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

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CANTO 5
THE DEPARTURE
5.1 Sā tathā viśayair vilobhyamānāḥ
paramāṁ ārhair api Śākyarājaśṭruṇuḥ
na jāgama dhṛtim na śarman lebhe,
hṛdaye sīṁha iv’ ātīśigdhaśīddhaḥ.

atha mantriśutaiḥ kṣamaḥ kadā cit
sakhibhiś citraṇakathaiḥ kṛt’ āṇuyātraḥ
vanaḥbhūmīśidṛṣṭayā śaṁ’epsur
nara(dev’) ānumato baiḥ prasthe.

nava'rūmakjalinaṇkiniṇikaṃ
pracalac-cāmara-cāru-hemaḥbhāṇḍam
ābhiruha ya sa Kānthe kāṃśaśvam
prayayau ketum īva drūm’ābjaketuḥ.

sa viṃṭatarāṃ van’āntaḥbhūmiṃ
vanaḥlobhac ca yayau maḥīguṇac ca;
salil’ōrmīvikāraśiraśārgāṃ
vasudhāṃ c’ āiva dadarśa kṛṣyamāṇam.

5.5 halabhinnāvikiṃśāśpaś darbhaṃ
hataśūksmaśkrīminīkājaṭantukīrṇāṃ
samavekṣya rasāṃ tathāśvadhdāṃ tāṃ
eva sajanasy’ īva vadh bhrāṃ śuṣoca.
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.

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 Kānthaka—the bells hanging from its bit were made of new gold, its gold trappings made charming with flowing chowries—like the glint of drumābja 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.
LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

krṣataḥ puruṣāṃś ca viḵṣamāṇaḥ
pavan’ārk’āṁśu ra jo vibhinnā varṇān
vahana klama viklavaṁś ca dhuryān
param’āryaḥ paramāṃ kṛpaṁ ca kāra.

avatīrya tatas turaṅga prṣṭac
chanakair gāṃ vyacarac chucā parītaḥ
jagato janana vyayaṃ vicinvan
«kṛpanaṃ khalv idam» ity uvāca c’ ārtaḥ.

manasaḥ ca viviktatām abhipṣuḥ
suhṛdas tān anuyāino nivārya
abhitaś calacāru pāraṇavatīyā
vijane mūlam upeyivān sa jambvāḥ.

nīrasāda sa yatra śau vacatvāyām
bhuvi vaiḍūryā nikanāśāśādvālayām
jagataḥ prabhava vyayaau vicinvan
manasaś ca sthitimārgam ālalambe.

5.10 samavāpta maṇaḥ jīsthitiś ca sadyo
viṣay’ecch’adhibhir adhibhiś ca muktaḥ
sa vitarka vīcāram āpa śāntaṃ
prathamaṃ dhyānam anāśra vā prakāram.

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THE DEPARTURE

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

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

“How wretched, indeed, is this world!”

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

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

Achieving at once the state of mental stillness,
and freedom from worries, such as sensual desire,
he attained the first trance—

with thought and reflection,
tranquil, uninfluenced by the evil inflows.*
adhigamya tato vivekajañ̄a tu
paramapritiṣukhaṁ maṇah/samādhiṁ
idam eva tataḥ param pradadhyau
manasa lokagatiṁ niśāmya samyak:

«kṛpaṇaṁ, bata, yajjanaṁ svayaṁ sann
avyāśo vyādhijarārijñāśadharmaṁ
jaray” ārditaṁ āturaṁ mṛtaṁ vā
param ajiñño vijujupgate mad’āndhaḥ.

iha ced aham idṛśaḥ svayaṁ san
vijujupseya paraṁ tathāsvabhāvam,
na bhavet saḍṛśaṁ hi tat kṣamaṁ vā
paramaṁ dharmaṁ imaṁ vijānato me.»

iti tasya vipāyato yathāvaj
jagato vyādhijarājapiṭṭhiḍaṁ
balayauvanajīvita/pravṛtti
vijāgāṁ ātmaṅgato madha kṣaṇena.

5.15 na jaharṣa na c’ āpi c’ ānutepe;
vicikitsāṁ na yayau na tandriṇidre;
na ca kāmaiguṇeṣu saṁraraṇeḥ;
na vididveṣa paraṁ na c’ āvamene.
THE DEPARTURE

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

“How wretched that ignorant man, blinded by pride, who, though himself powerless and subject to the law of disease, old age, and death, should treat with contempt another who’s sick, dead, or oppressed by old age! If I, being myself like that, should treat with contempt another man here with a nature just like that, it would not 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.
iti buddhir iyaṁ ca niṣṭajka
vavṛdhe tasya mahī'atmano viśuddhā
puruṣair aparair adṛṣyamānaḥ
puruṣaś ca 'opasarpa bhikṣṣuvesaḥ.

nara-devaśutas tam abhyapṛcchad:
«vada, ko ’ś ākaṁ sa sa’ḥa tasmai:
«nara-pumgava, janmaṁṛtyubhiḥaḥ
śramaṇaḥ pravrajito ’śmi mokṣāhetoḥ.

jagati kṣaya-dharmake mumukṣur
mṛgaye ’ham śivam aṅkṣayaṁ padaṁ tat
tva jana ’nyajane ca tulyaṅ-buddhir
viṣayebhya vinivrīta-rāga-dosaḥ.

nīvasan kva cid eva vrksaṁ-mule
vijane v” āyatane girau vane vā
vicarāmy aparigraho nirūśaḥ
param ‘ārthāya yath’ ’ōpannya-bhaikṣaḥ.»

