

# Buddhaghosa: A Great Translator and Commentator of Buddhism

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## I: Introduction

In this article I would like to shed some light on the life and works of one of the leading figures of *Theravāda* Buddhism who has contributed enormously to the correct understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. Almost all Buddhists and readers of Buddhist texts know him as Buddhaghosa. He was of Indian origin and later on in his life became a Buddhist monk, spending a length of time in Sri Lanka in order to translate original Sinhalese commentaries into Pāli and also to compose his own commentaries (*aṭṭhakathās*) on *Sutta*, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma* texts. Many scholars wrote about him, but there still remains some hidden information to be discovered. In view of this, I will investigate in this paper the ‘authentic’ biography, translations and commentaries of Buddhaghosa in accordance with the available historical as well as legendary information.

## II: Family Background and Early Education of Buddhaghosa

The name of Buddhaghosa some interpret as “Voice of the Buddha”. According to reliable historical records Buddhaghosa lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>1</sup> The *Mahāvamsa*, a chronicle of Sri Lanka, stresses that Venerable Dhammakitti, a learned monk of ancient Sri Lanka, in his account of the reign of King Mahānāma, who was the King of Ceylon in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE., has given a report of the life and works of Buddhaghosa.<sup>2</sup> Another reliable information on Buddhaghosa is provided by Mahāmaṅgala Thera in his work *Buddhaghosuppatti* or *Mahābuddhaghosassa Nidānavatthu*, written in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> In his book *The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa*, Bimala Charan Law states that Mahāmaṅgala Thera was of Ceylonese origin and is to be credited with the above-

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<sup>1</sup> The *Mahāvamsa*, Vol.1, ed. by George Turnour, Ceylon, 1837, (chapter XXXVII) pp.250-253.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> The *Buddhaghosuppatti* or *Mahābuddhaghosassa Nidānavatthu* by Mahāmaṅgala, ed. and transl. by James Gray, London, 1892. This work is divided into eight chapters: The first chapter deals with the childhood of Buddhaghosa. The second chapter informs about his conversion to Buddhism and his ordination. The third chapter deals with his father’s conversion to Buddhism; the fourth describes his arrival in Ceylon, modern Sri Lanka; the fifth deals with Buddhaghosa’s witnessing a quarrel between two slave women; the sixth gives an account of his getting permission to translate scriptures; the seventh deals with his achievements in Ceylon and the eighth describes his departure for India and his passing away there. The work ends with the author’s wishes – by the merit of his composition - to be reborn in the world of men, among those endowed with wisdom, in the time of the future Buddha Metteyya in order to become one of his disciples.

named important work.<sup>4</sup> Venerable Mahāmaṅgala wrote his work in Pāli prose, divided into eight chapters. James Gray has edited and translated it, with a long introduction, in 1892, providing his readers with a comprehensive record of the life and works of Buddhaghosa. His translation reads like a record of legends being, nevertheless, of great historical value. In the *Cūlavamsa* it says that the birthplace of Buddhaghosa was near *Bodhimaṇḍala*, the holy place of the Buddha's Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Gunapala Malalasekera in his *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* also states that the native place of Buddhaghosa was in the kingdom of Magadha, i.e. a small village near the Buddhist holy place of Bodhgayā.<sup>6</sup> His career, however, started in South India where he acquired proficiency in the three *Piṭakas* and also began to write some treatises before going to Ceylon. Before undertaking his mission in Sri Lanka he was "confined to the Coḷa or Damiḷa country of the Deccan. He resided at Kāñcīpura and other places."<sup>7</sup> Even though some scholars pay less attention to legendary accounts concerning, e.g., the former life of Buddhaghosa, B. C. Law gives an interesting description of the same. The story runs that some *theras*<sup>8</sup> of the Buddhist order were searching for a person who could well explain and translate the teachings of the Enlightened One, preserved in Sinhalese, into the Māgadhī language. By the power of clairvoyance (*iddhi*), the *theras* found a celestial being who was in the heaven of Tāvātimsa. Then the *theras* appeared in front of Sakka,<sup>9</sup> the chief of that heaven, and requested him to ask the would-be Buddhaghosa to accept his future sacred mission in Sri Lanka. Thereupon Sakka, with the support of another *Deva*, asked the celestial being Ghosa to accept the invitation of the *theras*. The *Deva* Ghosa, however, replied: "I desire to go to a higher celestial world and not to the human world where there is too much suffering; but if the teaching of the Lord is difficult for human beings to understand, I am ready to go there."<sup>10</sup> According to the above legend, all the same, Ghosa, later on Buddhaghosa, after

<sup>4</sup> *The Life and Work of Buddhaghosa* by Bimala Charan Law, with a Foreword by Mrs. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, Calcutta, 1923, re-printed in New Delhi, 1997, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Cūlavamsa*, Part, 1, translated by Wilhelm Geiger, and from German into English by Mrs. C. Mabel Rickmers, published by the PTS, London, 1973, p. 22. At *ibid.*, p. 22, n. 7 it says: " *Bodhimaṇḍala*," i.e. the place of Enlightenment", not far from the present Bodhgayā in Southern Bihar where, according to tradition, the *Bodhisatta* meditating under a *figus religiosa*, by his attaining supreme enlightenment became the Buddha.

