Sadvidya Journal of Sanskrit and Indian Knowledge Systems
DOI: 10.18311/sadvid/2025/51466

The Buddhist Philosophy in Kumāraṇ Āsaṅ's *Nalini*

Girish U

Department of Sanskrit, Fatima Mata National College (Autonomous), Kollam – 691001, Kerala, India; giriufmnc@gmail.com

Abstract

The poem *Nalini* by Kumāran Āśān explores deep ideas from Buddhist philosophy, especially the problem of human suffering and how to overcome it. The main issue in the poem is how love and attachment can lead to pain, and how one can find peace by letting go. This study looks at how Āśān uses the story of Divākara and Nalini to share Buddhist teachings like the Four Noble Truths and the Middle Path. The poem shows that true love is not just emotional or physical, but spiritual and pure. Divākara's life as a calm and kind renunciant reflects Buddhist values such as compassion, balance, and detachment. The poem also talks about how life is always changing and how we can be free from suffering by controlling desire. In the end, *Nalini* shares a message of inner peace, kindness, and freedom from attachment through simple and thoughtful living.

Keywords: Buddhist Philosophy, Four Noble Truths, Kumāran Āśān, Middle Path, *Nalini*

1. Introduction

The human being who wandered in search of the ultimate truth of life finally arrived at the science of liberation (*Mokṣaśāstra*). Eastern philosophical traditions have long approached the idea of *mokṣa*—freedom from suffering—through diverse systems of thought. As the ancient saying goes, "*Yena tattvaṁ dṛśyate, tat darśanam. Tac chādhyātmāyattam*",[1] meaning, "That by which the truth is seen — that is *darśana* (philosophy). That is dependent on the self." *Darśana*, therefore, is the vision of truth that arises through inner realisation. Indian philosophies are broadly classified into two streams: *Āstika* (orthodox), which accept the authority of the Vedas, and *Nāstika* (heterodox), which do not. The *Āstika* schools include *Sāṅkhya*, Yoga, *Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Pūrva Mīmāṁsā,* and *Vedānta*. The *Nāstika* schools include *Chārvāka*, Buddhist, and Jain systems. Despite differences, all aim at understanding the nature of existence, morality, and human liberation.

1.1 Emergence of Buddhism

Among the *Nāstika* schools, Buddhism holds a special place for its message of compassion, non-violence, and freedom from suffering. Siddhārtha Gautama, who became the Buddha, lived in the 3rd century BCE. He rejected the old religious systems of his time and introduced a new path based on the Middle path (*Madhyama Mārga*), the Four Noble Truths (*Ārya Satyas*), and the Eightfold Path (*Aṣṭāṅga Mārga*). Siddhārtha was born into a royal family of the Śākya clan, known for their pride and strength. But he gave up all comforts to understand deep questions like: What is the meaning of life? Why do we suffer? Is there life after death? His search led him to enlightenment (*bodhi*), and he became a teacher who helped others find peace.

2. Core Teachings of Buddhism

2.1 The Four Noble Truths (*Ārya Satyas*)

Buddhist philosophy is based on the Four Noble Truths *(Ārya Satyas)*[2]. These truths are the foundation from which all Buddhist ideas grow. The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Worldly life is filled with suffering *(duḥkha).*
2. Suffering has causes *(samudaya)*
3. It is possible to eliminate suffering *(nirodha)*
4. There is a path that ends suffering *(mārga)*

*Author for correspondence

Article Received on: 17.09.2025 *Peer-reviewed* Accepted on: 12-11-2025

2.2 The Eightfold Path (*Aṣṭāṅga Mārga*)

Along with these truths, the Eightfold Path (*Aṣṭāṅga Mārga*)[3] is presented as the initial way to overcome suffering. The eight components of this path are:

1. Right View (*samyak dṛṣṭi*)
2. Right Intention (*samyak saṅkalpa*)
3. Right Speech (*samyak vāk*)
4. Right Action (*samyak karma*)
5. Right Livelihood (*samyak ājīva*)
6. Right Effort (*samyak vyāyāma*)
7. Right Mindfulness (*samyak smṛti*)
8. Right Concentration (*samyak samādhi*)

Buddhist philosophy teaches that the sufferings of life — such as birth, ageing, disease, death, sorrow, distress, fear, and despair — can be overcome through the Eightfold Path. As stated in the Dhammapada: "When someone is caught in the three fires of suffering, change, and confusion, where can they find joy? Where is happiness?"[4] Through mental discipline, one can attain *nirvāṇa*, the state of ultimate liberation.