5.20 iti paśyata eva rājaśūnor
idam uktvā sa nabhaḥ samutpaṭā;
sa hi tadvāpur anyā-buddhaḥaṅgarī
śmrtye tasya sameyivān div’āvukāḥ.

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THE DEPARTURE

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

The son of the king then questioned that man:

“Tell me. Who are you?”

And the man gave him this reply:

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

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

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

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

ṣṭivarḥ samjahirṛse visismiye ca;

upalabhya tataś ca dharmaśamjñām*

abhinirvāṇāvidhau matiṃ cakāra.

tata Indraśamo jīt’ēndriy’āśvaḥ

pravivikṣuḥ puram āśvam ārūroha;

parivārajanāṃ tv avēksaṃānas

tata ev’ ābhimaṇaṃ vanaḥ na bheje.

sa jārāmarāṇaṃśaṃḥ cikīrṣur

vanaṃśāya matiṃ śṛṃtau nīḍhāya

praviveśa punaḥ puraṇaḥ na kāmad

vanaḥbhūmer iva maṇḍalaṃ dvip’ēndraḥ.

«sukhitā, bata, nirvṛtā ca sā stri

patir idṛkṣa iḥ’ āyat’ākṣa yasyāḥ!»

iti taṃ samudīksya rājaṅkanyā

praviṃantaḥ pathi s’āṇjalir jagāda.

atha ghoṣaṃ imaṃ mah’ābhraṇghoṣaḥ

pariśūṣṛava śaṃmaḥ paraṃ ca lebhe;

śrutavān sa hi «nirvṛt” ēti” śaṃdaṃ

parinirvāṇāvidhau matiṃ cakāra.

5.25
THE DEPARTURE

When he had flown to the sky like a bird,
that foremost of men was thrilled and amazed;
than, perceiving that emblem of dharma,*
his 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.
attha kāṇcanaśailaśrīgavarṣāmā
gajaśeṣaśabhabhauḥ/nisvanānāśaḥ
kṣayam aṅkaśayadharmajataśrāgaḥ
śāsiśiṁhaśananaśikramaḥ prapede.

mrgarājaigatis tato bhayagacchan
nṛpatiṁ mantrigacchān upāsyaśānam
samitau Marutām āva jvalantau
Maghavantaṁ triṇdive Sanatkumāraḥ.

pranipatya ca sānjalir babhāse:
«diśa mahyaṁ, naraidevā, śatī bhunujāṁ;
parivivrajiśāmi mokṣaḥhetor,
niyato hy asya janaśya viprayogaḥ.»

iti tasya vaco niśāmya rājā
kariṇāv evē abhīhato drumaś ca cāla
kamala-pratime 'ñijalau gṛhitvā
vacanaṁ c'e dēma uvacā bāspaṁcaṇṭhaḥ:

5.30 «pratisaṁphara, tāta, buddhim etāṁ,
na hi kālas tava dharmasamśrayasya;
vayasi prathame matau ca layāṁ
bahuśoṣāṁ hi vadaṇti dharmacaryāṁ.

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THE DEPARTURE

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

Then he, with the gait of the king of beasts, approached the king attended by the group of ministers, as Sanat-kumāra 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.

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.
LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

viśayeṣu kutūhal’endriyasya
vrataśkeṣyev āsamarthaṇīścayasya
taruṇasya maṇaś calaty aranyād
anjabhijñasya viśeṣato viveke.

mama tu, priyādharmā, dharmākālas
tvai lakṣaṁīm asaśṛṣya lakṣmaṇabhūte;
śhirāvikrama, vikramena dharmas
tava hitvā tu guruṇi bhaved aḍḍarman.

tad imāṁ vyavasāyam utsṛja tvaṁ,
bhava tava nirato gṛhaśṭhaḍharme;
puruṣasya vayaḥṣukhāni bhuktvā
dharmāya hi tapoṇaḥpraveśāḥ.

iti vākyam idaṁ niśamya rājñah
kalaviṅkasvara uttaraṁ babhaśe:
«yadi me pratibhūs caturṁ rājan
bhavasi tvaṁ na tapoṇaṁ śrayisyec.

5.35 na bhaven maraṇāya jīvitaṁ me,
viharet svāsthyam idaṁ ca me na rogaḥ,
na ca yauvanam ākṣipej jārā me,
na ca sampattim imāṁ hared vipattih.»

