

Who was Buddhaghosa?

THE reticence of scholars about their personal life-histories has often placed the students of research at a serious disadvantage. The only sources for a reconstruction of the life-history of the commentator Buddhaghosa are the *Mahāvamsa*, the *Buddhaghosuppatti* and the stray references to himself or to his works scattered throughout his commentaries. Although the *Saddhammasaṅgaha* and the *Sāsanavamsa* contain accounts of him they evidently follow the narrative in the two works referred to above.

The authorship of the *Buddhaghosuppatti* is ascribed to an Elder Mahāmaṅgala whose time and place are undetermined. The Rev. Dr. P. Vajirañāṇa is of the opinion that it is a work of the 13th century, composed by the Elder Maṅgala who was a pupil of the Elder Vedeha.³ Let us critically examine the validity of this view. The statement in the colophon to the work, on which this view is based, says that it was composed by "a certain Elder named Mahāmaṅgala" (*Mahāmaṅgala-nāmakena ekena therena*). This is obviously a later addition and is an inference which may or may not have had the support of tradition. The concluding stanzas however, which contain an aspiration of the writer may be the work of the author himself; but in point of language and style, which are rather poor in quality, they can hardly be attributed to the great Sinhalese Elder Maṅgala who was the head of the 'Five-Pirivenas' *Pañcaṣarivenādhipati*. A foreign trait in language and style seems to be a characteristic of the work itself. For instance, in the introductory paragraph we read: "*Evam Iddhiyādīhi saddhim āgantvā paṭhamam tāva āyasmā Mahindatthero imasmim patitthāti*:" here 'Iddhiyādīhi' stands for *Iṭṭiyādīhi*' and is the form which is found to occur in many Burmese manuscripts, while the use of the historic present, as in '*patitthāti*' (for *patitthāsi*), is quite a common feature in the works of Burmese monks. Evidence is also not wanting for the fact that the author was not conversant with the customs and conditions prevailing in Ceylon. An anecdote about Buddhaghosa relates how he used to collect the dry palm leaves which had fallen from the talipot palm trees in order to write his books. A Sinhalese monk, who would have known that in Ceylon only young talipot leaves are used for writing after being boiled and polished, would not have committed this blunder. On the other hand, it is the custom in Burma to use mature leaves. Such evidence leads us to believe that it is the work of a Burmese or Siamese monk. The fact that up to thirty

1. J. P. T. S. 1890.

2. P.T.S. Edition 1897. Its real name is "*Sāsanavamsapaḍīpikā*," and it is translated into Pali from Burmese by the Elder Paññāsāmi, 1861. A.D.

3. Sinhalese introduction to the Sinhalese Com. on *Visuddhimagga*. Part I, 1927.

or forty years ago there was no tradition current in Ceylon about the very existence of such a work strengthens our conjecture.

The accounts in the *Mahāvamsa* and the *Buddhaghosupṭṭi* state that Buddhaghosa was born in India in the vicinity of the Bodhi-tree in the district of Gayā; the latter work adds that his village was called 'Ghosa,' as it was a settlement of cowherds. In the *Vamsadīpani*⁴, a work composed by the Great Elder Jīnālankāradhaja, who lived in Burma, we are told that, according to the Talaing chronicles, Buddhaghosa was born in the city of Goḷa, near Sudhammapura (Thāton) in Lower Burma. James Gray, in a valuable Preface to his translation of the *Buddhaghosupṭṭi*, argues in support of the authenticity of this chronicle and quotes the conclusions of Dr. Forchhammer, who spent a considerable time at Thaton doing research into Talaing history. A reference to this city of Goḷa occurs in the Kalyāni Inscriptions. It runs thus: "*Tadā Suvaṇṇabhūmiratthe Sirimāsoka nāma rājā rajjam kāreti. Tassa rājatthānī-nagaram Kelāsapabbataceliyassa pacchimānudiśāyam hoti. Tassa tu nagerassa pācīnupaddhabhāgo pabbatamuddhani hoti, pacchimupaddhabhāgo same bhā mibhāge hoti. Tam pana nagaram Goḷamanussagharānaṃ viya mattikagharānaṃ bahulatāya Goḷamuttikanagaraṃ ti yāvajjatanū voharanti.*"⁵ (At that time a king called Sirimāsoka ruled over the country. His capital was situated to the north-west of the Kelāsapabbata shrine.⁶ The eastern half of this town was situated on an upland plateau, while the western half was built on a plain. This town is called, to this day, Goḷamattikanagara, because it contains many houses built of clay resembling those of the Goḷa people.) Here Goḷa is evidently equivalent to Gauḍa (modern Gour); presumably a set of Indian emigrants from Gour settled down and, constructing their dwellings in Indian style, transferred the name of their district to this city. That these settlers were Indians and that Buddhaghosa was one of their stock is very probable on the face of the above evidence and the contention of Rev. Vajirañña that Buddhaghosa could not have been born in Lower Burma as he was a brahmin becomes untenable.

