

Portrayal of the Didactic through the Narrative The structure of Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*

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Abstract

At the end of his text, the *Buddhacarita*, Aśvaghōṣa has written that he has composed this poem for the good and happiness of the people, in accordance with the Sage's Scriptures and out of reverence for the Buddha. The importance that he has accorded to disseminating the doctrine is evident from his emphasis on the discourse. However, this discourse is not communicated in the manner in which one would expect, and this may be attributed to the structure of the text. Since the *Buddhacarita* is a hagiography that traces the life of the Buddha from his birth till the attainment of *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, the expected student-teacher dialogue between the Buddha and his disciples is not present in the first half of the text (until his attainment of *nirvāṇa*). However, this does not mean that there are no such interactions. In this paper, I have examined the interesting manner in which the doctrine has been communicated by Aśvaghōṣa, through the agency of others, as prince Siddhārtha gradually proceeds to his ultimate position as the teacher of the doctrine, and after that as well. The manner in which Aśvaghōṣa has encapsulated the doctrine within the framework of a story, makes it interesting for the reader to probe the fascinating author/speaker and audience/listener dynamic in this text.

Introductory Remarks

The *Buddhacarita*, a hagiographical account of the life of the Buddha, has been composed and compiled by Aśvaghōṣa. Of its twenty-eight cantos, a little less than half is available in the original Sanskrit, but complete translations in Chinese and Tibetan have been preserved. A. K. Warder has said that this poem falls naturally into four distinct parts of equal lengths – seven cantos each – and these correspond to the four stages of the Buddha’s life. First comes the birth and youth, culminating in his renunciation of worldly life and departure to the forest for living the life of an ascetic. The second quarter of the text ends with the attainment of Enlightenment, after a long quest of studying with various teachers and defeating Māra. The third quarter narrates how the Buddha, by teaching, made his realizations available to all beings. The last quarter describes the events leading up to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, his cremation, the enshrinement of his ashes, and the final redistribution of the ashes in *stūpas* constructed by king Aśoka.¹

A unique feature of this text is that it was composed in a style that made it distinct from the scriptural or canonical works (*āgama*), the tradition or history (*itihāsa*) and the systematic treatises on specific subjects (*śāstra*). This style of writing – *kāvya* – refers to “literature as a form of art”.² Warder has regarded the works of Aśvaghōṣa as representing an example of a, “fully developed *kāvya* epic and drama”.³ Vidya Dehejia has also said that the *Buddhacarita* is a well-planned work, written in Sanskrit by an accomplished poet with a developed skill in the use of the style of ornate court poetry (*kāvya*).⁴ She has pointed

¹ A. K. Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature, Vol. 2: Origins and Formation of the Classical Kāvya*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1972, pp. 146, 147.

² A. K. Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature, Vol. 1: Literary Criticism*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1972, p. 1.

³ Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 142. Warder has said that Vālmīki is referred to as the ‘First Kavi’, and the Rāmāyaṇa was the first epic *kāvya*. However, this genre did not remain static and the pioneers of the epic *kāvya* after Vālmīki transformed it from a continuous narrative to a chain of independent stanzas. Aśvaghōṣa was not the ‘great innovator’ of this new style, but he was one of the poets of the time, who used it in his works. Warder, while praising Aśvaghōṣa’s skills as a writer, has said, “His genius was such that he evidently could take all the intricacies of theory – of language, poetics, the science of pleasure *kāma* and other incidental props of writing – in his stride, and find the process exhilarating and productive of the most spontaneous caprices of his poetic wit”. See, Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vol. 2, pp. 76, 145, 172.

⁴ Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1997, p. 68.

out that Aśvaghōṣa was as much a court poet, trained in the *kāvya* style, as he was a Buddhist ecclesiast.⁵ These two dimensions of Aśvaghōṣa's identity are evident in the praise written for the *Buddhacarita* by Yi-Jing, a seventh century Buddhist monk and traveller. Yi-Jing, as cited by Dehejia, wrote that the *Buddhacarita*, "...is widely read or sung throughout the five divisions of India, and the countries of the South Sea. He (Aśvaghōṣa) clothes manifold meanings and ideas in a few words, which rejoice the heart of the reader so that he never feels tired from reading the poem. Besides, it should be counted as meritorious for one to read this book, inasmuch as it contains the noble doctrine given in a concise form".⁶

