

Theology and cosmology in the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa

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The need to find clarity concerning (1) the relationship between scientific and religious cosmological discourses and (2) the imagining of a space where various religions could meet in fruitful conciliation as far as (1) is concerned, formed the basis of the article. The aim of the article was to investigate the relevance of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (5th CE, Pali compendium of Theravāda Buddhism) with regard to the above problems.

The methodology employed involved clarifying the historical context of the *Visuddhimagga*; understanding the subjective intentions of Buddhaghosa and extrapolating non-emphasised but promising underlying tendencies in his magnum opus, conducive to a perspective of ultimate, universal peace as far as Cosmos, all of humanity and its various religious discourses are concerned.

The reading of the *Visuddhimagga* revealed a mythology of many deities, tolerated but demoted to a status lower than that of enlightened humans; the denial of a Creator God; no notion of an analogia entis between humans and a living Cosmos, nor any tendency towards pantheism and a commitment to the ideal of universal happiness for all beings.

The main conclusion was that Theravāda Buddhism (and, to a lesser extent, Christian theology) could be extended towards the notion of a living, evolving Cosmos, appearing from and disappearing into non-substantial silence. It is not claimed that Buddhaghosa succeeded in achieving a great cosmology. It remains an unrealised possibility, latently possible as an extension of Theravāda.

Contribution: The contribution of the article is that it uncovers deeply hidden lines in Buddhism (and Christianity) that are emerging and converging. 'Theo-logy', re-interpreted as mystical 'cosmo-sophy', would not amount to a cynical debunking or irresponsible annexation of Buddhaghosa for utterly unthinkable ends, but as a topic worthy of investigation. The article is part of work in progress.

Keywords: analogia entis; analogia relationis; apokatastasis; Buddhaghosa; cosmos; cosmosophy; God; gods; mysticism; *Visuddhimagga*.

Introduction: Problem, working hypothesis, method

In this *Festschrift*, dedicated to Johan Buitendag and with a central focus on theology and cosmology in honour of the laureate's major contribution to this field, the author intends entering a field seemingly far removed from Christian discourse: theology and cosmology in the monumental *Visuddhimagga* (ed. Rhys Davids 1975) of Buddhaghosa, final consolidator of Theravāda Buddhism. At first glance, both concepts, 'theology' and 'cosmology', may seem wholly inappropriate as far as Buddhaghosa is concerned. Yet, on a closer look, his work warrants attention in this regard. Furthermore, if lines in both Buddhism and Christianity are extended as suggested hypothetically, promising points of possible contact and conciliation at a higher level emerge.

The meeting of cosmology and theology deserves priority on the agenda of contemporary thought on the meaning of existence. 'Cosmology' as discussed here includes the contribution of the natural sciences and accompanying philosophical and theological reflection. And 'theology' is understood in a broad sense: speech (taken in the broadest sense, including the whole corpus of theological academic subjects) about '(G)god(s)' (also taken in the broadest sense, including mono-, poly-, heno-, pan- and panen-theism). It is time to explore new frontiers. In this connection, the term 'religion', derived from the Latin *religare* and intended as (re-) integration in nature in a wide sense, deserves recognition as a wider context of 'theology'. In this article, 'cosmosophy' indicates the basic approach underlying such a journey.

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The working hypothesis leading my argument is that from the thinking of Buddhaghosa, as laid down in his *Visuddhimagga*, may be extrapolated (most certainly transcending his own intentions but articulating the deep tendency of his thinking), the notion of a reverent re-connection with Nature, Cosmos, as a living Whole. This allows (but does not insist on) the nomenclature 'God' for becoming and decaying, impermanent, non-substantial Cosmos on the edge of emptiness.

The method followed advises a combination of textual analysis, historical explanation, sympathetic understanding, extrapolation of suspected hidden inner tendencies and conciliatory meeting of Buddhist and Christian thought in a wider space than is usually associated with them. The article is not an exercise in closed intra-religious, institutionally expected and prescribed discourse, whether of a Christian or Buddhist or any other variety. Neither is it an inter-discourse, harbouring associations of separate identities and separate development, however, friendly. It will not be a propagandistic, apologetic or polemic exercise but will move in an open space shared by all human beings in all cultures and religions, reaching across all historical times. Experimentally, it situates itself in the large, inclusive clearance of basically the one, same, religious search. In that spirit, we meet an impressive member of the human species, a fundamental thinker, a *kalyāṇa-mitta* ['noble friend'].