This city of Goḷa is also recorded as the place to which the Elders Soṇa and Uttara came with their retinue when they were sent by the Emperor Asoka to spread Buddhism in Suvaṇṇabhūmi.⁸ According to the *Kalyāni Inscriptions* the city lay close to the sea but the fact that it is now twelve miles away from the sea-coast is probably due to changed geographical conditions. Sudhammapura (modern Thaton), which became the capital at a later date, is situated twenty-two miles inland from the city of Goḷa.

4. See Gray's introduction to the *Buddhaghosupṭṭi*.

5. *Kalyāni Inscriptions*, edited and translated by Taw Sein ko. p. 37.

6. The editor of the above states that it is near Bilin in the Shwegyin District.

7. *Kalyāni Inscriptions* p. 6.

8. Suvaṇṇabhūmi includes the coast line of Lower Burma and the Malay Peninsula.

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It is stated in the Talaing chronicles that Buddhaghosa entered the Order and resided in Kelāsa-monastery which, according to the inscription mentioned above, formed part of the city of Goḷa. There is reason to believe that like the Mahāvihāra of Ceylon this was the first Buddhist establishment in Suvanṇabhūmi. The *Mahāvamsa* mentions it once, when recounting the names of the most famous Elders who attended the foundation-ceremony of the Great Thūpa in Anurādhapura. It says that "the Great Elder Suriyagutta came from the monastery of Kelāsa with a retinue of ninety-six thousand monks."⁹ The present shrine on the Kelāsa hill, the highest of the Kelāsa range of hills, which lies twenty-two miles to the North-East of Thaton, is considered to have been built by King Dhammacetiya who came to the throne of Rāmañña (*i.e.* Lower Burma) in 1458 A.D. and the site of the Kelāsa monastery is located by archaeologists on the level ground as one comes down the flight of steps leading up to the courtyard of the shrine.

In the colophon of the *Visuddhimagga* occurs the statement: "*Buddhaghoso ti garūhi gahitanāmadheyena therena Moraṇḍacetakavatthabbena kato Visuddhimaggo nāma.*" It is strange that both the authors of the *Buddhaghosuppatti* and the writer of "*The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa*"¹⁰ should have overlooked this statement, the only statement of its kind in all the works of Buddhaghosa, which seems to give a clue to his place of birth or residence. The elucidation of the key-term '*Moraṇḍacetakavatthabbena*' is, however, rendered difficult as the reading appears to be defective and obscure; the form '*Mudantakhedaka*' is found to occur in Burmese MSS., while old Sinhalese MSS may have had other *variae lectiones*. We prefer to read the former part of the word as *Muraṇḍa*—the name of a race of people. As for the latter part, Rev. Pandit K. Ñānavimala¹¹ says that he has seen the reading '*khataka*' in an old Sinhalese MS., but as the vowel *e* is common to both the Burmese and Sinhalese MSS I am inclined to believe that it should be some such form as '*chedaka*;' thus the term '*Muraṇḍachedakavatthabbena*' would mean 'by him who dwelt in the section of the Muraṇḍas'. Let us try to identify the Muraṇḍas. Samuel Beal has given the following note in his "*Buddhist Records of the Western World*" (p. 90): "Lampo corresponds with the present Lamghān, a small country lying along the northern bank of the Kābul river, bounded on the west and east by the Alingar and Kunar rivers—Cunningham. The Sanskrit name of the district is Lampaka, and the Lampakas are also said to be called Muraṇḍas." The word also occurs as '*Muraṇḍa*,' which is only a phonetic variant. Dr. R. N. Saletore¹² has noted a statement of Ptolemy to the effect that a chief of the Muraṇḍa tribe

