: 2010).

**vāk-karma samyak saha-kāya-karma yathāvad ājīva-nayaś ca śuddhaḥ /
idaṁ trayam vṛtta-vidhau pravṛttaṁ śīlāśrayaṁ dharma-parigrahāya // 16.31 //**

Using the voice well and the body well in tandem, and making a clean living in a suitable manner: / These three, pertaining to conduct, are for the mastery, based on integrity, of one's dharma-duty. // 16.31 //

satyeṣu duḥkhādiṣu dṛṣṭir āryā samyag-vitarkaś ca parākramaś ca /

idaṁ trayam jñāna-vidhau pravṛttaṁ prajñāśrayaṁ kleśa-parikṣayāya // 16.32 //

Noble insight into suffering and the other truths, along with thinking straight, and initiative:/These three, pertaining to know-how, are for dissolution, based on wisdom, of the afflictions. // 16.32 //

nyāyena satyābhigamāya yuktā samyak smṛtiḥ samyag atho samādhiḥ /

idaṁ dvayaṁ yoga-vidhau pravṛttaṁ śamāśrayaṁ citta-parigrahāya // 16.33 //

True mindfulness, properly harnessed so as to bring one close to the truths; and true balance: / These two, pertaining to practice, are for mastery, based on tranquility, of the mind. // 16.33 //

Three Class-Eightfold path model in Johnston's Edition of the Saundarananda is given below (Johnston, E.H., 1928):

Sila (16:31)	Samyag vakkarman
	Samyak sahakayakarman
	Samyag ajiva-naya
Prajna(16:32)	Samyag dristi
	Samyag Vitarka
	Samyak parakrama
Sama (Samadhi) (16:33)	Samyak smṛti
	Samyak samadhi

Nidāna, cause, is as in the 12 *nidāna* which form the links in 12-fold dependent arising.

Nāma-rūpa is the 4th in the 12 links in the dependent arising of suffering.

dravyaṁ yathā syat kaṭukaṁ rasena tac copayuktaṁ madhuraṁ vipāke /

tathaiva vīryaṁ kaṭukaṁ śrameṇa tasyārtha-siddhau madhuro vipākaḥ // 16.93 //

Just as a fruit may have flesh that is bitter to the taste and yet is sweet when eaten ripe, / So heroic effort, through the struggle it involves, is bitter and yet, in accomplishment of the aim, its mature fruit is sweet. // 16.93 //

The meanings of *vīrya*, one of the six transcendent accomplishments (*pāramitā*), include manliness, valour, energy, and heroism. From here to the end of Canto 16, *vīrya* has been translated "directed energy."

Canto 17: In context *amṛtādhigama* describes Nanda's success in making into his own possession the Buddha's timeless truth of a remedy to end all suffering. One aspect of *amṛta* that the Canto title alludes to, then, is the deathless nature of the four noble truths, the eternal validity of which is akin to $2 + 2 = 4$. But another aspect of *amṛta* is that, as the heavenly nectar, its taste is so sweet that it is like pure liquid joy. That being so, Nanda's obtaining of the nectar represents the fulfillment of the Buddha's promises that Nanda's bitter struggles, if he sticks to principle, will – as sure as night follows day – eventually bring the sweet taste of success.

**athaivam ādeśita-tattva-mārgo nandas tadā prāpta-vimokṣa-mārgaḥ /
sarveṇa bhāvena gurau praṇamya kleśa-prahāṇāya vanam jagāma // 17.1 //**

Having thus had pointed out to him the path of what is, Nanda took that path of liberation. / He bowed with his whole being before the Guru and, with a view to abandoning the afflictions, he made for the forest. // 17.1 //

Tattva-mārga, the path of what is, or *vimokṣa-mārga*, the path of liberation, means the noble eightfold path, described by the Buddha in Canto 16 under the three headings of *śīla* (integrity), *prajñā* (wisdom), and *śama* (peace). This Canto describes Nanda's progressing on that path all the way to the fourth fruit of dharma, the worthy state of the arhat.

