Handsome Nanda
by Ashva·ghosha

Translated by
LINDA COVILL

In Ashva·ghosha’s drama of spiritual re-orientation, handsome Nanda is transformed from libertine to liberated man. The Buddha’s strong-arm and seductive tactics risk the imputation of a forced and dishonest conversion. But the suffering of each pleasure’s end is succeeded by a more enticing prospect, until Nanda attains the total bliss of enlightenment.

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Here is a new Clay Sanskrit Library translation of Ashva·ghosha’s Handsome Nanda.

Nanda has it all—youth, money, good looks, and a kittenish wife who fulfills his sexual and emotional needs. He also has the Buddha, a dispassionate man of immense insight and self-containment, for an older brother. When Nanda is made a reluctant recruit to the Buddha’s order of monks, he is forced to confront his all-too-human enslavement to his erotic and romantic desires.

Dating from the second century CE, Handsome Nanda portrays his hero’s spiritual makeover with compassion, psychological profundity, and great poetic skill. The Buddhist monk Ashva·ghosha’s ancient composition succeeds both as a work of poetry and as a Buddhist spiritual biography. Native of Saket, perhaps Ashva·ghosha too had been torn between his celibacy-demanding faith and a beloved woman.

Nanda is not alone in being cured by the Buddha’s sugar-coated bitter pills; the famous penultimate verse identifies all who hear or read Handsome Nanda as patients on the path to liberation, because we have savored the medicine that is bottled in this honeyed poem.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
Washington Square
New York, NY 10003
www.nyupress.org

ISBN 978-0-8147-1683-0

LINDA COVILL translates Sanskrit literature for the JJC Foundation, co-publishers (with NYU Press) of the Clay Sanskrit Library.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Asvaghosa
[Saundarananda. English & Sanskrit]
Handsome Nanda / by Asvaghosa ;
translated by Linda Covill. – 1st ed.
p. cm. – (The Clay Sanskrit library)
In English and Sanskrit (romanized) on facing pages;
includes translation from Sanskrit.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
I. Covill, Linda, 1962- II. Title.
BQ905.N2A713 2007
294.3’.4432–dc22
2007003642
## CONTENTS

Sanskrit alphabetical order 7
CSL conventions 7

HANDSOME NANDA

Introduction 13

Invocation 29

Canto 1  A Description of Kāpila-vastu 33  
Canto 2  A Description of the King 47  
Canto 3  A Description of the Realized One 63  
Canto 4  His Wife’s Request 79  
Canto 5  Nanda is Made to Ordain 95  
Canto 6  His Wife’s Lament 113  
Canto 7  Nanda’s Lament 131  
Canto 8  The Attack on Women 149  
Canto 9  The Denunciation of Infatuation 173  
Canto 10  A Lesson in Heaven 191  
Canto 11  The Condemnation of Heaven 213  
Canto 12  Comprehension 229  
Canto 13  The Conquest of the Senses by  
    Moral Self-Restraint 241  
Canto 14  The Initial Point of Departure 255
CANTO 4
HIS WIFE’S REQUEST
4.1 _Munanubravana_ 'pi tu tatra dharmaṃ dharmam prati jñātiṣu c' adṛṣṭeṣu, prāśādajāsmittho madaṃ'āiakaṃkṛtyaḥ priyāsahāyo vijāhāra Nandah. sa cakravākyā'eva hi cakravākas tayā sameṭaḥ priyāyā priyārhaḥ n'ācintayad Vaiśravaṇaṃ na Śakraṃ tāṭiṣṭhānaḥeṭoḥ kuta eva dharmam. lakṣmyā ca rūpeṇa ca Sundar" iti stambhena garveṇa ca Mānin" iti diptyā ca mānena ca Bhāmin" iti yato babhāṣe triṣṭhidaṇaḥ nāmāṇā. sa hāsaḥmaṃṣas natyānadvirephaṃ pīnaṣṭan'ātyunnaṭapadmaṃkośā; bhṛtyo babhāсе svakul'ōdātāna śrīpadminī Nandaḍīvākareṇa. 4.5 rūpeṇa c'ātyanta manohareṇa rūḍ'ānūrāṇeṇa ca ceṣṭitena, manusyaśloke hi tadā babhūva sa sundarī strīṣu nareṣu nandaḥ. sa devatā Nandaṇaḥārīn" ita kulasya nandījananaś ca Nandaḥ atīṭya martṛyān anupetya devān srṣṭāv abhūṭām ita bhūtaḥdhrātā. tām Sundarīṃ cēn na labheta Nandaḥ sa vā niṣeṣeṇa na tāṃ nataḥbhṛuh, dvandveṇa dhrusvaṃ tad vikalamaḥ na śobhet' ānṛṣṭyāhīṃāv ita rātrīcandrau. KandarpāḥKatyor ita lakṣyābhūtaṃ pramoḍaiṇāṇḍyor ita niḍāḥbhūtam
Though the sage was in the city teaching the dharma, and though his near relations honored the dharma, Nanda stayed in his palace with his wife, making love his only concern. For Nanda was fitted for love, and so lived united with his beloved like a chakra-vaka bird with its mate. In this situation he thought of neither Váishravana nor Shakra, let alone the dharma. She was known by three different names: Súndari for her charm and beauty, Mánini for her stubbornness and disdain, and Bhámini for her sparkle and willfulness.

