Lost in India, Found in China: Nine(+) Lives of the Buddha[1]

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Abstract: This is an article about a major poetic text that was partially lost in the original language but many centuries later found in translation in two other countries and languages: the foundational epic biography of the Buddha, composed in Sanskrit c. the 1st/2nd century CE by Ashvaghosha, the *Buddhacharita*. Nine versions of this text are examined, which were produced successively in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, English, Hindi, and back into Sanskrit. After a meta-textual overview, a close discussion is offered of some significantly divergent cultural details. Also taken into consideration is a hugely popular life of the Buddha which was in no way connected with the *Buddhacharita* but because of its exotic "Orientalist" character became the most widely known version of the life and teachings of the Buddha in its day, in the high noon of imperialist England, *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold.

Keywords: translation, loss and gain, cultural variations, transient popularity, the Buddha, Christianity

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A partial truth often widely and mindlessly reiterated is that much is lost in translation. This axiom is subscribed to largely by pedantic bilingual scholars more firmly committed to the Source Language (SL) than the Target Language (TL), and a cry of righteous outrage tends to accompany each little error in translation that can be pointed out. Over the many years that I taught graduate courses in Translation Studies in the Department of English at the University of Delhi where most of my students were proficient bilinguals, knowing well their respective mother-tongues as well as English, my stock answer to this charge was as follows. If we drew up a balance-sheet showing on the one side all the scores or even hundreds of items that were lost outright in translation (i.e., omitted altogether) or retained but rendered erroneously, and then pit against them on the other side just one single item that was gained, which was a whole book that would not have been available to read in the TL but for the translation, the balance would surely tilt heavily in favor of this one vital gain against all the trifling losses. As a Hindi idiom has it, bigger than one hundred little cuts of the chisel by a goldsmith is a single hammer-blow by a blacksmith.

But this whole undying debate is put into a new and unsettling perspective by a case where the original has been lost in the SL and then, about 18 centuries later, found in translation in a far-away land—from which it was then promptly translated back into the original language, with an assertion of proud patriotic ownership! This could be called a literary-cultural reprise of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*—especially as the text involved is also, as in John Milton's case, an epic of central religious significance.

The Lost Text and Its Travels East and West

This long-lost but lately found text is the first and foundational biography of the Buddha, titled the *Buddhacharita*, i.e., the acts or deeds of the Buddha. It was composed in India in Sanskrit by the Buddhist poet Ashvaghosha[2] in the 1st century AD but not long afterwards, more than half of this epic in 28 cantos went missing and has not yet been found in Sanskrit. The text preserved in Sanskrit stops at stanza 31 of Canto XIV, i.e., just before the midpoint; also missing are a few words each in stanzas 1 to 7 of Canto I, and the whole of stanzas 25 to 39 in the same Canto.

The text then continues uninterrupted, as noted above, until XIV: 31, and then it stops altogether. Tantalizingly, as if by design but surely by accident, this is just before the renunciant Prince Siddhartha Gautama, after performing long penance and finally triumphing over his great adversary Mara, the God of Desire, attains spiritual enlightenment or awakening (from worldly ignorance) and becomes the *Buddha*. This is a Sanskrit word that means the Enlightened One; *buddhi* in Sanskrit means the intellect and here, the implication is that enlightenment is achieved by the Buddha through intellection and reasoning out, and not, for example, by devotion or good deeds.

The first public indication that the *Buddhacharita* had in fact survived intact came when it was translated into English and published in the monumental series titled "Sacred Books of the East," edited by F. Max Muller and published in 50 volumes by the Oxford University Press from 1879 to 1910. Volume XIX of the series, published in 1883, was described on its title page as "*The / Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King / A Life of the Buddha* / by Ashvaghosha Bodhisattva / Translated from Sanskrit into Chinese / by Dharmaraksha, A. D. 420 / and from Chinese into English / by / Samuel Beal." ("*Fo*," as I understand, is the word "Buddha" as rendered in Chinese; it is alternatively spelt "Fu" and pronounced rather like "Foor" as in "poor," which bears at least some resemblance to the Sanskrit name.)

The Rev. Samuel Beal names and briefly considers at the beginning of his scholarly introduction to this translation over a dozen Chinese translations of various other Indian accounts of the life of the Buddha, with some of these translations being themselves lost since they were made. Of all these accounts, Beal declares the one by Ashvaghosha (whose Chinese translation he is here translating into English) as being the "most reliable," with "many passages throughout the poem of great poetic beauty" and many other passages that he found "dry and abstruse" (Beal xxviii, xxxiv). He also attempts to adjudge the "faithfulness" of the Chinese translations of various Sanskrit Buddhist texts of this early period, but it is not clear whether his Sanskrit is up to the task, and in any case, there was yet no published version of the original Sanskrit text by Ashvaghosha for Beal to judge the Chinese translation against.

