

Buddhaghosa

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Buddhaghosa



Buddhaghosa with three copies of [Visuddhimagga](#), [Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara](#)

Occupation Buddhist monk
Era 5th century
Movement [Theravada](#) [Buddhism](#)

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Buddhaghosa was a 5th-century Indian [Theravada Buddhist](#) commentator, translator and philosopher.^{[1][2]} He worked in the [Great Monastery \(*Mahāvihāra*\)](#) at [Anurādhapura](#), [Sri Lanka](#) and saw himself as being part of the [Vibhajjavāda](#) school and in the lineage of the Sinhalese Mahāvihāra.^[3]

His best-known work is the [Visuddhimagga](#) ("Path of Purification"), a comprehensive summary of older Sinhala commentaries on Theravada teachings and practices. According to Sarah Shaw, in Theravada this systematic work is "the principal text on the subject of meditation."^[4] The interpretations provided by Buddhaghosa have generally constituted the orthodox understanding of Theravada scriptures since at least the 12th century CE.^{[5][6]}

He is generally recognized by both Western scholars and Theravadins as the most important philosopher and commentator of the Theravada,^{[2][7]} but is also criticised for his departures from the canonical texts^[citation needed].

□

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Name

The name **Buddhaghosa** means "Voice of the Buddha" (*Buddha+ghosa*) in [Pali](#)^[8], the language in which Buddhaghosa composed. In Sanskrit, the name would be spelled Buddhaghōṣa (Devanagari बुद्धघोष), but there is no retroflex ṣ sound in Pali, and the name is not found in Sanskrit works.^[9]

Biography

Limited reliable information is available about the life of Buddhaghosa. Three primary sources of information exist: short prologues and epilogues attached to Buddhaghosa's works; details of his life recorded in the [Mahavamsa](#), a Sri Lankan chronicle; and a later biographical work called the *Buddhaghosuppatti*.^{[10][11]} A few other sources discuss the life of Buddhaghosa, but do not appear to add any reliable material.^[7]

The biographical excerpts attached to works attributed to Buddhaghosa reveal relatively few details of his life, but were presumably added at the time of his actual composition.^{[7][12]} Largely identical in form, these short excerpts describe Buddhaghosa as having come to Sri Lanka from India and settled in [Anuradhapura](#).^[13] Besides this information, they provide only short lists of teachers, supporters, and associates of Buddhaghosa, whose names are not generally to be found elsewhere for comparison.^[13]

The [Mahavamsa](#) records that Buddhaghosa was born into a [Brahmin](#) family in the kingdom of [Magadha](#).^[2] He is said to have been born near [Bodh Gaya](#), and to have been a master of the [Vedas](#), traveling through India engaging in philosophical debates.^[14] Only upon encountering a Buddhist monk named Revata was Buddhaghosa bested in debate, first being defeated in a dispute over the meaning of a Vedic doctrine and then being confounded by the presentation of a teaching from the [Abhidhamma](#).^[14] Impressed, Buddhaghosa became a [bhikkhu](#) (Buddhist monk) and undertook the study of the [Tipitaka](#) and its commentaries. On finding a text for which the commentary had been lost in India, Buddhaghosa determined to travel to Sri Lanka to study a Sinhala commentary that was believed to have been preserved.^[14]

In Sri Lanka, Buddhaghosa began to study what was apparently a very large volume of Sinhala commentarial texts that had been assembled and preserved by the monks of the [Anuradhapura Maha Viharaya](#).^[15] Buddhaghosa sought permission to synthesize the assembled Sinhala-language commentaries into a comprehensive single commentary composed in [Pali](#).^[16] Traditional accounts hold that the elder monks sought to first test Buddhaghosa's knowledge by assigning him the task of

elaborating the doctrine regarding two verses of the [suttas](#); Buddhaghosa replied by composing the [Visuddhimagga](#).^[17] His abilities were further tested when deities intervened and hid the text of his book, twice forcing him to recreate it from scratch.^[18] When the three texts were found to completely summarize all of the Tipiṭaka and match in every respect, the monks acceded to his request and provided Buddhaghosa with the full body of their commentaries.^[16]

Buddhaghosa went on to write commentaries on most of the other major books of the Pali Canon, with his works becoming the definitive Theravadin interpretation of the scriptures.^[2] Having synthesized or translated the whole of the Sinhala commentary preserved at the Anuradhapura Maha Viharaya, Buddhaghosa reportedly returned to India, making a pilgrimage to [Bodh Gaya](#) to pay his respects to the [Bodhi Tree](#).^[16]

