

The *cakravāka* bird in Aśvaghōṣa's *Saundarananda*: the Buddhist twist in a *kāvya* image

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The *Saundarananda*, a *mahākāvya* in 18 cantos, was composed by the Buddhist monk and poet Aśvaghōṣa in the early second century C.E. It relates the legend of Nanda, half-brother to the Buddha, who is very much in love with his charming young wife. One day the Buddha appears and leads him away to be ordained. Nanda continues to long for his wife, until the Buddha shows him a vision of the Apsarases, the enchanting nymphs of heaven. Nanda now undertakes a life of celibate self-discipline, with the aim of winning the Apsarases as celestial concubines in his next life. Before long he realises the futility of this aim, devotes himself to meditation, and finally wins liberation.

As is expected of a poet, Aśvaghōṣa adorns his work with a wealth of imagery and metaphor. Some images are original to Aśvaghōṣa, some are familiar Buddhist tropes, and some belong to the conventional stock-in-trade of *kāvya* literature. Even in this latter case, the poet often realigns the sense to suit his Buddhist subject matter. This paper takes as an example of Aśvaghōṣa's technique the simile of the *cakravāka* bird, a bird which traditionally functions, in Indian literature, as a symbol of conjugal love and fidelity.

This paper will make a brief survey of the *cakravāka* in ancient Indian literature, by way of establishing its conventional treatment. It will then explore the *Saundarananda*'s five references to the *cakravāka*. Its conclusion will demonstrate that while Aśvaghōṣa initially conforms to conventional treatment of this image, he ultimately undermines it, thus forcing this *kāvya* image to contribute to his Buddhist theme.