This aim of putting across the doctrine has been indicated by Aśvaghōṣa himself at the end of the last Canto of the *Buddhacarita*. He has said that he has composed this poem for the good and happiness of the people, in accordance with the Sage's Scriptures and out of reverence for the Buddha, not to demonstrate his qualities of learning or skill in poetry.⁷ The importance that he has accorded to disseminating the doctrine of the Buddha, as contained in the canonical texts, is evident from his emphasis on discourse. In this regard, Warder has said that the works of Aśvaghōṣa are "highly doctrinal" and put forward the Buddha's teachings in full detail.⁸ In fact, he is of the opinion that the *Buddhacarita* is much fuller in terms of putting forward a detailed doctrine than the various recensions of the *Tripitaka*.⁹ He regards this text as superior even in terms of its skilful presentation. This is because the points are made immediately clear rather than relying on the heavy and repetitive style of the original canonical *sūtras*. Thus, Aśvaghōṣa has, "...simply improved the clarity and acceptability of the exposition without – as far as one can see – modifying the content as he received it through his school".¹⁰ In fact, Warder has pointed out that, later on, the Buddhist scholars valued and appreciated Aśvaghōṣa's works, as statements of the Buddhist doctrine, and they borrowed and quoted from him quite often.¹¹

⁵ Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, p. 69.

⁶ Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*, p. 68.

⁷ *Buddhacarita* (henceforth referred to as *B.*), xxviii. 74., tr. E. H. Johnston, *Aśvaghōṣa's Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*, Part III, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1995 (First Edition: Lahore, 1936).

⁸ Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 169.

⁹ Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 169.

¹⁰ Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 170.

¹¹ Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 170.

While the portrayal of the discourse, especially in the form of teacher-student interactions, is present throughout the text, it is not always communicated in the manner in which one would expect. In this paper, I have argued that a likely reason for this can be attributed to the structure of the text. Since the *Buddhacarita* is a hagiography that traces the life of the Buddha from his birth till the attainment of *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, the expected student-teacher dialogue between the Buddha and his disciples is not present in the first half of the text (until his attainment of *nirvāṇa*). However, since this appears to have been Aśvaghōṣa's primary aim of writing this text, this does not mean that there are no such interactions in the first fourteen cantos. The prince Siddhārtha (who is not yet the Buddha or the "Enlightened One") is often portrayed as the student and the technique of using monologues and dialogues to put across the discourse is also often utilized. In this paper, I have examined the interesting manner in which Aśvaghōṣa communicated the doctrine through the agency of others, as prince Siddhārtha gradually proceeded to his ultimate position as the teacher of the doctrine. I have also examined how Aśvaghōṣa has represented the Buddha's teachings followed by 'conversions' after his attainment *nirvāṇa*, and the manner in which this can be contrasted with discourses communicated by the other teachers of the Buddhist doctrine. The manner in which Aśvaghōṣa has balanced the two elements of telling a story and communicating the doctrine has given rise to an interesting structure of the discourse.

The prince as a student

The first teacher-student dialogue is depicted as taking place between the *Śuddhādhivāsa* deities¹² (who functioned and spoke through the charioteer) and the prince when the latter insisted on visiting the city. These deities taught him about the realities of life, at a time when all others were deliberately trying to hide it from him. They made the prince witness old age, sickness and death.¹³ These realizations, which are clearly laid out in statements made by the prince

¹² The *Śuddhādhivāsa* deities have been mentioned very frequently as aiding the Buddha in leaving the palace and renouncing the world, despite obstructions by the king and the prince's companions. Olivelle has referred to them as 'Gods of the pure realm', and he has mentioned that they are a particular class of deities within Buddhist mythology. See Patrick Olivelle, *Life of the Buddha*, New York University Press, New York, 2009, p. 434, n. 1.20.

¹³ *B.*, iii. 26. onwards, *B.*, iii. 40. onwards, and *B.*, iii. 54. onwards, tr. Johnston (Part II).

while talking to the charioteer, spurred him to renounce.¹⁴ Thus, since this text depicts the journey that culminates in the Buddha becoming a teacher, the initial instances of the teacher-student interaction constitute discourses being imparted to him, rather than by him. This is also evident in the prince's interaction with the mendicant (actually a heavenly being who had come to show him the path that he was to take – that of a *śramaṇa*). Once again the prince is described as a student who learned from the mendicant about how a renunciate is supposed to live his life.¹⁵

The prince is also depicted as the student in Canto XII, when he visited his first teacher, the sage Arāḍa. However, it is interesting that the teacher is portrayed as speaking to this particular student with “reverence”.¹⁶ Also, sage Arāḍa told him that he was exempt from the rules that normally bind a teacher and a pupil. He said that the doctrine was generally taught only when the student had been tested. However, considering the depth of character and resolution of the prince, he said, “...I need not put you to an examination”. The prince used various metaphors to refer to the kind of guidance that he wanted from this teacher, and this included the correlation between sight and light, travelling and a guide, and a river and a boat. He asked Arāḍa to explain to him how one could attain release from old age, death and disease.¹⁷ This was followed by the teacher's discourse on the senses, the objects of the senses, the *dharma* (as it was laid out in the *śāstras*), the manner in which one could practice concentrated meditation, and finally, the steps for attaining liberation.¹⁸ It is interesting that even here the prince was placed above the teacher, and this is clear from the fact that he was referred to (by Arāḍa) as – ‘O knower of the nature of things’,¹⁹ ‘O knower of the right means’,²⁰ ‘O prince free from attachment’,²¹ ‘O prince free from delusion’,²² and so on. It is also crucial to note that, at the end, after

