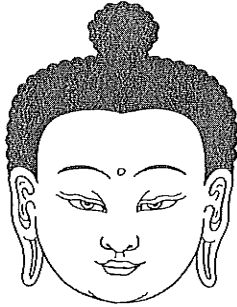


LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

by AŚVAGHOṢA

TRANSLATED BY

Patrick Olivelle



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CANTO 5
THE DEPARTURE

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 *drumábjá* 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

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,
 and freedom from worries, such as sensual desire,
 he attained the first trance—

5.10

with thought and reflection,
 tranquil, uninfluenced by the evil inflows.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 *āpsarases* entertained
the son of the Lord of Wealth.*

5-45

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, Akanishtha 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 armlets linked to each other;

5.50

others too, decked with jewelry of new gold,
 dressed in peerless yellow clothes,
 fell down helpless overcome by deep sleep,
 like a *karnikára* branch
 torn down by an elephant;*

another slept leaning on a window,
 her slender body was bent like a bow;
 she sparkled, her lovely necklace dangling,
 looking like a *shala* plucker
 carved upon a gateway;*

another had her lotus-face bent down,
 her jeweled earrings scraping
 the decorative lines on her face,
 looking like a lotus with its stalk half bent down,
 pushed by the perching of a *karándava* coot;*

others were resplendent—
 lying down where they sat,
 bodies bent down by the weight of their breasts,
 embracing each other with entwined arms
 adorned with golden bracelets;

one girl in deep sleep embraced her large lute
 as if it were her girl-friend,
 as she rolled, her gold chains shook,
 her earrings in disarray on her face;

5.55

another girl was lying down
 laying her drum between her thighs—
 the drum's beautiful cord
 slipping from her shoulder—
 like a lover lying exhausted
 after making passionate love;

but others, though their brows were pretty,
 and their eyes were large,
 displayed no beauty with their eyes closed,
 like lotuses with their flower-buds closed
 after the setting of the sun;

another girl likewise was lying there,
 her hair disheveled and hanging loose,
 her clothes and ornaments slipping down
 from her waist, her necklaces scattered,
 like a statue of a girl
 trampled by an elephant;

although genteel and endowed with beauty,
 others were snoring with their mouths agape,
 without any shame and out of control,
 with limbs distorted and arms extended,
 sleeping in immodest pose;

others looked revolting, lying as if dead,
 their jewelry and their garlands fallen down,
 unconscious, with eyes unblinking,
 the whites gazing in a fixed stare;

5.60

another was lying as if she was drunk,
 mouth wide open and saliva oozing,
 legs wide open and genitals exposed,
 body distorted, looking repulsive.

Thus, in diverse postures those enticing girls slept,
 each in keeping with her nature,
 her family and pedigree;
 in appearance they resembled a pond,
 with its lilies knocked down, crushed by the wind.

When he saw those girls sleeping in such poses,
 their bodies distorted, movements unrestrained,
 the king's son gave vent to his utter contempt—
 though their bodies were exquisite,
 and the way they spoke was so sweet:

“Dirty and distorted lies here exposed
 the true nature of women in this world;
 Deluded by their nice clothes and jewelry,
 men become infatuated with them.

If men reflect on women's true nature
 and this mutation brought about by sleep,
 Surely their passion for them would not wax;
 yet, struck by the thought of their elegance,
 they become infatuated with them.”

5.65

When he understood thus their difference,
 the urge to depart surged in him that night;
 when the gods discerned his intention, then,
 they opened the door of his residence.

Then, he came down from the palace roof-top,
 in utter contempt of those sleeping girls;
 having come down, then, resolute,
 he went out to the first courtyard.

He woke up Chándaka and told
 that quick-footed groom of his horse:

“Quickly bring the horse Kánthaka!
 I want to leave this place today,
 To arrive at the deathless state.

Contentment has arisen in my heart,
 and resolve has taken hold of my mind;
 Even in a deserted place
 I do have some sort of a guide;
 The goal I yearn for has appeared
 before my eyes, that is certain.

