Commenting on Commentaries: A Review of Maria Heim's *Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words*

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Maria Heim. *Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 222 + 52; USD 105.

Maria Heim's Voice of the Buddha: Buddhaghosa on the Immeasurable Words *is a rare example of sustained scholarly engagement with commentarial literature. The book introduces the reader to the literary world of the Theravāda Buddhist exegete Buddhaghosa (fifth century), with the stated goal of learning to read as he did. Heim shows with a series of close readings how Buddhaghosa read scripture with a high degree of attention to context, and how he understood both the Buddhist canon and the Buddha's knowledge to be infinitely expansive. Heim's thorough and accessible treatment makes her presentation an approachable case study of commentarial literature.*

Key words: Buddhism; Pāli canon; Buddhaghosa; commentarial literature; exegesis, hermeneutics

The study of commentaries on classics is out of fashion. The causes for this lie partly with ourselves as scholars. Modernist intuitions regarding individual originality and historicity, for example, drive the scholar away from the later layers of commentary.[1] Yet it must also be said that exegetical works themselves make for difficult objects of study: almost by nature they are verbose and abstruse, filled with technical terminology and internal references. Instead of giving us the clear account of the base text that we hoped for, the exegete brings us into a wholly different approach to reading. In *Voice of the Buddha*, Maria Heim does a remarkable job of making the commentaries of the fifth-century Buddhist exegete Buddhaghosa approachable and even enjoyable. Her book, clearly based on an intimate and extensive acquaintance with the relevant texts, introduces this Theravādin commentator's key hermeneutic tools as well as the general structure and coherence of his commentarial works.

Heim's book consists of two parts. In the first, she introduces what she takes to be Buddhaghosa's overarching concerns (chapter 1) and describes his main interpretative methods (chapter 2). In the second, Heim devotes a chapter to each of the so-called "three baskets" (Pāli: *tipiṭaka*), illustrating how the aforementioned concerns and methods figure in the commentaries.[2]

In the introduction, Heim introduces Buddhaghosa and his corpus as well as her approach. While, as she briefly mentions, there are a number of historical problems with the attributions of commentaries to Buddhaghosa, her working hypothesis is that we can indeed speak meaningfully of a single author (or chief editor) (18–9). Heim's aim in the book is to learn how to read as Buddhaghosa does (26–7). Buddhaghosa, she illustrates, approaches the vastness of the canon as consistently showing the omniscience and perfection of the Buddha. Learning from this omniscience with Buddhaghosa, however, is not learning propositional knowledge. Rather, the relevant ways of knowing are deeply contextual *methods*. This contextuality is the textual variant of the Buddhist teaching of interdependence. Buddhaghosa's reading practices, thus, are intertwined with Buddhist contemplative practice. In what follows, I will elaborate on these themes as I discuss

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the individual chapters. I will then come back to Heim's introduction to consider the framing of her book and also offer some of my own observations on this issue.

In chapter 1, "The Buddha's Omniscience and the Immeasurability of Scripture," Heim introduces Buddhaghosa's overarching concerns. Consistent with Buddhaghosa's method of reading (see below) where form and content cannot be separated, Heim's presentation here includes an overview of various different ways in which the Buddha's authoritative speech (*buddhavacana*) is defined and distinguished in the commentaries. One definition points to the soteriological motivation and efficacy that define the entire canon; another divides scripture into its three different genres; yet another distinguishes a total of 84,000 divisions, based on various different types of discourse (34–8). This illustrates not only the commentarial penchant for classification, but also points to a central theme for Heim: the oceanic expansiveness of the Buddha's word. According to Buddhaghosa, it is characteristic of the Buddha that he could say very much with very little, that even his shortest sermon had countless meanings (39–44, 49–57). Reading scripture with Buddhaghosa means becoming familiar with how to analyze and contextualize the Buddha's words. The flipside of this understanding is that the Buddha is considered omniscient as his teachings always impeccably cover all relevant issues (44–9). To engage with scripture, thus, is to encounter an omniscient teacher.

