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by Maria Heim (review)

Upali Sraman

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BOOK REVIEW

Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words. By Maria Heim. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 274. Hardback \$99.00, ISBN 978-1909-0665-8



Reviewed by **Upali Sraman**
Emory University
upali.sraman@emory.edu

Despite more than two hundred years of modern academic study of the Pali literature, Pali commentaries still remain understudied. We know very little about the reading practices of the traditional Pali commentators and philosophers themselves. Maria Heim is one of the very few scholars invested in filling this major lacuna in Buddhist studies. Heim's 2014 publication, *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency*, already illuminated the philosophical acumen of Buddhaghosa, the foremost Pali commentator of the fifth century CE, whose name is intertwined with Theravada Buddhism itself. In her recent publication, the *Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words*, Heim continues to expand our understanding of the fascinating world of Pali commentaries. She argues that carefully observing the ways Buddhist authors themselves read canonical texts and commented on them can be a valuable exercise to understand their hermeneutic practices which can enrich our own ways of doing Buddhist studies. In particular, this is a refreshing exploration into how Buddhaghosa, read, understood, and interpreted *buddhavacana* (words of the Buddha) in the Pali canonical texts and what we can learn from his practices of reading to become better readers of the same texts.

In this new book, Heim explores Buddhaghosa's commentaries on the Pali *Tiṭṭaka* and his manual, the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*), "in the manner of an apprentice looking over Buddhaghosa's shoulder as he labors to create readers adequate to read him" (p. 218). The resultant product, divided into five chapters, the first two laying out the "building blocks of an interpretive program," and the following three devoted to "interpreting the three *piṭakas*," is an admirable contribution in the study of Pali commentarial literature. In the conclusion, Heim summarizes the main theoretical interventions of the book. The book is also supported by appendices containing selected translations of texts from Buddhaghosa's commentaries. Students of Theravada Buddhism in particular, Buddhist philosophy more generally, and comparative philosophy more broadly will find much to learn (and a few things to unlearn) in this book.

and will be rewarded with a greater appreciation of Buddhaghosa's commentarial methods as reflecting also his philosophical practice.

Heim maintains throughout the book that Buddhaghosa recognized himself as an analyst (*vibhajjavādī*) (p. 153), a term which Theravadins actually used for identifying themselves. The method of analysis (*vibhajjā*) was crucial for Buddhaghosa's philosophical practice. However, as an analyst, Buddhaghosa was not primarily interested in making universal and decontextualized metaphysical propositions. To be clear, metaphysics is not absent in Buddhaghosa's philosophy. On the contrary, he teaches us how to make sense of the metaphysical propositions within and by means of narrative contexts (*nidāna*) of the *Suttapiṭaka* and the *Vinayapiṭaka*, and in the narratives connected to the origins of the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*. In Buddhaghosa's reading of the scriptural texts, Heim shows, narratives are integral to understanding the Buddha and his teachings (*dhmma*). Buddhaghosa's mode of reading the scriptures rests on a buddhology traditionally expressed through a nine-fold formula of the Buddha's qualities. The most important of Buddha's qualities, used by Buddhaghosa as a hermeneutic tool, is omniscience (*sabbaññū*)--the immeasurable and endless expanse of Buddha's knowledge. The omniscience of the Buddha is reflected in the *dhmma*, the depth of which is characterized as immeasurable and infinite. Buddhaghosa's commentarial practice, as Heim shows us, is based on an exploration into the Buddha's omniscience and how we as readers can access it through our readings of the Buddhist scriptural texts. Using Buddhaghosa as an example, Heim illustrates what doing philosophy as an encounter with the omniscience, the immeasurable, looks like.

For Buddhaghosa, the narrative contexts in the canonical texts where the Buddha is seen as interacting with his immediate audience are illustrations of how omniscience is enacted (p. 50). Omniscience in this sense is not about knowing everything about everything at all times, but rather is a narrative enactment through "dialogical encounters" with others, demonstrating also the Buddha's skillful pedagogical methods. Buddhaghosa does not rush to outline the doctrines contained in the narratives but reads them carefully to understand the atmosphere in which the encounter takes place, what it reveals about the Buddha as a teacher, and the transformation of his audience. Heim emphasizes that, for Buddhaghosa, reading the scriptural texts as encounter with the Buddha's omniscience is "one way in which texts generate new meaning and continue to speak to multiple (or perhaps infinite) contexts" (p. 15). The Buddha's pedagogical methods illustrated in the *piṭakas*--especially the distinction between contextual (*pariyāya*) and categorical (*nippariyāya*) modes of teaching--were skillfully and effectively used by Buddhaghosa as interpretive techniques for his commentarial practice. Heim carefully walks the reader through Buddhaghosa's readings of selected canonical texts and his mode of exegesis often embedded in narrative "recontextualization" (p. 219). He does so by situating the particular everyday events of the canonical narratives within a

larger cosmic context to illustrate doctrinal and philosophical concepts. For instance, Heim illustrates this with a brief but apt example of the *Mahānidānasutta*, a discourse on conditionality, where the philosophical content of the *sutta* is reflected in Buddhaghosa's framing of the narrative, i.e. that the condition for Ānanda questioning about dependent origination was laid down in a past life (p.126).