But only nine years later, in 1892, the *editio princeps* of the fragmentary Sanskrit text of

Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharita* appeared in the series "Anecdota Oxoniensia," which published manuscripts held by the Bodleian library. Max Muller promptly commissioned the editor of this text, the Rev. E. B. Cowell, to translate it into English for inclusion in Volume XLIX of the "Sacred Books of the East" series which was published the following year (Cowell ix) and proved to be effectively the last volume of the series (Volume L, which appeared in 1904, is the Index to the whole series). In his "Introduction," Cowell acknowledges Beal's translation, notes that there also exists a Tibetan translation of the full text of *Buddhacharita* done in the 7th or the 8th century, and adds that it "appears to be much closer to the original Sanskrit than the Chinese" version, partly because Tibetan is closer to Sanskrit anyhow, to the extent that "we can often reproduce the exact words of the original" when reading the Tibetan version (x). Cowell's own translation has not only the first 13 cantos composed by Ashvaghosha but also four more, from the 14th to the 17th, added by the Nepalese copyist of the text used by Cowell, Amritananda, as late as in 1830 AD—as Amritananda himself candidly (and perhaps with proud modesty) declared in the colophon (xi).

This trajectory of translation from translation, or partial translation from the original, found spectacular culmination, about forty years on, in the work of E. H. Johnston who, unlike Max Muller and Beal but like Cowell, had actually lived in India for a considerable period of time, as an official in the elite Indian Civil Service, before taking early retirement. (Later in their lives when they had returned from India, both Cowell and subsequently Johnston, were appointed professors of Sanskrit at Oxford University.) The *magnum opus* that Johnston published in 1936 was an edition of the *Buddhacharita* which included not only the first half that had been preserved in Sanskrit but also a reconstruction of the rest of the epic through a collation of the Chinese and the Tibetan translations. What was lost for centuries had now been found and restored by him; the circle was complete.

What made the moment propitious for Johnston to accomplish this great work was, as he himself acknowledged, the circumstance that a considerable number of relevant texts had become available in the intervening decades since the publication of Cowell's translation. A more reliable copy of the Sanskrit half of the text had surfaced in Nepal and the King had kindly loaned it to the Bodleian in 1924 so that it could be rotographed there. The crucial Tibetan translation of *Buddhacharita* had been translated into German by Friedrich Weller and published in two parts in 1926 and 1928. The Chinese "translations" of *Buddhacharita* had been made "easier to consult by those who are not Chinese scholars" by Taisho Issaikyo. And among a whole number of Buddhists texts that had been translated into English meanwhile was Ashvaghosha's other, later epic, *Saundarananda* (Johnston v–vii). Incidentally, this other epic features an episode relating to the life of the Buddha not found in the *Buddhacharita*. In it, the Buddha prevails upon his cousin Nanda to abandon his beautiful wife Sundari and to convert to Buddhism and join his monastic order, though only after epic-length resistance offered by the young Nanda who is besotted with his lovely wife. And, after returning to England, Johnston himself had acquired what he modestly calls "that smattering of Tibetan and Chinese" that could help him compare the versions of the *Buddhacharita* in those languages with the versions available in Sanskrit and in English.

The scholarly feat achieved by Johnston with such assiduous devotion gave us a reconstructed text which may be unmatched in the whole history of translation in terms of substantial recovery, careful assemblage, and literary reconstruction. It was even more difficult perhaps than putting together the shards of an ancient pot, because of the circumstance that there were shards of closely similar other pots lying around here as well, frequently in the form of less than accurate translations of the same or similar Buddhist biographical texts; Beal reported having found 14

biographies of the Buddha in Chinese, most of which were translations (xv). This array of broadly parallel texts tested the acumen and sensitivity of the restorer, and Johnston's work represented a triumph not only of industry and patience but also fine linguistic and cultural discrimination. It was as if the two halves of a globe broken off down the middle for over one and a half millennia had been joined together to become whole again.

