

The many voices of Buddhaghosa: a commentator and our times¹

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary dissent from orthodox Theravāda Buddhism. It presents four modern Buddhist thinkers who hold the fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa responsible for a drastic change in Buddhist doctrine. Several reasons are proposed to explain this ‘distortion’: it may be attributed to an excess of literalism (Shravasti Dhammika) or to the introduction of foreign ideas, drawn from other Buddhist schools (David J. Kalupahana) or from Brahmanism (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, Sue Hamilton). It will be argued that, in such cases, the figure of Buddhaghosa is linked to a particular reconstruction of ‘the Buddha’s Buddhism’, of which he is presented as a semi-legendary antagonist.

The man known as Buddhaghosa (‘the voice of the Buddha’) was a Buddhist monk who flourished in the 5th century CE, travelled to the island of Lanka from the Indian mainland, and is credited with the systematization of a commentarial tradition that would later (much later) be called Theravāda Buddhism. It is no exaggeration to say that Buddhaghosa is, for most contemporary Theravādins, the second highest authority of Buddhism, ranking only below its founder. The volume of his putative works is impressive, so much so that some contemporary

¹ I would like to thank Professor Christopher Handy for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

scholars prefer to imagine him at the head of a writing committee (Bodhi 2000, 193; von Hinüber 2015b). This paper deals with Buddhist scholars who take the opposite stance: who, in agreement with tradition, see those writings as the product of a single man. My interest is in how Buddhaghosa's personality is defined and redefined in modern times, according to present-day concerns.

There are still modern writers who replicate the classical depiction of Buddhaghosa as an industrious monk “toiling steadily and indefatigably, year in and year out, [...] immured in a cell of the great monastery at Anurādhapura,” with a life “necessarily devoid of events” (Law 1923, 173). But one can conceive more passion, adventure and even hazards in the life of a man who is remembered as a visitor in such faraway places as Burma (11, 40-41) and Cambodia (42, n. 2). In the first section, I will consider the work of two Buddhist scholars who emphasize how Buddhism can be read very differently from how Buddhaghosa does. The second section addresses three scholars who claim that the commentator was not reading what the original texts say, but a certain foreign tradition that he had learned elsewhere.

In this area, one cannot take the division between ‘Buddhist literature’ and ‘Buddhist scholarship’ very far. In principle, the difference is obvious: the former states what Buddhism is or should be, the latter describes what self-confessed Buddhists have claimed it to be. There is, however, much overlap between the two: ‘Buddhist’ works sometimes contain precious research, and scholarly accounts may conceal prescriptive and normative concerns. That one of the leading scholars on early Buddhism recently accused another leading scholar of disguising religious exegesis under a historical garb (Wynne 2018) shows how the problem, which is perhaps endemic to religious studies, is far from solved—if solvable at all. My concern here is merely to show one of the ways in which the intermarriage between historicizing and chronicling, between earnest study and free reconstruction, has taken shape. The works referenced in this article range from academic articles to religious sermons, but, in my view, they all share one feature: they are examples of modern *Buddhist* writing. Regardless of their factual accuracy or erudition, they are engaged with Buddhism in at least an exegetical way, but often go so far as to develop new Buddhist narratives, which may follow—as we shall see in the conclusion—well-trodden patterns.

In the early 20th century, the French archaeologist Louis Finot argued that Buddhaghosa was a purely legendary figure (Finot 1921). On the opposite side, the contemporary Sinhalese monk Ven. Samādhikusalo claims to have past-life memories of him (Anālayo 2018, 122-123). For the scholars discussed

in this paper, Buddhaghosa is neither pure fantasy nor a vivid presence: he remains open to reinterpretation. Each has his own arguments, outlook and motivations, but what unites them is how they bear witness to the fact that the ghostly old commentator, whether or not he is the voice of the Buddha, cannot yet stop speaking.