9. Mhv. XXIX, 43.

10. Dr. B. C. Law.

11. In a letter sent to me.

12. *Life in the Gupta Age* by R. N. Saletore M.A., Ph.D. Bombay, 1943.

lived in the Ganges valley in the second century A.D.¹³ The same author states : "As Sten Konow has interpreted Muruṇḍa, a Śaka word, to mean *lord*, having its counterpart in Sanskrit as *Svāmin*, and as the Śaka chiefs of Surasṭra and Ujjaini used this epithet, it has been suggested that the Saka Muruṇḍas apparently included the Scythian chiefs of Surasṭra and Central India."¹⁴ Thus, it appears as though the members of the Muruṇḍa tribe were scattered far and wide in India and we are led to believe that Buddhaghosa was born among people who resided in one of their settlements. That Buddhaghosa was a brahmin—a tradition which is not very plausible as we shall see later—is no serious objection against holding such a view for it is not unnatural for brahmins to have lived amongst a race of people who adopted the Hindu faith. The difficulty is to identify the location of this particular settlement of Muruṇḍas and unless further evidence is forthcoming we can come to no definite conclusion yet; it may be significant that the Talaing race referred to above call themselves 'Mūns' (Mvans). If this word happens to be a phonetic development of 'Muruṇḍa' it is quite likely that the settlement referred to is the one in the city of Goḷa in Lower Burma.

The tradition in the *Mahāvamsa*¹⁵ which says that Buddhaghosa was so-called because his voice was as deep and commanding as that of the Buddha hardly deserves credence. The author of the *Buddhaghosuppatti* himself appears to be uncertain, because he offers two or three theories in an attempt to explain the name. We are told that he inherited the name of his village which was called Ghosa as "many cow-boys generally resided there." The other story is that he was a god named Ghosa in his previous birth and because at the time of his birth here the servants made a clamour inviting people to eat and drink, the child came to be called Ghosa. I find it difficult to subscribe to any of these traditional explanations. I would rather identify his name with the Ghosh of Bengal; they belong to the Kāyastha clan, who form "the writer caste proceeding from a Katriya father and a Sūdra mother,"¹⁶ and are said to possess exceptional skill in the art of writing.¹⁷ That Buddhaghosa had a knack for writing in addition to being learned, is attested by the legend which says that he wrote out three copies of the Visuddhimagga in one night,¹⁸ and that he had been presented with a fast writing stylus, by Buddhadatta who had received it in turn from Sakka himself.¹⁹ In the light of this inter-

13. *Ibid* p. 13.

14. *Ibid*.

15. Mhv. XXXVII, 224.

16. Sanskrit-English Dictionary by L. R. Vaidya.

17. Buddhaghosa has himself admitted in the colophon of the Com. on the Vinaya that he took one year to complete the same; on this reckoning the Vism. would have taken him at least six months.

18. *Buddhaghosuppatti* p. 57.

19. *Ibid*.

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pretation, Ghosa would be his clan name and it is not unlikely that it was originally prefixed with some other name which gave place to the word Buddha after he was converted to Buddhism. The adoption of this view, however, would discredit the belief which has found wide acceptance, though without justification, that Buddhaghosa was a brahmin. The evidence of the texts themselves which often reveal the rancour with which he holds up the brahmins to ridicule seems to speak with eloquent testimony against this belief. In fact I find it difficult to imagine how a brahmin could have described a brahmin's gluttony in such spiteful terms as *āharahatthaka*, *alamsatāka*, *bhuttavamitaka* and *tatravattaka*.