This should have been the last word regarding the translations/reconstructions of the *Buddhacharita* into English, except that belatedly, there was a less than necessary postscript. As if turning up at a party which is already long over, Patrick Olivelle, a Sri Lankan scholar with a BA degree from Oxford in Sanskrit and Pali who later served as a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, published his translation of the *Life of the Buddha* in 2009. Dis-inventing the wheel, he translated only the first 14 cantos to be found in the original Sanskrit, and then offered brief summaries of the remaining cantos derived from Johnston's edition.

While Olivelle acknowledged that "[n]o student or translator of the *Buddhacharita* can ignore the monumental work of E. H. Johnston," he added that Johnston himself had provided a reason for a future translation when he stated that his translation was "a pedestrian affair designed to be read with the text and explain its meaning, and not to transmute [transmit] its spirit and literary qualities into an alien tongue" (50; including the quotation from Johnston). Olivelle is here perhaps making an opportune virtue of Johnston's modesty, for Olivelle's edition too caries the text of the Sanskrit original as well as his translation and the two can be read together. A more contingent reason for Olivelle to undertake his new translation could have been the fact that it was meant for a new series of translations (like the Sacred Books of the East), titled the Clay Sanskrit Library, which published 56 volumes of translation between 2005 and 2009 issued by the New York University Press. As for his implicit claim that his translation would be less "pedestrian" and more poetic, it is borne out mainly by his text being printed mostly in four-line stanzas which look like verse, as distinct from Johnson's text which was printed in run-on lines like prose, but which in its rhythms and caesurae often also follows the four-part meter of the Sanskrit verses, and is generally clearer in its syntax than the stanzas in many broken up lines in Olivelle's version.

The Text Comes Home: Translations into Hindi and Sanskrit and into Hinduism

It is not known when and under what circumstances the second half of the *Buddhacharita* got detached from the first and was lost. Sanskrit literature abounds in tales of lost texts, and of course only those texts are or were known to be lost which have later been found or to which there are clear and major references in other surviving works. The outstanding example is that of the playwright Bhasa (c. 1st century BCE to 1st century CE), 13 of whose plays were found and identified from conclusive internal evidence by the Indian scholar T. Ganapati Shastri in 1910, who then published them for the first time in 1912 in the Trivandrum Sanskrit series of which he was the general editor. But the works of two other playwrights named together with Bhasa by a later playwright, Kalidasa, as his three greatest predecessors, Saumilla and Kaviputra, still remain wholly lost to us (Bronner et al. 2).

In the case of the *Buddhacharita*, the recovery and reconstruction through foreign translations seem to have been undertaken and achieved, as seen above, entirely by British scholars, the only

Indian input being the fact that Johnston's great work was first published not in the West but in India in Calcutta as volumes 31 and 32 in the series the Punjab University Oriental Publications in 1935 and 1936. But once these volumes had been published, they were hailed and welcomed by many Indian scholars, including Suryanarayan Chaudhari, who proceeded now to reclaim and translate them into Hindi with an admission of mixed feelings:

> I feel both happy and unhappy at presenting this Hindi translation before the readers. I am unhappy because though we are located right next to Tibet [Xizang, China] and have had close ties, both of culture and trade, with Tibet [Xizang, China], we were unable to translate this work direct from the Tibetan. And I am happy that the latter part of the *Buddhacharita*, having been lost to us, […] after many wanderings and no doubt with many changes, has now returned to Hindi, the successor language of Sanskrit […]. (vi; my trans.)

Chaudhari's translation had gone into a third revised and enhanced edition by 1955 and was reissued in a fourth edition in 1985.

Inspired by this translation into Hindi, "the successor language of Sanskrit," and in fact based on it, there followed now a further—and perhaps ultimate—translation, this time into Sanskrit, the language in which the *Buddhacharita* was originally composed. This was done by Mahant Shri Ramachandra Das Shastri, and was published in two volumes, the first of which contained the original Sanskrit text as composed by Ashvaghosha, together with a translation into Hindi, and the second contained a reconstruction into Sanskrit of the latter half of the *Buddhacharita* as reconstructed into English by Johnston and thence translated into Hindi by Chaudhari. Thus, though this latter text is in the same language as the one in which Ashvaghosha had composed his epic originally, it is perhaps at the fifth remove from it, for it has been here filtered through the Chinese, Tibetan, English, and Hindi translations successively, as recounted above.