¹⁴ For instance, on seeing an old man and on being told by the charioteer that he will not be exempt from such a fate, he is portrayed as saying, “Thus old age strikes down indiscriminately memory and beauty and valor, and yet with such a sight before its eyes the world is not perturbed”. See, *B.*, iii. 36., tr. Johnston (Part II).

¹⁵ *B.*, v. 17. to *B.*, v. 20., tr. Johnston (Part II).

¹⁶ *B.* xii. 4., tr. Olivelle.

¹⁷ *B.*, xii. 13. and *B.*, xii. 14., tr. Johnston (Part II).

¹⁸ *B.*, xii. 17. to *B.*, xii. 65., tr. Johnston (Part II).

¹⁹ *B.*, xii. 18., tr. Johnston (Part II).

²⁰ *B.*, xii. 30., tr. Johnston (Part II).

²¹ *B.*, xii. 31., tr. Johnston (Part II).

²² *B.*, xii. 34., tr. Johnston (Part II).

listening to the sage, the prince stated that this doctrine would not lead to “final beatitude”.²³ Aśvaghōṣa had written, the prince “...was not satisfied on learning the doctrine of Arāḍa, and, discerning that it was incomplete, he turned away from there”.²⁴ It is mentioned that after this, he went to the hermitage of Udraka, but did not accept his system either.²⁵ These statements can be seen as leading up to Canto XV, in which the Buddha proclaimed himself as ‘*svayambhū*’ or the ‘originator’ of the doctrine.²⁶

Dialogues and monologues

There are instances in the text where the prince is portrayed as having realizations regarding knowledge, and these are sometimes shared with the portrayed listeners, but more often, they are not. Thus, the embedded discourse is presented in the form of dialogues and monologues. For instance, in Canto IV, when the women were trying to seduce the prince and lure him away from his urge to renounce, the prince is portrayed as almost giving a discourse about the impermanence of life to the women and the *purohita*’s son, Udāyin. However, a closer reading suggests that he was not addressing them directly, but rather referring to their ignorance in the third person.²⁷ The fact that there was no response from them also indicates that this is a silent monologue that the prince may have been thinking of rather than voicing aloud. While it may have been a monologue, as far as the ‘listeners’ in the text were concerned, it is an indirect discourse for the ‘audience’.²⁸ This may reflect a strategy employed by Aśvaghōṣa to describe the teachings of the Buddha before portraying his renunciation. This monologue/discourse is evident in Canto V as well, when the prince realized the impermanence of life.²⁹

²³ *B.*, xii. 69., tr. Johnston (Part II).

²⁴ *B.*, xii. 83., tr. Johnston (Part II).

²⁵ *B.*, xii. 84., tr. Johnston (Part II).

²⁶ *B.*, xv. 4., tr. Johnston (Part III).

²⁷ *B.*, iv. 56., tr. Johnston (Part II).

²⁸ It is crucial, at this point, to highlight the difference between what I mean by the ‘audience’ (that is, the readers) of the text, and the ‘listeners’ in the text. In the context of this specific example, while the portrayed listeners may have been the women and Udāyin, the intended audience were those who read or heard the recitation of the *Buddhacarita*, at a later stage. Thus, while this discourse was not communicated to the portrayed listeners, it was indirectly being communicated to the audience of the text. While this author/speaker and audience/listener dynamic, as portrayed in the *Buddhacarita*, forms a fascinating study in itself, it lies beyond the scope of this paper, but it is still worth mentioning as such demarcations are vital for the reader.

²⁹ *B.*, v. 12. to *B.*, v. 64., tr. Johnston (Part II).