<sup>6</sup> *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, vol.2, by G.P. Malalasekera, published for the Government of India, London, 1938, p. 306. However, the Burmese tradition has it that Buddhaghosa was born at a village called Ghosagāma, near Bodhgayā - see: Hackmann, *Buddhism as a Religion*, probsthain, 1910, p.86.

<sup>7</sup> See G.P. Malalasekera (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Vol. III, fasc. 3, Colombo, The Government of Sri Lanka Publication, 1973, p. 407.

<sup>8</sup> In the legend the word *theras* may refer to *arhants* or *senior bhikkhus*.

<sup>9</sup> Malalasekera 1938, p. 957: re. 'Sakka': "... almost always spoken of as '*devānam indo*', chief (or king) of the *devas*." In the *Abhidhānappadīpikā*, Dictionary of the Pāli Language by Moggallāna Thero, ed. by Waskaduwe Subhūti (in Sinhala), Colombo, 1865, p. 5, the following synonyms of Sakka are given: *purindado*, *devarājā*, *vajirapānī*, *suṇampatī*, *sahassakkho*, *mahindo*, *vajirāyudho* etc.

<sup>10</sup> See B.C. Law 1923, p. 27.

his rebirth was not a simple human being, but a person who was keeping his *bodhisattva* vows so as to fulfil the *pāramitās*.<sup>11</sup>

As regards Buddhaghosa's parents, some information can be gleaned from the *Sāsanavaṃsa*<sup>12</sup> and the *Gandhavaṃsa*<sup>13</sup> where it is clearly stated that his father was known as Kesa, a chaplain (*purohita*) to King Saṃgāma of Magadha, and that his mother was Kesī or Kesinī.<sup>14</sup> His parents named him Ghosa.<sup>15</sup> At the age of seven already, so it says, Ghosa had mastered the four *Vedas*<sup>16</sup> and other works of classical philosophy. Some scholars hold that before his becoming a Buddhist Ghosa was a follower of the Patañjali Yoga-tradition and of the *Sāṃkhya* philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as reported, he was fully acquainted with the system of Pāṇini's Sanskrit grammar. In the light of all this historical information, it can be maintained that already in his youth Ghosa must have been an extraordinary figure who had a profound knowledge of ancient Indian classical teachings before his embracing Buddhism.

### III: The Turning-point in the Life of Buddhaghosa

As noted above, Ghosa had mastered the *Vedas* and thus became a very talented person who could debate with any intellectual of his time and was never defeated. Through his deep and vast knowledge of philosophy, grammar, *Yoga*, *Vedic* and other Brahmanic teachings he ranked foremost among the scholars or *paṇḍitas* of ancient India. Thanks to his extraordinary skills and deep understanding of the ancient Indian Classics he had developed an unending thirst to learn about many other teachings unknown to him. Then his spiritual destiny saw a change; one day he met a very learned Buddhist elder whose name was Revata.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> According to the *Theravāda* tradition, there are 10 *pāramitās* to be fulfilled by someone aspiring after Full Enlightenment. They are: (i) *dāna*, (ii) *sīla*, (iii) *nekkhamma*, (iv) *paññā*, (v) *virīya*, (vi) *khanti*, (vii) *sacca* (viii) *adhiṭṭhāna*, (ix) *mettā*, (x) and *upekkhā*. According to the *Mahāyāna* tradition six *pāramitās* are to be fulfilled.

<sup>12</sup> *Sāsanavaṃsa*, ed. by Mabel Bode, PTS, London, 1897, p.29.

<sup>13</sup> *Gandhavaṃsa*, *Journal of the Pāli Text Society*, ed. by T.W. Rhys Davids, London, 1886, p. 66:

“*Mahābuddhaghosācariyo jambudīpiko so kira Magadharatṭhe Saṃgāmarāñño purohitassa Kesī nāma brāhmaṇassa putto satthu sāsane pabbajitvā Laṅkādīpaṃ gato heṭṭhāvuttappakāre gandhe akāsi*”.

<sup>14</sup> See G.P. Malalasekera 1973, p. 404: “Not far from the great Bo-tree at Gayā was a village named Ghosa or Ghosagāma, because it was inhabited by a large number of cowherds. A king ruled at that time and had a brahmin chaplain named Kesī. Kesī's wife was named Kesinī. Buddhaghosa was their son”.