Buddhist philosophy discusses numerous concepts such as Buddhist thought, the theory of mind-only *(yogācāra)*, non-violence *(ahimsa),* truth *(satya),* duty (*dharma),* the middle path *(madhyama-mārga),* enlightenment *(mahāsambodhi),* impermanence *(kṣhaṇikatā),* the ideal of compassion *(sneha-saṅkalpam),* the renunciation ideal *(saṁnyāsa-saṅkalpam),* social commitment, social life, the concept of karma, the mind, and many others. Buddhist monastic communities themselves were a section of society. This is a school of thought that addresses issues affecting the common people and resolves their doubts. Numerous philosophers, writers, social reformers, and Renaissance leaders—both Western and Eastern—have been inspired by Buddhist philosophy.

3. Buddhist Philosophy among Modern Indian Thinkers

In the early part of the 19th century, the influence of Buddhist philosophy was clearly evident among Renaissance leaders, social reformers, and poets. This influence was not limited to their thoughts and actions, but was also visible in their writings. Edwin Arnold's book *The Light of Asia*, published in 1879, brought the new generation closer to Buddhism. The spirit of resistance in nationalist movements against imperialism was shaped, in part, by the influence of Buddhist thought. Mahatma Gandhi transformed *ahimsa* (non-violence) into a powerful weapon. Similarly, religious reform movements like the *Ārya Sāmaj* also fought against casteism based on the principles of this philosophy.

4. Buddhist Influence in Kerala

Buddhist philosophy has had a significant impact on the cultural history of Kerala. It is widely accepted that Renaissance leaders such as Caṭṭampi Svāmikal, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru, C. Kṛṣṇaṇ, etc. were influenced by the ideas of the Buddha in shaping their path of action. Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru's temple consecration at *Aruvippuram* itself marked a revolutionary moment by allowing temple entry beyond caste and religious boundaries. Guru embraced this caste-free spiritual vision. Moreover, alongside the temples Guru consecrated, he also established schools and libraries—an approach reminiscent of the Buddhist *vihara* tradition. The very word *Pallikūṭaṁ* (school) is believed to be a contribution of Buddhism. Buddhist monks typically lived not in isolation, but for public service. Their monastic life was not one of detachment from society but of deep engagement with it. They provided invaluable services, especially in healthcare. During the 18th and 19th centuries, a large number of physicians came from the Ezhava community—an outcome attributed to the enduring influence of Buddhism. Even the name *Śrī Nārāyaṇa Dharma Paripālana Yōgam (SNDP)* reflects the adoption of the Buddhist concept of *dharma.*

5. Buddhist Influence in *Nalini*

Kumāran Āśān, a great poet and a disciple of Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru—also known by the name Chinnaswami—was deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy, both in his personal life and in his poetic works. While the early phase of Āśān›s poetic journey reflected worldly thought, it gradually shifted toward spiritualism. He eventually sought to sanctify the concept of love in an almost transcendent way. This becomes particularly evident in his lyrical and imaginative narrative poem *Nalini.*

In the preface to this poem, A.R. Raja Raja Varma remarks: "Although the predominant sentiment here

is *shṛṅgāra* (romantic love), it is expressed through a mode detached from worldly transactions and grounded in the purity of the *sāttvic* quality (virtue)"[5] *Āśān* often returns to the theme of sorrow *(duḥkha-darśanam),* which becomes a constant presence in his writings. As in poems like *Caṇḍālabhikṣukī, Vīṇāpūvu*, and *Prarodanam*, *Nalini* also portrays the transitions and phases of life in an orderly manner. The idea of suffering—central to the Four Noble Truths *(Ārya Satyas)* of Buddhism—is clearly reflected here.

