

Meditating on *Dukkha*: The presentation of Suffering in the *Visuddhimagga*

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Abstract: According to the fifth century Theravāda Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa, in his compendium of Buddhist psychology and meditation instructions, the

Visuddhimagga, *dukkha*, or suffering, is one of the three fundamental characteristics of all existing things (along with *anicca* and *anattā*). However, Buddhaghosa's writing shows a dual motivation: one philosophical, one instrumental, and because of this his characterization of *dukkha* is often contradictory. In some ways *dukkha* is an inherent facet of objects-in-themselves, while in other ways it is the merely conditional consequence of craving and aversion. Other ambiguities exist in his presentation of *dukkha* as well, and occur in both the meditation instructions and more logical analyses in the *Visuddhimagga*, associated with the instrumental and philosophical modes of Buddhaghosa's project, respectively. A special advantage of this essay is its thorough analysis of Buddhaghosa's meditation instructions in their relation to *dukkha* as well as his more theoretical discussions of *dukkha*. Bringing the insights into the contradictory presentation of *dukkha* to Buddhist soteriology, we show that while according to Buddhaghosa's instrumental project the spiritual ideal, the *arahant*, has completely eliminated *dukkha* and its cause, his philosophical project cannot reach the same conclusion. In fact, the temporary occurrence of some aspects of *dukkha* can never be eliminated. Finally, an appendix argues that although a careful consideration of Buddhaghosa's thought rescues him from any accusation of holding an *explicitly* pessimistic view of reality, a more zoomed-out view of his thought and tradition in general does in fact support this judgment. Most importantly, the appendix argues that such an anti-worldly stance is not appropriate, or soteriologically beneficial, to modern, Western Buddhist practitioners, and that the elements of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition which support it should be abandoned.

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Introduction

The question of suffering is of primary importance to the Buddhist project. It was the motivation which led the Buddha away from his palace of pleasure, ease, and family.

The four noble truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) are arguably the most basic teaching of all of Buddhism, and the truth of suffering is the first of these. It points to the bedrock of the Buddha's insight into the nature of reality and the foundation for spiritual progress. Buddhist monastics and laity for thousands of years have sought by means of the eightfold path to an end to this suffering, the third noble truth. But what is this 'suffering,' or 'pain' (translations of *dukkha* in Pāli), the language of the first written canonical Buddhist texts)? Given that the end of suffering is the whole crux of Buddhism, its originating motivation, and its highest soteriological goal, should we not try to get a clear understanding of the nuances of this concept, *dukkha*? For practicing Buddhists, should one not try to get a strong sense of what *dukkha* is and is *not*, in order to learn what, according to the ancient texts, one can actually become free from, and what one *cannot* become free from, and have a more informed expectation about the results of Buddhist practice? Beginning students of Buddhism, both within academia and in more "religious" settings, are often confused by what the first noble truth might mean: whether it really says that "all is suffering," or "all things have suffering," or merely that "there is suffering." Yet too often students are never given a thorough and satisfactory explanation for what exactly Buddhists are talking about, or offered a comprehensive guide to the occasions or uses of the term *dukkha* either in the canonical material or in later scholarly compendiums, commentaries, and practice manuals. On this basis students of Buddhism are left all too often simply substituting the most colloquial and imprecise uses of the English word for the sometimes technical and nuanced term '*dukkha*.' We should not let this basic and fundamental lacuna go unaddressed.

However there are far too many Buddhisms, each exceptionally elaborate and intricate on its own, to cover the subject effectively over the whole history and geography, philosophical and physical, of the development of Buddhism. Thus, this essay will limit itself to an investigation of the meanings and presentation of *dukkha* in a single, highly influential text originating in 5th c. CE Sri Lanka. Its treatment is a very preliminary and highly restricted investigation into the range of the Buddhist uses of ‘*dukkha*,’ but our text has been very influential since its creation, so our efforts will certainly not be without meaningful application. Actually, our text, the *Visuddhimagga*, or *Path of Purification*, by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa is possibly the most significant compilation of and commentary on Theravāda Buddhist psychology and meditation theory and practice. Originally written in Pālī and offering a comprehensive collation and analysis of all aspects of the Buddhist path as contained in *suttas* and earlier commentaries, the *Visuddhimagga* continues to be studied by Asian and Western Theravāda Buddhist practitioners and scholars today. Beyond its historical and current importance for Theravāda Buddhist thought and practice, the balance of theoretical, philosophical examination and practical meditation instruction offer a rich source to explore the meaning of *dukkha*. As we will see, these two modes of presentation reveal tensions in Buddhaghosa’s understanding of *dukkha*. The practical and theoretical writings are two modes of looking at and doing something with *dukkha* which conflict with each other and which conflict internally as well.