The details of the Mahavamsa account cannot readily be verified; while it is generally regarded by Western scholars as having been embellished with legendary events (such as the hiding of Buddhaghosa's text by the gods), in the absence of contradictory evidence it is assumed to be generally accurate.^[16] While the Mahavamsa claims that Buddhaghosa was born in northern India near Bodh Gaya, the epilogues to his commentaries make reference to only one location in India as being a place of at least temporary residence: [Kanci](#) in southern India.^[7] Some scholars thus conclude (among them Oskar von Hinüber and [Polwatte Buddhaddatta Thera](#)) that Buddhaghosa was actually born in [South India](#) and was relocated in later biographies to give him closer ties to the region of the Buddha.^[7]

The *Buddhaghosuppatti*, a later biographical text, is generally regarded by Western scholars as being legend rather than history.^[19] It adds to the Mahavamsa tale certain details, such as the identity of Buddhaghosa's parents and his village, as well as several dramatic episodes, such as the conversion of Buddhaghosa's father and Buddhaghosa's role in deciding a legal case.^[20] It also explains the eventual loss of the Sinhala originals that Buddhaghosa worked from in creating his Pali commentaries by claiming that Buddhaghosa collected and burnt the original manuscripts once his work was completed.^[21]

Commentarial style

Buddhaghosa was reputedly responsible for an extensive project of synthesizing and translating a large body of ancient [Sinhala](#) commentaries on the [Pāli Canon](#). His [Visuddhimagga](#) (Pāli: Path of Purification) is a comprehensive manual of Theravada Buddhism that is still read and studied today.^{[22][23][24]} Maria Heim notes that, while Buddhaghosa worked by using older Sinhala commentarial tradition, he is also "the crafter of a new version of it that rendered the original version obsolete, for his work supplanted the Sinhala versions that are now lost to us".^[25]

Writing style

[Ñānamoli Bhikkhu](#) writes that Buddhaghosa's work is "characterized by relentless accuracy, consistency, and fluency of erudition, and much dominated by formalism."^[26] According to Richard Shankman, the Visuddhimagga is "meticulous and specific," in contrast to the Pali suttas, which "can be vague at times, without a lot of explanatory detail and open to various interpretations."^[27]

Method

According to Maria Heim, Buddhaghosa is explicitly clear and systematic regarding his [hermeneutical](#) principles and [exegetical](#) strategies in his commentaries. He writes and theorizes on texts, [genre](#), registers of discourse, [reader response](#), Buddhist knowledge and [pedagogy](#).^[28] Buddhaghosa considers each [Pitaka](#) of the Buddhist canon a kind of method (*naya*) that requires different skills to interpret. One of his most important ideas about exegesis of the buddha's words ([buddhavacana](#)) is that these words are immeasurable, that is to say, there are innumerable ways and modes to teach and explain the Dhamma and likewise there are innumerable ways in which to receive these teachings.^[29] According to Heim, Buddhaghosa considered the *dhmma* to be "well-spoken [...] visible here and now, timeless,"^[29] visible meaning that the fruits of the path can be seen in the behavior of the noble ones, and that comprehending the *dhmma* is a transformative way of seeing, which has immediate impact.^[30] According to Heim, this idea of the transformative and immediate impact of the scriptures is "vital to Buddhaghosa's interpretative practice," concerned as he is with the immediate and transformative impact of the Buddha's words on his audiences, as attested in the suttas^[31]

Regarding his systematic thought, Maria Heim and [Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad](#) see Buddhaghosa's use of [Abhidhamma](#) as part of a phenomenological "contemplative structuring" which is expressed in his writings on Buddhist praxis.^[32] They argue that "Buddhaghosa's use of [nāma-rūpa](#) should be seen as the analytic by which he understands how experience is undergone, and not his account of how some reality is structured."^[32]

Yogacara influences

Some scholars have argued that Buddhaghosa's writing evinces a strong but unacknowledged [Yogācāra](#) Buddhist influence, which subsequently came to characterize Theravada thought in the wake of his profound influence on the Theravada tradition.^[33] According to [Kalupahana](#), Buddhaghosa was influenced by Mahayana-thought, which were subtly mixed with Theravada orthodoxy to introduce new ideas. According to Kalupahana, this eventually led to the flowering of metaphysical tendencies, in contrast to the original stress on [anattā](#) in early