Shastri's Sanskrit reconstruction is in metered verse, though he uses by and large the same meter throughout (with only a few exceptions), unlike Ashvaghosha who had varied the meter in each canto as Sanskrit epic poets were expected to do. Shastri's preface to the second half is composed in Sanskrit too, which he concludes with a verse stating that he has "composed this poem not to display his learning or artistry as a poet" but rather for the benefit and the inner peace (*shantyai*, i.e. for the *shanti*) of the readers (2; my translation from Sanskrit). Unlike Chaudhari who had expressed both regret and happiness at the route this epic had taken back to India, Shastri expressed undiluted joy and also pride:

> Thus, this classic of Indian wisdom and glory of our literature, after having spent such a long time in foreign lands, now has again arrived at its birthplace India, and having assumed its original body/incarnation [*sharira*] in Sanskrit, adds to our stock [*sandoha*] of happiness. (1; my trans.)

However, much had changed in India since Ashvaghosha composed his epic so far as Buddhism was concerned. The Buddha had lived in the 6th or the 5th century BCE and though the *Buddhacharita* is the first and foundational epic narration of his life and teachings, it was composed about half a millennium after the Buddha had passed away and the *dhamma/dharma* or the religion founded by him had spread far and wide in India and beyond to the Gandhara region (now in part

Afghanistan) in the north and to Sri Lanka in the south if not further. Buddhism flourished and continued to expand in these lands and as far away as China, until about the 8th century CE. During this millennium, Buddhism was one of the major religions in all these countries, co-existing with earlier forms of local beliefs, and often finding royal patronage and protection.

However, in India Buddhism began to lose ground to a resurgence of Hinduism from about the 7th–8th centuries, and then suffered irretrievable damage at the hands of the iconoclastic Muslim rulers from the 13th century onwards. It all but disappeared from the land of its birth then, and has not become significantly more visible, despite an attempt at revival pioneered by the political leader Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, who himself abandoned Hinduism in 1956 to convert to Buddhism in a public ceremony together with a large number of his followers. In the 2011 census of India (which is the latest, for a census in 2021 could not be held due to COVID-19), only 0.7% of the total population of India declared themselves to be Buddhists, as compared with 79.8% Hindus, 14.3% Muslims, 2.3% Christians, 1.7% Sikhs, and 0.4% Jains (Pew Research Centre).[3]

The Hindi and Sanskrit translators of the *Buddhacharita* were, unlike Ashvaghosha, not ardent Buddhists but both Hindus and welcomed and recreated the Buddhist epic primarily as an act of literary pride. Shastri in his preface to the Sanskrit text alluded to a vital factor which contributed to the disappearance of Buddhism in India when he said he had entertained a deep-rooted but implicit (*prachchhanna*) reverence for the Buddha which had become explicit as he started to work on his translation. For he remembered that the Buddha too was one of many incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu and thus a Hindu god, and that had made this account of his life an object of regard and attraction even for him as a Hindu.

Buddhism had arisen as a protestant, even rebellious, off-shoot of Hindu beliefs and practices, and one of the several tenets of Hinduism it denied was the existence of God/god. (Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, and indeed all the other Indian languages use no capital letters so this fine but often specious distinction does not exist in them.) Over the centuries as the two religions struggled for hegemony and dominance, Hinduism's strategy for assimilating Buddhism back into it was to declare that the Buddha himself was a part of the Hindu pantheon of ten incarnations of the god Vishnu, of which eight had already taken place. The wide acceptance now among Buddhists worldwide of the worship of the Buddha himself as God, despite his own denial of the existence of any god at all, derives from this deep Hindu stratagem. When I last visited Sarnath in 2024, the place near Kashi/Varanasi where the Buddha had preached his first sermon and thus launched his new religion, and where a new university was established in 1978 for the study of Tibetan Buddhism, I heard from a local cab driver a new popular derivation of the Buddha's divine status in Hinduism. Further to being an incarnation of the god Vishnu, I was told, the Buddha was the brother of the goddess Parvati and thus a brother-in-law of the great god Shiva who ruled over Kashi! (Trivedi, "Vishva" 36).

Some other key concepts of Buddhism have been known in India (though not always in the West) to be clearly the same as in Hinduism, for example *karma* (as the word is now widely understood in English, though in Sanskrit it means only an act or deed), *punarjanma* (rebirth), *karuna* (compassion), and *ahimsa* (non-violence). The biggest proponent of *ahimsa* in our modern times was M. K. Gandhi, and he said he had got the concept and the practice from his Hindu upbringing and from his interaction with peacefully agitating Hindu peasants; in fact, he elevated *Ahimsa* to be a (Hindu) goddess ("devi") in its/her own right (Gandhi 379, 464).