We will unpack this much more thoroughly below, as it is one of the primary theses of this essay, but to continue our introduction a brief word about the structure of the *Visuddhimagga* would be helpful here. The *Visuddhimagga* is organized into three

sections concerning, respectively, virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and understanding (*pañña*) (Buddhaghosa, xiv-xv)¹. This tripartite division is represented also in the canonical literature; for example the eight-fold path to the cessation of suffering, which is the fourth noble truth, is divided into three components of virtue or ethical conduct (right speech, right action, and right livelihood), three components of the development of meditative concentration (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration), and two components of understanding (right thinking and right understanding) (XVI, 75-83).

While all three aspects of the Buddhist path are represented in the *Visuddhimagga*, the section on virtue is much shorter than either the sections on concentration and understanding, about a fifth the length of each of the other two. Since our attention is on *dukkha* in this essay, and *dukkha* goes virtually unmentioned in the description of virtue, we will be focusing almost exclusively on the sections on concentration and understanding. The concentration section is comprised of a detailed collation and analysis of the concentration meditation techniques contained in the Pāli *suttas* and in the commentarial literature written before the *Visuddhimagga*. In general, its presentation delves into the varieties, purposes, progression, obstacles, remedies, and benefits of each, laying out a comprehensive menu of options and suggestions for developing one's skills in concentration meditation to a very high degree. Similarly, the understanding section contains delineations of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation intended to support an investigation into experienced reality: its stages, obstacles, remedies, and benefits. Both the concentration and insight meditation descriptions are extremely

¹In-text citations follow this format: "(Book # in roman numerals, Paragraph)"; when citing the introduction by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli: "(Buddhaghosa, page)".

practical, with the concentration section including an extreme amount of detail in its instructions. In addition to this, the understanding section also includes long discussions of *Abhidhamma* material: analyses of the components of mental and physical experience, the five aggregates and their relationships, the elements, the noble truths, *kamma*, and dependent origination. So while the concentration and understanding sections of the *Visuddhimagga* both appear to have been possibly intended as manuals for meditation practice, the understanding section also contains a collation, clarification, and systematization of more philosophical content from the Theravāda canon.

Before we begin our exploration of *dukkha* in the *Visuddhimagga* in earnest, a few more brief preliminary remarks are in order. The first is that it should be stated explicitly and from the beginning that one potential weakness of this essay is that it is based solely on a translation. At this point in my linguistic training critically studying the *Visuddhimagga* in its original Pāl,i is not feasible. The translation² I've used is fairly recent (as far as translations of major Pāl,i texts goes), being first published in 1956, and is the best English translation, though it is still not the primary source. Moreover, I have no reading knowledge of German, French, or Sinhalese and so could not cross-reference my understanding of the English text with the translations of the *Visuddhimagga* in those other languages. These are important points to consider when considering the arguments in this essay, however It would seem quite odd to me if the ambiguities present in Buddhaghosa's development and use of the concept of *dukkha* become non-issues upon reading the text in Pāl,i or other translations. Therefore, although the real standard of this study would build itself upon research of multiple manuscripts, in multiple scripts, from

² Buddhaghosa, Bhadantācariya. *The Path of Purification*. trans. Bhikkhu Ñyāṇ)amoli. Berkeley: 1976, Shambhala.

multiple cultures and countries as well as make use of previous translations in multiple modern languages, this essay does not do that. Still, this presentation offers a valuable analysis of suffering as conceived by Buddhaghosa and developed in the *Path of Purification* and useful to professional scholars who have not themselves read the *Visuddhimagga* thoroughly, and to beginning and more advanced students of Buddhism, within and without the tradition, who wish to seriously grapple with the nuances and consequences of the first noble truth.