However, this strategy was not used all the time, and there are instances during his ‘studentship’ when the prince is often depicted as giving a discourse. The discourse given to the charioteer Chandaka, in order to convince the latter of his decision to renounce, marks the first instance of such a discourse. The prince asked Chandaka to return his ornaments to his father, and tell him that he had entered the penance grove. This is followed by a dialogue in which he tried to convince Chandaka about the impermanence of life and the certainty of death, as well as the fact that his ancestors had also followed this path of renunciation. Chandaka tried to persuade him to return because he did not deem this to be the correct age for him to renounce. He also quoted *dharma* and referred to the prince’s emotional ties with his family members. However, the prince reiterated his point about the inevitability of separation, and sent Chandaka and the horse Kanthaka back to the palace.³⁰

The conversation between the prince and the minister and *purohita* in Canto IX also took the shape of a discourse in which the views of the Buddha related to the inevitability of death, the contrasts between the lifestyle of an ascetic and that of a king, and the *āśrama* system were described by the author.³¹ This is also the case with the interaction between Siddhārtha and King Śreṇya. The discourse that followed this interaction mainly focused on the manner in which one should not fall prey to the objects of the senses, and specifically addressed the transitory nature of kingship (since he is portrayed as addressing a king).³² It is interesting to note that, while the prince is portrayed as giving a discourse to the king and advising him about the transient nature of kingship and the pull of the objects of the senses, he is portrayed as ending the conversation by saying, “...enter into the glories of sovereignty, O king, observe your own *dharma*”. Thus, although Aśvaghōṣa has woven in the discourse of the Buddha in the dialogue, he has not yet portrayed the listeners in the text as students of the Buddha.³³

An intriguing monologue, takes place in Canto VII, in which the prince is once again portrayed as a student. However, he is portrayed as a student, who learnt and subsequently rejected what he had learnt. When the prince went to the hermitage of the descendants of Bhṛgu, he inquired about their “method of *dharma*”, and what they had resolved to achieve. This inquiry can be deemed

³⁰ *B.*, vi. 13. to *B.*, vi. 53., tr. Johnston (Part II).

³¹ *B.*, ix. 31. to *B.*, ix. 51., tr. Johnston (Part II).

³² *B.*, xi. 2. to *B.*, xi. 50. and *B.*, ix. 55., tr. Johnston (Part II).

³³ *B.*, xi. 70., tr. Johnston (Part II).

as genuine from the statement, “As I have never seen a hermitage till to-day, I am unacquainted with this method of *dharma*. Will you therefore kindly explain to me what is your resolve and to what point it is directed?”³⁴ The brahmins referred to their food habits, the austerities practiced by them, the rituals they performed on a daily basis,³⁵ and their desire for attaining ‘*divam*’³⁶ (which has been translated by Johnston as ‘Paradise’³⁷ and by Olivelle as ‘heaven’).³⁸ The fact that he learnt from them but rejected their teachings, and subsequently charted his own path is evident from the monologue, in which he did not teach them what he believed to be the correct way, but rather thought to himself what he regarded as incorrect. The prince was of the opinion that ‘*divam*’ was in itself a form of bondage. He also questioned the relevance of the food restraints that were imposed and the rituals that were practiced.³⁹ The author has stated, “...examining the austerities, and after considering them all and forming a judgement on them, he departed from that place of austerities”.⁴⁰

This may be viewed as an attempt to show the prince as exploring different existing paths before he propounded his own doctrine. Thus, the students of such monologues were probably meant to be the actual audience, without the presence of an intermediary listener in the text. While the prince did not regard the ascetic brahmins as his ‘teachers’ (considering the fact that he rejected what they had told him), it is interesting to note that these brahmins were portrayed as redirecting him to his first teacher, sage Arāḍa. However, here too it was ‘perceived’ by the brahmin speaker that the prince would reject his views and leave him (despite the fact that Arāḍa is referred to as one who had “gained insight into final bliss”).⁴¹

Another discourse, described by Aśvaghōṣa, which took place in the form of a silent, contemplative monologue, is in Canto XIV. This section of the text describes the prince’s attainment of enlightenment, in which Siddhārtha remembered his past lives and realized the karmic impact of indulging in sense

³⁴ *B.*, vii. 12., tr. Johnston (Part II).

³⁵ *B.*, vii. 14. to *B.*, vii. 17., tr. Johnston (Part II).

³⁶ Aśvaghōṣa: *Buddhacarita*, http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/5_poetry/2_kavya/asvbc_1u.htm, accessed on 21/01/2015 at 10:13 PM.

³⁷ *B.*, vii. 18., tr. Johnston (Part II).

³⁸ *B.*, vii. 18., tr. Olivelle.

