

**BUDDHIST HYMNS: VERSIFIED
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE
DHAMMAPADA AND
VARIOUS OTHER SOURCES**

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Buddhist Hymns: Versified Translations from the Dhammapada and Various Other Sources by
Paul Carus

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PAUL CARUS

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VARIOUS OTHER SOURCES**

BUDDHIST HYMNS

VERSIFIED TRANSLATIONS FROM THE DHAMMA-
PADA AND VARIOUS OTHER
SOURCES

ADAPTED TO MODERN MUSIC

BY

PAUL CARUS

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FOREWORD.

BUDDHISM exercises an increasingly powerful influence upon the people of western civilization: it fascinates the pious Christian on account of its remarkable agreements with Christian ethics; it interests the unbeliever on account of those features of its doctrines which stand in contradictory opposition to Christianity, and it is admired by thinkers on account of its philosophical depth, its humane spirit, and the loftiness of its morality.

As to myself, Buddhism has constantly grown upon me and I have found more and more reason to justify my esteem for both this grand religion and its noble founder. I can repeat the words and make them my own which the venerable Professor Fausböll said after having spent a lifetime on the study of Pali literature, "the more I know of Buddha, the more I love him."

The influence of Buddha's spirit upon his followers shows itself in the excellencies of the Buddhist canon, which among all the religious literature on earth—and here not even the Bible can be said to make an exception—is distinguished by purity, profundity, and loftiness. In my literary labors I have met with repeated occasions when I felt the need of quoting Buddhist hymns for the qualities that characterize the devotional poetry of Buddhism, and thus I was frequently induced to try my hand at the versification of these ancient and venerable stanzas, the result of which is collected in this little volume. In addition to versifications of Buddhist poetry, I have written a few original poems in the same strain, and these are also included in the present collection.

I have set some of these Buddhist poems to music, which, as

I am fully conscious, is a bold innovation, but may be welcome to some musical friends of Buddhism. Music is a comparatively recent invention, but the religious services of ancient India at an early time were possessed of a melodramatic recitative, or better, a chanting, which came very near to being real music and may be characterized as the initial stage of sacred music.

Secular music may have existed in the days of early Buddhism, for among the rules for novices we find a prohibition from attending musical performances which, we may well assume, corresponded somewhat to modern variety theaters or vaudeville shows; and in consequence, even to-day the majority of Buddhist priests in Burma, Siam and Ceylon look upon music as profane and sensuous—a thing to be shunned. Yet there is a difference between the noble strains of Johann Sebastian Bach and foolish rag-time tunes, between the sonatas of Beethoven and the operettas of Offenbach; and we know that in the age when Buddhism flourished in India, when the prosperity of the country reached its highest mark, sacred music existed; for we read in a translation of the Dharmapitaka that the philosopher Ashvaghosha was a musician, and a hymn of his composition was used in public worship. We read:¹

“He [Ashvaghosha] then went to Pataliputra for his propaganda-tour, where he composed an excellent tune called *Lai cha huo lo*, that he might by this means convert the people of the city. Its melody was classical, mournful, and melodious, inducing the audience to ponder on the misery, emptiness, and non-atman-ness of life.* That is to say, the music roused in the mind of the hearer the thought that all aggregates are visionary and subject to transformation; that the triple world is a jail and a bondage, with nothing enjoyable in it; that since royalty, nobility, and the exercise of supreme power are all characterized with transitoriness, nothing can prevent their decline, which will be as sure as the dispersion of the clouds in the sky; that this corporeal existence is a sham, is as hollow as a plantain tree, is an enemy, a foe, one

¹ Translated from the Chinese by Teitaro Suzuki in his *Ashvaghosha's Discourse on the Awakening of the Faith in the Mahayana*, pp. 35-36.

* This should read, “impermanence, misery and emptiness of life,” for it obviously translates the words “*anicca, dukkha, anatta*.”

not to be intimately related with; and again that like a box in which a cobra is kept, it should never be cherished by anybody; that therefore all Buddhas denounce persons clinging to a corporeal existence. Thus explaining in detail the doctrine of the non-atman and the *shunyata*, Ashvaghosha had the melody played by musicians, who, however, not being able to grasp the significance of the piece, failed to produce the intended tune and harmony. He then donned a white woolen dress, joined the band of musicians, beating the drum, ringing the bell, and tuning the lyre, and this done, the melody in full perfection gave a note at once mournful and soothing, so as to arouse in the minds of the audience the idea of the misery, emptiness, and non-atman-ness of all things. The five hundred royal princes in the city thus moved all at once were fully awakened, and abhorring the curse of the five evil passions, abandoned their worldly life and took refuge in the Bodhi. The king of Pataliputra was very much terrified by the event, thinking that if the people who listened to this music would abandon their homes (like the princes), his country would be depopulated and his royal business ruined. So he warned the people never to play this music hereafter."

We quote from the same source:

"The fact agrees well with Taranatha's statement which in its German translation reads as follows: 'Die von ihm verfassten Loblieder sind auch in allen Ländern verbreitet; da zuletzt Sänger und Possenreisser dieselben vortrugen and bei allen Menschen des Landes mit Macht Glauben an den Buddha entstand, erwuchs durch die Loblieder grösserer Nutzen zur Verbreitung der Lehre.' (*Geschichte des Buddhismus*, German translation, p. 91.)"

Literally translated the name Ashvaghosha means "The Neighing Horse," and so he is commonly portrayed in connection with a horse. The accompanying picture is reproduced from a Chinese frontispiece of Ashvaghosha's *Awakening of Faith* after a reproduction made by the Rev. Dr. Timothy Richard. Here the sage is shown as floating in the clouds, and his emblem is placed beneath.

How commonly music must have been a pastime or perhaps even a means of private edification among the Buddhist priests

of ancient India during the first millennium of the Christian era, appears from the wall paintings on the caves of Ajanta, where we see monks with guitars and other musical instruments; and



ASHVAGHOSHA, THE BUDDHIST ST. AMBROSE.

the thought that there could be anything wrong in music seems to be altogether missing.

In China and Japan music is freely used in religious worship