I gods, and God

Gods [*devas*]

Significantly, the *Visuddhimagga* (I.1)¹ opens with an unidentified deity [*deva*], entangled in doubt, coming to the enlightened human being Gotama in the night (obviously to escape embarrassing attention), asking him who could disentangle this tangle. Gotama replies: a 'wise man' (*naro sapañño*, I.3), specifically a monk. A similar instance (there are many) occurs in I.150: a monk desiring to become a deity [*deva*] is severely censured. However, in II.30, the gods envy a monk fulfilling the alms-food-eater's practice. In III.58, a meditating *bhikkhu* affectionately but somewhat condescendingly develops loving-kindness towards all deities residing in trees and elsewhere within the boundaries of a town. IX.69 describes how a deity living in a nearby tree bursts into tears because a monk intends leaving and pays respectful homage to him. Deities, clothed in dirty garments and sweating from their armpits, taking note of the Perfect One's teaching concerning the Wheel of Becoming [*bhavaṅkamma*] (the cosmic process of never-ending impermanence, birth and death), are overcome by fear and anxiety (XVII.278). According to VII.115–118, a meditator's recollection of deities, all subject to death and rebirth but also capable of faith just like humans, is a legitimate theme of meditation. Such a *bhikkhu*, devoted to the recollection of deities, can be dearly loved by deities. The bottom line is the suggestion of a relative difference in kind but not in hierarchy between deities and humans as two species of some larger generic form of humanlike life. In our own age of the

exploration of space, it is indeed not impossible that elsewhere intelligent forms of life may be discovered.

The existence of deities is thus not denied. In fact, Theravāda assumed the existence of six classes of deities inhabiting a heavenly Sensuous Sphere, four classes inhabiting a Fine-material Sphere and four classes inhabiting an Immaterial Sphere. And then there is the Great Brahma [*mahā-Brahmā*], referring to himself as the Omniscient Ruler, Creator, Preserver, Controller and Father of all that was, is and will be. Like humans, gods are subject to the universal cycle of birth and death and rebirth in a spiral of suffering, because of desire and hatred and ignorance, subject to the laws of cause and effect. The strategy employed by Theravāda in general and Buddhaghosa to deal with that culturally inherited, traditionally Indian polytheism was not to deny the existence of gods or to denounce any positive relationship to them (as was the case in Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinking), but to relegate them, not without humour, to a lower order, not superior or equal to but inferior to enlightened human beings. Indeed, according to the *sutta* tradition, the cosmos as well as the high gods Brahmā and Sakka pay homage to the essentially human and not-divine Buddha immediately after his full nirvana.

God

Buddhaghosa, continuing the drift of classical Theravāda, explicitly and firmly denies the existence of a personal God with known qualities, as ultimate, eternal reality discontinuous with human and cosmic fate and life, Creator and Judge of all and provider of supernatural revelations. Ultimately there is only the natural order of existing things, accessible to humans experienced in deep states of meditation. From this point of view, the human being is not the creation of God, made after his image, but God is the creation of the human being, projected and made after the latter's image. The Wheel of Becoming 'reveals no known beginning', 'no Maker' [*kāraka*], is just 'spinning forever' (XVII.273). It 'is devoid of a Maker such as a conjectured Brahmā the Great, the Highest, the Creator' of the empirical process (XVII.282). 'Over and above mere mentality-materiality there is nothing else that is a being or a person or a deity or a *Brahmā*' (XVIII.24). Clearly the notion of an eternal Creator God could not be dismissed. Buddhaghosa could be interpreted to imply that 'gods', up to 'God', are human constructs: mythologically (e.g., the Hebrew belief in Jahweh) or rationally (e.g., the Christian trinitarian and Christological dogmas developing over centuries) or both.