The *Mahāvamsa* records that Buddhaghosa came to Ceylon at the instance of his teacher, the Elder Revata, and the *Buddhaghosupṭatti* tells the story that one day when the Elder Revata discovered Buddhaghosa wondering whether he was not more learned than the teacher himself, Revata reproved him and exhorted him to go over to Ceylon and bring back the Sinhalese commentaries translated into Pali in order to atone for his offence. In the Sinhalese commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*, a work composed by Parākramabahu II, it is stated that he came at the general request of the Elders of India for the task of translating the Sinhalese commentaries into Pali. I am inclined to accept this latter view as the more plausible especially because Buddhaghosa makes no mention whatsoever of this Elder Revata in any of his works. In the *Vinayavinicchaya-ākā*, too, I find it stated that Buddhaghosa was sent to Ceylon by the Great Elders who lived in India. The reason why he was sent on such a mission could not have been due to the scarcity of commentaries in India, for the study of the canonical texts would not have been possible without any exegetical literature. Besides, the fact that the canonical texts were known is evidenced by the fact that Buddhaghosa was well-versed in them when he came here. It was, therefore, more probably his interest in the exegesis of the Theravāda sect that brought him here—of the sect which took firm root in Ceylon after it had lost its hold in its native soil, giving way to other sects such as the Mahāsaṅghikas which thrived in different parts of India. In these circumstances, Buddhaghosa could not have been a Theravādin and the sympathetic treatment that he accords to Theravāda was probably guided by the nature of the mission he had undertaken.

The traditions about Buddhaghosa, preserved in the *Mahāvamsa*, are not quite reliable and do not tally with the internal evidence of the texts themselves. For instance, the *Mahāvamsa* says that Buddhaghosa translated the Sinhalese commentaries in the library of the Dūrasaṅkara Vihāra, but in the Vinaya commentary Buddhaghosa himself says that he did his work in the building erected by Mahānigamasāmi close to the *padhānaghara* (house of meditation) of the Mahāvihāra. Again, it is stated both in the

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Mahāvamsa and *Visuddhimārga-sanne* that Buddhaghosa learned the Sinhalese commentaries under the Great Elder Saṅghapāla, who resided in the same *padhānaghara*, while Buddhaghosa himself admits, in his Vinaya Commentary, that he learnt the three Sinhalese Commentaries from the Elder Buddhāmitta and mentions the Ven. Saṅghapāla, who was undoubtedly a very learned monk, as the person at whose instigation he wrote the *Visuddhimagga*. The *Buddhaghosuppatti*, however, says that the Saṅgharāja (Head of the Church) of Ceylon invited him to write the latter work, but no historical evidence can be adduced to show that such a title was prevalent at the time.

In determining his date, too, it would not be very prudent on our part to attach too much credence to the account in the *Mahāvamsa* where it is said that he came to Ceylon during the reign of King Mahānāma who ruled for 22 years from B.E. 954. This king is not mentioned in any of Buddhaghosa's works while on the other hand in the Vinaya Commentary we read that he started composing that work in the 20th year after the accession of King Sirinivāsa and completed it in the following year. In 1914 I expressed the opinion²⁰ that Sirinivāsa may have been just another title of King Mahānāma, but in the absence of any evidence to justify my contention, I now feel sceptical about it. In the *Pūjāvaliya* the names of both kings are found; the Commentaries are said to have been composed by Buddhaghosa at the request of King Sirinivāsa and his minister Mahānigama and in another context Buddhaghosa is said to have come to Ceylon at the time of King Mahānāma. These discrepant statements are by no means authoritative and are probably due to a confused reading of the passages in the Vinaya Commentary referred to above and of the account of the *Mahāvamsa*. According to the *Mahārājāvamsa*²¹ Bgh. should have arrived in Ceylon in B.E. 930, for it says that he came in the 42nd year after the accession of King Dhammapāla (Thinligyaung) who ruled from B.E. 888. The ruling sovereign in Ceylon at the time would have been Upatissa, the eldest son of King Buddhādāsa, and it would be necessary to investigate from inscripational and other sources whether this king was also called Sirinivāsa. In the *Vamsadīpani*, King Mahānāma is said to have ascended the throne in B.E. 915 and it is added that Bgh. set out for Ceylon from the village of Buddhaghosa in Suvanṇabhūmi 15 years later, in the year B.E. 930. The *Sāsanavamsa* gives the same date, though it says Bgh. started out from the city of Sudhammavati. In a narrative from an MS. entitled the "*Thāthanajinacak*" sent to James Gray by one Mr. Stephen M'Kertich, Bgh. is said to have crossed over to Ceylon in the very same year. The *Kalyani Inscriptions*, however, fix the date for