5.1 Buddhist Renunciation in *Nalini*

In *Nalini*, the lives of Nalini and Divākara resemble those of Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā to a striking degree. Divākara becomes a renunciant *(sannyāsi),* turning away from a life of sorrow to seek eternal wisdom. He realises the impermanence and suffering of worldly life and sets out in search of transcendental liberation *(mokṣa).* Through the character of Divākara Yogī, Āśān conveys that the ultimate aim of human life is liberation from sensory emotions and eventual self-realisation. The poet introduces Divākara in this way:

Pārililla bhayamennu, mēreyu
-ṇḍārilum karuṇayennu, mēthinum
pōrumennumaruḷī prasannamāy
dhīramāya mukhakāntyāl avan.[6]

(Meaning, He gently declared, with a calm and courageous glow on his face: There is no fear in the world, there is compassion in everyone, and there will always be patience.) Divākara is portrayed as a Buddha-like figure through his qualities of compassion, inner peace, and selfless love. His calm presence and detachment from worldly desires reflect the essence of Buddhist philosophy. In one scene, the compassionate Divākara Yogī gently consoles Nalini, saying:

tōzhi, kāruṇikanāṇu ninṉil ñān,
kēzholā kṛpaṇabhāvamēlolā[7]

(Meaning, Dear friend, I am a compassionate one within you — Do not cry, do not let sorrow or misery take over.) Through these words, he shows empathy without attachment, offering spiritual guidance rather than emotional entanglement. There is a scene where Divākara Yogī expresses that there is nothing wrong in *sannyāsī* (renunciants) enjoying the beauty of nature. This is not found in the Hindu concept of renunciation. Normally, Buddhist monasteries *(vihāras)* are located in the midst of gardens or natural surroundings. He says:

Vanya śobhagaḷilatrayallayī
dhanyanārnnoru nisarggajaṁ rasaṁ[8]

(Meaning, the beauty of nature isn't just in the wild — There's a deeper, richer charm in it, too.) Divākaran reminds us that man is not separate from the universe, and that he can exist meaningfully only in connection with it. Moreover, the Middle Path (*Majjhima Patipadā*) of Buddhism is embraced here. Even a renunciate *(sannyāsī)* can enjoy the beauty of the universe. It is also emphasised here that one should not go to any extreme.

Many aspects of Buddhist renunciation are discussed here. In Buddhist monasteries (*viharas*), female renunciants are referred to as *Bhaginīs* (sisters). In *Nalini*, Divākaran says:

Maṅgalaṁ bhagini ninte bhaktiyāl
tuṅgamōdamiyalunna ñān śubhe"[9]

(Meaning, Blessings to you, sister — Because of your devotion, I feel great joy, O auspicious one.) Similarly, there is a part where it is said that the maiden (*kanya*) and the sannyasi (*vaṭu*) are equal:

Kanyayennu vaṭumennumēluki-
llanyabhāvamarikātmavēdikaḷ.[10]

5.2 Transcending Suffering: Buddhist Reflections in *Nalini*

In *Nalini*, Kumāran Āśān uses the characters' emotional journeys to reflect core Buddhist teachings. He transforms romantic love into a spiritual experience, showing that suffering, change, and detachment are key truths of life—just as Buddhism teaches. In this poem, love is shown as pure and imaginary. It is not based on physical attraction but on deep emotions and a spiritual bond. This love is free from worldly desires and shows inner purity and self-control. The characters feel that love helps them grow and understand themselves. It also leads them to give up worldly life. The poet makes romantic feelings seem sacred and thoughtful. He also shows that life is full of pain and change. From birth, living beings continue to have karmic *(vāsanā)* bonds, and this is the cause of suffering. In *Nalini*, it is said,

jantuvinṉu tuṭarunnu vāsanā-
bandhamingguṭaluvīzhuvōḷavum[11]

(Meaning, the living beings continue to have a strong bond of scent—even when the body falls and decays.)