Comparable Western Christian approaches

Buddhaghosa makes no moves similar to those of Roman Catholic Thomas Aquinas in his Medieval Christian scholastic *Summa Theologiae* (a Christian equivalent of Buddhaghosa's *summa*), according to whom, in addition to and supporting supernatural revelation, sound rational thought necessarily, taking earthly beings as point of departure, must postulate the existence of one transcendent first unmoved mover; one first efficient cause; one primal intelligent being; one absolutely good; one designer and creator of all things:

1. To facilitate citations, they are identified with the reference system devised by Nānamoli 1979 (e.g. I.106, meaning 'chapter I', 'paragraph 106'). The Pali text edited by Rhys Davids offers no assistance in this regard.

termed 'God', between whom, perfect being and his fallible creation an analogous relationship (*analogia entis*: neither identical similarity nor incompatible difference) exists.

Neither would Buddhaghosa have agreed with an alternative such as 20th century Protestant Karl Barth's *analogia relationis*. Applied to human relations, Barth postulates similarities between human life on earth and the Divine inner-Trinitarian life. However, the point of departure here is not life below, then extended to God via reason, but the opposite. According to Barth, the point of departure on the ontological route of 'analogy' is divine Trinitarian existence, a Wholly Other, utterly separate from being in cosmic time and space, yet supernaturally revealed to earthly folks in the God-man Jesus Christ, a viable bridge from above to below. Human life can and should approximate analogically the revealed inner-Divine life.

Both, Buddhaghosa would have said: 'make-believingly grope to too high'.

Provisional summary

Buddhaghosa displays no qualms in describing the emotions, thoughts and actions of anthropomorphic 'gods' in a friendly yet debunking mode. His own thinking on gods is itself a variety of mythologising at a penultimate level but ultimately aims at absolute transcendence, petering out on an absolute ultimate horizon, utter silence. His 'theo-logy' boils down to a form of de-re-mythologising, deconstructing one system and constructing another, self-consciously make-believe, yet polytheistic one. He does not 'believe' in gods or any One in particular. The gods do not transcend the laws of nature but are completely subject to them. And there is no God speaking to mankind, Creator of all and Revealer of the nature of things. Human beings claiming to know such a God, to say what He says (I interpret Buddhaghosa), are trapped in a circle: God, claimed to speak, says what humans think and construct. The way to knowing the deep structure of things, implies Buddhaghosa, is the way of meditation, a deep experience of reality ending in utter silence, supplemented by valid empirical knowledge and sound reasoning. Buddhaghosa insists on that and claims no supernatural, extra-cosmic More.

Mentality-materiality

Aggregates of existence [*khandha's*]

Buddhaghosa starts his exposition of right understanding (*paññā*), the third major part of his book, with an explanation of the 'aggregates' (*khandha's*) of existence. Elaborating and systematising classical Theravāda he puts forth a structure of five cohering aggregates:

- materiality [*rūpa*]
- sensory feeling [*vedanā*]
- perception [*saññā*]
- mental formation, volition [*sankhāra*]
- consciousness [*viññāna*] (XIV)

These five are internally grouped as *nāma-rūpa* ['mentality'- 'materiality']. It is important to realise that the five are not substances, nor parts of an overriding substance but functions in the ever-changing, conditionalistic, non-substantial mental-material flow of reality.

Under 'materiality', our author subsumes two major categories (XIV.35–36): (1) 'primary materiality' [*bhūta-rūpa*], namely the four basic constituents, elements, of all material reality, that is earth, water, fire and wind (XI.27–38) and (2) 'derived materiality' [*upādā-rūpa*], combining vital, bodily organs (XI.47 ff) and the more subtle dimensions of matter as such (e.g. space and impermanence [*aniccatā*]). He thus integrates 'matter' and 'life' as a continuum.

A synonym of 'mentality' is 'mind' [*citta, mano*], comprising the remaining four aggregates. The second constituent of the aggregates ('feeling' as 'sensation') (XIV.125–128) likewise presents a categorial continuum, this time of bodily and mental sensation as agreeable (pleasurable), disagreeable (painful) or neutral, at the level of pre-volitional, pre-reflective (we might call it instinctual) sensation. The third, 'perception' (XIV.129–130), introduces the element of interpretation, thereby factoring in human cognition. The term for the fourth aggregate, *sankhāra* (XIV.131ff) has a wide range of meanings, but in the context of the five aggregates the association of karma-producing 'emotion' and 'volition' is prominent. The fifth and crowning aggregate, consciousness, emphasises the intellectual cognition of an object. All of this adds up to a complex, integrated whole.