<sup>15</sup> Polwatte Buddhadatta, *Bhāratīya Bauddhācārya*, Ambalangoda, Ceylon, 1949, pp. 3, 8: The author refers to two Buddhist masters named Ghosa: 1) In the Travel Record of Xuanzang (6<sup>th</sup> century CE), one Ghosa is mentioned as having been an *arhant* who lived during the period of Emperor Asoka in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. The second Ghosa, or Ghosaka Thera, according to Buddhadatta, lived in India in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. His name is mentioned in the *Traikāla parīkshā* of Sāntarakkhita Thera.

<sup>16</sup> See William Stede (ed.), *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, vol.I, London, The Pali Text Society, p.247. According to this commentary, the four *Vedas* are mentioned as follows : (a) *Irubbedā* or *R̥gveda*, (b) *Yajubbedā* or *Yajurveda*, (c) *Sāmaveda*, (d) *Athabbanaveda* or *Atharva Veda*.

<sup>17</sup> Malalasekera 1973, *loc.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> According to the *Sāsanavaṃsa* (Bode 1897, p.29), the Mahāthera Revata was an *arhant*, an enlightened person. ( *Atha kho ekena arahantena saddhim vedakham sallāpanto...* ).

*Sāsanavaṃsa* gives a full account of the meeting and conversation of Ghosa (the ‘Brāhmaṇa’) with Mahāthera Revata as follows:

“Thus he came (once) to a *vihāra* and elucidated during the night the ideas of Patañjali word for word and quite exhaustively. Hereupon the Grand *Thera* (of the *vihāra*) named Revata realised: ‘This is a being of the highest wisdom; he must be won over,’ and he said: ‘Who then is he who brays like an ass?’ The (Brāhmaṇa) said to him: ‘Do you understand at all what the braying of an ass signifies?’ and after the *Thera*’s reply: ‘I understand’, he went on expounding his ideas and asking knotty questions. Revata answered each single thesis and pointed out the inherent contradictions. On the request: ‘Explain then your own system of doctrine,’ he held forth to him on the texts and content of the *Abhidhamma*.<sup>19</sup> The (Brāhmaṇa) did not understand it. He asked: ‘Whose sayings are these?’ ‘These are the sayings of the Buddha,’ answered the other. To the request (of the Brāhmaṇa): ‘make them known to me,’ Revata answered: ‘You will receive them when you will have undergone the ceremony of world-renunciation.’ As the Brāhmaṇa craved for the sayings, he underwent the ceremony of world-renunciation<sup>20</sup> and learnt the *Tipiṭaka*. He recognised: It is only this path that leads to the goal of final emancipation and, accordingly, accepted it thereafter. As his speech was profound like that of the Buddha he was called Buddhaghosa. His speech, indeed, (resounded) through the earth like (that of the Buddha).”<sup>21</sup> According to the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*,<sup>22</sup> Venerable Revata gave him the Buddhist ordination and higher ordination by asking him to meditate and practise ‘*tacakammaṭṭhāna*’<sup>23</sup>. According to the above narrative the Brāhmaṇa Ghosa became a Buddhist monk and began to follow the teachings of Sakyamuni, and Venerable Revata acted as his preceptor and mentor to guide him in order to undertake his extraordinary work as a translator and commentator.

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<sup>19</sup> At *loc.cit.* it says that Revata Mahāthera taught Buddhaghosa *Abhidhamma* with special reference to *kusaladhamma*, *akusaladhamma*, and *abyākatadhamma*.

<sup>20</sup> In the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (Malalasekera 1973, *loc.cit.*) it is mentioned that before his entering the Buddhist Order Ghosa informed his parents of his intention to become a Buddhist monk only in order to learn about the ‘cult of the Buddha’, and that after having disrobed he would return home.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Cūlavāṃsa*, (Geiger, Rickmers 1973) , *loc. cit.* and p. 23.

<sup>22</sup> *Saddhammasaṅgaho*, ed. by Nedimale Saddhānanda, in: *The Journal of the Pāli Text Society*, London, 1890, p. 52: *Tato Brāhmano mantatthāya pabbajjaṃ yāci. Thero Brāhmaṇaṃ pabbājetvā upasampādesi. Atha kho thero sabbam pi te piṭakam Buddhavacanam ugganhāpesi.*

<sup>23</sup> The Buddhist *tacakammaṭṭhāna* means to meditate on the hair (*kesā*), skin (*lomā*), nails (*nakhā*), and teeth (*dantā*).