She seemed a lotus-pool in womanly form, with her laughter for swans, her eyes for bees and her swelling breasts as budding lotus calyces; still more did she shine after the sun-like Nanda had arisen in her own family. With her captivating beauty and manner to match, in the world of humankind she, Súndari, was the loveliest of women and he, Nanda, the happiest of men. The Creator had made them greater than mortals, though not yet gods—she, walking the Nándana gardens like a divinity, and Nanda, bringer of joy to his kin. If Nanda had not won her, Súndari, or if she, arch-browed, had withheld herself from him, then the pair would surely have appeared impaired, like the night and the moon without each other.

Blind with passion, the couple took their pleasure in each other, as though they were the targets of Kandárpa and Rati, as though they were a home to joy and rapture, as though
praharṣaṭuṣṭyor iva pātraḥbhūtaṁ
dvandvaṁ saḥ āraṇḍa maḍʿāndhaḥbhūtam.
parasparʿ/ōḍvīkaṇatattatparʿ/ākṣaṁ.
paraspara/yaḥṛṣṭa/sakteṣitare
parasparʿ/āsleṣhṛṭ/āṅgarāgaṁ
parasparaṁ taṁ mithunaṁ jahāra.

bhāvʿ/ānuraktau girinirjharaiṣṭhau
tau kiṃnariḥkimpurṣāv ivʿ/ōbhau,
cikriḍatuṣ cʿ/ābhivirejatuṣ ca
rūpa/jriyʿ/ānyonyam ivʿ/āksipantau.
anyonyaśaṃṛtaṇa/avardhanena tād
dvandvam anyonyam arīramac ca,
klamʿ/āntare ʿnyonya/avinođanena
salilam anyonyam amimadac ca.
vibhūṣayām āsa taṭaḥ priyaṁ sa
śiṣevisus taṁ na mrjʿ/ajvaḥ/ārtham;
svenʿ/āva rūpeṇa vibhūṣita hi
vibhūṣaṇānām api bhūṣaṇāṁ sa.
dattvʿ/ātha sa darpaṇam asya haste
ʿmamʿ/āgrato dhāraya tāvad enam
viṣeṣakaṁ yāvad ahaṁ karomʿ ity).
uvāca kāntaṁ sa ca taṁ babhāra.
bharats taṭaḥ śmaśru niṅkṣamāṇā
viṣeṣakaṁ sʿ/āpi cakāra tādṛk.
iṅvāṣa/avēna ca darpaṇasya
cikṣaṇitvā nighaṇhā Nandaḥ.
they were a vessel for arousal and satiety. With eyes only for each other’s eyes, they hung upon each other’s words and rubbed off their cosmetics through caressing each other, so mutually absorbed was the couple. They were resplendent in their play like a kinnari and a kimpurusha standing in a mountain waterfall intent on love, as though wishing to outdo each other in beauty and splendor. The couple gave each other pleasure by exciting passion in each other, while in languid moments they teasingly inebriated each other by way of mutual entertainment.