It is in this broad and long historical context that one needs to view the fact that the *Buddhacharita* that returned to India was not the same text as the one that had left the mother

country at least a thousand years ago. It was literally much the same text, as far as multiple assiduous scholars could reconstruct it, but the religious context it returned to was radically different. This would explain why the Hindi and Sanskrit translators in the 20th century were keen to claim the text back not only for Hindi and Sanskrit but also for Hinduism. While the first seven verses of Canto I are missing in Johnston's text, the Hindi translator Chaudhari constructs them on his own to say that the Buddha was born in the same dynasty, Ikshvaku, as the great Hindu god Rama, and then he places the Buddha's mother the Queen Maya as being on the same level as the gods (*devatulya*) (verses 1 and 5; Chaudhari 1, 2).

The Sanskrit translation goes much further. It carries a foreword by a Hindi scholar, Vyohar Rajendra Singh, which offers a detailed comparison of the key concepts of Buddhism and Hinduism and proceeds to state that in Ashvaghosha's account in the *Buddhacharita* of the Buddha's teachings, the Hindu influence and element are so strong that Buddhism "does not seem to be a separate religion" (Shastri I: 14). He then lists several allusions, echoes, and direct references through which Ashvaghosha in his own epic about the Buddha evokes the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, the foundational epic of Hinduism written about eight hundred years before Ashvaghosha, which narrates the life of the supreme Hindu god Rama. Altogether, Buddhism as expounded here seems to belong to the same religious tradition as Hinduism, and the *Buddhacharita* to the same literary lineage as the older dominant Hindu-Sanskritic one.

Beyond the *Buddhacharita*: Buddhism Goes West

If the translations of the *Buddhacharita* into Hindi and Sanskrit seemed to offer not much that was new in India, the opposite turned out to be the case in the West. Such was the novelty of this new religion that it seemed to cause a notable impact on some of the best contemporary minds in the West, and it continues to have a cult following especially among those disillusioned with Christianity. However, the translations of the *Buddhacharita* from the Chinese and Sanskrit by Beal and Cowell that appeared in the Sacred Books of the East series were not the first bearers of the news of this virtually unheard-of Eastern religion, for it arrived in the West through another route and was popularized by a book in English verse that did not have a direct relationship with the *Buddhacharita*.

The first accounts of Buddhism to gain currency seem to have originated not from India but from Sri Lanka. That island immediately to the south of India was the first territory where Emperor Ashoka (c. 304–232 BCE), who converted to Buddhism at the conclusion of a particularly bloody war he had fought and won, sent his son and daughter to spread the religion to which he had newly converted. In Sri Lanka, the language of Buddhism remained Pali, in which the teachings of the Buddha were first collected and conserved in India, while in India, even before Ashvaghosha wrote his great epic in it, Sanskrit had become the main vehicle of Buddhism as it had traditionally been of Hinduism.

Thus, it was the British civil servants ruling Sri Lanka and the missionaries working to spread Christianity there who "discovered" Buddhism, as being the main adversary to their proselytizing endeavor. Sri Lanka has long been a Buddhist-majority country with currently 70% of its population being Buddhist, with 14% Hindus and 4% Christians, and Pali over time has transformed into the majority language of Sri Lanka, Sinhala, while it remains a "dead" classical

language of scholarship in the Buddhist canon. The Pali Text Society was founded in 1881 (two years before Beal's translation of the *Buddhacharita* from the Chinese came out) by Thomas William Rhys Davids, who had served in the Imperial Civil Service in Sri Lanka—just as Johnston was to serve in India a little later. The Pali Text Society still exists, has translated into English by now virtually the whole Buddhist canon in Pali, and the translations of the major Buddhist scriptures published and disseminated by it have played a major part in the spread of Buddhism in the West ("The Pali Text Society").

Besides, Rhys Davids himself wrote several expository books about Buddhism which were more easily accessible to the common reader than translations of the original scriptures. These included *Buddhist Birth Stories: Jataka Tales* (1880), *Buddhism: Its History and Literature* (1896), and *Buddhist India* (1903). He also translated or co-translated as many as six volumes in the Sacred Books of the East series, mostly of texts containing the Buddha's teachings, of which two had come out in 1881, before Beals's translation of the *Buddhacharita*, while Max Muller, the editor of the series, had himself translated in 1881 the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha's teachings as reportedly uttered by the Buddha himself.