Buddhaghosa the prioritizer

Theravāda Buddhists, as long as they identify as such, generally avoid concluding that the main commentator of their tradition got everything wrong. Even some groundbreaking reappraisals of Theravāda Buddhism, such as the work of Ñāṇananda (1971, 11, 46), only blame Buddhaghosa openly for minor mistakes, though their theories and methodologies leave him and his ideas quite aside. Bhikkhu Payutto, a leading Thai scholar-monk, is also cautious when discussing the one-life interpretation of the Buddhist chain of dependent origination in the *Vibhaṅga*, one of the earliest Buddhist scholastic works (Anālayo 2008, 94). This one-life interpretation stands in contrast to the standard interpretation, in which the successive twelve links (*nidāna*) describing the arising of suffering are divided into three lives. Payutto discovers that the canonical text dedicates five pages to the life-to-life version, and 72 to the version that considers only one mind-moment. Buddhaghosa's commentary (*Sammohavinodanī*), however, reflects the opposite: 92 pages for the life-to-life version against 19 pages for the one-mind-moment interpretation. Payutto's tentative explanation for such an obvious contrast is that the commentator may have considered the one mind-moment interpretation as "already explained sufficiently in the *Tipiṭaka*," and seen no need for further commentary (Payutto 1994, 101). "It may also be," he suggests, "that the author felt more comfortable with [the life-to-life] interpretation," since the other had "disappeared from scholastic circles" by his time (100).

Though, as Payutto states, "only traces of it remain in the commentaries," this-life interpretations of dependent origination appear not only in the Theravāda *Vibhaṅga* (on which see Ñāṇaponika 2007, 27), but also in the *Patisambhidāmagga* (Pat 271-275), where four out of five expositions "describe dependent origination in one life" (Ñāṇamoli 2010, 607, n.), and in the Sarvāstivāda *Mahāvibhāṣā* (Iida 1991, 26). The Vibhajyavādins also held a similarly momentary conception of the understanding of the four noble truths (Cousins 1994-96, 52). Having said that, most contemporary sympathizers of

the one-life dependent origination seem to have been influenced primarily by modern authors, such as Paul Dahlke (Ñāṇatiloka 1980, s.v. *paticca-samuppāda*), Ñāṇavīra Thera (2003, 80-83) and Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu (see below).

While the Ven. Payutto turns out to be a conciliatory scholar, the tactic of comparing canonical texts with Buddhaghosa's writings about them can also be used for polemics. This is what Australian-born monk Shravasti Dhammika does in *The Broken Buddha*, an incisive critique of Theravāda Buddhism. Dhammika wrote this book after he parted ways with a tradition that, in his opinion, sees "the Buddha's words through the lens of these commentaries' turgid and often fantastic pedantry rather than allowing them to speak for themselves" (Dhammika 2006, 6). As a monk inspired by the early Buddhist scriptures but wary of commentaries, he predictably targets Buddhaghosa. Here, again, the perceived difference between the Buddha's Buddhism and Buddhaghosa's is one of emphasis. Like Payutto, Dhammika employs the graphic strategy of comparing the number of pages the commentator devotes to each topic. One of his main objections is the perceived lack of a more active understanding of compassion and kindness in the Theravāda.

The *dvattiṃsākāra* consists of a bare list of body parts and is meant to be reflected upon to help bring about a detachment or, in Theravāda, a revulsion, towards the body. The *Mettā Sutta* is a beautiful and deeply stirring song advocating benevolence towards all that lives. Buddhaghosa expands the meagre thirty six Pali words of the *dvattiṃsākāra* into a commentary thirty six pages long, while the *Mettā Sutta*, which is more than three times the length of the *dvattiṃsākāra*, is expanded into a dull and rather uninspiring commentary of only twenty one pages (30).²

This difference of emphasis is confirmed by another page-count comparison, dealing with a topic we will address in the next section:

Buddhaghosa devotes a full eleven pages to the meditation on death while a generous twenty six pages are devoted to the meditation on the repulsiveness of the body. But it is when describing the contemplation on rotting corpses that Buddhaghosa is really in his element. Through a full nineteen pages he lingers

² I have amended the Pali and the punctuation in this and the next three citations.

lovingly and in minute detail over putrid flesh, bloated viscera and maggots oozing out of eye sockets. By contrast, when he comes to elaborating on meditations that could lift the heart and refresh the mind his imaginativeness seems to dry up. The recollection on generosity, for example, is passed over in less than three pages while the recollection on peace gets only two pages. Other positive meditations like the recollection on spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇamitta-anussati*, A.V,336) are ignored completely (30).

