

# Visualizing Enlightenment: A Kukkonenian Cognitive-Narrative Reading of Buddhist Graphic Novels

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## Abstract

*The graphic novels of Buddhism, as a method of cognitive-narrative reading, are visualized in this paper. Through this paper, a theoretical framework of Karin Kukkonen applied in *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* is applied to analyze the strategies of narrative, cognition, and visualization used in the present day in Buddhist graphic novels. Based on the ideas of multimodality, readerly cognition and the complexity of narrative developed by Kukkonen, the paper examines the sequential art as a construction of the life and philosophy of the Buddha by means of images, text, gutters and panel transitions. Graphic biographies of the Buddha make doctrinal teachings, including suffering, renunciation, enlightenment, and compassion, into easy-to-read pictorial stories, which stimulate the active involvement of the reader. It is possible through preempting the cognitive processes of meaning-making to argue that Buddhist graphic novels are neither simplified versions of the stories but rather complex and entertaining narrative forms as they appeal to readers emotionally, ethically, and intellectually. The paper illustrates the means through which visual metaphor, temporal overlay, focalization, and embodied cognition (which are uniquely comics) can be used to transmit spiritual philosophy into popular culture. Finally, the paper locates the Buddhist graphic novels as a significant point at which the religious discourse, visual narratives and cognitive narratology meet, extending the model by Kukkonen to the analysis of the sacred and philosophical narratives in books of graphic art.*

*Keywords: Cognitive Narratology, Multimodality, Visual Narrative, Sequential Art, Reader Engagement, Graphic Biography*

## Introduction

The historical methods of transmission of Buddhism philosophy include oral tradition, scriptures, and visual representations. The graphic novels have in recent decades become an important medium of reconsidering the life of the Buddha and his teachings. Through the use of sequential art, multimodality and narrative layering, these texts make intricate doctrinaire themes of suffering, renunciation and enlightenment palatable to the modern reader. The cognitive-narrative model, introduced by Karin Kukkonen, proves to be a helpful approach in understanding the ways in which comics appeal to readerly cognition, create meaning through text-image relations, and provoke moral thought.

This paper suggests that Buddhist graphic novels cannot be perceived as abridged

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versions of religious texts but are complicated multimedia discourses. These works appeal to readers on emotional, intellectual, and ethical levels through such techniques as visual metaphor, temporal layering, and embodied cognition. Although the Buddhist philosophy has been thoroughly researched in terms of textual and doctrinal issues, the fact that the Buddhist philosophy has been transformed into the graphic narrative form has been under-researched. The literature tends to view religious comics merely as educational resources, and not in terms of narrative sophistication and cognitive interest.

Using a qualitative and interpretive approach, this paper uses Kukkonen cognitive-narrative model in the analysis of *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* by Kieron Moore and Rajesh Nagulakonda. It also examines the role of multimodal aspects in triggering cognitive mechanisms, including inference, empathy and ethical judgment, e.g. panel transitions, focalization and visual-textual interaction. Another aspect of the study is the contribution of comics-specific strategies to the successful communication of Buddhist philosophy and its adaptation to the popular culture.

The results indicate that the Buddhist graphic novels are dynamic cultural spaces in which religious discourse is overlapped by the modern-day narratives. This accessibility and conceptual depth is aided by their visual metaphor and embodied cognition. Therefore, there is a strong pedagogical value in these texts and it can be seen that graphic narratives may be useful to convey philosophical and spiritual concepts. Nevertheless, the analysis is confined to a set of texts and a cognitive-narrative approach, but not to a larger scale of analysis, including historical or reception.

### **Review on Karin Kukkonen's Theory**

Karin Kukkonen starts the examination of comics and graphic novels by placing comics into the large area of narratology, by noting that comics are multimodal. She claims that “comics are a medium that communicates through images, words, and sequence” (4). She further elaborates:

A medium is constituted in three ways: (i) it is a mode of communication, (ii) it relies on a particular set of technologies, and (iii) it is anchored in society through a number of institutions (Jensen 2008). Comics work as a mode of communication in that they tell stories or present jokes in a particular manner using images, words, and sequence. Comics also rely on the technology of print and the format of the book. With the increasing digitalization of comics and the rise of web comics, a new set of technologies might be introduced for comics, but as of now, most comics are printed and bound in various formats (4).