20. In the Introduction to my edition of the *Visuddhimagga* in Sinhalese characters.

21. Mentioned in the Introduction to *Buddhaghosuppatti*.

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Bgh's. arrival in Ceylon at B.E. 903 (=C.E. 360) ; this would correspond to the reign of King Buddhādāsa in Ceylon. The date B.E. 930 which is supported by the majority of Burmese traditions corresponds to C.E. 387. Now, Fa-Hian, the Chinese Elder, is considered to have come to Ceylon in C.E. 410, which would be 23 years after Bgh. (according to the above date). If these dates are correct and if Bgh. returned with the Commentaries to the Mahābodhi monastery in India after completing his work here, then Fa-Hian, who has noted down events of historical value in the places he visited, should have recorded this fact when he visited that monastery in India. But the absence of such a mention is not strange if Bgh. returned to Lower Burma and not to India. Although we have no concrete evidence to support the above date (*i.e.* B.E. 930) yet we have reason to assume on other grounds that Bgh. came here before Fa-Hian. Fa-Hian writes with elaborate detail about the festivities connected with the Tooth-relic, but Bgh. does not mention them though he has noted in his works other events of interest in the Island. This would indicate that Bgh. came here at least before King Sirimeghavaṇṇa, who ascended the throne in B.E. 846 and in the ninth year of whose reign (*i.e.* in B.E. 855) the Tooth-relic was brought here. The only king whose name would approximate to Sirinivāsa immediately before King Sirimeghavaṇṇa is King Sirināga, a brother-in-law of King Khuddanāga ; but he ruled only for 19 years from B.E. 738 to 757.

There is evidence from his own works to show that Bgh. had at different times lived in different parts of India. In the colophon of the *Manorathapūraṇī* we read :

“*Āyācito sumatinā therena bhadanta-Jotipālena Kañcīpurādīsu mayā pubbe saddhīm vasantena.*”

It would appear that he had stayed with the Ven. Jotipāla at Kañcīpura (modern Conjeevaram) and other places. Similarly, in the colophon of the *Papañcasūdanī* we read that he had lived with the Ven. Buddhāmitta in the port of Mayūrarūpa: *Āyācito sumatinā therena bhadanta-Buddhamittena pubbe Mayūradīta²²-paṭṭanamhi saddhīm vasantena.* If we connect these statements with the Burmese tradition, which says that he returned after his mission with a retinue of persons who filled two ships,²³ we may surmise that he came here not alone but with a band of learned monks such as the two mentioned above.

Although numerous works have been attributed to Bgh., the evidence of the texts would lead us to conclude that he composed the commentary on the Vinaya, the four Commentaries to the first four Nikāyas, and the

22. *Mayūrarūpa*, *Mayūrasutta* are various readings.

23. Gray's Introduction to *Buddhaghosuppatti*.

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Visuddhimagga, and not the commentaries to the Abhidhamma or to the books of the Khuddaka-nikāya. In all the four Sutta Pitaka commentaries there occurs the statement :

“ *Silakathā dhutadhammā kammaṭṭhānāni c’eva sabbāni Iti pana sabbam yasmā Visuddhimagge mayā supārisuddham vuttam tasmā bhīyo na taṃ idha vicāreyissāmi.*”

On the other hand in the Abhidhamma Commentary we find :—

Kammaṭṭhānāi sabbāni cariyābhīññā vipassanā Visuddhimagge paṇ’ idam yasmā sabbam pakāsitam.’