Buddhism.^[34] According to Jonardon Ganeri, though Buddhaghosa may have been influenced by [Yogacara *Vijñānavāda*](#), "the influence consists not in endorsement but in creative engagement and refutation."^[35]

Theory of consciousness

The philosopher [Jonardon Ganeri](#) has called attention to Buddhaghosa's theory of the nature of consciousness and attention. Ganeri calls Buddhaghosa's approach a kind of "attentionalism", which places primacy on the faculty of [attention](#) in explaining activities of thought and mind and is against [representationalism](#).^[36] Ganeri also states that Buddhaghosa's treatment of cognition "anticipates the concept of [working memory](#), the idea of mind as a global workplace, subliminal orienting, and the thesis that [visual processing](#) occurs at three levels."^[36] Ganeri also states:

Buddhaghosa is unlike nearly every other Buddhist philosopher in that he discusses episodic memory and knows it as a reliving of experience from one's personal past; but he blocks any reduction of the phenomenology of temporal experience to the representation of oneself as in the past. The alternative claim that episodic memory is a phenomenon of attention is one he develops with greater sophistication than has been done elsewhere.^[36]

Ganeri sees Buddhaghosa's work as being free from a [mediational picture of the mind](#) and also free of the [Myth of the Given](#), two views he sees as having been introduced by the Indian philosopher [Dignāga](#).^[37]

Meditation

See also: [Vipassanā](#) and [Vipassana movement](#)

The [Visuddhimagga](#)'s doctrine reflects Theravada [Abhidhamma](#) scholasticism, which includes several innovations and interpretations not found in the earliest discourses (*suttas*) of the Buddha.^{[38][39]} Buddhaghosa's [Visuddhimagga](#) includes non-canonical instructions on Theravada [meditation](#), such as "ways of guarding the mental image (nimitta)," which point to later developments in Theravada meditation.^[4] According to [Thanissaro Bhikkhu](#), "the Visuddhimagga uses a very different paradigm for concentration from what you find in the Canon."^[40] [Bhante Henepola Gunaratana](#) also notes that what "the suttas say is not the same as what the Visuddhimagga says [...] they are actually different," leading to a divergence between a [traditional] scholarly understanding and a practical understanding based on meditative experience.^[41] Gunaratana further notes that Buddhaghosa invented several key meditation terms which are not to be found in the suttas, such as "*parikamma samadhi* (preparatory concentration), *upacara samadhi* (access concentration), *appanasamadhi* (absorption concentration)."^[42] Gunaratana also notes that the Buddhaghosa's emphasis on *kasīna*-meditation is

not to be found in the suttas, where *dhyana* is always combined with mindfulness. ^{[43][note 1]}

[Bhikkhu Sujato](#) has argued that certain views regarding [Buddhist meditation](#) expounded in the [Visuddhimagga](#) are a "distortion of the Suttas" since it denies the necessity of [jhana](#). ^[44] The Australian monk Shravasti Dhammika is also critical of contemporary practice based on this work. ^[45] He concludes that Buddhaghosa did not believe that following the practice set forth in the [Visuddhimagga](#) will really lead him to Nirvana, basing himself on the postscript to the [Visuddhimagga](#). ^[45]

Even Buddhaghosa did not really believe that Theravada practice could lead to Nirvana. His *Visuddhimagga* is supposed to be a detailed, step by step guide to enlightenment. And yet in the postscript [...] he says he hopes that the merit he has earned by writing the *Vishuddhimagga* will allow him to be reborn in heaven, abide there until Metteyya ([Maitreya](#)) appears, hear his teaching and then attain enlightenment. ^{[45][note 2]}

According to Sarah Shaw, "it is unlikely that the meditative tradition could have survived in such a healthy way, if at all, without his detailed lists and exhaustive guidance." ^[4] Yet, according to Buswell, by the 10th century *vipassana* was no longer practiced in the Theravada tradition, due to the belief that Buddhism had degenerated, and that liberation was no longer attainable until the coming of *Maitreya*. ^[48] It was re-introduced in Myanmar (Burma) in the 18th century by [Medawi](#) (1728 - 1816), leading to the rise of the [Vipassana movement](#) in the 20th century, re-inventing *vipassana*-meditation and developing simplified meditation techniques, based on the [Satipatthana sutta](#), the [Visuddhimagga](#), and other texts, emphasizing [satipatthana](#) and bare insight. ^{[49][50]}