The five-fold system of aggregates is related to a system of 40 exercises of 'mental development' [*bhāvanā*] (III–XI), that is foci of meditation, leading to the most profound and pure insight attainable into the depth of structure of all of reality. The meditative system itself progresses from concentration on external material objects (earth, water, fire, wind); to feelings, such as reactions to loathsome objects (e.g. food); to positive perceptions, emotions and volitions (e.g. regarding divinities) and to plumbing the message of the Buddha.

Striking in its absence as a topic of meditation is the domain of earthly nature, manifesting as plant and animal life. This could be taken as an insignificant absence or as a remarkable unintentional shortcoming or as an indicator of an intentional exclusion signalling a lack of solidarity with nature, highly problematic in our time of looming ecological disaster. On the other hand, the compendium does extend the disallowance of killing and the admonition to love, to all living beings and in the domain of *kamma* and rebirth, examples of crossing the boundaries between human and animal (and other forms of life) are frequent. A meditation subject such as breathing involves and activates all of the above aggregates, as Buddhaghosa explains in great detail (VIII.145–244). Today we could interpret: breathing simultaneously and essentially embraces a *physical (chemical) process; life; emotion-volition and cognition* (culminating, if conducted profoundly, in insight into reality as sets of processes of impermanence, of beginning and end).

So far, one may suspect that Buddhaghosa could accept a four-layered ontology: (matter)-(life)-(emotion-volition)-(thought). For 'emotion-volition' 'soul' would also do. That Cosmos could be understood as emanating from an inaccessible empty quiet depth, with all four levels present essentially and *ab initio*, evolving over time in a context of causality, also contained in the basic Theravāda system, as conditionality [*paccayatā*].

Formulated in contemporary terms, the dimensions of matter, life, emotions-volitons and thought rise like an integrated pyramid into the empty sky. The entire structure adds up to neither a materialistic, nor a vitalistic, nor a voluntaristic, nor an idealistic one-sided system, but to a multi-layered, coherent, holistic metaphysical vision, culminating in supreme states of consciousness. Cosmos is not merely the not necessarily friendly dwelling of the human species, but its extended beings and the human species is not merely just another product of a blind evolutionary process, but in its highest manifestations such as an enlightened Gotama and a Jesus, perfected to a Buddha and a Christ, the pinnacle of Cosmic being. In that sense, the human species is the microcosm, responsible for the well-being of the Earth and its wider body and the Cosmos as a whole is anthropomorphic, anthropocentric and intelligent (Kirchhoff 1999:87, 223 et passim).

In coming to terms with this vision, let us first and in passing remind ourselves that its concept of a foursome basic material (earth, extension [*paṭhavi*]; water [āpo], fire [*tejo*] and wind [*vāyo*]) was not unique, but shared by India and Greece in a remarkably overlapping epoch of creative thought. From the point of view of a reader in our own epoch of cultural convergence, certain questions arise. A first observation is that although Buddhaghosa could not have processed the theory (with metaphysical implications) of evolution, the leading Theravāda notions of impermanence [*anicca*] and conditionalism [*paccayatā*] are reconcilable with such a theory, easier than appears to be the case in Christianity.

Buddhaghosa is primarily anthropologist and psychologist, not cosmologist. Obviously, he would have been committed to the Buddha's warning (according to the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, D 1) to steer clear of certain questions, including whether the universe is temporarily eternal or not, spatially finite or not, caused or not, as not only unanswerable speculatively but also as soteriologically irrelevant. Nevertheless, early Buddhist tradition did hold a cosmologically highly speculative view, namely that cosmos is circular, surrounded by an iron mountain, in turn surrounded by a number of heavens, reachable in deep meditation. Fully endorsing that, Buddhaghosa accepted a speculative 10000 world system, destroyed 64 times by fire, water and wind (XIII.28-71). His anthropology focuses on the five aggregates as a human phenomenon, and he inadvertently (or deliberately?) refrains from the possibility, of extending it to the Cosmos as a whole. Then the Cosmos could have been envisioned as a material, living, feeling and thinking being (like all other existents, impermanent, non-substantial and shot through

with conditionalistic causality). Buddhaghosa does not pursue the possibility of attributing a mental, spiritual dimension to Cosmos as such. However, he might be making a tentative move in that direction when, in giving advice on the contemplation of the earth kasina, the possibility appears of semi-addressing Earth reverently as 'Great One' [*mahī*], 'Friendly One' [*medinī*], 'Provider of Wealth' [*vasudhā*], 'Bearer of Wealth' [*vasudharā*] (IV.29).