#### IV: Buddhaghosa Visits Sīhaladīpa / Ceylon to Translate the *Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathā*

After his ordination Buddhaghosa studied the *Therāvada Tipiṭaka*<sup>24</sup> under the direction of Revata Mahāthera and gained profound knowledge of the original teachings of the Buddha (*Buddha-desanā*). Within a short time he successfully mastered all the teachings of the Buddha. Thereafter he wrote two books entitled a) the *Ñānodaya*, and b) the *Atthasālinī*, a commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgani* (the first treatise of the *Abhidhamma*). Venerable Revata observed that Buddhaghosa very much wished to undertake the compilation of ‘*aṭṭhakathās*’, i.e. commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka* collections. So he said to Buddhaghosa: “The *Piṭakattaya* (the ‘Three Baskets’ in Pāli) have been preserved in this land, but the *aṭṭhakathās* are only extant in Sri Lanka in Sinhalese. The latter were composed in the Sinhalese language by the inspired and profoundly wise Mahinda who had previously consulted the discourses of the Buddha authenticated at three convocations (*saṅgāyanā*) through examination and arguments by leading members of the Buddhist Order; as these commentaries are now only extant in Sinhalese, do study them and then translate them according to the rules of the grammar of the Māgadhī language (Pāli). It will be an act conducive to the welfare of the whole world.”<sup>25</sup>

During his stay with his teacher (preceptor), Venerable Revata, one day it came to Buddhaghosa’s mind that he would be superior to his own teacher in respect of knowledge of the Buddha’s *dhamma*. The teacher of Buddhaghosa read his thought and said to him: “If you think like that, it is unworthy of you.” Then Buddhaghosa begged his pardon for his unworthy thought. The Mahāthera answered: “I will pardon you if you go to Ceylon and translate the teachings of the Buddha into the Māgadhī language from the language of Sīhaladīpa.”<sup>26</sup>

In several legends it is reported that Buddhaghosa, before leaving for Sīhaladīpa or Ceylon, succeeded in converting his father, who held very strong wrong views (*micchādiṭṭhi*), to Buddhism. Having received the blessings and permission from his teacher, Venerable Revata, he sailed for Ceylon. On his way, Buddhaghosa met Buddhaddatta, who was on his return to Jambudīpa or India after

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<sup>24</sup> The original teachings of the Buddha are preserved in the *Tipiṭaka*, comprising the *Sutta* collection (discourses), the *Vinaya* (the code of monastic discipline) and *Abhidhamma* (the analytic doctrine of the Buddhist canon).

<sup>25</sup> B.C. Law 1923, p.6.

<sup>26</sup> *Sāsanaṇaṃsa*, (ed. Bode, 1897, p. 29): *Tato pacchā raho ekako va nisinnassa etad ahosi: Buddhahāsīte piṭakattaye mama vā paññā adhikā udāhu upajjhāyassa vā ti. Taṃ kāraṇaṃ ñatvā upajjhācariyo niggaḥaṃ katvā ovādi. So saṃvegapatto hutvā khamāpetum vandi. Upajjhācariyo tvaṃ āvuso Sīhaladīpaṃ gantvā piṭakattayaṃ Sīhaḷabhāsakkhareṇa likhitam Māgadhābhāsakkhareṇa likhāhi evaṃ sati ahaṃ khamissāmi ti āha. Buddhaghoso ca pitaram micchādiṭṭhibhāvato mocetvā ācariyassa vacanaṃ sirasā paṭiggahetvā piṭakattayaṃ likhitam Sīhaḷadīpaṃ nāvāya agamāsi).*



accomplishing his work in Ceylon.<sup>27</sup> On their meeting in mid-ocean, Buddhadatta informed Buddhaghosa that he, too, had been charged with the translation of the commentaries in Sinhalese, but that he could not obtain them and that he was able to compile only the *Jinālaṅkāra*, the *Dantavaṃsa*, *Dhātuvāṃsa* and the *Bodhivaṃsa*.<sup>28</sup> He encouraged Buddhaghosa in his mission and requested him to carry it out thoroughly as he himself would not live long.<sup>29</sup> According to the *Cūlavāṃsa*, Buddhaghosa arrived in Ceylon during the reign of King Mahānāma. In the inscriptions of Monarāgala and Tissamahārāma King Mahānāma is given the epithet ‘*Tiripali*’, which is Old Sinhalese being equivalent to Pāli Siripāla. According to both epigraphical and literary information Buddhaghosa sojourned in Ceylon during the reign of King Mahānāma, also known as King Sirinivāsa or Siripāla, who was his royal patron.<sup>30</sup> The *Sāsanavaṃsa* relates that Buddhaghosa reached the *Mahāvihāra* in Anurādhapura without any difficulties and met there the Saṅgharāja Mahāthera. Having saluted him, he sat down behind the monks who were studying the *Abhidhamma* and *Vinaya*. The legend says that one day the chief monk who was teaching *Abhidhamma*, met with a difficulty to explain a knotty point. Buddhaghosa knew the correct answer and wrote it down on the blackboard. Having read it, the Saṅgharāja was deeply impressed and asked Buddhaghosa to teach the three *Piṭakas* to the monks. The latter refused and told him the purpose his coming to Ceylon. The Saṅgharāja was not yet ready to hand over to him the ancient documents or *Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathās*, but asked him to write an exposition on the significance of a stanza uttered by the Buddha with reference to the three *Piṭakas*. Buddhaghosa complied<sup>31</sup> and wrote the *Visuddhimagga*<sup>32</sup> in ‘a single afternoon’. The legendary narrative says that after writing the first copy of the *Visuddhimagga*, he fell asleep. Sakka, the chief of the Gods stole it. Buddhaghosa wrote it again by lamplight. The second time also Sakka did the same. The third copy which Buddhaghosa wrote he had attached to his robe while he was sleeping. The legend says that Sakka then left the two books, stolen by