Abandoning modesty and deference,
 the girls slept right in front of me;
 And the doors were thrown open on their own—
 so today is the time I must
 depart from this place, that’s certain.”

5.70

Then, although he knew well the king’s decree,
 he acceded to his master’s command;
 and he made up his mind to bring the horse,
 his mind as if goaded by someone else.

Then, he brought to his lord that sterling steed,
 a horse endowed with strength, heart, speed,
 and breed—
 its mouth was furnished with a golden bit,
 its back was covered with a soft bedspread,
 its chine, rump, and fetlocks were long,
 hair, tail, and ears were short and still,
 with sunken back, bulging belly and flanks,
 and with wide nostrils, forehead, hips and chest.

The wide-chested prince then embraced that horse,
 caressing it with his lotus-like hand;
 he ordered it in a sweet voice, as if
 wishing to charge into enemy lines:

“Many a time did the sovereign mount you,
 and vanquish in battle his foes;
 that is well known;

5-75

So act in such a way, O best of steeds,
 that I too may obtain the deathless state.

Companions are easy to find to fight a war,
 to win riches or to enjoy sensual delights;
 But they are hard to find when one is in dire straits,
 or when one takes to the path of dharma.

The companions of a man in this world
 in foul acts or in the path of dharma,
 They too will doubtless partake of the fruits,
 this is what I'm told by my inner self.

Knowing, therefore, that my exit from here
 is connected with dharma
 and for the good of the world,
 Strive, you best of horses, with speed and dare,
 for your own welfare
 and that of the world."

Wishing to enter the forest, that finest king
 thus instructed in his duty that finest horse,
 as if he were a friend;
 and that handsome prince, who was blazing like a fire,
 mounted the white horse, like the sun
 an autumn cloud.

Then, the good horse went without making any sound 5.80
 that would cause alarm in the night
 or awaken the attendants;
 his jaws made no noise and his neighing
 was suppressed;
 he walked with unwavering steps.

Yakshas, then, bending their bodies low, supported
 the horse's hooves with the tips of their
 trembling hands,
 hands that resembled lotus buds,
 forearms adorned with golden bands,
 so that it seemed they were scattering lotuses.

As the prince made his way, the city's gates
 opened noiselessly on their own,
 gates that were closed with heavy iron bars,
 gates not easily burst open
 even by elephants.

He then left the city of his father,
 firm in his resolve and unwavering,
 leaving his loving father and young son,
 his devout subjects and highest fortune.

Then he, with long eyes like white lotuses,
 caught sight of the city
 and roared this lion-roar:

“I will not enter this city called Kápila,
 Before I’ve seen the farther shore of birth and death.”

Hearing these words of his, the retinue
 of the court of the Lord of Wealth rejoiced,
 and hosts of deities, their minds filled with joy,
 announced to him the success of his vow.

5.85

Other fiery-bodied denizens of heaven,
 knowing his vow was exceedingly hard to keep,
 shined a light on his frosty path,
 like moonbeams coming down through
 an opening in a cloud.

As that steed sped along like the steed of the sun,
 its mind as if spurred on, he traveled many leagues,
 before the stars became faint in the sky
 at the coming of the dawn.

Thus ends the fifth canto named “The Departure”
 of the great poem “Life of the Buddha.”



CANTO 6
CHÁNDAKA IS SENT BACK

THEN, AT THE moment when the sun,
the eye of the world, rose,
that best of men beheld
Bhārgava's hermitage.*

6.1

When he saw that hermitage,
with deer sleeping full of trust,
birds resting in perfect ease,
he felt as if he was refreshed,
as if he had attained his goal.

To remove any arrogance,
and to respect ascetic toil,
to guard his own subservience,*
he got down from the horse.

Having got down, he stroked the horse,
saying: "You have fulfilled your task;"
he spoke to Chándaka, full of joy,
as if bathing him with his eyes:

"By following this steed,
as fast as Gáruda,
You have shown devotion to me,
as well as this prowess of yours.

6.5

I'm given wholly to other pursuits,
yet you have clasped me to your heart;
Your devotion to your master
is paralleled by such ability.