But the single Buddhist text which had the most enormous impact was a long poem in blank verse of 231 pages, divided in eight cantos or "Books," by Sir Edwin Arnold, published in 1879 and titled *The Light of Asia, or the Great Renunciation (Mahabhinishkramana), Being the Life and Teachings of Gautama, Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism.* It was an exotic, erotic, lyrical, and characteristically "Orientalist" production (in the denunciatory sense in which Edward Said used that term, of grossly misrepresenting the East), and it just sold and sold. (My own copy, bought for 20 pence in 1986 in Britain from a used-book shop, is from "the fiftieth edition" that it had already gone into in 1889.) It eclipsed every other account and version of Buddhism available in English, and among the eminent men who were introduced to Buddhism by this immensely popular work were Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru (who became the first prime minister of independent India), and Ambedkar, mentioned above, who owned three copies. Among the literary figures on whom it had "a marked influence," according to Jairam Ramesh, author of a comprehensive recent book on Arnold and his poem, were the Nobel prize winners Rudyard Kipling, Rabindranath Tagore, W. B. Yeats, Ivan Bunin, and T. S. Eliot, and furthermore "Herman Melville, Leo Tolstoy, Lafcadio Hearn, D. H. Lawrence, John Masefield and Jose Luis Borges" (Ramesh xv–xvi).

Of all these writers the one who showed the influence most clearly was perhaps Kipling, who had read *The Light of Asia* as a schoolboy, and had later worked as a newspaper reporter in India from 1882 to 1889. In his great novel *Kim* (1901), he created probably the most famous Buddhist character in all of English fiction, the Teshoo Lama, who has arrived in India on a pilgrimage to the River of Arrow, a mythical site not known to anyone at all. At the beginning of the novel, he meets the unnamed curator of the museum at Lahore, a character modeled on Rudyard's father Lockwood Kipling who for long years had served in that capacity. The Lama and the Curator cordially exchange old and new knowledges of Buddhism, and the Lama hears of the "labours of European scholars" of whom two are named: "[Samuel] Beal and Stanislas Julien" (Kipling 10; Lycett 338; Trivedi, Introduction xxvi–xxx).

Notwithstanding this wide impact, Arnold's poem is an anachronistic and culturally inconsistent hodgepodge of various exotic elements, familiar not only from ancient India but apparently also from Muslim sources such as the Persian and the Ottoman courts. Arnold showed off his little knowledge of Sanskrit and India by inserting in the elaborate title of his poem a long

Sanskrit word, "Mahabhinishkramana," (which means not "the Great Renunciation" as he has it but the great departure from his palace), and by sprinkling over his text some more Sanskrit and even modern Hindi/Urdu words. Strikingly inept are his references to the "nautch-dancers" and a "nautch-girl" (Arnold 147, 148), "nautch" being a British mispronunciation of the Hindi word *naach*. Even more incongruous are words of Persian origin like *attar* (perfume) made from roses, a flower not known in India in the Buddha's time. Besides, Arnold merrily goes about calling Gautama "Lord Buddha" even before he attains enlightenment and even "Buddh" (144, 148, 151), while he seems habitually to misspell his other name Siddhartha as "Siddartha" (145, 165, 166 *et passim*.). While Ramesh in his celebratory book has a short chapter on "attacks on *The Light of Asia*," all of these turn out to be from defenders of Christianity rather than secular readers of the poem as a coherent literary text (Ramesh 96–103).

Ironically, this was the coda to all the scholarly translations of the *Buddhacharita* that have been documented in this article, from the 4th century to the 20th, successively into Chinese, Tibetan, English, Hindi, and Sanskrit. Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharita*, the great epic on the life and teachings of the Buddha, was put in the shade by a shoddy and trumpery performance which catered to what a contemporary critic called "a transient whim of Occidental taste" (qtd. in Ramesh 97). But that whim has indeed proved transient and the *Buddhacharita* endures among those with a serious and sustained interest in and engagement with the Buddha and the religion he founded.

Translations and Cultural Variations

The present account of the many translations of the *Buddhacharita* has been largely macroscopic and meta-textual, offering a whistle-stop tour through approximately two millennia. Before concluding, it may however be apt to offer a little glimpse of the culturally significant variations that such a long journey of a text naturally acquires, especially a text of which the latter half is missing and had to be reconstructed through translations. It is from this shadow latter half that I have chosen a verse which in its translations into foreign languages like Chinese and Tibetan and then the translations back from them, as it were, into Hindi and Sanskrit, deploys metaphors at wide variance with each other.