Another preliminary note to be made here concerns sets of paired terms which we will use throughout the essay. These terminological pairs map out the hermeneutical framework with which I organize Buddhaghosa's ideas, and by which I gain insight into what he means by *dukkha*. Although the real work that these terms do will become clear through the actual use of them below, it is necessary to lay out their definitions and a short discussion at the start. These terminological pairs are (1) "inherentist" and "contingent" views on the *fundamental* characteristics of *dukkha* and our relationship with it; (2) "philosophical" and "instrumental" motivations behind Buddhaghosa's writings in various parts of the text; (3) "phenomenal" and "objective" types of *dukkha*; (4) "technical" and "suggestive" language used to talk about *dukkha*; and (5) the "theoretical" and "practical" textual context which surround particular statements about *dukkha* in the *Visuddhimagga*.

The first pair, (1), involves the juxtaposition of the "inherentist" and "contingent" views on *dukkha*. A major contribution of this essay is the thesis that there are 'inherentist' and 'contingent' views of *dukkha* and that both these distinct understandings exist side by side in the *Visuddhimagga*. The inherentist view is that *dukkha* is innate and

intrinsic to all formed objects and events in the world-out-there. The contingent view accords more with the colloquial notion of *dukkha* in Buddhism: that it is merely accidental and has more to do with one's confused relationship with the world, and that it can be eliminated through behavioral and mental modifications. The second pair, (2) "philosophical" and "instrumental," refers to two basic motives of Buddhaghosa, two motives which affect his presentation and the whole thrust and goal of his writing. His "philosophical" goal is the attainment of clarity, cohesion, sophistication, and universal applicability and scope of the idea of *dukkha*. His "instrumental" motivation is less concerned with consistency and specificity than with inspiration and instruction in those specific techniques of meditation which, he says, lead to the ending of the causes of suffering. Buddhaghosa's goal when under the sway of this motivation is primarily to instruct Buddhist students in doing and thinking what is soteriologically helpful, even if it does not exactly lend support to the interpretations of *dukkha* supplied by Buddhaghosa when writing more philosophically.

The third pair of terms outlines two different types of *dukkha*, (3), and this juxtaposition, I think, is another major contribution of this essay. It argues that there is a "phenomenal" and an "objective" *dukkha*, that Buddhaghosa uses them in different ways, and that they refer to different things. Much of the confusion around what *dukkha* really is and what the first noble truth really means arises because of the simultaneous presence of these two forms of *dukkha* and a consequent ambiguity in their use in the *Visuddhimagga*. We will go into all of this in much more detail when we consider the theoretical depictions of *dukkha* below, but just to set the stage: the phenomenal type of *dukkha* is that which refers to the whole range of subjective experiences which "feel"

bad. It points back to the experience of the subject and is equivalent to the normal, colloquial way that we use the word “suffering” in English. The objective type of *dukkha*, on the other hand, refers to a characteristic of “objects-out-there,” and does not necessarily “feel” bad. All objects are also characterized by impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anattā*), two other fundamental Buddhist concepts that we will touch on later, though only to a limited extent.

The two types of language used to speak about *dukkha*, (4), are “technical” and “suggestive.” The technical language is precise and used by Buddhaghosa to elucidate the types of *dukkha* and their definitions. It is most associated with Buddhaghosa’s philosophical motivation. The suggestive language is primarily used with descriptions of concentration-meditation and insight-meditation, and is used to evoke in the reader, and especially the Buddhist meditator, his or her own memory and familiarity with particular states of suffering. The apparent intention is to cause him or her to reflect on these familiarities, to use them for gaining insight into the nature of things, and to bolster his or her motivation to practice. The fifth pair of terms, (5), refers two different textual themes which surround discussions of *dukkha* in the *Visuddhimagga*: “theoretical” and “practical.” The theoretical sections are primarily those using rigorous, technical language, backed by a strong interest in the philosophical development of the concept of *dukkha*. The practical sections are dominated by instruction in the concentration and insight meditation techniques.

It’s clear that many of these pairs are very closely related to each other. For example Buddhaghosa’s dual motivation leads him to use the two different types of language to describe *dukkha*, and the two primary textual themes. Also, while the

coexistence of these pairs within the *Visuddhimagga* creates much of the tension which is so fruitful and interesting and relevant to our study, none of these pairs should be thought of as in absolute opposition to each other. They all exist as ideal and useful poles on the ends of spectrums, which Buddhaghosa seemed to have no trouble navigating between.