³⁹ *B.*, vii. 21., and *B.*, vii. 28. to *B.*, vii. 33., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁴⁰ *B.*, vii. 34., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁴¹ *B.*, vii. 54. and *B.* vii. 55., tr. Olivelle.

pleasures, as well as the different levels of consciousness, which finally led to the state of omniscience.⁴²

Transition from student to teacher

At this point, in Canto XIV, the transition from a ‘prince’ to a ‘sage’ takes place. However, he is still not portrayed as a teacher. In fact, there is a point after the attainment of enlightenment, where the sage is depicted as wishing to remain immobile rather than teaching, because he felt that the doctrine of salvation was exceedingly subtle and the world was lost in ‘false views’ and ‘vain efforts’.⁴³ He is portrayed as being coaxed out of this thought-process by two chiefs of the heavenly realm. They encouraged him to rescue the world that was ‘drowning in suffering’.⁴⁴

After attaining enlightenment, the sage was asked by a ‘pious mendicant’ who his Guru was, from whom he had learnt this accomplishment. The sage is portrayed as replying that he did not have a teacher and he had ‘obtained’ *nirvāṇa*, and was the ‘*svayambhū*’ or the ‘originator’ of the doctrine.⁴⁵ He also clearly proclaimed that he had comprehended all that there was to be comprehended, and that which others had not comprehended, and therefore, he categorically stated, “...I am a Buddha”.⁴⁶ This marks the transition of the terminology used to address the Buddha from ‘prince’ to ‘sage’ and finally to ‘the Buddha’. This is reiterated in a later section of the Canto where the Buddha is portrayed as saying, “...for salvation’s sake I developed eyesight for an unprecedented method of the Law, *which had been hitherto unheard of*”.⁴⁷ (Emphasis mine.)

After this, he proclaimed to the mendicant that he was on his way to preach the “deathless Law” to those who were “harassed by suffering”.⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, the Buddha is portrayed as proclaiming that he does not have a teacher, and he has originated the *dharma*. On the other hand, he is portrayed as emphasizing on his future role as a teacher to many. With respect to the author’s portrayal of the teacher-student relationship, this may imply that

⁴² *B.* xiv. 6. to *B.* xiv. 86., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁴³ *B.* xiv. 96., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁴⁴ *B.* xiv. 101., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁴⁵ *B.*, xv. 4., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁴⁶ *B.*, xv. 5., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁴⁷ *B.*, xv. 38., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁴⁸ *B.*, xv. 6., tr. Johnston (Part III).

this relationship was only relevant when the Buddha takes the role of a teacher, and not when he was the student, and sage Arāḍa, Udraka Rāmaputra or the ascetic brahmins at Bhṛḡu's *āśrama* were the teachers.

It is also noteworthy that after deciding to preach the tranquillity that he had experienced, the Buddha is portrayed as first thinking about his teachers – Arāḍa and Udraka, in order to go and teach them. However, after realizing that they were no longer alive, he decided to go to the five mendicants.⁴⁹ This is quite fascinating because Aśvaghōṣa has put forward a reversed teacher-student dynamic.

The interactions with the five mendicants are interesting because these mendicants are portrayed as transitioning from associates of the prince to the first students of the enlightened Buddha. Hints of this transition are indicated by the author right from the beginning of their interactions (even before he attained *nirvāṇa*). For instance, it is written that they saw him and, “desiring liberation”, approached him. It is also stated, “...they served him reverently, abiding as pupils under his orders...”⁵⁰ While the prince is almost depicted as their teacher, it is interesting that he is portrayed as practicing the same severe austerities to end the cycle of birth and death, and in fact, this was a practice that they had vowed to follow before they even met him.⁵¹ This path was later rejected by the prince due to the belief that the desired result could not be attained by one who was worn out and exhausted due to hunger and thirst.⁵² The five mendicants (who had earlier approached him as his pupils) decided to leave him because they thought that he had “renounced the holy life”.⁵³

Thus, when the Buddha went to the mendicants after his enlightenment, the mendicants criticized him because they felt that he had chosen a path of ease and abandoned the path of severe austerities.⁵⁴ However, despite this, they are still

⁴⁹ *B.*, xiv. 106., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁵⁰ *B.* xii. 92. and *B.* xii. 93., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁵¹ *B.* xii. 91. to *B.* xii. 95., tr. Johnston (Part II). Although not directly related to the issue at hand, it is significant to note that Aśvaghōṣa has glorified the prince even in the state of emaciation that was brought on by these austerities. This can be contrasted with the Buddha's firm stance against the severe austerities and self-mortification practiced by the naked ascetic Kassapa as portrayed in the *Dīgha-nikāya*. See *DN.*, 8.15. and *DN.*, 8.16., tr. Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995, and *B.* xii. 97. to *B.* xii. 99., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁵² *B.* xii. 103., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁵³ *B.* xii. 114., tr. Johnston (Part II).

⁵⁴ *B.*, xv. 17., tr. Johnston (Part III).

represented as treating him with respect and reverence. For instance, it is stated, “Showing Him many attentions...they all treated him as their Guru...”⁵⁵ This may reflect the manner in which Āśvaghōṣa’s perception of the Buddha (as his teacher) had an impact on the depiction of these interactions. Another possibility is that since the mendicants were in any case going to become his students, the author may have created such a description in order to ultimately lead up to that moment.