At one time he arranged her jewellery on her, not to make her lovelier, but to do her a service; for she was so adorned by her own beauty that it was she who lent loveliness to her jewels. She put a mirror into his hand and said to her lover, “Just hold this in front of me while I do my vishēshaka,”* and he held it. Then, looking at her husband’s mustache, she made up her vishēshaka just like it, but Nanda blew on the mirror to remedy this.
sā tena cēṣṭā/lalitena bhartuḥ
dhāṣṭhyena c’ āntar’/manasā jahāṣa
bhavec ca ruṣṭā kilā nāma tasmai
lalāta/ājihmaṅ bhrukuśitaṁ cakāra,
cīkṣeṣa kaṅ/’ōpalam asya c’ āṁṣe
dhāraṇa savyena mad’/ālasena.
patṛ’āṅgu/ṇiṁ c’ ārdha/ṇimili’t/ākṣe
vaktre śya tām eva vinirdudhāva.
tataś ca/laṇ/ṇūpurajoktritābhyaṅ
dhakṣaprabh’/ōdhasitar’āṅgulibhyāṁ
padbhyaṁ priyāyā nalin’/ōpamābhyaṅ
dhāṅkārṇa mūrdhnā bhayān nāma nanāma Nandaha.
sa muktā/puṣp’/ōmniṣīteta mūrdhnā
tataḥ priyāyāḥ priyākṣuṇaḥ babhāse
suvarṇa/vedyam anil’/āvabhagnah
puṣp’/ātiḥbharād iva nāgaś/ṛkṣaḥ.
sa taṁ stari’/ōdvartitahārāyaṣṭī
tathāpayām āsa nipidīya dorbhyāṁ.
<katham kṛtorno ’ś itīḥ> jahāṣa c’/occair
mukheṇa sāc/ṛkaṇṭaṇḍalena.

patyus tato darpaṇa/saktapāṇer
muhur muhur vaktram avekṣamāṇā, tamāla/patṛ’/āṛdra/ṇa/tale kapole
samāpayām āsa viśeṣakaṁ tat,
tasyā mukhaṁ tat saṭaṁmāla/pattraṁ
tāṁ/’āḍhaṁ/’āṣuṣhaṁ cikur’āyati’/ākṣam,
rakṣ/’āḍhik’/āgraṁ parita’/dvirepham
saññāvalaṁ padmaṁ iv’/ābabhāse.
Nandasa tato darpaṇaṁ ādareṇa
bibhṛat tadā maṇḍaṇa/ākṣi/ḥbūtāṁ
His wife’s request

She smiled to herself at her husband’s cheekiness and playful little game, but furrowed her brow as though annoyed, and with her left hand, languorous with wine, she threw the lotus from behind her ear at his shoulder. Then she smeared some of her make-up on his face and half-closed eyes.

Nanda, in a pretence of fear, bent his head to his lover’s lotus feet—feet encircled with swaying anklets, with toes brightened by their shimmering nails. His head blossoming with loosened flowers as he begged his lover’s pardon, he resembled a nāga plant overburdened with flowers, bending over its golden pedestal in the breeze.* She pressed him close in her arms and raised him up, making the strands of her pearl necklace lift off her breast. “What are you doing?” she cried laughingly, as her earrings were pushed sideways from her face.

While she finished applying the vishešaka to her cheeks, damp with tamāla paste,* she kept looking at her husband’s face as he held the mirror in his hand. Her own face, with its tamāla paste, lips touched with red and eyes extending to her hair, seemed a moss-bedecked, crimson-tipped lotus settled by bees.

So Nanda dutifully held the mirror which bore witness to her act of adornment, and as he squinted to watch her maquillage, he observed his lover’s mischievous face. Nanda
viśēṣakāvekṣāṇaśkekar’ākṣo
laḍātprīyāyā vadaṇāṃ dadarśa.
tatēkūṇḍal’ādaśaaviśēṣakāntāṃ
kāraṇḍavaklīṣṭam iv’ āravindaṃ
Nandāḥ prīyāya mukham ikṣamāṇaḥ
bhūyaḥ prīya’ēnandaśkarār babhūva.
vimāṇākalpe sa vimāṇaśgarbhe
ativas tathā c’ āiva nananda Nandāḥ,
Tathāgataś c’ āgata/bhaikṣaṇkālo
bhaikṣāya tasya prāviveśa veśma.

4.25 avāṁmukho niśprāṇayaśa cā tāsthaṃ
bhrātur gṛhe ’nyasya gṛhe yath’ āiva.
tasmād artho preṣyaśaṇaḥpramādād
bhikṣāṁ aḷabhṛh’ āiva punar jagāma—
kā cīt pipes’ āṅgāvilepanam hi,
vāso ’ṅgānā kā cid avāsayaḥ ca,
ayoja at na śnāṇvidhīṁ tath’ ānyā,
jagranthur anyāḥ surabhīḥ srajaś ca.
tasmin gṛhe bhurṭur atāś ca rartyaḥ
kṛid’ jāṇurtūpaṃ laḷitaṃ niyogam
kāś cīt na Buddhāṃ daḍḍhur yuvatyo
Buddhasya v” āśā niyataṃ maniśā.
made his sweetheart happier than ever when he watched her face, the edge of its visēhaka smudged by her earrings so that it seemed a lotus nibbled by a karāndava bird.