We'll begin by briefly outlining some of the methods by which Buddhaghosa suggests the Buddhist meditator investigate the nature of his or her experience, specifically his instructions for practicing the Contemplation of Impermanence, the Contemplation of Pain (an alternate translation of 'dukkha'), and the Contemplation of Not-self, and highlight what Buddhaghosa claims one will find upon undertaking such practice. We will then devote most of the rest of the essay to fleshing out exactly what Buddhaghosa does and does not mean when he uses the term *dukkha*. Finally we'll examine the goal of Buddhist practice, arahantship, as contained in the *Visuddhimagga*. One's initial hypothesis may be that for the arahant, one who has achieved a way of living which is free from the causes of suffering, *dukkha* is no longer a fundamental characteristic of things. However, the *Visuddhimagga* gives us a broader picture of "suffering", and we can demonstrate the ways in which *dukkha* remains a fundamental characteristic of formed *dhammas* even for arahants.

I'd now like to preface our entrance into the main body of our discussion with an overview about its structure and what we can expect as we go forward. The first part of the paper deals with *dukkha* in the theoretical contexts. These are defined as only those sections of the text on 'understanding' (*pañña*) which do not explicitly outline meditation instructions. In general this content is philosophical. This does not mean, as we will see, that Buddhaghosa's instrumental motivation is entirely absent in these sections, but it

plays a much weaker role. It is true, though, that in both the generally theoretical contexts and the generally practical contexts both the philosophical and instrumental motivations are present, both technical and suggestive language is used, and both the inherentist and contingent views are represented. Regardless, the first broad movement of this essay covers the theoretical presentations of *dukkha*, including the multiple types of *dukkha* he delineates, a discussion of their definitions, and examples of how he uses them and which specific manifestations of suffering conform to each. We'll then try to flesh out exactly what Buddhaghosa does and does not mean when he uses the term *dukkha*. The next broad movement focuses on *dukkha* in the practical sections, those devoted to giving concentration and insight meditation instructions. Here we will outline some of the meditative techniques by which Buddhaghosa suggests the Buddhist meditator investigate the nature of his or her experience, and highlight what Buddhaghosa claims one will find upon undertaking such practice. After that, as an application of the questions posed in this essay, we'll then examine the goal of Buddhist practice, *arahantship*, and show that it also becomes problematized as the notion of *dukkha* itself becomes problematized. A teaser: One's initial hypothesis may be that for the *arahant*, one who has achieved a way of living which is supposedly free from the causes of suffering, *dukkha* is no longer a fundamental characteristic of things. However, since the *Visuddhimagga* gives us a broader picture of "suffering," we can demonstrate the ways in which *dukkha* remains present and fundamental, even in the arahant's existence.

Finally, in the conclusion we'll gesture towards further important research questions. We begin now by giving an overview of the three types of *dukkha* that

Buddhaghosa defines very technically, which will be helpful for understanding the rest of the first movement of the essay, and then move on to an explication of *dukkha* as it arises in specific forms.

Dukkha: The first Noble Truth

Buddhaghosa’s technical type of analysis uses more precise, and also more universal language to describe the nature of *dukkha*, and the most condensed presentation of the technical discussion of *dukkha* in the *Visuddhimagga* occurs in the explication of the four noble truths. As noted above, one of the most basic and fundamental doctrines of Buddhism is the doctrine of the four noble truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*). In total these are the truths of *dukkha*, its causes, the cessation of suffering, i.e. *nibbāna*, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering, i.e. the eightfold path. It is in the largely theoretical segment of the *Visuddhimagga* that Buddhaghosa discusses the noble truths, and here first truth is defined in technical language. Here is a technical-style example which defines it in terms of what is not *dukkha*: “All states excepting craving and states free from cankers are included in the truth of suffering.” Craving is excluded because it is the *origin* of suffering, and the only states free from cankers occur post-attainment of the final stage of awakening, called *arahantship* (XXII, 70). Here we already learn that Buddhaghosa wants to conclude that the *arahant* is free from *dukkha*. This will become very important later in the essay. Though this section is primarily technical we do also get some suggestive descriptions of *dukkha*. Here is an example: “The truth of suffering has the characteristic of afflicting. Its function is to burn” (XVI, 23). And, “the truth of suffering should be regarded as a burden” (XVI, 87). The image and impression of