Even though he credits Buddhaghosa with the idea that a minor rule can be broken out of compassion (“one of the few feeble glimmers of light in his otherwise dreary writings”), the commentator’s general attitude is depicted as an almost complete and uncompromising observance of monastic regulations.

For example, [Buddhaghosa] says that even if one’s mother falls into a raging river one must under no circumstances attempt to save her if it means making physical contact. Again, he says that if a monk falls into a pit he must not dig himself out even to save his life as this would be breaking the rule against digging the earth. Now when such petty rules are thought to be more important than the lives of others, more important even than one’s own life, is it surprising that they are given so much attention that the things that really matter are considered insignificant by comparison? (23).

The Ven. Dhammika provides no scriptural reference for the “petty rules” he mentions, nor does he state to what extent he follows them as a Buddhist monk. The English ethicist Damien Keown (1983, 74) agrees with Dhammika in that Buddhaghosa’s moral prescriptions are mostly confined to monastic rules. However, the striking example of the monk letting himself die in a hole to observe the prohibition against digging could once have been seen as an edifying story. In fact, one traditional account of Buddhaghosa’s own death has the moribund commentator mentally revising the three meanings of the word ‘death’ while expiring, and it seems clear that this, rather than a parody of pedantic intellectualism, was intended as praise (Law 1923, 42).

Dhammika is unique among the writers mentioned in this paper in that he openly parts company with Theravāda Buddhism. For him, Buddhaghosa becomes a symbol of the shortcomings of this tradition, rather than a threat to it: the commentator may have been misguided as to the core of the Buddha’s original message, but he is seen

as quintessentially Mahāvihāran, quintessentially Theravādin.³ It is hence fitting that he is invoked once more to embody the ultimate failure of the tradition:

Even Buddhaghosa did not really believe that Theravāda practice could lead to Nirvana. His *Visuddhimagga* is supposed to be a detailed, step by step guide to enlightenment. And yet in the postscript [lacking in the Burmese edition] he says he hopes that the merit he has earned by writing the *Visuddhimagga* will allow him to be reborn in heaven, abide there until Metteyya [Maitreya] appears, hear his teaching and then attain enlightenment. Thus we have the extraordinary and I believe unprecedented situation where the majority of people adhering to a religion, including many of its clergy, freely admit that their religion cannot lead to its intended goal. Is it surprising that so many monks seem to be lacking in conviction? (Dhammika 2006, 13).

In fact, the lack of allusions to his own spiritual practice, and the extreme pessimism he expresses regarding meditative success (Brasington 2018), make it surprising that Buddhaghosa has been chosen as a Buddhist interlocutor to set against some of the greatest mystics of Christianity, such as the Spanish Carmelites Teresa of Ávila (Millet 2017) and John of the Cross (Feldmeier 2006). This attribution of mysticism to the commentator, into which we cannot venture here, seems to be nourished by what Robert Sharf (1995) calls the Buddhist “rhetoric of experience”: taking scholasticism for descriptions of inner experiences.

Like Dhammika, Caroline Rhys Davids prefers to see Buddhaghosa as an uninspiring scholastic: “a striking embodiment of the meticulous erudition, the piety, the complacent sectarian view, the amazing credulity, the absence of curiosity as to the greater world so characteristic of his epoch” (“Preface” in Law 1923, viii). Her husband Thomas Rhys Davids (1909, 887) writes,

of originality, of independent thought, there is at present no evidence. He had mastered so thoroughly and accepted so completely the Buddhist view of life, that there was no need for him to occupy time with any discussions on ultimate questions. [...] Of the higher criticism Buddhaghosa is entirely guiltless. To him there had been no development in doctrine, and all the texts were the words of the Master.

³ As we would call him (only?) today: see Gethin 2012.