This excerpt gives us the definition of what a medium is and then demonstrates how

comics can be classified under that concept. To begin with, Jensen (2008) states that there are three important aspects of a medium. (i) Mode of communication refers to how messages are developed and exchanged. (ii) Technologies are those material and technical objects enabling communication. (iii) Institutions refer to the social formations of the society, i.e. publishers, markets, and cultural practices which support and govern the manner in which the medium operates within the society.

Comics are a unique communication medium which combines visual, textual and sequential components to create meaning. Their story is active as images, words, panels, page layout interact, not as individual semiotic modes. Comics are traditionally based on print technology, and they have been printed and distributed as bound media, but have lately become available on digital platforms. Further, institutional structures like publishing networks, distribution systems and communities of readers support their continued development, making them a fully developed medium.

The research will have a qualitative, interpretive approach based on the cognitive-narrative model by Karin Kukkonen. To look at the cognition of the reader, it uses multimodal and narratological analysis based on the *Buddha: An Enlightened Life*. It counters reductionist arguments that comics are visualizations of prose, and this underlines their rich semiotic and narrative organization.

One of the key ideas of Kukkonen is that the gutter, the gap between the panels, is also a location of active cognition of a reader:

The panel frame is one of the unobtrusive features of the comics page. It usually goes unnoticed, but here it becomes visible. When elements of the form, such as panel frames, captions or gutters become salient, because characters jump out of the panel, because they interact with the captions (usually invisible to them) or because they take a short cut in the gutter from one panel to the another, then comics become self-reflexive. The move across the boundaries of the story world is called metalepsis. In metalepsis an element of the story world moves onto the metalevel of the author and readers or an element from this metalevel moves into the story world. (65).

The use of panel frames in comics is generally inconspicuous structural elements, but when foregrounded (e.g. by characters crossing frames, interacting with captions, or breaking gutters) they reveal the artificiality of the medium. These instances create self-reflexivity, in which comics reflect on their own narrative procedures. This is a boundary violation between fictional and narrative planes that make up metalepsis. Kukkonen is applying the idea of indeterminacy of Wolfgang Iser to visual-verbal stories, yet critics warn that her focus on reader cognition runs the risk of universalizing interpretation among different cultural contexts.

Another similarity Kukkonen emphasizes is embodiment, according to him,

“Embodiment refers to the ways in which the images and words of a comic narrative affects and engages with the readers’ own bodily experience” (170). Though Charles Hatfield laments her comparative lack of emphasis on socio-political contexts, her model throws light on the issue of affective representation in comics. In addition, her perspective of adaptation as transmedial storytelling (74) highlights the way in which the complex concepts are disseminated in the media, even though the fidelity of particular media might limit the processes of creative re-interpretation metalevel moves into the storyworld.

The book *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* by Kukkonen places the comics in the contact point between narratology, cognition theory, and visual culture. The fact that she insists that:

Narratology, the study of narratives, has a similar interest in the building principles of comics as semiotics, but its emphasis lies in the stories that comics tell, rather than the localized meaning-making processes as such. Like semiotics, narratology understands the entirety of cultural production to be its domain and endeavors to provide a framework for analyzing narrative and storytelling in literature, films, comics, but also everyday encounters (128).

Kukkonen places comics at the nexus of narratology, cognitive theory and visual culture, highlighting their dual nature of being perceptual and cognitive narratives. Although her narratological method places more emphasis on narration than on semiotic units in isolation and spans media genres, its universalizing tendencies are criticized by critics. However, her paradigm is of importance to explain theoretically in a systematic manner how sequential art forms meaning through narratively cognitively stimulating structures. Moholy-Nagy views visual communication as a combination of text and image, and states that “typography is communication composed in type” while “photography is the visual presentation of what can be optically apprehended” (33) and that “the visually most exact rendering of communication” (33).