“burning” and “burden” reminds us of the experience of suffering or being in pain, rather than presenting a formal and tight definition. The suggestive descriptions refer to phenomenal states. Only *subjects* suffer from the feeling of being burnt or carrying a heavy burden. But, again, the bulk of the description of *dukkha* is in technical language, including a long and detailed sub-section which lists the most important types of suffering which arise in one’s lifetime and why they deserve to be included under “suffering.” These are the primary example cited for examples of suffering in life, and which inspire the formulation of the first noble truth to begin with. We’ll refer to these after we’ve investigated the three definitions of the types of *dukkha*.

The most important thrust of the technical aspects of this section is Buddhaghosa’s delineation of three major types of *dukkha*. These are “intrinsic suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*), suffering in change (*viparin*)*āma-dukkha*), and suffering due to formations (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*)” (XVI, 34). Again these present not a subjective, phenomenal view of suffering “from the inside,” but rather characterizations of suffering which make it, by definition, an aspect of the *objects* in the world (whether gross exterior objects, like a tree, or subtle interior objects like a neutral feeling [*vedanā*]).

Those objects which have suffering as their “individual essence,” such as “bodily and mental painful feeling (*vedanā*),” are called intrinsic suffering (XVI 35). They *feel* bad. In fact, objects falling under intrinsic suffering are the only objects which feel bad. The *Paramatthamañjūsā*, the commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*, which is also considered authoritative by the Theravāda tradition (Buddhaghosa, xxx) says ““Since also what does not have suffering as its individual essence is yet called suffering indirectly, consequently “intrinsic suffering” (*dukkha-dukkha*) is said particularizing what does have

suffering as its individual essence’ ... (Pm. 528)” (XVI n. 9). The way we normally use the word ‘suffering’ then actually only applies to intrinsic suffering; Buddhaghosa’s use of the word *dukkha* includes much more than this, as we’ll see below.

“[Bodily and mental] pleasant feeling[s] (*vedanā*) are called suffering in change because they are a cause for the arising of pain when they change (XVI, 35).”

Buddhaghosa is not here denying the pleasantness of eating an ice cream cone or walking in the sunshine, his point is that these pleasant events and the pleasant feelings that they give rise to will undoubtedly end and turn into something else, and this falling away of pleasant feeling will bring suffering in and of itself.

“Equanimous feeling (*vedanā*) and the remaining formations of the three planes are called suffering due to formations because they are oppressed by rise and fall” (XVI, 35). This is the subtlest of the three types of suffering. “The remaining formations of the three planes” simply means all other experienceable objects and events (excluding the unformed *dharmas*). Clearly this type of suffering also does not feel bad.

Buddhaghosa’s explanation of this type of suffering is not very thorough or clear. In some ways this type of suffering seems similar to the suffering of change, but on a much smaller scale. Rather than becoming suffering at some point in the future, it is an object’s very momentariness, fleetingness, and ephemerality which makes it *dukkha*.

According to Buddhist thought all definable objects have three marks or characteristics (*tilakkhanā*): impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and not self (*anattā*). These characteristics are seen as fundamental to the very nature of the objects themselves. This phrase, ‘definable objects’ is my attempt to simply elucidate a technical phrase, “*sañhata dhamma*,” which need not be explicated fully for our purposes. Other

terms I'll use are formations, formed objects, and formed *dhammas*. Put roughly this refers to any conventionally definable object which comes into existence in a particular time and place due to certain conditions, and dissolves from existence or changes into some other conventionally definable object later also due to certain other conditions. Formed *dhammas* constitute virtually everything we know and interact with all the time, including all interior and exterior objects (except time, space, and *nibbāna*, the “unformed *dhammas*”), and are subject to the three characteristics. Though Buddhaghosa talks about the *dukkha* characteristic phenomenally as well, it is really most suited for the “objective” types of *dukkha*, *viparin)āma-dukkha* and *saṅkhāra-dukkha*. These types of *dukkha* describe aspects of objects-in-themselves, while *dukkha-dukkha* is subjective, describing that which *feels* bad to persons. So we have all of reality divided into these three categories of suffering. The subjective feeling of unpleasantness itself, and all those mental and physical states which are characterized by it, are *dukkha-dukkha*. But all other formed objects, *even if they do not feel bad*, are also suffering, because of suffering in change or suffering or suffering due to formations. Because of this Buddhaghosa can support the Buddhist idea that *dukkha* is an inherent characteristic of the whole world. Notice now, that there are these two ways of describing *dukkha*: one as the phenomenal state of unpleasant physical and mental events, and the other as a characteristic of objects which is independent of persons. This is an important point for trying to decide whether suffering “goes away” for the *arahant*.