Contrasting with the two problematic applications of 'analogy' mentioned earlier (Aquinas and Barth), an *analogia entis* between humankind as part and the Cosmos as whole, announces itself as a possibility not taken up by Buddhaghosa. It would not have been a rather strained set of somehow similar characteristics of two awkwardly different entities, but a natural, evident accommodation of 'part' and 'whole'. The relationship between part and whole opens a new train of thought. The Cosmic whole consists of innumerable numbers of smaller 'wholes' with their constituent 'parts', all adding up to unimaginably complex networks of wholes and parts, each present in and distinct from the other: every *pars pro toto*, *totum pro parte*, *pars pro parte*, and all connected: no whole or part unconnected to any other, yet no two identical.

This could help resolve the ultimately rather strained theory of uninterrupted continuities of personal yet not identical rebirths, through countless aeons of *samsāra*, of human constellations of aggregates without souls (which distinguishes it relatively from the Hindu view): virtually the same individual in processes of growth or decline. The author sees this as a compromise of the basic, revolutionary discovery of the Buddha (the indivisible threesome *anattā*, *aniccatā* and *pan-paccayatā*) and the almost irresistible pull of classic Indian culture. Expanding the Buddha's basic perspective on aggregates, every human being, born of parents in ever widening contexts of family life and life in the widest sense, could be seen as born from living nature as the outcome of incredibly complicated ever widening sets of conditional factors and returning to nature, making and having made his or her karmic input to the Cosmic process. From time to time, singular geniuses such as a Mozart and saints such as Francesco d'Assisi as well as low-down scoundrels are produced, mostly very ordinary people with their good and bad deeds in earthly life that are largely the outcomes of their own inadequate conditionalistic responsibility. They all live and act with consequences for themselves and the rest of humanity and the Cosmos, and return to the realm of nature, becoming compost for the ongoing Cosmic process, part of the matter-life-soul-thought soil producing the next mountain and tree and insect and animal and human, and co-produced by them.

Utilising the word 'God' in this context is a possibility. It would be a variety of pantheism, a tendential extrapolation of the inner, almost hidden logic underlying or implied in the *Visuddhimagga*. From time to time, the reader can indeed pick up unexpected signs of a sensitive awareness of the relationships between an ascetic seeking deliverance, nature and deities. The solitary ascetic living a secluded life at the

root of a tree in the jungle is protected by deities in the tree and observing the tender red leaves turning green and then yellow as they fall, he discovers the truth of impermanence which humans, deities, trees and everything share (II.55). It would be an appearing and disappearing God, like all existents. Cosmoses come and go (*Sattasūriya sutta* [A 7.66]) and exist on the edge of an unfathomable horizon where human speech and thought peter out.

Apokatstasis

A corollary of an extending interpretation of the *Visuddhimagga* would be the possibility of a universal salvation of the divine totality with its inherent struggle, its 'Jah und Nein' (Jacob Böhme). Such an apokatstasis would be postulated not as fact but as hope, not in the indicative mode but in the optative, as a dream, as moral imperative, at a time of ecological disaster without equal as the human species evolved, and not without human culpability.

The primary focus in the *Visuddhimagga* is on the achievement of enlightenment in this life by the individual whose journey proceeds as a straight route from (1) virtue [*sīla*], via (2) meditative concentration [*samādhi*], to (3) insight [*diṭṭhi*, *vipassanā*] culminating in personal enlightenment, the *terminus ad quem*, like crossing a river once and for all. Buddhaghosa seems bound to the basic analogy underlying the structure of his *Visuddhimagga*, adopted from the *Rathavinīta Sutta* (M 24): a king on urgent business organises seven coaches to get him to his destination in seven stages. But what then, after the seven coaches reached its destination, after arrival on the other side of the river (another basic Theravāda analogy for the journey of salvation)? As such that would not exclude the possibility of committing oneself to a universalistic ideal in this Cosmic dispensation.