While Nanda was thus enjoying himself in his palace, which was like a celestial palace, the Tathāgata, the realized one, entered his home for alms, since it was the time for his alms-round. Looking downwards and without asking for anything, he stood in his brother's house as he would in the house of any other person. But he went away again without obtaining any alms because of the household's preoccupation—one woman was grinding body-unguents, another was perfuming clothes, one was preparing a bath, and others were weaving fragrant garlands. The Buddha came to the unavoidable conclusion that the housemaids were so busy carrying out frivolous tasks related to their master's dalliance that none of them noticed him.
kā cit sthitā tatra tu harmya śṛṣṭe
gavāksaipakṣe prāṇidhāya caksuḥ
vinispaṭantaṁ Sugataṁ dadaṁśa
payoda-garbhād iva diptam arkam.
sā gauravaṁ tatra vicārya bharuḥ
svaya ca bhaktī “ārhatay” “ārhatas ca,
Nandasya tathau purato vivaksus
tadājñayā c’ ēti tād” ācacakṣe:

4.30 “anugrahaḥ” āsya janasya śaṅke
gurur gṛhaṁ no bhagavān praviṣṭaḥ,
bhiṣṭāṁ alabdhaṁ giram āsanaṁ vā
śunyād aranyād iva yāti bhūyāḥ.”
śrutvā mahaṁ’rṣeḥ sa gṛha-praveṣaṁ
satkaraḥśīnaṁ ca punaḥ prayāṇaṁ,
cacalā citrā bharanaṁ ‘āmbarastra
kalpadrumo dhūta iv’ anilena.
kṛtvā ‘ānjaliṁ mūrdhāni padma-kaḷpaṁ
tataḥ sa kāntaṁ gamanaṁ yāyaṁ.
«karma niṣmīyāmi gurau prāṇaṁ.
māṁ abhyanujñātum ih’ ārhas’ iti?”
sā vepamāṇā parisasvaje tāṁ
śālaṁ latā vātāyaśmīrit” eva.
dadaṁśa c’ āśrutapuṣṭalolānaṁetra
dirghaṁ ca niṣvasya vaṣo ‘bhuvāca:
«n’ āhaṁ yiyāsor gurudarṣaṁ’ārtham
arhāmi kartum tava dharma-piḍām.
gacch’, ‘ārya-purt’, āhi ca śīghram eva
viṣeṣako yāvad ayaṁ na śuṣkāḥ.

4.35 sace’d bhaves tvaṁ khalu dirghaḥṣūtro
daṇḍaṁ mahāntaṁ tvayi pātayeṣam;
HIS WIFE’S REQUEST

However, one woman at the top of the palace had glanced at a side-window, and she had seen the Súgata emerging like the radiant sun from a cloud. Taking into consideration her master’s deep respect for the enlightened one as well as his worthiness and her own devotion to him, she approached Nanda to tell him, and spoke at his permission: “The Blessed One, the guru, entered our house, presumably as a favor to you. He received no alms, no conversation, and no seat, and so he is going away as though from an empty forest.”

When he heard that the great seer had come to his house, found no hospitality and left again, he trembled, seeming, with his bright decorations, garments and garlands, like a tree of Paradise swaying in the wind. Putting his hands together in the shape of a lotus, he raised them to his forehead and asked his wife if he might leave. “I would like to go and pay my respects to the guru. Will you let me?” She held him close and shivered like a wind-stirred creeper encircling a shala tree. Looking at him with her rolling eyes filled with tears, she sighed deeply and replied:

“You wish to leave in order to see the guru, and I ought not to hinder you in your duty. Go, my dear husband, but come back quickly before my vishéshaka dries. If you are late, I will punish you severely; as you lie sleeping, I will keep waking you up by brushing against you with my breasts, but then refuse to talk to you. But if you hurry back to me before my vishéshaka is dry, I will hold you in my arms, bare of ornaments and still damp with unguents.” Her voice shook
handsome nanda

muhur muhus tvāṁ śayitaṁ kucābhyāṁ
vibodhayeyanāṁ ca na c' alapeyam.

ath' āpy anāśyānaśīśesakāyāṁ
mayy esayasi tvam tvaritaṁ tatas tvāṁ
nipiḍāyisyāmi bhujādvayena
nirbhūṣanen' ādraśīlepanena."

ity evam uktas ca nipiditaś ca
tay' āśaśvarṇaśvanayā jagāda.
«evaṁ karisyāmi, viṣṇu, caṇḍi,
yāvad gurur dura gato na saḥ.»
tataḥ stan' ādvaṃtaścandanaśvayāṁ
mukto bhujābhyaṁ na tu mānasena.

vihāya veśaṁ madan'ānurūpaṁ
satāraājyogaṁ sa vapur babhāra.
śa taṁ prayāntaṁ ramaṇaṁ pradadhyau
pradhyaṇaśūnyaśtitaśiśical'akṣi,

sthit'" ocajkarṇā vyapaviddhaśaspā
bhṛntaṁ mṛgāṁ bhṛntaṁ/mukhi mṛg" iva.