There is another way to understand these three types of *dukkha* that I find helpful, and if not exactly intentional on the part of Buddhaghosa, then at least a significant coincidence. We can relate to these three types of *dukkha* in terms of the three

characteristics of existence themselves. The first type of *dukkha*, *dukkha-dukkha*, is the type that corresponds to *dukkha* itself in the delineation of the three characteristics. It is the pain which is painful. Despite the rather cloudy faux-profundity quality of this last statement, the point is actually really simple: the first type of *dukkha* is intuitive and obvious, and all things have it because all things also have the first mark of existence: pain. The second correspondence is also obvious. There is suffering in change and all formed objects are characterized by this type of suffering because all formed objects are impermanent. The third correspondence is the least obvious, and requires the most speculation or philosophizing on my part, but is also the most fruitful and can give us a potentially clearer picture on the meaning of “suffering due to formations.”

The third correspondence between types of suffering and the three characteristics is between suffering due to formations and not-self. Above I said that suffering due to formations is similar to the suffering of change but on the scale of infinitesimally small moments. However, another way to understand this type of suffering is that it is suffering simply based on the ever, mutually *conditioned* nature of all formed objects. Every object is both caused by something and causes something else in turn. Moreover, every object is only defined and understood in comparison and contrast to many, many other objects in the world, as well as the vast meshwork of conceptions about name, definition, composition, function, history etc. developed and shared by all those who interact with and communicate about that object now *and* all who have done so in the past. The formed object itself is embedded and “spread out” everywhere and every-when and cannot be pinpointed. Even further, this vast meshwork of interacting meanings and relationships is itself never static. Rather, it is always fluid and changing and shifting:

each and every object in the meshwork, which all continuously serve as anchors-in-meaning for all other objects, are themselves shifting in meaning depending on use and misuse, understanding, misunderstanding, and re-understanding or re-definition. This is also a good way to understand no-selves.

Selves are mutually conditioned objects just like all other objects in the meshwork of fluid relationships and meanings. There are no permanent selves in time, but there are also no definable, stable, locatable selves in definition or meaning. Thus, suffering due to formations is the suffering of mutual-conditioning, of mutual interdependence, not in terms of causation in time, but because meaning and definition itself is relational. So we have three types of suffering and three characteristic marks of all existing objects. An argument of correspondence can be made between the three elements in each set, such that each type of suffering is distinctive because the characteristic mark it corresponds to is distinctive. The *distinctive* suffering of *saṅkhāra-dukkha* lies in its arising from the a-temporal conditioned nature of the self.

Whether this theory holds water according to Buddhaghosa's thought is hard to say. On the one hand, although it helps to grasp the concepts of the three types of suffering and how they might be distinctive from each other, it still does not do the work of identifying *why* exactly change and formations deserve to simply be identified with suffering. Also, the correspondence theory is definitely a legitimate framework for defining and learning the patterns in the philosophical portions of Buddhaghosa's thought, but only insofar as we only mean his thought as contained in the *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaghosa's writings, however, are far more extensive than just this one text. To do justice to Buddhaghosa's conception of *saṅkhāra-dukkha* would require

a thorough study of all of his writings, something which is too large an investigation for this paper. However, if we find it useful to allow this correspondence theory to do some work for us, it brings to light some of the complexities of Buddhaghosa's use of the term "*dukkha*."