<sup>27</sup> Among the works attributed to Buddhadatta are two manuals on the *Abhidhamma*, the *Abhidhammāvatāra* and the *Rūpārūpavibhāga*, two manuals on the *Vinaya*, the *Vinayavinicchaya* and the *Uttaravinicchaya*, and a commentary on the *Buddhavaṃsa*, the *Madhuratthavilāsinī*; see: Malalasekera 1971, 1999, p.396.

<sup>28</sup> Some scholars, however, doubt the attribution of the above works to Buddhadatta; see Malalasekera 1973, p. 396.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> See U.D. Jayasekera, *Early History of Education in Ceylon*, Colombo, Department of Cultural Affairs of Ceylon, 1969, p.7.

<sup>31</sup> At the conclusion of his *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa mentions the chief of the congregation at the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura, viz. Bhadanta Saṅghapāla.

<sup>32</sup> Pe Maung Tin, *The Path of Purity*, Being a Translation of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga*, London, The Pali Text Society, 1975. Concluding his work, Buddhaghosa notes that: “It was composed by me according to the wishes of Bhadanta Saṅghapāla.” At the end of his treatise (in verses only in Sinhalese texts) he expresses his wishes - by the performance of such merit as gained through his opus and ‘any other still in hand’ – to be reborn in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven and in his ‘last life’, after becoming a disciple of the future Buddha Metteyya and having received his teaching, to realise Final Emancipation.

him on his head.<sup>33</sup> Buddhaghosa was very pleased to see his three copies of the *Visuddhimagga* and showed them to the chief of the congregation of monks. Then the three copies were recited and it was found that all of them were exact copies of each other in all details. The chief of the congregation of monks was very pleased with Buddhaghosa's great achievement and gave him permission to translate the 'teachings of the Buddha' from Sinhalese into the Māgadhī language. He extolled the merits of Buddhaghosa who from those days became famous among the people of *Sīhaladīpa* or Ceylon.<sup>34</sup> Happy with what he had already achieved, he began to translate the ancient *Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathā* from Old Sinhalese into Māgadhī, i.e. Pāli.

In this place it is necessary to guard against some misunderstanding regarding Buddhaghosa's translating the 'teachings of the Buddha'. Some believed or still believe that he translated the *Tipiṭaka* into Pāli which, of course, is not correct. According to available authentic information Buddhaghosa only translated the *Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathā* into the Māgadhī language and also wrote some commentaries on texts of the *Tipiṭaka*.<sup>35</sup>

## V: Buddhaghosa and the *Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathā*

According to the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, ancient Tāmbapaṇṇi, before Buddhaghosa's arrival there existed many commentaries on the canonical texts of the *Tipiṭaka* composed according to the *Mahāvihāra* tradition. Gunapala Malalasekera writes that it was Mahā-Mahinda who had compiled the *Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathā* or at least had it composed under his supervision.<sup>36</sup> It seems that some of these ancient commentaries already existed in book form, whilst others were pieces of scattered literature composed by different learned monk scholars of the Island. In Sri Lanka it is traditionally held that the *Arhant* Mahā-Mahinda brought some of the important commentaries on texts of the *Tipiṭaka* from India to Ceylon,<sup>37</sup> where they were handed down orally from master to disciple (*sissānusissa paramparā*). In his work *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, E.D. Adikāram lists very important Sinhalese commentaries (*Sīhaḷaṭṭhakathās*)<sup>38</sup> as follows:

<sup>33</sup> *The Journal of the Pāli Text Society*, London, 1890, p.53.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* « Tatopaṭṭhāya so bhikkhu Buddhaghosatthero nāmātiloke pākaṭo ahoṣi ».

<sup>35</sup> As regards Buddhaghosa's work in Ceylon, Spence Hardy says that Buddhaghosa dwelt in the secluded *Ganthākāra Vihāra*, occupied with the work of translating, according to the grammatical rules of Māgadhī, which is the 'root of all languages' (*mūlabhāsā*), the whole of the Sinhalese *Aṭṭhakathā* into Pāli.