In the same way, Lissitzky anticipates the visual cognition and says that “the book finds its channel to the brain through the eye, not through the ear” (29), and that the meaning is temporal and spatial: “as a sound it is a function of time, and as a representation it is a function of space. The coming book must be both” (27). Such observations can be made to match cognitive narratology and comics theory where meaning is created with the help of deliberate sequence (McCloud, 1994, 9) and readerly closure (63). Eisner emphasizes the importance of experience of engagement (7), and Lupton emphasizes the fact that design is present everywhere, but at the same time, it is invisible (unnoticed and unrecognized) (7) which also points to conscious and subconscious processing. Typography is, according to

Lupton, a visual language (13), and according to Bringhurst, it has a purpose to be able to express content (17), to make complex philosophical concepts cognitively available, as graphic stories can do.

### **Review on Campfire graphic novel *Buddha: An Enlightened Life***

The framework of Kukkonen can be applied to the religious graphic texts like the book of *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* where visual metaphor and condensed symbolism organize the meaning. An early dream scene, beginning with the appearance of a white elephant, with its six great tusks, and a lotus flower in its nostrils--a dream that is pure and has penetrated my womb... (Moore 7) exemplifies multimodal narration, where the elephant has a symbolic meaning of purity and spiritual power. According to John Powers, this symbolism renders abstract doctrines more relatable (112) but critics believe that it runs the risk of simplifying complicated Buddhist cosmology to wider audiences.

The story is carried on by morally provoking, dramatizing scenes, such as the swan incident, - It is a living creature, (Moore 13) and the verdict that "A life can never belong to one who tries to destroy it, (14), anticipating ethical thought. Likewise the Four Sights- No. he was old. (Moore 21) and the ascetic realization- Asceticism is as fruitless as extreme yoga (47) use contrast and stylization, fitting into the category of amplification through simplification used by McCloud (30). Although Hatfield criticizes such clarity as didactic (88) and Powers cautions against overstatement (118), the ultimate enlightenment that is presented as transcending Mara (Preface) echoes the concept of selective visual framing as stressed by Kukkonen (47).

### **Textual Analysis**

Kukkonen also stresses that comics are multi-layered narrative systems where the text and image are interdependent to create meaning (19). In *Buddha: An Enlightened Life*, this multimodality can also be seen in the dream of Queen Maya, who, on the one hand, was prophesied verbally; on the other hand, it is presented through symbolic imagery when the white elephant, which has six magnificent tusks and a lotus flower in its trunk, approached her in her dream (7). This type of synthesis is a prime example of what Kukkonen explains by the idea that meaning is created as a result of the readerly synthesis of modes. In the same way, the cognitive dissonance created by the gutter in Siddhartha, when he encounters old age, when he sees the twisting body of old man, instead of youthful vitality (Moore 22), is forced to create meaning, which makes it congruent with cognitive narratology of Kukkonen.

Siddhartha is compassionate as dramatized in the swan episode. As Master Asita declares, “A life can never belong to one who tries to destroy it, but only to one who tries to save it. Therefore, the swan belongs not to Devadatta, but to Siddhartha.” (Moore 14). The swan in this case has been used as a visual representation of ethical responsibility. The idea of embodied cognition, stated by Kukkonen, in which the drawn body expresses the affect and cognition with the gesture and style, is also apparent in the way Siddhartha treats the bird so kindly. Not only is the ethical message being conveyed, but also demonstrated, and it is to the readers to become compassionate through empathy in the image of the person.

Kukkonen draws attention to the fact that comics are able to layer past and present on the same page (66). The events of old age, sickness, and death are shown in the image of the Four Sights through consecutive panels (Moore 21-25). All the views are time-specific but are placed in opposition to each other, producing the stratification of the story of suffering. Such time compression enables readers to understand the universality of dukkha in one sequence, which is a reflection of the Buddhist philosophy due to the ability of comics to afford such a meaning.