Although these might seem (and are clearly intended as) unflattering descriptions, there are reasons to suspect that for an individual known as ‘the voice of the Buddha’ they could amount to the highest praise. The same applies to Dhammika’s criticism of his lack of nirvanic commitment. To be sure, legend has it that after an arduous monastic life (and after having penned some of the most negative descriptions of the body in world literature), Buddhaghosa “was reborn in the Tusita heaven surrounded by divine nymphs in a golden mansion seven leagues broad” (Tambiah 1984, 29). This conclusion, however, was intended to be as flattering for the religion as Dhammika finds it unflattering. If it proves anything, it is merely how long Buddhaghosa has been thought and rethought, made born and made reborn.

Buddhaghosa the infiltrator

In the previous section, Buddhaghosa was seen as a representative of the tradition he claimed to be serving, even typically so. For Payutto, the disproportion between texts and commentaries reveals that the Theravādan corpus is more inclusive than previously thought, and balances itself (see Seeger 2009). For Dhammika, such disparities only indicate how much the Theravāda, pre- and post-Buddhaghosa, has missed the point of the Buddha’s gospel.

There is good reason to believe that the commentator was not original in his ideas. According to Robert Sharf, “only once in the *Visuddhimagga* does Buddhaghosa openly advance an opinion of his own, which consists solely in expressing his preference for one scriptural interpretation over another with regard to a particularly arcane point concerning the recollection of past lives” (Sharf 1995, 239).

Some Buddhist authors, however, reject the classical association between Buddhaghosa’s work and the orthodoxy that precedes him. In a sense, they break the foundation of the Buddhaghosa myth, which lies in continuity. As they see it, the scholar-monk introduced his own ideas into the tradition he was commentating, changing it forever. Theories about the nature of this infiltration and its origins differ wildly, but all face a similar obstacle: the manifest lack of originality of the commentator, who, as shown by his very name, takes pride in being nothing but a loudspeaker. Perhaps it is Buddhaghosa’s conformity that forces these authors to postulate a *subconscious* infiltration, related to his upbringing and unexamined values. The difficulties of such an approach are obvious: it amounts to postulating what is at the back of the mind of someone who almost never speaks his mind, and mapping the socio-cultural

conditioning of someone of whose life we know but one place name. This dearth of personal references does not deter the following authors, whose recreations of Buddhaghosa aim to illuminate other facets of the historical development of Buddhism. If modern, critical Theravāda has some similarities with Protestant Christianity (Johnson 2004), Buddhaghosa is the closest to the figure of a Church Father: understanding him also means understanding what “went wrong”.

An example of this position is the Sri Lankan philosopher David J. Kalupahana. His magnum opus, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*, is a complete revision of Buddhist thought throughout the ages, and a major effort to reformulate the early Buddhist message in a way stimulating to both traditional Buddhism and—primarily analytical—Western philosophy.⁴

Kalupahana sees the Buddha as a pragmatist and a philosophical non-absolutist, who rejected both ultimate objectivity and extreme scepticism, and developed a contextualist approach to ethics and human experience. That this primordial Buddhist insight has not always been predominant in later traditions requires the elucidation of “continuities and discontinuities”, as set out in the subtitle of the work. As usual, placing Siddhārtha Gautama in a specific square leads to the reassignment of all the major pieces of the Buddhist board, Buddhaghosa among them.

Though he identifies “anti-foundationalism” in the last chapters of the *Visuddhimagga*, Kalupahana ascribes to Buddhaghosa two doctrines which he sees as a reification of a less essentialistic, earlier Buddhist philosophy: the theory of moments (*khana-vāda*), and a fourfold exegetical scheme grounded on the ‘characteristic’ (*lakkhana*). In both cases, he refers to the lack of adequate scriptural support for Buddhaghosa’s position, and postulates that the commentator must have introduced theories learnt in his native South India, perhaps from Mahāyāna or Sautrāntika teachers (Kalupahana 1992, 207-208). Even though he acknowledges that “Buddhaghosa’s life story is cloaked in mystery,” Kalupahana assumes the commentator’s mastery of “a variety of doctrines with which he was familiar before he arrived to Sri Lanka” (208). Such a claim is, however, unsupported, for the only contemporary fact we have about the early life of Buddhaghosa is that he once stayed somewhere in South India (von Hinüber 2015a) and, as far as I know, he does not mention in his writings other “sectarian” influence than the Mahāvihāran ancient commentaries. After

⁴ The fact that ‘David Hume’ and ‘William James’ each have more references in the index than a word like ‘rebirth’ surely bears witness to this concern.

reviewing Buddhaghosa's oeuvre, Law (1923, 174) concludes that Mahāyānism "does not appear to have been studied by him. Nowhere in his works does he make any mention of it," nor did he leave any text in Sanskrit (91).