Buddhaghosa also teaches ways of reading the Buddhist texts and doing philosophy that can be therapeutic and potentially can bring the kind of transformation experienced by Buddha's immediate audience. In certain strands of Buddhist studies, a hierarchical distinction of truths as conventional (*sammuti*) and ultimate (*paramattha*)--Heim translates this as "farthest-sense"--where the former is inferior to the latter, is widespread. Heim, following Charles Hallisey, shows that according to Buddhaghosa these are not ranked (p. 57) but are two modes of using language that also mark the genres of Buddhist scriptures--*sammuti*, prevalent in the *suttas*, for colloquial or transactional talks (*vohara*), and *paramattha*, prevalent in the *Abhidhamma*, for "dismantling ideas to show how they can be broken down into smaller parts to understand the conditional relations between them" (p. 90). Both modes of speech are capable of bringing soteriological transformations. Similarly, in Buddhist studies, the *Abhidhammic* lists and analyses of conditioned phenomena have generally been characterized as presenting a Buddhist ontology of reality and experience. Heim convincingly shows that Buddhaghosa treats them "as phenomenological practices--that is, methods to explore therapeutically one's experience--and not assertions or arguments about reality" (p. 149). From that perspective, the lists in the *Abhidhamma* are not finite and closed categories, but are examples of the myriad ways experience and reality can be analyzed. The analysis is not aimed at producing a complete set of knowledge about reality but is itself a therapeutic mode of practice that leads to untangling from internal and external emotional and psychological tangles.

Heim's book also deserves attention for showing us how Buddhaghosa read *Vinaya* as a subject for serious philosophical reflection. In modern times, *Vinaya* texts are usually regarded as legal documents or sources for medieval Indian Buddhist monasticism. For Buddhaghosa, as the *Vinaya* responds to the particular situations in a way that also sets precedence for the future, it is an excellent expression of the Buddha's omniscience. Buddhaghosa reads the *Vinaya* not merely as a store of monastic rules but also to understand the distinct functioning of Buddha's omniscience in response to the behaviors and inclinations of his immediate disciples. It's worth mentioning here that, in her previous publication, Heim (2014) explores Buddhaghosa's philosophical treatment of the *Vinaya*, addressing, for instance, how *Vinaya* functions as a "technology for self-formation." She also explores in details how intentionality and agency in *Vinaya* are different in comparison to the *Sutta* and *Abhidhamma*. Heim shows that for Buddhaghosa, genres of the Pali canonical texts, namely

Sutta, *Vinaya*, and *Abhidhamma*, were not mere schemes of categorization. They are themselves distinct modes of philosophical exercise and ways of training our minds as we read the scriptural texts. Particularly astute in this regard is Buddhaghosa's observation that the beginning phrases used for the time or occasion is indicated using a different grammatical case in the canonical texts, such as using the instrumental case to show causality in the *Vinaya*, using the accusative case to show continuity in the *Sutta*, and using the locative case to show the locus of possible phenomena in the *Abhidhamma*. While this does not mean much for many traditional commentators within Theravāda tradition itself, Buddhaghosa reads these as not only differentiating the genres but also building our anticipation and training the reader's minds from the beginning phrase itself (p. 199).

These observations should suffice to illustrate that, by highlighting Buddhaghosa's reading practice and accomplishments as a Buddhist philosopher, Heim's book will leave a lasting impression in the study of Buddhist commentarial literature. Her careful readings of Pāli canonical texts with Buddhaghosa teaches us that the narratives do not just frame the stage for philosophy to take place, but that engaging them with some poetic and literary sensibility is itself a productive philosophical exercise. Heim's book is also remarkable for deliberately bypassing western historical and philological methods that are interested in the reconstructions of the social, historical, and the intellectual milieu of the past. Heim does not deny the importance of such methods by any means. Instead, she insists that the reader should read Buddhaghosa in his own terms. By doing so, Heim lets Buddhaghosa's use of indigenous terms and concepts such as *sabbaññū*, *nidāna*, *pariyāya*, *nippariyāya* and so on stand out as helpful hermeneutic tools that can, I think, potentially be used widely in Buddhist commentarial studies and beyond. Heim herself indicates the "comparative potential" of the reading practices of the philosophers of different religions, especially as regards the depth and infinity of meanings in scriptural texts (p. 16-17).

Heim's skillful writing makes the highly technical subject of commentarial studies very accessible and a pleasure to read. Heim takes care of explaining technical terms--often using the key ones with their English meanings to ensure that they stick in the reader's mind and indicating if a Pali word can be rendered in more than one way based on the different contexts. Readers might find it beneficial to begin by reading Heim's beautiful translations of the Pali texts in the appendices. Those looking for an exhaustive account of the life and legacy of Buddhaghosa or the entirety of Pali exegetical methods will be disappointed as this is not what the book promises to give us. It promises to highlight Buddhaghosa's creative ways of reading Buddhist canonical texts and fulfills that promise commendably. Heim's treatment of the subject is an example of how we can use commentaries more productively not only to study

them as objects from a distant past or excavate doctrines and philosophy but also to become better readers ourselves.