At first glance, it could appear that the dominant accent in the *Visuddhimagga* is on the negative evaluation of cosmos and nature. There are telling anecdotes of ascetics seeking enlightenment (e.g. in II) seemingly turning away in disgust from life altogether. One instance: in the Great Cave of Kurandaka there was a lovely painting, Buddhaghosa explains (I.105). Wandering monks admired it, but the occupant, a senior monk, admitted that he had never seen it for more than 60 years and never looked at a great ironwood tree nearby. For that, he received special homage. However, a cosmos with the potential for ultimate perfection warrants the appreciation of present cosmic existence, without desire or hatred or indifference. Indeed, the route could also be described as proceeding from (2) (meditation), via (3) (insight) to (1) virtue in thought, word, deed and livelihood as destiny: righteous, exemplary, valuable practical existence for the sake of all beings in this life, with a view to attain a destiny of universal Cosmic wholeness.

Mahāyāna is characterised by its central vision of a *bodhisatta's* vision of cosmic happiness, as expressed in, for example, the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. However, this emphasis is not altogether absent from the *Visuddhimagga*. In his meditation on

the four 'divine abidings' [*Brahmavihāra*] (lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity), Buddhaghosa explains, the aspiring traveller on the way towards enlightenment pervades all that is, all the quarters of the cosmos, with lovingkindness (IX.50 ff):

'May all beings ... all breathing things ... creatures... persons ... women ... men ... Noble Ones ... not Noble Ones ... deities ... those in states of loss ... all beings in the eastern, western, northern, southern, downward direction ... be free from enmity, affliction and anxiety, and live happily'.

Yes, even gods and all beings in hells. All beings are related as family. And tales of the wellbeing of animals, both as receivers and providers of saving compassion abound in *Pāli* literature. This vision is not specified as far as the present or future is concerned, but it could be interpreted as 'all times, 'eternally', and as taking concrete shape in selfless, exemplary, constructive speech, deeds and life arrangement in all respects, conducive to such an universally open, inclusive space of indiscriminate love. Life becomes universal love.

The similarity in perspective between the above and the call of Jesus (Mt 22:35 ff) to love God above all as the greatest commandment and then, as second, to love ones' neighbour as oneself, should not be overlooked. But neither should the subtle differences. Buddhaghosa certainly could not have preached the first, and as far as the second is concerned, his outspoken emphasis is wider. Yet, could Buddhaghosa have said 'May Cosmos be happy', Cosmos understood as a living entity? Historically probably not in those words, but metaphysically it was not impossible.

Apokatstasis is also an expectation appearing from time to time in orthodox Christianity. In early Christianity, this dream was treasured by Origen of Alexandria (c 185–c 253 CE), at the present time by Jürgen Moltmann. A space opening up for a meeting of people of all religions, beyond propagandistic triumphalism, unfolds. Taking note of the three achievements intellectual 'insight' [*vipassanā*], 'higher powers' [*abhiññā*] and 'cessation' [*nirodha*], of individuals who have attained the highest degree of meditative mental concentration [*samādhi*], yields interesting results concerning cosmological relevance in the *Visuddhimagga*.

Insight [*vipassanā*]

We could summarise that in customary Theravāda style of thinking and presentation, namely analysing nexuses within nexuses of nuances in increasing complexity, 'insight' reveals a threesome as ultimate ontological constituents of all of reality: the universal, cosmic, ontological, functional trio (not substantial trinity as is the case in Christianity) of *aniccatā* ['impermanence'], *paccayatā* ['conditionalism'] and *anattā* ['non-substantiality']. The first two indicate what lies at the heart of human as well as cosmic existence: non-permanent conditional change. The role of the third characteristic is to express the truth that all things from atom-small to Cosmos-whole, arise from, hang in, fade away on an absolute cognitive horizon. The calm achieved by the meditator appears to be

not only a human emotional and cognitive quality but merges ontologically with an absolute, calm emptiness: 'Matter should be regarded as a lump of froth; feeling as bubble on water; perception as mirage; formations as a plantain trunk; consciousness as a conjuring trick' (XIV.224).

'There is suffering, but none who suffers; doing exists although there is no doer; extinction is, but no extinguished person; although there is a path, there is no goer' (XVI.90).

The aggregates 'come from nowhere, break up, nowhere go; flash in and out, as lightning in the sky' (XX.72; cf XXI.48, 53, 59–60, 70).