Even the South Indian connection is historically doubtful. Kalupahana's sources for the biography of Buddhaghosa, which he uses selectively, are not earlier than the 13th century: the first full surviving biography appears in the medieval *Cūlavamsa* and even there, Buddhaghosa is said to be born in North India.

As Kalupahana (1992, 208) presents it, Mahāvihāran doctrine had previously been free from essentialistic underpinnings, and remarkably loyal to the orthodoxy introduced by Mahinda almost one millennium before. This postulate is not only unverifiable, as it is based on later legendary chronicles, but also contradicts Buddhaghosa's allusions to a previous Mahāvihāran commentarial tradition to support most of his exegetical positions, "essentialistic" or not. In fact, the other, "essentialistic" schools were already present in Lanka in Buddhaghosa's time, so that the South Indian connection would seem fortuitous, if not part of a familiar narrative: Sri Lanka as the island where pure Dhamma was introduced and preserved for centuries by the lineage that would become the Mahāvihāra, then Theravāda, facing a "heretical" subcontinent. It seems as if corruption *has* to come from abroad, in the person of a South Indian Brahmin, and this siege mentality comes to the fore when discussing the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. Kalupahana sees this *sūtra*, which he tentatively renders as *The Invasion of Laṅkā*, as "a textbook for the conversion of Laṅkā to Mahāyāna Buddhism" (244), and finds in it indirect references to "the Sinhala race" and the "Mahāvihāra tradition" (243-244). In the end, however, Mahāyāna transcendentalism failed to conquer the Sinhalese, who were "too deeply rooted in the tradition representing the less mystical, more empirical and pragmatic teachings of the Buddha" (246).

To be sure, as the author himself acknowledges, the contention that Buddhaghosa "was no voice of the Buddha" (xiii) earned him enmity in Theravādin lands, including his native country. However, his retelling of Lankan ancient history seems to be greatly indebted to the Sinhalese nationalistic worldview: Sri Lanka as the island of pristine Dhamma under continuous internal and external threat. Even the introduction of essentialism in the tradition that would become Theravāda Buddhism is seen as comparatively minor and far from complete: in blending essentialism and pragmatism, Buddhaghosa is not considered a corrupter, but "a great harmonizer" of disparate strands (216). He thus serves as a kind of scapegoat, but one that is spared in the end. How "anti-essentialism" can lead to such views on history and its actors is not a question one can attempt to solve here.

The mistrust of Buddhaghosa’s commentarial enterprise reaches its summit in the works of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. A Thai monk, Buddhadāsa certainly lacks the regional preferences of Kalupahana’s discourse: for him, Buddhaghosa’s alien infiltration is not due to his South Indian origins, but to his high-caste Hindu upbringing. The difference is one of religion, and indeed Buddhadāsa is one of the modern Buddhist masters who have most stressed the gap between Hinduism and Buddhism. Others, like the Burmese monk U Pandita, after studying other reincarnationist doctrines from India or ancient Greece, concluded that “the Buddha was not original in His teaching” (Spiro 1971, 390), but few apart from Buddhadāsa have reached the conclusion that the Buddha may have not taught rebirth *at all*. Rebirth is seen as a Hindu introduction, which early on transformed Buddhism from an immanent, psychological wisdom into cosmological fantasies, legendary lore and the impractical scholastic gymnastics of the Abhidhamma: little wonder that Buddhadāsa is also a staunch defender of the one-life interpretation of dependent origination, against Buddhaghosa’s three.

To his shame, Buddhadāsa’s innovative thought has been positively compared with the *Visuddhimagga*, for never since “has there been such a comprehensive attempt to systematically reinterpret the entirety of Theravāda doctrine in the light of contemporary views and expectations” (Jackson 2003, 2). Its most striking aspect, as a Buddhist system, is that physical rebirth is left out of the picture.