While in the former passage he speaks of what he himself (=mayā) wrote in the *Visuddhimagga*, it is significant that in the latter passage there is no such implication. Dr. P. V. Bapat, too, who has recently brought out a new edition of the *Aṭṭhasālīni*, argues against the possibility of it being a work of Bgh. in view of the divergencies of the comments on textual terms in it as compared with the *Vism*. The commentaries to the Abhidhamma were rather composed at the request of Buddhaghosa. The *Aṭṭhasālīni* says :—

Visuddhācārasīlena nipuṇāmalabuddhinā bhikkhunā Buddhaghosena sakkaccaṃ abhīyācīto,” and in the *Sammohavinodanī* :—

“ *Aṭṭhapākāsanattham tassāham yācīto ṭītaguṇena yatinā adandhagatinā subuddhinā Buddhaghosena.*”

Although the introductory and concluding stanzas of the Abhidhamma Commentaries differ in each book, yet the fact that they were all composed by one person is conclusively proved from the following stanzas in the *Paṭṭhāna* commentary.

“ *Sattappakarāṇaṃ Nātho Abhidhammam adesayī
Devātidevo devānaṃ devalokamhi yam purā,
Tassa aṭṭhakathā esā sakalassāpi niṭṭhitā.*”

The assertion that the Buddhaghosa mentioned in these Commentaries is not the commentator but another person becomes unnecessary if we do not regard Bgh. as their author ; yet, Dr. Bapat is hesitant to regard the Bgh. referred to as the scholiast as he has been called a ‘*bhikkhu*’ and not by a more respectable term like *ācariya* or ‘*thera*.’ This scepticism, however, would not appear to be justified when we examine the epithets ‘*visuddhācārasīlena*’ and ‘*nipuṇāmalabuddhinā*’ etc. which seem to describe an outstanding personality even though he happened to be a *bhikkhu* as a result of not completing his ten years’ standing after his ordination. He was already a learned person when he entered the Order. As Bgh. could not be the author of these commentaries they were composed at his request ; they were most pro-

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bably the work of a learned monk of Mahāvihāra, such as Saṅghapāla or Buddhamitta, or of some such monk as Jotipāla, who accompanied him.

Thus, the works of Bgh. would be the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Samantapāsādikā*, the *Kankhāvitaraṇi*, and the commentary to the four Nikāyas, viz. the *Sumangalavilāsinī*, *Paṇācasūdani*, *Sāratthapakkāsinī*, and *Manorathapūraṇi*. The last named is, as he explains, specifically called so inasmuch as it marked the consummation of his great desire to fulfil the task of writing the commentaries on all the Āgamas. That he did not comment on any of the books of the Khuddaka-nikāya is further made clear by his reference only to four āgamas in a stanza which is found to occur in the above commentaries :—

*Majjhe Visuddhimaggo esa catunnam pi āgamānañ hi
Thaṭṭvā pakāsayissati tathā yathābhāsitaṃ attham."*

Yet in a stanza occurring in the *Visuddhimagga* a reference is made to five Nikayas²⁴; this is probably due to a 'correction' of an earlier 'catunnam' by substituting 'pañcannam.'

It is generally believed in Ceylon that the *Suttani-pātaṭṭhakathā* is a work of Bgh. but in the absence of any reference to the Mahāvihāra or earlier Commentaries, unlike in the authentic works of Bgh., there seem to be no grounds for holding such a belief. On the other hand, there is no reason for not regarding the Sanskrit work *Padyacū āmaṇi* which is attributed to Bgh. as a work of his on the grounds that Bgh. was a Theravādin. As we have said above, the assumption that he was a Theravādin is unwarranted.

After completing his work Bgh. is said to have gone to India, according to the *Mahāvamsa* in order to worship at the Great Bodhi-tree. If India was his homeland and if he lived near the Bodhi-tree it is strange that this tradition should state that he went to India for this special purpose. It is more likely, as I attempted to show above, that his destination was Lower Burma, his native land, but that he went *via* India as would have been the normal procedure in those days. He could have followed a similar route on his way here, too, and it is quite probable that he met *en route* the commentator Buddhadatta somewhere in India, possibly in Kañcipura, for all the traditions link their names together and regard them as contemporaries. More substantial evidence to show that they were contemporaneous is, however, not lacking, for the Ven. Saṅghapāla who asked Bgh. to compose the *Visuddhimagga* is mentioned as having also invited Buddhadatta to write the *Uttaravīnicchaya* on Vinaya. There is no reason to regard them as two different persons for the descriptions of the person made by the two authors are found to tally.

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24. *Visuddhimagga* P.T.S. ed. p. 711.