Attributed works

The [Mahavamsa](#) ascribes a great many books to Buddhaghosa, some of which are believed not to have been his work, but composed later and attributed to him. ^[51] Below is a listing of the fourteen commentaries ([Atthakathā](#)) on the Pāli Canon traditionally ascribed to Buddhaghosa ^[52]

Tipitaka		Buddhaghosa's commentary
<i>from the Vinaya Pitaka</i>	Vinaya (<i>general</i>)	Samantapasadika
	Patimokkha	Kankhavitarani
<i>from the Sutta Pitaka</i>	Digha Nikaya	Sumangalavilasini
	Majjhima Nikaya	Papañcasudani
	Samyutta Nikaya	Saratthappakasini
	Anguttara Nikaya	Manorathapurani

		Khuddakapatha	Paramatthajotika (I)
		Dhammapada	Dhammapada-atthakatha
	<i>from the</i> <i>Khuddaka Nikaya</i>	Sutta Nipata	Paramatthajotika (II), Suttanipata-atthakatha
		Jataka	Jatakatthavannana, Jataka-atthakatha
<i>from the</i> <i>Abhidhamma Pitaka</i>	Dhammasangani	Atthasālinī	
	Vibhanga	Sammohavinodani	
	Dhatukatha	Pañcappakaranatthakatha	
	Puggalapaññatti		
	Kathavatthu		
	Yamaka		
	Patthana		

While traditional accounts list Buddhaghosa as the author of all of these works, some scholars hold that only the *Visuddhimagga* and the commentaries on the first four Nikayas as Buddhaghosa’s work.^[53] Meanwhile, Maria Heim holds that Buddhaghosa is the author of the commentaries on the first four Nikayas, the [Samantapasadika](#), the Paramatthajotika, the Visuddhimagga and the three commentaries on the books of the Abhidhamma.^[54]

Maria Heim also notes that some scholars hold that Buddaghosa was the head of a team of scholars and translators, and that this is not an unlikely scenario.^[55]

Influence and legacy

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In the 12th century, the Sri Lankan (Sinhalese) monk [Sāriputta Thera](#) became the leading scholar of the Theravada following the reunification of the Sri Lankan (Sinhala) monastic community by King [Parakramabahu I.](#)^[5] Sariputta incorporated many of the works of Buddhaghosa into his own interpretations.^[5] In subsequent years, many monks from Theravada traditions in Southeast Asia sought ordination or re-ordination in Sri Lanka because of the reputation of the Sri Lankan (Sinhala) Mahavihara lineage for doctrinal purity and scholarship.^[5] The result was the spread of the teachings of the [Mahavihara](#) tradition — and thus Buddhaghosa — throughout the Theravada world.^[5] Buddhaghosa's commentaries thereby became the standard method by which the Theravada scriptures were understood, establishing Buddhaghosa as the definitive interpreter of Theravada doctrine.^[17]

In later years, Buddhaghosa's fame and influence inspired various accolades. His life story was recorded, in an expanded and likely exaggerated form, in a Pali chronicle known as the *Buddhaghosuppatti*, or "The Development of the Career of Buddhaghosa".^[17] Despite the general belief that he was Indian by birth, he later may have been claimed by the [Mon people](#) of [Burma](#) as an attempt to assert primacy over Sri Lanka in the development of Theravada tradition.^[56] Other scholars believe that the Mon records refer to another figure, but whose name and personal history are much in the mold of the Indian Buddhaghosa.^[19]

Finally, Buddhaghosa's works likely played a significant role in the revival and preservation of the [Pali](#) language as the scriptural language of the Theravada, and as a [lingua franca](#) in the exchange of ideas, texts, and scholars between Sri Lanka and the Theravada countries of mainland Southeast Asia. The development of new analyses of Theravada doctrine, both in Pali and Sinhala, seems to have dried up prior to Buddhaghosa's emergence in Sri Lanka.^[57] In India, new schools of Buddhist philosophy (such as the [Mahayana](#)) were emerging, many of them making use of classical [Sanskrit](#) both as a scriptural language and as a language of philosophical discourse.^[57] The monks of the Mahavihara may have attempted to counter the growth of such schools by re-emphasizing the study and composition in Pali, along with the study of previously disused secondary sources that may have vanished in India, as evidenced by the Mahavamsa.^[58] Early indications of this resurgence in the use of Pali as a literary language may be visible in the composition of the [Dipavamsa](#) and the [Vimuttimagga](#), both dating to shortly before