<sup>36</sup> Malalasekera 1938, p. 1170.

<sup>37</sup> In all likelihood such ancient commentaries brought by Mahinda Thera from India to Tāmbapaṇṇi in 243 BCE, may still exist in the island under the protection of higher Buddhist monastic authorities.

<sup>38</sup> *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, by E.W. Adikāram, published by Buddhist Cultural Centre, first edition 1946, re- printed in 1994 and 2009, Sri Lanka, p. 10. Gunapala Malalasekera (see Malalasekera, *The Pāli*

1. *Mahā-Aṭṭhakathā or Mūla-Aṭṭhakathā*
2. *Mahāpaccāriya-Aṭṭhakathā*
3. *Kuruṇḍī-Aṭṭhakathā*
4. *Andhakaṭṭhakathā*
5. *Samkhepaṭṭhakathā*
6. *Vinayaṭṭhakathā*
7. *Suttantaṭṭhakathā*
8. *Āgamaṭṭhakathā*
9. *Dīghaṭṭhakathā*
10. *Majjhimaṭṭhakathā*
11. *Samyuttaṭṭhakathā*
12. *Aṅguttaraṭṭhakathā*
13. *Abhidhammaṭṭhakathā*
14. *Sīhalaṭṭhakathā*
15. *Aṭṭhakathā* (in the singular)
16. *Aṭṭhakathā* (in the plural)
17. *Aṭṭhakathācariyā*
18. *Ācariyā*
19. *Ācariyavāda*
20. *Ācariyamata*
21. *Therasallāpa*
22. *Parasamuddavāsī-Therā*
23. *Vitaṇḍavādī*
24. *Porāṇā*
25. *Porāṇakattherā*
26. *Porāṇacariyā*
27. *Porāṇaṭṭhakathā*
28. *Bhāṇakā*

According to available information, Buddhaghosa studied the above-mentioned commentaries under the direction of Venerable Saṅghapāla and retranslated them into Māgadhī (Pāli).<sup>39</sup> It should be mentioned that Buddhaghosa's task in Ceylon was not to write a series of original books on the *Tipiṭaka*, but to retranslate into Pāli in a coherent and intelligent form the teachings that already existed in various Sinhalese commentaries. Buddhaghosa kept in mind that his mission in Ceylon was only to translate the original *Sīhala-Aṭṭhakathās* into Māgadhī.

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*Literature of Ceylon*, London, 1928, reprint: Colombo, M.D. Gunasena & Co., Ltd., 1958, pp. 91-92) notes that at the arrival of Buddhaghosa in Ceylon six commentaries must have existed at this period whose titles, at least, are known to us. They are: (i) *Mūla- or Mahā-Aṭṭhakathā*, (ii) *Uttaravihāra-Aṭṭhakathā*, (iii) *Mahāpaccarī-Aṭṭhakathā*, (iv) *Andha-Aṭṭhakathā*, (v) *Kuruṇḍī-Aṭṭhakathā*, (vi) *Samkhepa-Aṭṭhakathā*.

<sup>39</sup> See: Malalasekera 1938, p.1170.



Having been convinced of his profound knowledge of the *Dhamma* and the *Tipiṭaka*, the elders of the Mahāvihāra (*mahātheras*) handed over to him all Sinhalese commentaries and the *Tipiṭaka* which were in their safe custody. Adikāram reports on this as follows: “Buddhaghosa had before him copies of all different Sinhalese commentaries and also the canonical texts. In translating an *Aṭṭhakathā* from Sinhalese into Pāli he frequently consulted the corresponding canonical text. An illustration from the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* will make this point clear. Having given the etymological explanation of the word *khiḍḍā padosikā*, he mentions that there is also a variant reading *khiḍḍā-padūsikā* in the text; and at the same time he observes that the latter form is not found in the commentary. Instances of this nature are very frequent in Buddhaghosa’s works. While on the one hand these are an index of the scholarly way in which the great commentator performed his task, on the other they show that in his time the various recensions differed from one another only very slightly. The phrase *sabba aṭṭhakathāsu vuttaṃ* (‘mentioned in all the commentaries’) is also of frequent occurrence and is proof for us that Buddhaghosa had before him and that he referred to all the Sinhalese commentaries”<sup>40</sup>. In realization of this important task, Buddhaghosa never forgot to describe his working method. In his introduction to the *Vinaya* Commentary, the *Samantapāsādikā*, he says that: “In commencing this commentary - having embodied therein the *Mahā-Aṭṭhakathā*, without excluding any proper meaning from the decisions contained in the *Mahāpaccarī*, as also in the famous *Kuruṇḍī* and other commentaries, and including the opinions of the Elders - ... From these commentaries, after casting off the language, condensing detailed accounts, including authoritative decisions, without overstepping any Pāli idiom, (I shall proceed to compose my work).”<sup>41</sup> In addition to that, whenever Buddhaghosa proposes his own views on some important points, and is also compelled to do so in the absence of any explanation given by ancient *Ācariyās* in the Sinhalese commentaries, he never forgets to mention that the proposed idea is his own (*ayaṃ pana me attano mati*).