Scaling the ladder of the concentration *jhāna*'s, the meditator transcends 'applied thought' 'sustained thought' and, suspending sense-perceptions, reaches four Spheres (cf X) that, in addition to a human epistemological dimension, also have a cosmological bearing: 'Boundless Space' [*ākāśānañcāyatana*], 'Boundless Consciousness' [*viññānañcāyatana*], 'Nothingness', [*ākāśānañcāyatana*] and 'Neither-Perception-nor-non-Perception' [*nevasaññā-n'-āsaññāyatana*]. Having reached the pinnacle of the *jhāna*'s, the wise reach a state of perfect calm in the realisation of *anattā*. This is what Siddhartha experienced in the night of his supreme enlightenment. The calm achieved appears to be not only a human psycho-somatic quality but signifies a cognitive penetration into a quiet ontological depth dropping away unfathomably under Cosmos. It confirms the vision of an *analogia entis* between human and Cosmos, implied in the *Visuddhimagga*.

Register the sequence and substance of these four *jhāna*'s. The dimension of boundless (undifferentiated) matter (space) is transcended in the dimension of boundless (undifferentiated) consciousness, which is followed by the dimension of nothingness. But then, it seems, the danger, with fatal consequences, of falling into the quicksand of annihilationism or substantialising 'Nothingness' is realised. That would be the ultimate betrayal. It is better to rather settle for the end of thought, where both perception and non-perception, all thought, expire.

This is the ultimate religious mystery, petering out into unsound, unsight, unspeech. It is not supernatural revelation providing information to be believed on authority. After the ultimate *jhāna*'s, we may interpret, the inevitable religious job of systematising, giving a conceptual explanatory shape to what has been intuited beyond all words and thoughts and almost inevitably compromising the ultimate truth, admittedly starts. Mythologies and rational systematic constructions in the form of theologies and metaphysical philosophies make their appearance. In chronological and perhaps essential succession, the mystically risky, perhaps socially necessary, verbalisation, rational teaching, interpreting dogmas, institutional orders, normative scriptures, elders and novices, ethical systems, see the glaring light of day. The Buddhist doctrines so thoroughly thrashed out in Councils and so systematically written on palm leaves, the Christian doctrines developed by an Origen and others, attacked and defended at great synods, are logically

formulated. An absolutely empty horizon of Cosmos, *anattā*, condenses as the Buddhist Eightfold Path and the Christian Twelve Articles of Faith. The *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas and the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* of Karl Barth and the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa are prime examples of this activity. The ultimate truth of all theological thinking is the realisation of that horizon where *nevasaññā-n'-āsaññāyatana* is the only fitting response. Final agnosticism as the ultimate wisdom was the unsurpassed contribution of the Buddha, recovered by Nagarjuna (2nd century CE). Buddhaghosa realises that and makes no claims to supernatural infallibility, whether revealed or self-discovered. That is part of his greatness.

Also note the close relationship of matter and mind [*nāma-rūpa*]: initially formulated as anthropological aggregates, they are in deeper perspective recognised as basic components of all existents, by implication including all-embracing Cosmos, in its ultimate meta-theistic truth. Theology and cosmology meet and dissolve and Buddhism fully realises that. Let mystical silence be the ultimate respectful response to monotheistic and pantheistic and every other type of 'god'-conceptualisation and 'god'-talk. However, allow unsound to become sound among the followers of Gotama as well as of Jesus but with extreme care to protect the mystical depth. After the radically demythologising of the *jhāna*'s people will inevitably start talking again. Let them, with equanimous love, in a spirit of universalistic tolerance embrace all religions. May all reach the north-pole of their commonly shared instinctive longing: ecstatic silence.

Higher powers [*abhiññā*] and cessation [*nirodha*]

Finalising and closing the teaching on meditative concentration (*samādhi*), Buddhaghosa explains the 'higher powers' (*abhiññā*, XII–XIII) attained by the meditator far advanced on the mystical journey. In line with the teaching of the five aggregates, we find an intimate connection of matter and mind and of human and Cosmic being. We are now concerned with the first five of the list of six powers, presented hyperbolically by Buddhaghosa as miraculous, seemingly contra-natural achievements:

- magical powers (e.g. passing through mountains and walking on water)
- divine ear (hearing all sounds in all distances)
- telepathy (penetrating, knowing, the minds of other beings)
- divine eye ('seeing' beings vanishing and reappearing according to the cosmic law of karma)
- remembering former existences in the cosmic cycles subject to non-permanence and conditionality.