As to who introduced the belief in rebirth into Buddhism, Buddhadāsa’s oeuvre is too vast and unsystematic to find a single culprit. At some times he blames Buddhists themselves and their lack of perspicacity, at others he devises a Brahmanical conspiracy to undermine Buddhism by introducing the idea of a soul (*ātman*), which for Buddhadāsa (1988, 11) seems to be a requisite for any conception of rebirth. By the end of his life, he preferred to portray it as an exercise of skilful means, which the Buddha resorted to because he was unable to counter the beliefs of most of his contemporaries (2016, 5-6). Sometimes, however, Buddhaghosa is to blame:

It must be mentioned that our *Tipiṭaka*, at a certain moment, was retranslated from Sinhalese into Pāli and that the original text was burnt. Buddhaghosa, the most eminent commentator, was the one who did that. He was a Brahmin by birth and this leads many researchers to think that several dozens of Brahmanical themes—heaven, hell, Rāhu eating the moon, etc.—have been inserted into the *Tipiṭaka* afterwards, so that now they are referred to as words of the Buddha (quoted in Gabaude 1988, 107).

The preceding passage belongs to a collection edited by Buddhādāsa's longtime collaborator Pun Chongprasert, who often sharpened the language of the texts at his whim (Payulpitack 1991, 153). This may explain why in other works Buddhādāsa appears more empathetic, and even claims that he agrees "some 95 per cent with Buddhaghosa," which virtually excludes only his *ātmanic* version of dependent origination (Gabaude 1988, 184).

Buddhādāsa does not name those "many researchers" who delineate an opposition between the Buddha and the Brahmin Buddhaghosa. We do find views of that sort among the followers of the Sri Lankan guru D. A. Jayasuriya (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 376) or the Thai Marxist theoretician Jit Bhumisak, who accused Buddhaghosa of having introduced non-Buddhist past-life stories into the Canon (Gabaude 1988, 417). Even the 18th-century Japanese critic, Tominaga Nakamoto (perhaps the first modern author to favour a one-life interpretation of dependent origination: Nakamoto 1990, 129), wrote that Buddhist cosmological teachings about Mount Sumeru "were all handed down by brahmins" (88).

Buddhaghosa's Brahmanism is also a concern in Sue Hamilton's article *From the Buddha to Buddhaghosa*. Hamilton's views on early Buddhism are not unlike Kalupahana's, since she also considers the message of the Buddha as anti-metaphysical and focused on experience, on the *how* and not *what* of things (Hamilton 1996). Her promising phenomenological turn is aligned with Buddhādāsa in its tendency to view Buddhist cosmology as "spacial metaphors for spiritual progress" (150), but also in a depiction of Buddhaghosa that stresses his (presumed) Brahmanical upbringing as a major influence on his vision of Buddhism.

A British academic, Hamilton makes many of the same points we have reviewed in South and Southeast Asian Buddhist authors, when examining Buddhist views on corporality. Again, a clear-cut division is made between what she calls "the Buddha's point of view" (Hamilton 1995, 46), in this case an analytical approach to the body, and the "Brahmanized" and less sophisticated point of view of later monks, which is predominantly negative and would become the standard Theravādin position. "The Buddha's point of view,"⁵ as presented by Hamilton, fits almost entirely into what we might call 'philosophical Buddhism', a doctrine in which the body cannot be the source

⁵ The attitude attributed here to the Buddha is sporadically (and somewhat confusingly) linked to "the Pali canon" (Hamilton 1996, 189), "Theravāda" (169) and "Buddhism" (187; 1995, 60).

of all evil, because the mind is the primary karmic agent (48), and because the interrelatedness of the five aggregates (*khandha*) presupposes a mind-body continuum (49-51). Accordingly, negative views, present in even the earliest texts (as she acknowledges: 57), are labelled “non-Buddhist” or “Brahmanical”, since some of their features, such as the dislike of bodily impurities, are shared with Brahmanism.