The first proper teacher-student interaction that is portrayed in the *Buddhacarita* takes place in Canto XV, when the mendicants questioned him about why he abandoned severe austerities, and expressed skepticism regarding his attainments.⁵⁶ The Buddha is, in turn, portrayed as questioning the role of severe austerities on the path to enlightenment while also speaking against severe indulgences.⁵⁷ He laid down the teachings associated with the ‘Middle Path’⁵⁸ and the ‘Eightfold Path’.⁵⁹ With this portrayal of students who are active listeners in the text, the teachings were no longer recorded in the form of a monologue.

Discourses followed by ‘conversions’

There are many instances of discourses followed by ‘conversion’ in the second half of the *Buddhacarita*. In fact, Canto XVI has been translated by Johnston as “Many Conversions” (although he has acknowledged in a footnote that the literal translation would have actually been “Having/Who has many disciples”).⁶⁰ This Canto refers to the manner in which many people became a part of the Buddhist fold. This is evident in the Buddha’s interactions with Yaśas and King Śreṇya in Canto XVI;⁶¹ the brahmin Upatiṣya and the brahmin who went on to become the Arhat Mahākāśyapa in Canto XVII;⁶² the wealthy householder Sudatta in Canto XVIII;⁶³ the Buddha’s own father, King Śuddhodhana in Canto XIX;⁶⁴

⁵⁵ *B.*, xv. 21., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁵⁶ *B.*, xv. 25. and *B.*, xv. 26., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁵⁷ *B.*, xv. 27. to *B.*, xv. 31., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁵⁸ *B.*, xv. 34., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁵⁹ *B.*, xv. 37., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶⁰ Johnston, *Āśvaghōṣa’s Buddhacarita*, p. 15, n. 1.

⁶¹ *B.*, xvi. 3. onwards, tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶² *B.*, xvii. 4. onwards, tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶³ *B.*, xviii. 1. onwards, tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶⁴ *B.*, xix. 16. onwards, tr. Johnston (Part III).

King Prasenajit in Canto XX;⁶⁵ Amrapālī in Canto XXII;⁶⁶ the Licchavi nobles in Canto XXIII;⁶⁷ Ānanda in Canto XXIV;⁶⁸ the Mallas in Canto XXV;⁶⁹ and the wandering ascetic Subhadra in Canto XXVI.⁷⁰ Āsvaghoṣa has conveyed the major tenets of Buddhism through the portrayal of these discourses.

It is interesting that the kinds of teachings that are portrayed are often context-specific. In Canto XX, King Prasenajit admitted that he was being harassed by passion and the ‘kingly profession’. The response of the Buddha seemed to be aimed at stirring his mind to come out of this, and rule his kingdom in accordance with the Law.⁷¹ This was also the case with the teachings imparted to Sudatta, the wealthy householder, who was told about the fruits that followed the act of giving.⁷² Also, when the courtesan Amrapālī approached the Buddha, he is portrayed as telling the monks to be aware of the knowledge and keep their passions in check, because he perceived the ‘impact’ that Amrapālī had on men. The sole aim of women is depicted as distracting men from the ‘true goal’.⁷³ At the same time, her intentions to come to the Buddha are described by him as virtuous and she is portrayed as reverently doing obeisance. However, he discouraged her by saying that the Law could not be attained by a woman who was so young and ‘in the bloom of her beauty’.⁷⁴ After this, the tone of the conversation suddenly changed. Amrapālī is praised for desiring to know the Law, and the Buddha is depicted as describing this as her real wealth. This is followed by a discourse on impermanence.⁷⁵ In Canto XXIII, before the discussion takes place between the Buddha and the Licchavis, there is a description of their elaborate clothing and ornamentation. It is interesting that the basic premise of the discourse given to them was related to the fact that a man may live in a palace and dress elaborately. However, if he has cultivated

⁶⁵ *B.*, xx. 5. onwards, tr. Johnston (Part III). Legitimacy for the Buddha is sought from the King Prasenajit. He is depicted as saying, “O Saint, no gain is known outside this, namely the sight of your doctrine”. See, *B.*, xx. 10., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶⁶ *B.*, xxii. 16., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶⁷ *B.*, xxiii. 20. to *B.*, xxiii. 56., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶⁸ *B.*, xxiv. 8. to *B.*, xxiv. 18., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁶⁹ *B.*, xxv. 68. to *B.*, xxv. 81., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷⁰ *B.*, xxvi. 2. to *B.*, xxvi. 20., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷¹ *B.*, xx. 10. to *B.*, xx. 48., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷² *B.*, xviii. 61., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷³ *B.*, xxii. 20. to *B.*, xxii. 36., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷⁴ *B.*, xxii. 41., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷⁵ *B.*, xxii. 44. to *B.*, xxii. 49., tr. Johnston (Part III).

discipline, then his way of life is equal to that of a seer.⁷⁶ Thus, the listeners that were portrayed in the text were kept in mind while putting forward the discourse. It is also possible to see this in another way – the listeners in the *Buddhacarita*, such as the king Prasenajit or the courtesan Amrapālī, were portrayed in accordance with the kind of discourse that the author wished to put forward for the audience that would listen to or read the text later on.