Buddhaghosa's arrival in Sri Lanka.^[10] The addition of Buddhaghosa's works — which combined the pedigree of the oldest Sinhala commentaries with the use of Pali, a language shared by all of the Theravada learning centers of the time — provided a significant boost to the revitalization of the Pali language and the Theravada intellectual tradition, possibly aiding the Theravada school in surviving the challenge to its position posed by emerging Buddhist schools of mainland India.^[59]

According to Maria Heim, he is "one of the greatest minds in the history of Buddhism" and British philosopher [Jonardon Ganeri](#) considers Buddhaghosa "a true innovator, a pioneer, and a creative thinker."^{[60][61]} Yet, according to [Buddhadasa](#), Buddhaghosa was influenced by Hindu thought, and the uncritical respect for the *Visuddhimagga* has even hindered the practice of authentic Buddhism.^{[62][63]}

Notes

1.

- See also Bronkhorst (1993), *Two Traditions of Meditation in ancient India*; Wynne (2007), *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*; and Polak (2011), *Reexamining Jhana*

2. • Devotion to Metteya was common in South Asia from early in the Buddhist era, and is believed to have been particularly popular during Buddhaghosa's era.^{[46][47]}

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1.

- ([v. Hinüber 1996](#), p. 103) is more specific, estimating dates for Buddhaghosa of 370 – 450 CE based on the Mahavamsa and other sources. Following the Mahavamsa, ([Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxvi) places Buddhaghosa's arrival as coming during the reign of King Mahanama, between 412 and 434 CE.
- • [Strong 2004](#), p. 75.
- • Gethin, Rupert, Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin? Buddhist Identity in the Pali Commentaries and Chronicles, 2012.
- • [Shaw 2006](#), p. 5.
- • ([Crosby 2004](#), p. 837)
- • [Gombrich 2012](#), p. 51.
- • ([v. Hinüber 1996](#), p. 102)
- • [Rhys Davids](#) & Stede, 1921–25, *Pali-English Dictionary*, [Pali Text Society](#).
- • *"Sanskrit Dictionary"*. Retrieved July 23, 2016.
- • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxviii.
- • [Gray 1892](#).

- • ([Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxix)
- • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxix-xxx.
- • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxxiv.
- • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxxii.
- • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxxv.
- • [Strong 2004](#), p. 76.
- • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxxc.
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- • [Heim 2014](#), p. 7.
- • Ñāṇamoli, 1999, Introduction p. xxxvii
- • [Shankman 2008](#), p. 54.
- • [Heim 2018](#), p. 5–6.
- • [Heim 2018](#), p. 9.
- • [Heim 2018](#), p. 13.
- • [Heim 2018](#), p. 14.
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- • [Kalupahana 1994](#).
- • Ganeri, 2018, 32.
- • Ganeri, 2018, 31.
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- • [Sponberg 2004](#), p. 737 – 738.
 - • ["Maitreya \(Buddhism\) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia"](#). Retrieved 2009-01-28.
 - • [Buswell 2004](#), p. 889.
 - • [Buswell 2004](#), p. 890.
 - • [McMahan 2008](#), p. 189.
 - • ([v. Hinüber 1996](#), p. 103)
 - • Table based on ([Bullitt 2002](#)) For translations see [Atthakatha](#)
 - • For instance, regarding the Khuddha Nikaya commentaries, ([v. Hinüber 1996](#), pp. 130 – 1) writes:
Neither Pj [*Paramattha-jotika*] I nor Pj II can be dated, not even in relation to each other, except that both presuppose Buddhaghosa. In spite of the 'Buddhaghosa colophon' added to both commentaries ... no immediate relation to Buddhaghosa can be recognized.... Both Ja [*Jataka-atthavannana*] and Dhp-a [*Dhammapada-atthakatha*] are traditionally ascribed to Buddhaghosa, an assumption which has been rightly questioned by modern research....
 - • [Heim 2018](#), p. 19.
 - • [Heim 2014](#), p. 9.
 - • ([Pranke 2004](#), p. 574)
 - • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxvii.
 - • [Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli 1999](#), p. xxvii-xxviii.
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