Towards the end of the reconstructed epic, the Buddha determines how long he should live and as the self-chosen day of his death approaches, he leaves Vaishali, the capital city he has been living and preaching in, and goes off to lie down and die. This happens at the beginning of Canto XXV, and the effect of his departure on the city is described in verses 1–5, of which verses 1–2 are quoted below in the versions in which they occur.[4]

A. Ashvaghosha, *Buddhacharitam*. These verses, being in the latter half of the epic, are missing. (They are similarly missing in Cowell's translation of the earlier half of Ashvaghosha from Sanskrit.)

B. Translation into Chinese from "A" above, and from the Chinese into English by Beal:

When Buddha [sic] went towards the place of his Nirvana, the city of Vaishali was (as if) deserted, as when upon a dark and cloudy night the moon and stars withdraw their shining.

The land that heretofore had peace, was now afflicted and distressed; as when a loving

father dies, the orphan daughter yields to constant grief. (Beal 25; verses 1900–1901, as cumulatively numbered by him.)

C. Translations into Chinese and Tibetan, collated and combined into a single version into English by Johnston:

When the Sage departed for His Nirvana, Vaisali, like the sky overspread with darkness on the eclipse of the sun, no longer appeared brilliant.

Though beautiful and free from pride, though delightful (*ramaniya*) in all parts, it did not shine because of its burning sorrow (*santapa*), like a woman whose husband has died. (Johnston XXV: 1–2)

D. Translation into Hindi from Johnston's composite version in English ("C" above), here translated from the Hindi into English:

When the Muni proceeded to nirvana, Vaishali became lusterless, like the sky covered in darkness during a solar eclipse.

Though beautiful and modest, though full of charm throughout, it did not look attractive, as a wife at the death of her husband. (Chaudhari 25: 1–2; my trans.)

E. Translation into Sanskrit from the Hindi version ("D" above), here translated from the Sanskrit into English:

Vaishali was covered in darkness upon the departure of the Muni for nirvana, lusterless like a log of wood when the Sun is afflicted by Rahu.

Charming and full of charming attributes, full of wealth and foodgrains, [it was] yet struck by sorrow in its innermost being and looked lusterless like a widow. (Shastri 25: 1–2; my trans.)

F. Summarized from C above (Johnston) by Olivelle:

The Buddha leaves Vaishali making that city lose its lustre and throwing it into mourning. (Olivelle 427)

While there are many small differences between these several versions concerning the choice of individual words or the order of phrases, the two most remarkable probably are that in the Chinese version, as in no other, it is not the sun but the moon which is not shining any more, and the grieving woman in the simile is not a widow but a daughter. If these variations have some deep cultural connotations, they have not been spelled out by any translator—including Johnston, who typically has several footnotes on each page of his text, giving his reasons for accepting either the Chinese or the Tibetan reading over the other. (On the page cited here, he has two notes concerning other matters, but nothing on the moon or the daughter.)

The other cluster of differences concerns the translations into Hindi and Sanskrit. They both refer to the Buddha not as "the Buddha" or "the Sage" but as "Muni," which is a synonym for a sage deriving from the Sanskrit word *mauna* which means silence, i.e., a sage who (wisely) speaks little. Moreover, the Sanskrit version by Shastri (who incidentally is the only translator cited here who did not know English) introduces two new terms. As he puts it, the city looks lusterless like "a log of wood," a traditional Sanskrit image for something that is without any feature of life or

attraction. The other term is *Rahu*, which in traditional Sanskrit belief is one of the nine major celestial bodies but is a "shadow" planet, which has no substantial existence but whose shadow falls now and then on the Sun or the Moon and causes eclipses. Of the 12 "houses" in a traditional Hindu horoscope, one is always filled by *Rahu*, in either a beneficial or adverse aspect. Shastri aptly evokes these connotations, for without *Rahu* there can be no eclipse in traditional astronomy, and the naming of *Rahu* thus assimilates the *Buddhacharita* into the Indic-Sanskritic worldview.

Though Arnold's *Light of Asia* is not a version of the *Buddhacharita* (probably because even the first half of it preserved in Sanskrit had not been published when he began writing his poem), its roaring success acted as a veritable *Rahu* in overshadowing all the versions of the *Buddhacharita* that became successively available in English. It may be of some interest then to know how Arnold depicted the terminal departure of the Buddha from Vaishali. Well, he did no such thing, for his poem seems to rush to its end as soon as the Buddha has revisited the family he walked out on years ago to seek his truth, which he now does, in order to convert his father, wife, and son also to the creed he has founded! (This family conversion occurs in all other versions in Canto XIX, with nine more cantos yet to come.)