Heim goes on to provide an overview of hermeneutical tools in chapter 2, "Scripture, Commentary, and Exegetical Distinctions." Essential to Heim's overall argument is her discussion of Buddhaghosa's own reflections on the practice of exegesis (64–71). He understands himself, and the school that he represents, as "Vibhajjavādin," an "Analyst." For Buddhaghosa, this explicitly includes a traditionalist orientation that aims to be faithful to scripture and senior teachers; yet it also, as Heim emphasizes, is a creative practice of "developing numerous classification schemes to analyze in brief and in detail, sometimes apparently endlessly, possibilities for meaning" (68).

In the remainder of chapter 2, Heim discusses a series of categories employed by Buddhaghosa. Some of these may seem rather straightforward or might be known to those familiar with Buddhist philosophy, yet Heim shows that these distinctions often contain surprising elements. The rather pedestrian distinction between teachings that are in brief (*saṃkhitta*) and in detail (*vitthāra*), turns out to be contextual in Buddhaghosa's use (71–3). While his distinction between meaning (*attha*) and phrasing (*byañjana*) is reminiscent of the idea in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts that the "spirit" of the text trumps the letter, Heim shows how Buddhaghosa never understands the two as contradictory. Rather, by focusing on linguistic elements he can show the ways in which the literary perfection of scripture matches its perfect doctrines (73–85).

The next pair that Heim discusses, *sammutidesanā* and *paramatthadesanā,* is in many contexts translated as "conventional" and "ultimate" teachings, understood as implying opposing truth claims regarding what really exists or can be known (85–94). Heim, instead, translates the terms as "conventional teachings" and "teachings in the furthest sense." She argues that in Buddhaghosa's commentaries, this distinction is not ontological or epistemological. Rather, what is at stake is pedagogical context. In teachings on, say, merit or loving-kindness meditation, the conventional language that refers to complex phenomena such as persons is necessary. For spiritually mature audiences, the Buddha might expound on certain topics that require a "further" analysis, leaving behind concepts of personhood. Next is the distinction between statements that are definitive (*nītattham*) and interpretable (*neyyattham*) (94–7). While in many cases this distinction is similar to the preceding one, the two are not completely parallel; Heim shows that in some cases the present distinction is used in arguments about how literally to take a given passage. The final hermeneutic tool that Heim introduces is the distinction between *pariyāya* and *nippariyāya,* which she glosses respectively as "contextually, modally, figuratively, or in a qualified sense" and "categorically, abstractly, literally, or unqualifiedly" (98; 97–103). Heim's various glosses show the variety of usages to which these categories are put. Accordingly, her key argument about Buddhaghosa's use

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of this division is that its use is indeed contextual—what is categorically true in one context might, in another, be understood in a qualified sense (see esp. 102–3).

In the second part of the study, Heim takes her readers on a tour through the various parts of the Theravāda canon. Here, we get to see Buddhaghosa in action, as it were, applying the reading practices discussed above. Heim focuses on his appreciation for context in chapter 3, "The Contexts and Conditions of Buddhavacana in the Suttanta," first developing the theme in general terms and then showing the specifics with readings of the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (126–36) and the *Mūlapariyāya Sutta* (136–41). Heim shows how for Buddhaghosa, the narratives surrounding the Buddha's doctrinal teachings are not mere embellishments. Rather, they reveal the teachings—and Buddhaghosa shows how. As he presents the narratives that frame the *suttas'* teachings, he focuses on three areas (124–5). Firstly, he goes into painstaking detail regarding the immediate everyday setting, showing how the Buddha's actions unfailingly reveal his omniscience. Contrary to modern readings of the Pāli *suttas* as depicting the Buddha as a relatable human, the commentaries depict a docetic Buddha who regularly performs miracles on par with those common in Mahāyāna scriptures (115, 132–3). Secondly, he nests each narrative within an infinite cosmological timescape, explaining the present encounter as conditioned by a history that goes back lifetimes. Lastly, Buddhaghosa reads the narratives as illustrations of the doctrinal content of the *sutta* such that, as Heim puts it, "the frame story performs the sermon" (139). In her conclusion to the chapter, Heim points out that this way of reading Buddhist scripture by endless contextualizing is also itself illustrative of the central Buddhist doctrine of "the radical conditionality of experience" (143).