<sup>40</sup> Adikāram 1946 (1994, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Malalasekera 1928 (1958), pp. 93,94. J. Takakusu, M. Nagai (eds.), *Samantapāsādikā, Vinaya-aṭṭhakathā*, London, Pali Text Society, 1924-1947, pp. 1-2, vv. 10-16:

*Samvannaṇā Sīhaḍadīpakena - vākyena esā pana saṅkhatattā*  
*Na kiñci atthaṃ abhisambhūnāti - dīpantare bhikkhujanassa yasmā*  
*Tasmā imaṃ pālinayānurūpaṃ - samvannaṇaṃ dāni samārabhissaṃ*  
*Ajjhesanaṃ buddhasirivha yassa - therassa sammā samanussaranto*  
*Samvannaṇaṃ tañ ca samārabhanto -tassā mahāṭṭhakathaṃ sarīraṃ*  
*Katvā mahāpaccariyaṃ tatheva - kuruṇḍī nānādisu vissutāsu... .*

## VI: The Works of Buddhaghosa

A number of works have been attributed to Buddhaghosa, written by him in Ceylon, except for two treatises which he wrote during his stay in India. As mentioned above, the *Ñānodaya* and a treatise on *Abhidhamma* called *Atthasālinī* were his very first works dealing with Buddhist subjects. After reaching Ceylon he composed the *Visuddhimagga* at the request of the Mahāthera of the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura to prove his skill and deep understanding of the *Tipiṭaka*, enabling him to undertake the translation of the Sinhalese *Aṭṭhakathās* into Pāli. According to the *Cūlavamsa*, Buddhaghosa wrote the *Visuddhimagga* by giving an overview of the *Tipiṭaka* and the commentaries on the canonical texts.<sup>42</sup> Another important work of his is the *Samantapāsādikā*, a voluminous commentary on the Buddhist *Vinaya*, the code of monastic discipline or of canon law. Buddhaghosa composed this work at the request of Mahāthera Buddhāsiri of the Mahāvihāra during the reign of King Mahānāma in 429 CE. In the epilogue of the *Samantapāsādikā* Buddhaghosa clearly mentions that he learned the Sinhalese commentaries under the tutorship of Mahāthera Buddhāmitta. His study of the Sinhalese tradition concerning relevant methodologies greatly helped him to accomplish the translations and compilations of his commentaries with great success. The *Kaṅkhāvitaranī* or *Mātikaṭṭhakathā* on part of the *Vinaya* is also attributed to Buddhaghosa, written by him at the request of Mahāthera Sona.

Buddhaghosa was also invited by another four ancient teachers (*pubbācariyas*), to write commentaries on the four *Nikāyas*, viz. on the *Dīghanikāya*, the *Majjhimanikāya*, *Samyuttanikāya* and on the *Aṅguttaranikāya*. Complying with the *Pubbācariyas*' requests, Buddhaghosa very carefully and successfully compiled his extraordinary commentaries on the four *Nikāyas*. They are: (i) the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* on the *Dīghanikāya*, composed at the request of Dāṭhānaga, (ii) the *Papañcasūdanī* on the *Majjhimanikāya* as requested by Buddhāmitta, a friend of our commentator with whom he seems to have lived sometime in Mayurapaṭṭhana, (iii) the *Sāratthappakāsinī* on the *Samyuttanikāya* as requested by Jotipāla, and (iv) the *Manorathapūraṇī* on the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, also composed at the request of Jotipāla. It is interesting to note that in the prologue to the above four commentaries our author very clearly states that these translations into Pāli were done from the original commentaries brought to Ceylon by Mahāmahinda, being preserved at the Mahāvihāra in Anurādhapura by the 'teachers lineage' – *Ācariya-paramparā*. This statement is also confirmed in his

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<sup>42</sup> Geiger, Rickmers 1973, p.25.

opening verses to the *Dīghanikāya* Commentary, viz. that he composed the Pāli version by incorporating the essence of the Sinhalese *Mahā-Aṭṭhakathā*.<sup>43</sup>