The period of asceticism is the one painted in stark detail: “He lived on one grain of rice a day, which was as much as he ate” (Moore 44). The suffering is beyond expression, as expressed by the skeletal body, which is made with exaggerated lines that embodiment in comics allows readers to experience ethical struggle through visual metaphor (*Studying Comics* 170). The reader can emotionally experience the emptiness of excessive renunciation, which is also in line with Buddhist belief that ascesis is also not asceticism.

Kukkonen emphasizes the fact that comics play with focalization and lead the reader to another point of view thanks to panel structure (45). The scenes at the palace are also characterized by Siddhartha looking against the rich backgrounds as a way of highlighting his isolation. As an example, he sees dancers in the sleep after a feast and he is mentioned saying that he found the scene to be loathsome. Now he must move out of this suffocating life: “He found the sight loathsome. He had to leave this stifling life, now!” (Moore 29). The spectacle gives place to the disgust and is inviting the readers to follow the same disillusionment Siddhartha had.

The inner struggle is dramatized with the confrontation with Mara. It is a reflection of the text, which says, “...there is a Mara within all of us. The wisdom of Buddha leads us to an understanding of the true purpose of life-to overcome this Mara within us and to enable us to attain the inner peace and sanctity that we seek in ourselves” (Moore, Preface). Externalization of psychological temptation is done through the symbolic image of the demon. The theory of readerly cognition developed by Kukkonen is applicable in this case: a reader should guess that Mara

is an embodiment of internal desire and connect the visual metaphor with some doctrinal interpretation (*Studying Comics* 61). It is a kind of scene that illustrates the possibility of externalizing abstract philosophy by the means of comics.

Kukkonen suggests that comics invite readers to engage emotionally, ethically, and intellectually through multimodal cues (75). This three-fold interaction is depicted by the way Siddhartha leaves the palace. The juxtaposition between his quiet parting with Yasodhara and his powerful steps towards exile is made by the panels (Moore 29-30). Readers are emotionally sorrowful, ethically conflicted, and intellectually aware of renunciation. Sequential art therefore becomes a means of passing down Buddhist philosophy in an easy to understand form.

The dialogue in *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* tends to contain doctrines. A sage says, “Hmm... This Prince could become King of Kings if he wishes to rule. But should he choose a religious life... Yes, he could just as likely become a Buddha” (10). Siddhartha disowns kingship when he claims that there is no King who can prevent old age, or sickness, or death. Suffering cannot be fought away. This statement, framed within a visual confrontation, exemplifies Kukkonen’s claim: “Through the juxtaposition of the verbal and visual mode, Edward’s discourse and his facial expression, placed there as clues by the narrator, the discrepancy between the comics narrator’s knowledge as communicated to the reader and the character’s own knowledge comes back in, and with it cognitive complexity” (88). The conversation is made powerful with contrast to the images of royal enticement and the philosophical denial of the worldly authority.

Kukkonen notes that, in the case of adaptations into comics: “Creators might indeed decide to foreground their own interpretation by changing details of the setting, the appearance of the characters or the way they communicate” (81). The Campfire does a simplification of Buddhist doctrine into sequential art, allowing the ideas of the Middle Way to be understood visually. In fact, the image of the food and moderation in the concept of the Middle Way is reflected in Siddhartha’s realization after taking milk-rice: No, to become arhats - enlightened ones - you must follow | a Middle Way (Moore 61). Although a critic can suggest that this would be an over-simplification, the pedagogical clarity of adaptation has been validated by Kukkonen.

The narrative repeatedly positions readers as ethical participants. When Siddhartha names his son Rahula, “impediment” (28), Siddhartha gives the name to his son make the readers think about the meaning of attachment and renunciation. According to Kukkonen, as in the reader engagement theory, comics demand cognitive and ethical participation, as readers negotiate meaning across modalities (140). This is a demand that is seen in the naming scene, which raises ethical concerns by way of narrative economy.