In chapter 4, "Disentangling the Tangle: Abhidhamma as Phenomenological Analysis," Heim continues to emphasize Buddhaghosa's practice of reading contextually. Even for this most abstract portion of the canon, Buddhaghosa provides an elaborate narrative frame (156–62). For Heim, the relevance of contextual reading in the case of the Abhidhamma goes beyond narrative. She emphasizes that in its reductive analysis, the Abhidhamma continuously redefines *dhammas*, placing them in different lists to understand them in all their various relations (163–8). As such, the Abhidhamma, on Heim's reading of Buddhaghosa, is interested in providing methods and not, as the Sārvāstivāda school, in providing an account of the ontological reality. Heim thus reads the Theravāda Abhidhamma as a phenomenological project that provides us with "analytical practices to explore and describe experience" (148; cf. 148–9, 153–4). At the conclusion of her chapter, Heim points out that this understanding and use of Abhidhamma corresponds to the presentation of insight meditation in Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*), thus blurring the lines between scholasticism and contemplative practice (181).

Chapter 5, "The 'Completely Pleasing' Exegesis on the Vinaya," explores, through a number of close readings, central themes in Buddhaghosa's commentary to the Theravāda Buddhist monastic code. Richly amplifying the biographical elements already found in the *Vinaya,* Buddhaghosa understands it not as a legalistic document, but as an encounter with the Buddha (esp. 185). What is shown in the various occasions where the Buddha had to lay down a rule for his community is, again, his omniscience—his capacity to both respond perfectly to what is at hand as well as lay down the perfect rule for the future functioning of the Saṃgha (209–10). At the same time, given his emphasis on context, Buddhaghosa reads the *Vinaya* as portraying, as Heim puts it, "complex people caught in unfortunate and difficult circumstances" that thus "provide a morally complex and humane legal education for the Vinaya expert" (191).

In the conclusion, Heim provides a summary of the themes and methods in Buddhaghosa's commentary. In the appendices, Heim illustrates these with translated portions of commentary. Appendix A presents Buddhaghosa's commentary on the qualities of the Buddha's teachings, the Dhamma; Appendix B, the commentary on the opening of the *Vinaya*; and Appendix C, the *Atthasālinī* of the *Abhidhamma.*

Heim's book is an excellent introduction to Buddhaghosa's commentaries. Its relevance, however, goes well beyond the realm of Theravāda Buddhism. Heim herself dwells little on the larger framing and implications of her study, though she does offer some remarks that put her

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study in a larger context. These include, for example, comments regarding the way Buddhaghosa's interpretations of issues salient to issues in Buddhism writ large (e.g., the nature of *dhammas*, the nature of omniscience) and regarding touchpoints with broader comparative categories (e.g., drawing on José Cabezón's work on scholasticism; 58–9). At its broadest, however, Heim frames her project as responding to the call of Sheldon Pollock for a globalized philology that is inclusive of reading methods of scholars from all times and traditions (3–4). While this larger project is in the background, Heim does not let comparative concerns interfere with her, or her readers', understanding of Buddhaghosa. By presenting him so skillfully, she does more than introduce Theravāda commentaries. Her work offers, introduces, (and possibly revives) alternative models for engagement with text and culture that do not rely on the foundationalist epistemology and individualism of western modernity. In this way, Heim introduces us to—as she says he does—"a vast and imaginative literary world that can potentially take us deeper into teachings we think we understand, and perhaps even confront us with understandings we have not even conceived" (116).

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1 See, e.g., Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 2–3; and, for general comments on the lack and necessity of studying commentary, see Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): esp. 954–5.

2 In keeping with Heim's book, I provide Pāli rather than Sanskrit terms.

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