44.40 didṛksay' ākṣiptamānanā muney tu
Nandah prayāṇaṁ prati tattvare ca,
vivrūppadṛśī ca śaṅair yayau tāṁ
kar" īva paśyan sa ladāṭkareṇum.

chat'ādāraṁ pinaśpayodhar'oruṁ
sa Śundaraṁ rukmaṇaṅcarin iv' ādrey
kākṣeṇa paśyan na tataḥ Nandaḥ
pibann iv' āikena jalāṁ kareṇa.

tam gauravam Buddhagatam caṅkara
bhāry'ānurāgaḥ punar caṅkaraḥ.
so 'niścayān n' āpi yayau na tathau
utraṁs taraṅgeṣy iva rājaḥamśah.
as she spoke, and she embraced him. “I will,” he replied. “Now let me go, my little vixen, before the guru has gone too far.”

So she let him go from her arms which were scented with sandal from her breast, but she did not let him go in her mind. He set aside the clothes suited to love-making, and made himself presentable for paying his respects. She contemplated her departing lover, her face troubled and her eyes empty and unmoving in her preoccupation, like a doe standing with ears pricked up and chewed grass falling from her mouth as she watches the stag wander off. With his thoughts taken up by his wish to see the sage, Nanda hurried his departure, then lingered with a backward glance at her, like an elephant watching a playful she-elephant. But a glance at Sûndari, her waist compact between her swelling breasts and thighs like a golden fissure in a mountain, could no more satisfy Nanda than drinking water with one hand.

Reverence for the Buddha drew him on, love for his wife drew him back again. He hesitated, neither going nor staying, like a king-goose pushing forwards against the waves. However, once she was no longer in his sight, he came briskly out of the palace, only to hang back again, his heart
aḍaśānaṁ t’ úpagaṭasa ca tasyā
harṣyāt tataś c’ ávatatāra tūrṇam,
śrutaś tato nūpurāṇisvanam sa
punar lalambe hṛdaye ghitaḥ.
sa kāma-raṇaṇaṁ nigṛhyamaṇo
dharm’ānurāṇaḥ ca kṛṣyamāṇaḥ,
jaṅgaṁ duḥkhena nivṛtyaṁāṇaṁ
plavaḥ pratisrota iv’ āpagaśāḥ.

4-45

tat’ krama’iś dirghatamaṁ pracakrame
«kathaṁ nu yāto na gurur bhaved» iti
«svajeyā tāṁ c’ āiva viśeṣakapriyāṁ
kathaṁ priyāṁ ādrāviśeṣakāṁ» iti.
atha sa pathi dadarśa muktaṁāṇaṁ
piṭiñagare ‘pi tathāgaṭ’ābhimaṇam
daśābalaṁ abhito vilambaṁāṇaṁ
dhva-jam anuyāna iv’ āindram arcyāṇāṁ.

Saundaranande mahākāvye Bhāravyācyātako nāma
caturthāḥ sargaḥ.
contracting, at the sound of her anklets. Kept back by his passion for love, and drawn forward by his attachment to dharma, he proceeded with difficulty, being turned about like a boat going upstream on a river.

Then setting out with long strides, he thought “The guru can’t possibly not be gone by now!” and “Perhaps I’ll be able to hug my darling girl, whose love is so special, while her vishēśaka is still wet.”

Then on the road he saw him of the ten powers,* free from pride even in his father’s city, and with all arrogance similarly gone, stopping everywhere and being worshipped like Indra’s banner in a procession.

End of Canto 4: His Wife’s Request.
In Ashvaghosha’s drama of spiritual re-orientation, handsome Nanda is transformed from libertine to liberated man. The Buddha’s strong-arm and seductive tactics risk the imputation of a forced and dishonest conversion. But the suffering of each pleasure’s end is succeeded by a more enticing prospect, until Nanda attains the total bliss of enlightenment.