That there is a recognizable contrast between an analytical or philosophical approach to the body and (not necessarily less sophisticated) negative views does not justify Hamilton’s assumption that the former belongs to the Buddha and the latter to “some monks” (54), responsible for anything that does not fit. Doctrinal heterogeneity is not necessarily a result of the passing of time, and may well have been there from the start. Early Buddhism, an oral, geographically sparse tradition, must have been plural. Besides, there is little reason to think that contempt for the body and its impurities was the preserve of Brahmin priests, and something alien to ascetic movements like Buddhism or Jainism (53)—the evidence at present would rather incline us to label it (ancient) ‘Indian’.

As Liz Wilson comments, “If this focus on bodily impurity is indicative of a Hinduized Buddhism, then I think we must regard Buddhism as Hinduized from the start” (Wilson 1996, 53). Her remark may even have a demographic dimension. The image of a Buddha opposed to a priestly class of Brahmins is a common trope in modern accounts of Buddhism, partly designed to reinforce the parallels with Jesus and Luther (Almond 1988, 70-77). While perfidious and foolish Brahmins are certainly stock characters of Buddhist texts, Buddhaghosa’s purported Brahmin condition can hardly be statistically significant, since everything points towards a disproportionate number of Brahmins among even the earliest converts to Buddhism: Caroline Rhys-Davids calculates 113 among the authors of the *Theragātha*, against 60 *kṣatriyas* and just ten low-caste individuals (C. Rhys Davids 1913, xxviii). This disproportion is no guarantee of Brahmanization, since, as Bronkhorst (2011, 3) reminds us, “a region that has a number of Brahmins living in it but which does not recognize the Brahmin’s claim to superiority is not brahmanized,” and the early Buddhist milieu does not seem a fertile ground for such claims. However, it does suggest that whatever Brahmanization of Buddhism there was must have started many centuries before Buddhaghosa.

From a modern, vitalistic perspective, symptoms of neurosis or morbidity are not difficult to spot in the writings of Buddhaghosa, who may have been so concerned with bodily impurities as to defecate “with distaste, ashamed,

humiliated and disgusted” (Vis 11.22), but that this verdict could also apply to the Buddha would seem to be a taboo in Hamilton’s essay. The story of the sixty monks that committed suicide after hearing the Buddha preaching “again and again” about bodily foulness, attested in several of the earliest texts (Vin 3.68, SN 54.9), is only mentioned in a later re-edition of her article (1996, 81-82), which also includes some qualifications to blur Buddhaghosa’s protagonism (e.g., 190, n. 2). If Hamilton’s final reconstruction of the life and intentions of Buddhaghosa is not as complete as in Kalupahana or Ajahn Buddhādāsa, there is still enough material to sketch a psychological and even ethnic portrait of this self-effacing, almost anonymous commentator, whose proneness to be loved and hated, exalted and reviled, is certainly one of the least expected outcomes of Buddhist history.

Conclusion

Now on that occasion the venerable Mahā Moggallāna was walking up and down in the open. And on that occasion Māra the Evil One went into the venerable Mahā Moggallāna’s belly and entered his bowels. Then the venerable Mahā Moggallāna considered thus: “Why is my belly so heavy? One would think it full of beans” (MN 50, tr. Ñāṇamoli, Bodhi 1995).

Like other devilish creatures, Māra can enter into human bodies (and heavenly ones: MN 49). Moreover, as demons around the world, he can only be exorcised after he is identified *by his name*. Demons often conceal their names to avoid unexpected interferences in their plans, but the early Buddhist community took care to make Māra’s name known to all their members (see SN 4).

In fact, as an archetypal rival of the sages in quest of Awakening, Māra is likely to predate Buddhism. The Jains refer to Māra as a seemingly anthropomorphic creature (note that *māra* means in itself ‘death’) in their own scriptures (Sut 1.1.3.7, AS 1.3.1.3), and present an analogous character in the demon Meghamālin, the tempter of their twenty-third omniscient teacher, Pārśva. Only in Buddhism did this antagonistic figure gain some mythological prominence, but the theme seems to have been old or, at least, appealing to other sects.