Buddhaghosa is also recognized as the author of the commentaries on the *Khuddhakanikāya* of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*. In his introductory verses to the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā* he repeats that this work, too, constitutes a Pāli translation of the original Sinhalese commentary, done at the request of a *thera* named Kumārakassapa. The *Jātakatṭhakathā* was also composed by Buddhaghosa, complying with the request of three *therās*, namely Buddhadeva, Buddhamitta and Atthadassī. Explaining both the *Khuddakapāṭha* and the *Suttanipāta*, he wrote a single commentary, i.e. the *Paramatthajotikā*. Writing the commentary on the *Khuddakapāṭha* seems to have been a difficult task for him, for in his opening stanzas to that work he mentions that he had ‘difficulties in compiling the commentary without a better understanding of the *Khuddaka*- and *Suttanipāta* teachings.’<sup>44</sup> However, he also expressed his satisfaction that he could fulfil his task owing to the decisions and support of the ‘ancient teachers’ (*pabbācariyavinicchaya*) who encouraged him to attend to his work. Surprisingly, nowhere else any difficulties are referred to in connection with Buddhaghosa’s compiling Pāli commentaries in Sri Lanka.

Another important part of his work in Ceylon was his writing commentaries on the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*, on texts which originally motivated him to become a Buddhist. In accordance with available narrative information, Buddhaghosa had a profound knowledge of the *Abhidhamma-Piṭaka* before his leaving India for Ceylon because Venerable Revata had well instructed and prepared him for his challenging work. In the *Atthasālinī* it is mentioned that our author follows the principal teachings of the original *Sīhaḷatṭhakathā*, i.e. the commentaries on the *Abhidhamma* texts. His Pāli translations of the same he also did at the request of a *thera* whom he knew. In the prologue to the *Atthasālinī* Buddhaghosa reconfirms that the original *Aṭṭhakathās* on the *Abhidhamma* were brought to Ceylon by Mahā-Mahinda and were preserved in the Sinhalese language.<sup>45</sup> By respecting the original *Aṭṭhakathās* and the interpretation of the *Mahāvihāra*

<sup>43</sup> Rhys Davids, Carpenter 1886, p. 1:

*Atthappakāsanattham aṭṭhakathā ādito vasisatehi- Pañcahi yā saṃgītā anusamgītā ca pacchā pi Sīhaḷadīpaṃ pana ābhatātha vasinā Mahā-Mahindena - ṭhapitā Sīhaḷabhāsāya dīpavāsīnaṃ atthāya Apanetvāna tato 'haṃ Sīhaḷabhāsam manoramaṃ bhāsam - tantinayānucchavikaṃ āropento vigatadosam.*

<sup>44</sup> Helmer Smith, Marbel Hunt (eds.), *Paramatthajotikā*, Vol.1, The Pali Text Society, London, 1915, p.11:

*Uttamaṃ vandaneyyānaṃ - vanditvā ratanattayaṃ Khuddakānaṃ gambhīrattā kiñcāpi atidukkarā Vaṇṇanā mādiseṇ'esā abodhanantena sāsanaṃ.*

<sup>45</sup> See: Maung Tin (transl.), C.A.F. Rhys Davids (ed., rev.), *The Expositor, (Atthasālinī), Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, the first Book of the Abhidhammapiṭaka*, London, The Pali Text Society, 1920, p2.

tradition of Anurādhapura, Buddhaghosa composed his Pāli commentaries on the seven texts belonging to the *Abhidhammapiṭaka*.<sup>46</sup> They are: (i) the *Atthasālinī* on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, (ii) the *Sammohavinodanī* on the *Vibhaṅga*, (iii) the *Pañcappakaraṇaṭṭhakathā* on the remaining five books, namely the *Kathāvatthu*, *Puggalapaññatti*, *Dhātukathā*, *Yamaka* and *Paṭṭhāna*. Having very successfully completed a large number of translations and commentaries on the *Tipiṭaka* for the sake of the continuity of the *Buddha-Dhamma*, as confirmed by the *Mahāvamsa*, the great commentator Buddhaghosa left Ceylon by saying that he would wish to venerate the holy Bodhi-tree at Bodh Gayā.<sup>47</sup> According to other sources, we are informed that the task of writing the *Aṭṭhakathās* which were left untranslated into Pāli by Buddhaghosa, has been completed by Buddhaddatta, Dhammapāla, Upasena and Mahānāma.

## VII: Conclusion

Buddhaghosa and many other great Buddhist teachers had dedicated their whole lives and energies to uphold the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhism has an unbroken history; its original teachings – to the letter - have never been changed until today for more than 2500 years of history.

It is now our responsibility and should be our commitment to diffuse the noble words of the Buddha for the benefit of humanity, which have become more important and relevant than ever before in order to save humanity and the planet.

The great works of Buddhaghosa remain forever an incomparable contribution to Buddhism.

About the Author:

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Turnour 1837, p.253:

*Atha kattabba icchesu - gatesu pariniṭṭhitan*

*Vanditumī so mahābodhiṃ - Jambudīpam upāgamī.*