The interaction between the Buddha and his last disciple, the wandering ascetic Subhadra, is especially significant for two main reasons. Firstly, the straightforward and categorical manner in which the superiority of the Buddha's discourse is highlighted seems to clearly indicate the aim of Aśvaghōṣa's work – to convince the readers of the supremacy of the Buddha's doctrine. Secondly, the depiction of the last student of the Buddha entering the final *nirvāṇa* before his Teacher makes this dialogue stand apart from the other teacher-student interactions, in terms of the desired impact on the intended audience.⁷⁷

The teacher's expanded reach

With the portrayal of 'conversions', it is also interesting to note that the reach of the Buddha's knowledge expanded quite substantially. The impact of the knowledge was not just restricted to the five mendicants. It is mentioned that this knowledge was heard by a member of the Kauṇḍinya clan and a hundred deities, who "...obtained the insight that is pure and free from passion (*rajas*)".⁷⁸ There is also a general reference to the "certain self-controlled dwellers in the heavens", who reached a stage of tranquillity on hearing the Buddha's words.⁷⁹ In fact, it was not the mendicants, but rather the members of the Kauṇḍinya clan, who were the first to grasp the knowledge and understand the Law from, "...the holy Guru, the Tathāgata".⁸⁰ There are other similar instances as well. After teaching Yaśas, it is stated that fifty-four friends of Yaśas (out of attachment to him) "gained the Law".⁸¹ This was also the case with the conversion of the Kāśyapa seers. When the Buddha used magical powers in order to demonstrate his superiority over the Kāśyapa seers, it is stated that Auruvilva Kāśyapa's five hundred followers

⁷⁶ *B.*, xxiii. 20., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷⁷ *B.*, xxvi. 22., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷⁸ *B.*, xv. 51., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁷⁹ *B.*, xv. 57., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸⁰ *B.*, xv. 53., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸¹ *B.*, xvi. 16., tr. Johnston (Part III).

saw the seer's sudden change of heart and also adhered to the Law.⁸² Also, after the Buddha gave a discourse on salvation to the three Kāśyapa seers, it is stated that the thousand mendicants who heard these sermons of the Holy One were, "released from the infections".⁸³ It is also stated in the context of King Śreṇya, "Many men who dwelt in the capital of Magadha and the inhabitants of heaven became pure in mind in that assembly, on hearing the Sage's preaching..."⁸⁴

The other teachers

The transition of the characters of this story from the stage of a student to a teacher is not just portrayed in the context of the Buddha. In Canto XVI, the mendicants who were taught by Tathāgata were told to "help others who are still suffering". They were asked to, "...traverse this earth and impart the Law to mankind out of compassion for their affliction".⁸⁵ However, despite the fact that other teachers have been referred to, Aśvaghoṣa seems to have made a conscious attempt throughout the text to emphasize on the Buddha's predominant role as a teacher above all others, whether they were teachers of other traditions or even his own disciples. The teachers of other traditions like Arāḍa, Udraka and the ascetic brahmins have already been referred to in the previous section. The assessment of the Buddha's disciples, who were later represented as teachers, has been examined subsequently.

The first example is an instance where the student, who could have easily been portrayed as a teacher of the doctrine, continued to be portrayed as a student. After the 'conversion' of the Kāśyapa seers, they are portrayed as accompanying the Buddha to Rājagṛha. The Kāśyapa seer, after stating in an assembly that he had abandoned austerities and fire-worship, was told by the Buddha to demonstrate his miraculous powers, rather than teach the people gathered there. The people are portrayed as doing obeisance to the Kāśyapa seer with reverence after he demonstrated these magical powers.⁸⁶ However, at this point, it is clarified by the author (through the Kāśyapa seer himself) that he was the pupil, and his master was the 'Holy One'.⁸⁷

⁸² *B.*, xvi. 37., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸³ *B.*, xvi. 45., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸⁴ *B.*, xvi. 95., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸⁵ *B.*, xvi. 19. and *B.*, xvi. 20., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸⁶ *B.*, xvi. 65. to *B.*, xvi. 69., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸⁷ *B.*, xvi. 70., tr. Johnston (Part III).