These achievements, illustrated with hyperbolic legends and myths, should not be understood as the ideal of achieving masterful human domination of nature (the fatal, nature-destroying utopia of modern consumerist culture), but as the ideal of complete integration of Cosmic and human reality. It represents the peak of perfect morality: of 'right' (in the highest degree) thought, speech, action and livelihood.

On the last pages of his book (XXIII.17–52) Buddhaghosa explains ‘cessation’ [*nirodha*]. Having passed through the *jhāna*’s and achieved both insight and calm to the highest degree, the mystic attains cessation, then reaches, at the highest level, *arahant*ship. In that state of *nirodha*, which could last a week, all mental, verbal and bodily functions cease, without the loss of faculties or life. Then he resumes his saintly existence. Note the unity of matter and mind. An *analogia entis* between a human saint and Cosmos can be postulated, and in his or her cessation the holy person attains the experience of the disappearing edge of matter-mind, of all being, of Cosmos: the ultimate horizon.

Conclusions

Moving on a cosmosophic, meta-pantheistic course, with Cosmos emerging on and ending on an absolute horizon of silence, this article awards high value to the interdependent interconnections of matter and mind, and of human and Cosmic being. Cosmos appears as a living whole, resounding in every human, every atom. This seems reconcilable with Buddhaghosa’s approach, but only in a very limited way. In addition to the hardly surmountable theoretical difficulty, certain related ethical issues remain, for example, a tendency in the *magnum opus* to depreciate matter, body, nature and women. The vision described in this article transcends that.

Applied to Christian theology, this line of thinking would not take the form of a cynical debunking and rejection of Christian tradition and thought. Nevertheless, a convincing explanation, understanding, interpreting in the direction explored here, aiming at bridging the abysses between (1) past Christian epochs and the present challenge surrounding it and (2) Christian and other theologies, may not be self-evident. And then there is not only the crossing of these two abysses, but the peaceful petering out of all theologies of both the mythological and rationalistic varieties in the process of a purification of the human mind en route to absolute mystical Unsound. There (but ‘there’ ‘is’ no place) occurs not the silence of an otherwise speaking, communicating anthropomorphic person with an uncanny resemblance to an idealised old-time Semitic patriarch, but the disappearance of all speech, of every ‘b(B)eing, hypothesised object of such speech. On this trek to silence, the author postulates, Buddhist thought such as articulated by a Buddhaghosa presents an inviting challenge to Christian God-thought. However, be aware of and appreciate the direction of thought of, for example, a Meister Eckhart (c 1260–c 1321), most profound mystic of Western Christianity, and diverse Western religious philosophers and cosmosophists such as Proclus (410–485 CE), Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677), F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854), J.C. Smuts (1870–1950) and Jochen Kirchoff (1945–). In the Buddhist context, there is, to mention at least one figure, Fa-tsang (7th century CE), playing with the interplay of concrete well-being and ultimate emptiness.

In traditional orthodox Christian theology, true religion is about conquering death, achieved in the resurrection of the crucified God-man, Jesus the Christ. In Buddhism, true religion is about conquering birth (i.e. rebirth). In the depth of

Cosmic existence, in the cosmosophical perspective leading this article, both birth and death, personal as well as collective, are normal events in which the dimensions of matter, life and mind are forever combining and recombining. The investigation above revealed certain almost hidden lines in Buddhism and Christianity emerging and interpreted as converging. A fascinating universalising possibility opens, one that would allow for a conciliatory meeting of these two, and other noble religious, mystical traditions.

The bloc of religious thought erected on the figure of Jesus must certainly count as one of the most profound achievements of the human spirit in history. But the signs of historical non-permanence, all-penetrating causality and underlying emptiness, of which Buddhaghosa was an eloquent exponent, are there to observe in Christianity’s own actual history over recent centuries. May the following of Jesus, man from Nazareth and also Cosmic human, continue to play a major role in the continuing journey of the human spirit through time and space, following the vision of truth, love and beauty. Thank you, Johan, for your major contribution.

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