While the three type of suffering describe characteristics of objects, we can also inquire into their effects on subjects. The phenomenal, immediately painful, result of coming into contact with an object characterized by *dukkha-dukkha* is obvious, it is not so obvious for suffering in change or for suffering due to formations. Suffering in change presents itself as fairly straight-forward: when things which bring us pleasure leave us, we become unhappy. But this statement is actually deceptive. Though it attempts to locate suffering as a characteristic of an object, it cannot do so without also referring to a subjective state of mind. The issue becomes clearer when we discuss the suffering due to formations. It is not at all obvious why the mutually-conditioned nature of formed objects should count as a form of suffering, as we normally understand that word. Buddhaghosa is using language here which blurs the boundaries between a phenomenal sense of *dukkha* as a mental state or experience of physical or mental pain, and an objective sense of *dukkha* as a description of the characteristics of the objects themselves. Though *dukkha-dukkha* is essentially phenomenal, all three are objective statements about objects-out-there. To say that *dukkha* is one of the three marks of existence is also to make a statement about the nature of objects-out-there. We'll see later some of the consequences of this blurring on the overall picture of *dukkha* in the *Visuddhimagga*. Again simply note this subtle, but important, distinction: sometimes Buddhaghosa describes *dukkha* as a phenomenal state or experience and sometimes as the objective

nature of external objects. (Whether Buddhaghosa did this purposefully or not is impossible to tell, but it would make a great history story to know that he might have consciously left his philosophical definitions of *dukkha* a little ambiguous in order to account for why *dukkha* deserved to be discussed as an inherent characteristic of all objects in the world, rather than *merely* an unfortunate result of mistaken views, which it is anyway.) Though the correspondence theory helps bring this to light, this conclusion could have been reached without it, and will be discussed without relation to it from here on. Thus, the preliminary nature of the correspondence theory does not detract from the important note that Buddhaghosa uses language which blurs the distinction between the objective and phenomenal aspects of *dukkha*.

Now that we've covered the three technical types of *dukkha* let's see how it is applied to specific cases in the presentation of the truth of *dukkha*. As we'll see presently each of these subsections also includes a short verse exemplifying either the pain of the example itself or pain which it leads to. These verses use suggestive language. In these delineations of *dukkha*, then, Buddhaghosa, first stays true to his philosophical concern of defining types of suffering by using technical language, but then "brings the examples home" so to speak for the Buddhist reading the material with suggestive language meant to inspire detachment and the desire to practice the Eight-fold Path. When Buddhaghosa calls something the "basis for suffering," he must mean that it will lead in some causal fashion to the arising of *dukkha-dukkha* (intrinsic suffering) some time in the future. We've already seen that all formations are already characterized by *saṅkhāra-dukkha* (suffering due to formations) and *viparin)āma-dukkha* (suffering in change), so to refer to the property of something having one of these characteristics with the phrase "basis for

suffering” would be redundant and confusing. Likewise for using “basis for suffering” to refer to the characteristic of giving rise to something else in the future with one of these characteristics. Thus we must conclude that “basis for suffering” means “leading to *dukkha-dukkha* but itself not being characterized by *dukkha-dukkha*.” “Basis for suffering” is thus another characteristic which warrants something being called “*dukkha*” for Buddhaghosa. Of course, such does not really add any new objects which were not *dukkha* previously to the category, because all formations are characterized by *viparin)āma-dukkha* and *sañkhāra-dukkha* anyway. Let’s now look in detail at the twelve states associated with the truth of suffering.

The first is birth. “But why is it suffering? [According to Buddhaghosa] because it is the basis for many kind[s] of suffering” (XVI 34). The commentary to the *Visuddhimagga* says, except in cases of being born in an unfortunate realms, or “states of loss,” (the *apāyas*), “birth is not called suffering because of having suffering as its individual essence – for there is no rebirth-linking associated with painful feeling – but rather because it is the foundation for suffering (Pm. 528)” (823, n. 8). This is technical language, birth is merely a basis for suffering, it does not feel unpleasant in itself but causes unpleasant feeling in the future. This is the objective kind of suffering. However, Buddhaghosa also uses some pretty nasty suggestive language to describe the pain to the child during the birth process as well, which can only refer to the subjective type of suffering (XVI, 37-41 or the appendix to this essay).