*Buddha: An Enlightened Life* shows that comics reflect the cognitively-narrative theory of Kukkonen. The graphic novel interprets the Buddhist philosophy into sequential art through multimodality, focalization, embodiment, and temporal layering. As Kukkonen insists comics are sophisticated narrative forms that engage readers emotionally, ethically, and intellectually: Narrative patterns allow us to connect events into meaningful wholes and into complexes of intentions and agency to which we can relate and which we can evaluate (49). This sophistication is also seen in the Campfire adaptation, where the Buddhist doctrine is placed in popular culture and the viewer is invited to engage in a profound thinking process.

Kukkonen argues that panel transitions make the readers produce narrative continuity: “Once the principle of closure is moved to panel-to-panel transitions, there is the tacit assumption that we have the same characters and locations at a slightly later point in time but we do not run an inner film of how they got there” (11). The example of this principle presented in *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* is the panels where Siddhartha leaves the palace and goes on the secret way (Moore 28-30). The sudden change of the luxurious interiors and the silent night street makes the readers struggle to overcome the emotional discontinuity with the help of their mind. It is not just a change of location but one of state of consciousness, and the reader is part of the drama of Siddhartha renouncing himself.

The face-off with Mara is a very prominent instance of what Kukkonen refers to as cognitive metaphor in comics:

Cognitive approaches to comics work with the mental processes that unfold as we read comics, make meaning from the lines and squiggles on the page, and construct their narratives. “Cognitive” refers here to all the possible mental involvements with the comics page: to the reasoned, (more) conscious process of inferencing, to the patterns of conceptual metaphors and to the embodied understanding of emotions, intentional stances, and movement. (129)

The character of Mara makes the inner temptation external to allow readers to imagine the abstract psychological conflict in the form of an allegory: “This wisdom of Buddha makes us overcome this Mara in us (Moore, Preface). It can be projected onto the visual images of the outside world to consider this metaphor, which demonstrates the way through which comics make thought visual. Kukkonen highlights this multimodal economy as he points out that comics are engineered by visual, verbal as well as sequential modes as a multimodal medium (75). This is seen in how Rahula is named impendent (Moore 28), the conflict between the bond with family and sacrifice is reduced to one word in combination with imagery. Although Hatfield criticizes this clarity as possibly reductive (88), the scene shows how comics can reduce intricate moral issues to brief yet meaningful formulations.

Overall, *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* illustrates the cognitive-narrative theory of Kukkonen in the multimodality, focalization, embodiment and metaphor. Kukkonen reiterates that comics are complex narrative, which arouses emotions, morals, and the intellect of the readers: “The comic renders a highly complex narrative in and about language visually in images and mise en page” (157). The Campfire adaptation can be a model of how sequential art can convey sacred philosophy where Buddhist doctrine is placed into the popular culture but with a strong appeal to deep intellectual engagement. The novel is therefore a study of the ways in which comics should be regarded as a narrative art and philosophical commentary.

## Findings and Discussion

Among the research questions were how the narrative strategies are used in the Buddhist graphic novels to impart the doctrinal teaching. As the text indicates, the analysis of *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* shows that multimodality as the association of text, image, and panel transitions serve as the key means of narration. As an example, the Four Sights sequence contrasts the youthful innocence with the cold reality of old age, illness and death (Moore 21-25). This facilitates the aim of determining the way in which sequential art conveys abstract Buddhist ideas into visual stories that can be easily understood. Kukkonen makes an argument where he says the gutter is a place of inference and readers imaginatively fill in gaps: “the space between the panels. Sometimes, when panels are clearly demarked by panel frames, the gutter is rendered as a white space between the panels. Sometimes, panels are layered on top of each other or not clearly demarked, and then it is more difficult to discern the gutter” (182). It is correct in this instance because the readers do construct for themselves the cognitive awakening of Siddhartha in the transitions of the panels.

The other research question was aimed at understanding the way the readers think about Buddhist philosophy by reading graphic stories. The results show that embodied cognition is an important element. The futility of extreme renunciation is literally dramatized in the visuals of the skeletal body of Siddhartha when he is engaged in ascetic practices (44). The concept expressed by Kukkonen when he states that the drawn body expresses the affect and cognition through gesture and style is demonstrated in this scene as the reader can identify with the suffering and thus intuitively understand the Middle Way, which is shown in the graphic novel: “...to become arhats - enlightened ones - you must follow a Middle Way (Moore 61). This satisfies the goal of the study to show how the comics provoke ethical and emotional involvement in doctrinal self-reflection.