136
THE DEPARTURE

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

But for me it is the time for dharma,
after conferring on you sovereignty,
you who possess the marks of sovereignty
O lover of dharma;
But if you leave your father by violating
the right order, you whose courage is firm,*
your dharma will turn into adhārma.

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.”
LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

iti durjabham artham ucivamsam
tanayam vakyam uvaca Sakya-raja:
«tyaja buddhim imam atipravrttam
avahasyo 'tmanoratho 'kramas ca.»

atha Merugurur gurum babhaśe:
«yadi n' āsti krama esa, n' āsmi vāryaḥ;
saranaḥ jvalanena dahyanān
na hi niścikramisva kṣamaṁ grahitum.

jagataś ca yadā dhruvo viyogo,
nanu dharmāya varaṁ svayaṁviyogah;
avasaṁ nanu vipravojyen mām
akṛtaṁ 'ārtham āṭṛptam eva mṛtyuḥ.»

iti bhūmipatir niśamya tasya
vyavasyaṁ tanayasya nirmumukṣoḥ
abhidhāya «na yasyaḥ iti» bhūyo
vidadhe rakṣanam uttamāṁś ca kāmān.

5.40 sacivaṁ tu nidarśito yathāvad
bahujmānt praṇayāc ca śāstra-prūvam
guruḥ ca nivārītā 'śruṇātaiḥ
praviveś āvasāthāṁ tataḥ sa śocan—

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THE DEPARTURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

But when the ministers had duly counseled him,  
according to scriptures, with deep respect and love;  
and his father had stopped him,  
shedding copious tears,  
sorrowfully, then, he entered his residence—
sā hi kāṇcanaḥ parvataḥ āvadātō
hṛdayaḥ omadakaro vārāṅganānām
śravaṇaṅgaḥ vilocaḥ jātmakhaṃbhavan
vacanaḥ parvataḥ vapurguṇaḥ ājāra.

vigate dvāse tato vimānaṃ
vapuṣṭa sūrya iva pradīpyaṃnaḥ
timiraṃ vijīghaṃṣur ātmabhāsa
ravir udyann iva Merum āturoha.

kaṇakaḥ ojjvalaḥ diptaḥ dipaḥ vṛkṣaṃ
tavaṅkaḷaḥ āgurudhūpaḥ pūraṇagarbham
adhiruḥya sa vajraḥ bhaktiḥ citraṃ
pravaraṃ kāṇcanam āsanaṃ siṣeve.
THE DEPARTURE

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

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

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

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

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

paramair api divyaṭūrya\kaphaiḥ
sa tu tair n' āiva ratiṃ yayau na ṭaṣam;
param'ārthaśukhāya tasya sādhore
abhiniścikramiṣā yato na reme.

atha tatra surais tapo\variṣṭhair
Akaṇiṣṭhair vyavasāyam asya buddhāv
yugapat pramadājanasya nīdrā
vihīt" āśid vikṛtaḥ ca gātraçeṣṭāḥ—

abhavac chayītā hi tatra kā cid
viniveṣya pracale kare kāpolam
dayitām api rukmapatra\citra\r̤
ku$pīt" cv’ āṅkagataṃ vihāya viṇāṃ;

vibabhau karalagna\venur anyā
stanavīrastasit’āmśukā sayānā
ṛjusāṭpadāna\panktitjuṣṭa\padmā
jalaphena\prahasat\ta ṭa nad" iva;

5.50
avajpa\ṣkarāgarbха\komalā\bhyāṃ
tapanīy’\ojjvala\s\mga\ṭ’\āṅgadā\bhyāṃ
ts\vapīti \s\m a tath” ā\pa\bh uja\bhyāṃ
parirabhya priyavas miḍaṇgamas eva;

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THE DEPARTURE

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

Then, Akanis̄tha 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;
Ashvaghosa’s Life of the Buddha is a masterpiece of poetry in the service of religious teaching. The ravishing bodies of the future Buddha’s courtesans are lovingly described only to illustrate the ultimate transience of beauty. In sleep, Siddhartha’s lovers reveal their true physical squalidness, provoking him to leave home and go forth on his ascetic quest.

Here is a new Clay Sanskrit Library translation of Ashvaghosa’s Life of the Buddha.

The Buddhist monk Ashvaghosa composed his elegant biographical and religious poem in the first or second century CE, probably in the city of Ayodhya. Importantly, this is the earliest extant text of the Sanskrit genre of ‘literature as a fine art’ (kavya).

Fourteen cantos take the reader from the birth of Siddhartha, the future Buddha, to his Awakening when he discovered the truths of Buddhism. The remainder of the composition, lost in the original Sanskrit, is here summarized from its Chinese and Tibetan translations. The most poignant scenes on the young prince’s path to Awakening are the three occasions when he is confronted by the realities of human sickness, old age, and death, while at home he is continuously seduced by the transient charms of the women deployed by his father to keep him from the spiritual path.

A creative artist of the highest order, Ashvaghosa’s aim is not pure entertainment but deep instruction. His mission is to present the Buddha’s teaching as itself the culmination of the Brahmanical tradition.