**rjuṃ samagraṃ praṇidhāya kāyaṃ kāye smṛtiṃ cābhimukhīṃ vidhāya /
sarvendriyāṇy ātmani saṃnidhāya sa tatra yogaṃ prayataḥ prapede // 17.4 //**

By first directing the whole body up, and thus keeping his awareness turned towards the body, / And thus integrating in his person all the senses, there he threw himself all-out into practice. // 17.4 //

Jñānena lokyena. E.H.J. noted that *lokyā* is equivalent to *laukika* (of the world, mundane, ordinary, not sacred; see verse 17), which in turn is equivalent to *sāsrava* (still being possessed of the polluting influences, by which one is attached to *saṃsāra*). *Lokottara* ('supramundane,' world-beating, extraordinary, transcendent; see verse 22) is equivalent to *anāsrava* (being free of the pollutants). Describing *jñāna* as *lokyā*, then, distinguishes such knowing from the sixth of the six transcendent powers of knowing (*abhijñāḥ*), which is the power to rid the mind of pollutants. *Śīlena* is to be understood here, since *śīla* also – like *prajñā* and *samādhi* – can be either *laukika* (mundane, subject to the influence of the pollutants) or *lokottara* ('supramundane,' beyond the influence of the pollutants). The suggestion would thus be that Nanda progressed by the threefold means of mundane knowing (*jñānena lokyena*), mundane discipline (*śīlena lokyena*), and mundane tranquility (*śamena lokyena*), this threefold categorization mirroring the three sub-headings of the noble-eightfold path, viz. *prajñā*, *śīla*, *samādhi*. Aśvaghōṣa uses *manasvin* in its primary sense of being full of mind, bright, intelligent. As a secondary sense, however, the dictionary gives “fixing the mind, attentive.”

Canto 18: the Canto title *ājñā-vyākaraṇaḥ* might be translated “Giving Affirmation of Deep Knowledge” or, in short, “Affirming of Knowing.”

iḍyām is a corruption here for *ijyām*, which occurs occasionally in Buddhist works in the sense of *pūjā* (honour, worship, respect). *Uttamāṅge* (fr. *uttama* + *aṅga*) is lit. "to the highest part of the body." *Paramārtha* is as in *paramārthataḥ*, the word that Nāgārjuna uses in distinguishing between conventional truth (*loka-samvṛti-satyam*) and ultimate truth (*satya paramārthata*). In this verse, however, the Buddha's emphasis seems to be more practical than philosophical.

Saundarananda depicts the views of Mahayana and methods about the path of salvation as instructed by his ever helping brother Buddha, Nanda finally attained salvation and gradually gained the higher and higher stages of the true knowledge, freedom malice and reach to the gate of heaven. The epic ends with the spread out of Dharma by Nanda as directed by Buddha who ordered him not to be satisfied within his own liberation but to help others by showing them the path of enlightenment.

In fact Saundarananda is an honest attempt for those who leads a reckless life of self indulgence and devoted themselves to the worldly passions and enjoyments and become distracted from the path of salvation. In the words of the poet in the concluding verses, the poet shows the reason for adopting the Kavya style to capture the minds of the reader like the words of beautiful wives and tries to open their eyes and convince them about the great merits of non attachment, self control and austerity and make them a virtuous one.

Conclusion: From the above discussion it is clear that life of Buddha colorfully mentioned Asvaghos' Saundarananda. The second half work of the Saundarananda describes Buddhist doctrines and ascetic practices which are very relevant in the present context. In some teachings, like the Buddha's four noble truths are well represented both on and below the surface. Asvaghosa proceedings the Buddha's statement of the four noble truths as: *iti duḥkham etad "This is suffering. iyam asya samudaya-latā pravartikā. This is the tangled mass of causes producing it. śāntir iyam. This is cessation. ayam upāya iti. Here is a means"* (Saundarananda, SN 3.12). Here the fourth noble truth is not expressed in terms of a metaphor. *Upāya* means that by which one reaches one's aim, an expedient of any kind, a means-whereby (Mike, C.). Saundarananda Canto 6 describes Sundari performing the same abduction of the arms while gasping and going red (SN 6.27) and when indeed in SN Canto 12 describes the shocked Nanda seeming to go white (SN 12.8). Saundara-nanda, a poem that tells the story of the Buddha's younger brother Nanda, who is notably good-looking (*saundara*) and whose name (*nanda*) means "Joy." Below the surface, *saundara-nanda* can be understood to mean "beautiful joy"- in which case *saundara-nanda* is a word by which Aśvaghosa may have intended, again, to suggest the beauty and joy of just sitting.

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