Even when the students were portrayed as preaching the Buddha's message, they continued to identify themselves more as his pupils than as teachers of the doctrine. For instance, in Canto XVII, there is a reference to Aśvajit, who was approached by a mendicant of Kapila's sect. The latter is portrayed as asking the former who his teacher was, what did he teach, and how did these teachings lead to such a fresh appearance and inner tranquillity in Aśvajit. The student Aśvajit is then portrayed as referring to the Buddha and saying that since he was new to the path, he could only explain a small portion of "the words of the Great Sage".⁸⁸ This is followed by a discourse, which led to the realization of the truth by the brahmin, Upatiṣya.⁸⁹

It is further stated that Upatiṣya repeated the doctrine to another and that person also attained the "right eyesight".⁹⁰ Immediately after acquiring the knowledge, they felt drawn to the Teacher (that is, the Buddha) and went to visit him immediately.⁹¹ It is interesting to note that when they visited the Buddha, they were still portrayed as brahmins bearing the triple staff and twisted locks. However, after the Buddha taught them the Law, his 'might' turned them into mendicants dressed in ochre-coloured robes.⁹² It is significant to note that this transformation did not take place when they attained the knowledge for the first time from the disciples of the Buddha, but rather, when they were taught directly by him. These examples highlight the manner in which Aśvaghōṣa has referred to other teachers of the doctrine, but at the same time, consciously tried to focus only on the Buddha's role as the teacher.

An exception to this is evident from the unique portrayal of the brahmin Droṇa. After the Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, the kings were preparing to fight a war in order to receive a share of the relics. This situation was averted by the brahmin Droṇa. Droṇa represents a very interesting character of this text because, while he is clearly referred to as a brahmin, he is also a proponent of the Buddha's teachings. An interesting dialogue has been portrayed between Droṇa and the kings. Droṇa told them to practice forbearance according to the teachings of the Śākya Sage, whom they wished to honour by taking a share of the relics. The kings acknowledged their mistake and referred to his words as friendly and wise, but also pointed out that they had a right to fight in order to display their devotion to the Supreme Master. They referred to the purity of their intentions and criticized the miserliness of the Mallas (who were not ready to distribute the relics of the Buddha among the

⁸⁸ *B.*, xvii. 7., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁸⁹ *B.*, xvii. 9., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁹⁰ *B.*, xvii. 18., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁹¹ *B.*, xvii. 19., tr. Johnston (Part III).

⁹² *B.*, xvii. 22., tr. Johnston (Part III).

kings). In response to this, Droṇa drew upon the teachings of forbearance by the Buddha and asked them to share the relics and allow the Law to endure, despite the passing of the Master.⁹³ The emphasis on Droṇa's identity as a brahmin as well as a teacher of the Buddhist doctrine can probably be associated with Aśvaghōṣa's own amalgamated identity, because of his upbringing as a brahmin, the shift caused by his inclination towards ideas associated with renunciation and asceticism, and his devotion towards the Buddha and his teachings.

Concluding Remarks

In this way, although Aśvaghōṣa has primarily put across the life story of the Buddha, by his own admittance, he has focused on communicating the Buddhist doctrine as well. Since the doctrine has been encapsulated within the framework of a story, the teachings have been put across through specific speakers, and to specific listeners in the text. It is interesting for one analysing the text to make sense of this author/speaker and audience/listener dynamic. While the author was Aśvaghōṣa, the speakers, as far as the first half of the text is concerned, included King Śuddhodana, the Buddha's companion Udāyin, the charioteer Chandaka, the Buddha's wife Yaśodharā, the *purohita* and the councillor, who went to the forest in order to convince the Buddha to return, the ascetic brahmins of Bhrgu's *āśrama*, King Śreṇya and Māra. However, since these people were voicing the perception of the 'older' order or how things *were* understood and practiced, they were not portrayed as advocating the Buddhist teachings. The teachings were put across by the prince either in response to their views through a dialogue, or through a silent contemplation of why their views were incorrect, which could essentially be seen as a monologue.

The former approach reached out to the listeners in the text, whereas the latter was meant to communicate the teachings directly to the intended audience. This strategy changed in the second half of the text, once the Buddha started being depicted as the teacher. This transition marked an increase in the number of people who were brought into the fold as well as the degree to which the doctrine was spread by the Buddha as well as other teachers appointed by him. However, as the analysis has indicated, the Buddha was consciously put on a pedestal above the other portrayed teachers. Aśvaghōṣa, in this manner, effectively wove together the discourse and the life story of the Buddha.

⁹³ *B.*, xxviii. 16. to *B.*, xxviii. 51., tr. Johnston (Part III).

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