The research also enquired on impacts of adaptation to comics on the availability

of Buddhist teachings. The Campfire text breaks down complicated teachings, including the Middle Way, into visual images as the milk-rice episode (Moore 46). According to Kukkonen, adaptation is the process of transporting a story from one medium to another and how such adaptation shapes the narrative itself, focusing in particular on adaptations of novels in comics (80). It means the opportunity to add layers of temporality and to replicate philosophical concepts into usable stories, which comics allow us to create now, was previewed by comic adaptations.

What is found here is that adaptation is beneficial to pedagogical clarity, but it runs the risk of oversimplifying. This is in line with the task of assessing the accessibility/doctrinal depth tradeoff in graphic retellings. According to the findings, narrative economy foregrounds ethical lessons. The swan scene, which was decided by the utterance of Asita, “a life can never belong to one who tries to destroy it, but only to one who tries to save it (Moore 14). This reduction is confirmed by the framework of Kukkonen (as a cognitive-narrative approach) but, critics like Hatfield warn, such clarity can diminish interpretive ambiguity (88).

What is highlighted here is that, although simplification does take place, it is a pedagogical aim to pass Buddhist ethics to various readerships. Reader involvement is also central to the meaning-making that is presented in the findings. The renunciation of Siddhartha, which is dramatized with silent panels of parting (Moore 29-30), has to be filled with some emotional character by the readers. The theory of readerly cognition put forward by Kukkonen is helpful in this regard, and it states that comics require cognitive and ethical engagement as the reader negotiates between modalities:

Cognitive approaches are based on results of empirical experiments of how we respond to texts and the world and generalize likely readerly involvement. Cognitive approaches to comics are useful for you if you are interested in: how comics create meaning through cues and readerly inferences; [and] how fictional minds and bodily experience are represented and elicited in comics (130).

Buddhist graphic novels are not the passive retellings but the active invitations to the ethical thought that serves the purpose of positioning comics as complex types of narrative. Lastly, the findings are relevant to the general narratological arguments. The research, by utilizing the theory of Kukkonen to a religious graphic biography, proves that sacred discourse could be subject matter to the application of cognitive-narrative theories.

The Campfire adaptation is an example of the way multimodality, focalization, and embodied cognition can pass on spiritual philosophy. This expands the Kukkonen model not only to the text of secularism or popularism, but also satisfies the goal of

locating the Buddhist graphic novels as a key location where the religious discourse meets visual narrative and cognitive narratology.

## Conclusion

The paper has proven that *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* successfully represents the cognitive-narrative paradigm of Karin Kukkonen, indicating that the multimodality, focalization, and embodied cognition turn the Buddhist philosophy into sequential art, which can be easily comprehended. Through the examination of narrative techniques, which include the Four Sights, the swan episode, and the assault on Siddhartha by Mara, the results indicate that the graphic novel is not a recreation of the doctrine, but rather an active process of ethical thinking and mental involvement of the readers. Text and image are also played off, with the assistance of panel transitions and visual metaphor, and this places the reader in the position of co-creating meaning, which serves as the goal of studying how comics are used to pass along spiritual and philosophical stories.

Simultaneously, the study points at the duality of the concept of adaptation: whereas the text of the Campfire simplified the intricate doctrines to facilitate pedagogical accessibility, it also has the potential to decrease the interpretive ambiguity. However, the same simplification emphasizes the power of the medium to translate cultural messages, rendering the teachings of Buddhism available to a wide range of people. The application of the theory provided by Kukkonen is used to confirm that Buddhist graphic novels are advanced narrative modes that overlap religious discourse, visual narratives, and cognitive narratology. In this way, the paper comes to the conclusion that comics such as *Buddha: An Enlightened Life* are not only widespread cultural artifacts, but also essential pedagogical resources, which opens the narratological theory to the territory of sacred biography and philosophical education.

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