Every aspiring saint needs a villain that personifies his or her doubts, desires, pride, guilt, carelessness or even solitude (SN 4.24). In the case of Māra, such polyvalence has inspired some of the most creative works in the history of Buddhist art. The scene where the demon and his legions of monsters disturb

the Buddha is still one of the highlights of a new Theravādan temple, and, one would say, one of the few classical themes that allow for new characters and designs. Māra is an inspiration as well as a temptation.

My suggestion is that, despite the absence of any mythological continuity between the two, Buddhaghosa plays, in most of the works commented and in others, the role of Māra: that is, of the Antagonist of the Buddha and his message. Buddhaghosa has been possessing Buddhist bodies and minds for a much longer time than Māra possessed poor Moggallāna, making them say things they should not, and would not otherwise. Fortunately, he has been identified: now he is pointed out and called by his true name, now Buddhists can come back to their senses and distinguish the pure Dhamma from alluring worldly temptations. What are those temptations? The temptation of essentialism in Kalupahana, the temptation of rebirth folk-beliefs and philosophical eternalism in Buddhādāsa, the temptation of Brahmanical bodily obsessions in Hamilton, the temptation of reducing morality to the dead letter of the rules in Dhammika. Essentialistic philosophies, consolatory afterlives, hierarchies of purity, inflexible codes are no doubt safe, comfortable dwellings. What constitutes a challenge is, respectively, avoiding philosophical foundations, practicing for the sake of this life, analysing one's interior with perfect equanimity, and adjusting the rules to the intentions that generated them. Following the Buddha, and not his cheap imitators.

One could add to this list the temptation to follow standardized commentarial interpretations, instead of allowing the *suttas* to speak for themselves. This sentiment has often been voiced (Dhammika 2006, 6; Ñāṇananda 1971, 133), but the fact that it is voiced in works expressly written to let the *suttas* “speak for themselves” testifies perhaps to its utopian nature. Even a diatribe against commentaries is a commentary on them.

In the *suttas*, Māra's unsuccessful endeavours to tempt Buddhist ascetics often reinforce their own commitment to the Dhamma. Declarations of Awakening and doctrinal statements are typical at the end of such encounters (SN 4.22, 5.1-10). The Lord and the Foe nourish each other, and Buddhaghosa is no exception: both he and the Buddha have to be recast before they are set to fight. In fact, in most of the cases analysed the views credited to Buddhaghosa vary less than those attributed to the Buddha, which is not surprising, as we preserve extensive writings from the former, with a remarkable preoccupation with internal coherence, whereas of the Buddha we keep but a cacophony of dubious rumours and, below them, an ancestral silence waiting to host each one's voice (*ghosa*).

I am sure that other modern Buddhist traditions have their own Buddhas and Māras. I have remarked, for instance, some similarities between these visions of Buddhaghosa and the Critical Buddhism of Noriaki and Shirō (Shields 2011). There remains, however, a major difference: few traditions have placed a single commentator so highly; in few other traditions has a single individual reached a position that would allow him to be remembered as ‘the Buddha’s voice’. This is no miracle, since there is little reason to doubt that most of Buddhaghosa’s work was, as he himself acknowledged, a compilation drawing from a vast literature. Whether he likes it or not, his is the fame, and, if his desire was to be reborn at the feet of the *bodhisatta* Metteyya, he is continuously summoned back to earth, as he was before his last human life (Feldmeier 2006, 20). And, if it is true that he despised this world of coarse bodies, he must be quite unhappy about being forced to take new birth in Dhamma talks, apologetic pamphlets and scholarly volumes here and there—only to be defeated again.

Abbreviations

The numbering of Pāli *suttas* follows the method of *SuttaCentral* (<https://suttacentral.net/>). Jain *sūtras* are referenced according to Jacobi 1964, the *Visuddhimagga* as in Ñāṇamoli 2010:

AS	<i>Ācārāṅga-sūtra</i> (Jain)
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Pat	<i>Patisambhidāmagga</i>
SN	<i>Samyutta-nikāya</i>
Sut	<i>Sūtrakṛtāṅga</i> (Jain)
Vin	(Theravāda) <i>Vinaya</i>
Vis	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

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