This idea comes from Buddhist teachings about suffering, death, and illness. The unexpected arrival of fate can be seen in *Nalini*. The transience of life is clearly depicted in the poem. The Buddhist concept of impermanence can be observed in it. In the Noble Truths of the Buddhist path, it is clearly stated that there is definitely a way to end suffering. The ultimate solution is the control of the five senses. In *Nalini*, it is said:

Pañcavṛttikaḷaṭakkiyanvahaṁ
neñcuvaccuruthapōmayaṁ dhanaṁ[12]

In *Nalini*, Kumāran Āśān shows that love is not just romantic, but also imaginary and philosophical. The personal love between the characters becomes a kind of spiritual practice or tapas. Āśān describes love as the essence of the universe, something very pure and deep. He says that true love should not be given to things that will not last. This is how the poem shows the impermanence of material life and the truth of eternal love. The character Divākara Yogī explains this idea to Nalini. He says:

snehāmāṇakhilasāramūzhiyil
snehasāramiha satyamekamāṁ
mōhanaṁ bhuvanasaṅgaminnatil
snehamūlamamalē veṭiññu ñān[13]

(Meaning, Love is the essence of the entire universe. This essence of love alone is the truth. Enchanting is this union of the world; I am rooted in pure love.) In these lines, he tells her that love is the reason for all the beauty and unity in the world. But as a Yogī, he has chosen to give up this love to follow a higher spiritual path. Āśān uses this to show that love, when understood deeply, can lead a person toward peace and freedom. This concept of love, too, is indeed taken from Buddhist philosophy by Āśān. Therefore, when reading *Nalini*, we cannot find any other philosophical similarity apart from that of Buddhist thought.

6. Conclusion

In *Nalini*, Kumāran Āśān clearly presents important Buddhist ideas like suffering, letting go, impermanence, and the middle path. Through the story of Divākara and Nalini, the poem shows how emotional pain can lead to spiritual growth. Divākara's choice to leave behind worldly life and follow a peaceful, balanced path reflects the teachings of the Buddha. His kindness toward Nalini shows that true love is not about desire, but about compassion and understanding. One of the key ideas in the poem is that a person can live simply and still enjoy the beauty of the world—an idea that comes from Buddhism, not traditional Hindu renunciation. *Nalini* presents love as something pure and spiritual, helping people move beyond suffering and toward inner peace. This study shows that *Nalini* is more than just a love poem. It is also a thoughtful work influenced by Buddhist ideas, where Āśān talks about life, love, and freedom in a new way for Malayalam literature.

7. Footnotes

1. Dahāla, Ācārya Lokamānī. Saṃskṛtasāhityaitihāsaḥ. Vārāṇasī: Kṛṣṇadāsa Academi, 1999,p. 84.
2. Ibid-142
3. Śukla, Dr. Rameśacandra. Prabandharatnākaraḥ. Vārāṇasī: Caukhambhā Vidyābhavana, 2000, p. 131.
4. Dhammapada, Chapter 15 - Sukhavagga, Verse 202. In: Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli. Dhammapadaḥ: With Introductory Essays, Pāli Text, English Translation and Notes. Oxford University Press, 1950
5. Kumāranāṣante Sampūrṇa Padyakṛtikāl, National Book Stall, Koṭṭayām, 1981, p. 182.
6. *Nalini*, Verse 3, in Kumāranāṣante Sampūrṇa Padyakṛtikāl. National Book Stall, Koṭṭayām, 1981. p.183
7. Ibid. p.202
8. Ibid. p.184
9. Ibid. p.191
10. Ibid. p.194
11. Ibid. p.185
12. Ibid. p.199
13. Ibid. p.202