The last couplet of the Buddha's sermon to his (erstwhile?) family runs: "Touch not thy neighbour's wife, neither commit / Sins of the flesh unlawful and unfit" (Arnold 234). This is not an injunction the Buddha is known to have preached anywhere in any other version of his life, for it is clearly a slightly modified version of one of the Ten Commandments of Christianity as received by Moses. Just as this is the tenth and last commandment there, Arnold makes it the Buddha's last commandment here, without any regard for creed, context, and culture. A very few pages later, we are told that "in fulness of the times—it fell / The Buddha died, the great Tathagato / Even as a man 'mongst men, fulfilling all" (239). This sounds vacuous, and Arnold misspells "Tathagato" besides (sc. "Tathagata").

Arnold went on to write another long poem titled *The Light of the World* (1891), on Jesus Christ who had described himself as such, and it flopped for the same reasons that *The Light of Asia* had succeeded, for Arnold could not possibly have made it either exotic, erotic, or Orientalist. But it served to explain retrospectively why Arnold had called his earlier and more successful poem by a lesser title.

Notes

1. Parts of this long-brewing article were first presented at a Festschrift conference for Itamar Even-Zohar held at Tel-Aviv University in 2008.

2. As I have not used any diacritical marks, I have spelled names and titles close to how they are pronounced, and at variance with how they are spelled in the scholarly editions I cite here which use varying systems of diacritical marks. Thus, "Ashvaghosha," as I spell it, is spelled "Asvaghosha" by Samuel Beal with an acute accent on the first "s," but as "Asvaghosa" by Johnston with an acute accent on the first "s" and a dot below the second "s," to indicate the two different sounds in Sanskrit which are spoken as the same "sh" in English (as in "Shakespeare" or indeed "English"). For some odd reason peculiar to the series "Sacred Books of the East," in Cowell's translation (1894), the title of Ashvaghosha's epic, which I spell as "Buddhacharita," is spelt as "Buddhakaritam."

3. In China too, where Buddhism had flourished since the Han dynasty (202 BCE– 220 CE) and indeed evolved into what came to be called Han Buddhism, it began to decline from about the 9th century, after Emperor Wuzong of Tang in 845 suppressed Buddhism and looted and/or destroyed over 4,000 Buddhist monasteries and forced scores of thousands of monks and nuns to return to secular life. The current Buddhist population

of China is still, proportionately, much more than the Buddhist population of India.

4. A full bibliographic detail of the versions of *Buddhacharitam* and its translations, arranged by chronology: 1) *Buddhacharitam* by Ashvaghosha, 1st or 2nd century AD, written in Sanskrit; 2) *The Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King*, translated by Dharmaraksha, 420 AD, Sanskrit to Chinese; 3) untitled, translation from Sanskrit into Tibetan of Ashvaghosha (no. 1 above) by anonymous, c. 8th century AD; 4) *The Fo-Sho-Hing-Tsan-King* (no. 2 above), translated by Samuel Beal, vol. 19 in the Sacred Books of the East, edited by Max Muller, Oxford UP, 1883, Sanskrit to Chinese to English; 5) *The Buddha-Charita of Ashvaghosha* (no. 1 above), translated by E. B. Cowell, part of vol. 49 of the Sacred Books of the East, Oxford UP, 1894, Cantos I–XVII, Sanskrit to English; 6) *Ashvaghosa's Buddhacharita*, translated by E. H. Johnston, University of Lahore, 1936, (includes Part I: Sanskrit text, cantos I–XIV; Part II: English Translation Cantos I–XIV; Part III: English Translation of Cantos XV–XXVIII from Tibetan and Chinese versions), from Sanskrit, Tibetan (from German), and Chinese, i.e., nos. 1, 2 and 3 above to English; 7) *Asvhaghosh-krit Buddhacharit*, edited and translated by Surya Narayan Chaudhary, Varanasi, 1942, 1944 (Cantos I–XIV [in Sanskrit] with translation [into Hindi]; cantos XV–XXVIII translation only [from English, without the Sanskrit]), translation of no. 6 above, English to Hindi; 8) *Buddhacharitam*, translated by Mahanta Shri Ramachandra Das Shastri (vol. 1: cantos I–XIV, vol. 2: cantos XV–XXVIII), no. 7 above to Sanskrit and Hindi, with a reconstruction in Sanskrit by this author of the missing Cantos XIV–XXVIII; and 9) *Life of the Buddha*, translated by Patrick Olivelle, New York UP/JJC Foundation, 2009, Sanskrit to English.

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