The second item in the list is ageing. This is considered suffering because of “suffering due to formations and because it is a basis for suffering.” The suffering for which it is a basis includes “leadenness in all the limbs, decline and warping of the

faculties, vanishing of youth, undermining of strength, loss of memory and intelligence, [and] contempt on the part of others” (XVI 44). While suggestive language is used to describe some possibly painful events which occur due to ageing, ageing itself is only liable to the objective types of suffering (due to formations and because of change). To the extent that here and in the rest of the list Buddhaghosa uses technical language to justify the suffering nature of the elements of the list we can surmise that his motivation was philosophical. On the other hand, to the extent that the *dukkha* being described is *not* phenomenal, yet suggestive language, and often scary suggestive language, is being used, as with death, we can surmise that Buddhaghosa’s motivation was instrumental and that this section was, in part, meant to inspire meditators to practice. Given the fact that one way of seeing the cessation of *dukkha* is as the end of participating in the cyclical process of being born, growing and becoming, suffering, dying, and being reborn as someone else to begin the process over again, discussion about the suffering of birth and of ageing, and as we’ll see next, death, are especially understandable and could have been intended to be a motivating force to free oneself from the cycle by attaining awakening.

The third component of the list is death. Buddhaghosa says that the individual death of persons is only the basis of suffering, some of which is described explicitly in a poetic verse:

Without distinction as they die
 Pain grips their minds impartially
 When wicked men their foul deeds see
 Or sign of new rebirth, may be,

Also when good men cannot bear
 To part from all that they hold dear.
 Then bodily pain severs sinews,
 Joints and so on, and continues
 Torture unbearable, which racks
 All those whose vitals death attacks
 With grip that shall no more relax.
 Death is the basis of such pain,
 And this suffices to explain
 Why death the name of pain should gain. (XVI, 47)

This verse is actually very helpful. It clearly discriminates the suggestive language of the subjective *dukkha* that arises on the basis of death, the “bodily pain severs sinews” for example, from death itself. It also explicitly justifies the characterization of death *as dukkha*. Buddhaghosa’s *dukkha* includes things in life which are merely the basis of pain, even if they are not at all painful themselves. Whether we agree with this identification is not the point, we’re simply trying to understand accurately the range of things that Buddhaghosa refers to as *dukkha*.

Fourth is sorrow, defined as “a burning in the mind in one affected by loss of relatives, and so on... its function is completely to consume the mind. It is suffering because it is intrinsic suffering and because it is a basis for suffering” (XVI, 48). Here is the first explicit example from Buddhaghosa of intrinsic suffering, *dukkha-dukkha*, in this case it is a mental pain: sorrow does not feel good. The fifth is lamentation, the “verbal

clamour on the part of one affected by loss of relatives and so on.” Lamentation is behavioral, it is simply “crying out.” It is suffering because it is *saṅkhāra-dukkha* and because it is a basis for suffering. The verse here sticks exactly to the technical definition of lamentation and, though it uses suggestive language, it does so only to describe the suffering for which lamentation is the basis:

Now when a man is struck by sorrow’s dart and he laments
 The pain he is already undergoing he augments
 With pain born of dry throat and lips and palate, hard to bear.
 And so lamenting too is pain, the Buddha did declare. (XVI 49)

The sixth and seventh states associated with the noble truth of suffering, pain and grief, parallel each other and are two of the most general included in the last. Both are *dukkha-dukkha* on their own and the basis of suffering for the other one. “Pain is bodily pain. Its characteristic is the oppression of the body... Grief is mental pain. Its characteristic is mental oppression” (XVI, 50-51). While some of the other elements in the list of refer to only particular events and states, “pain” and “grief” refer to any type of physical and mental pain. Really, pain and grief could contain all the rest which are *dukkha-dukkha*, but not those which are solely *viparin)āma-dukkha* or *saṅkhāra-dukkha*. In his description of pain and grief, Buddhaghosa uses both technical language and suggestive language to describe phenomenal *dukkha*, so it is not always the case that those things which are intrinsic suffering must be described using suggestive language, and those that are objective suffering of either type must be described with technical

language. Technical language can be used in both cases, but if suggestive language is used to describe what is explicitly stated as *not* intrinsic suffering, *dukkha-dukkha*, then either we have to accept that there is a conflict and a contradiction or assume that the suggestive language is being used *solely* instrumentally, and that it has no bearing on the nature of the suffering being discussed but is only being used to aid the Buddhist reader soteriologically.

The eighth state is despair. It is suffering because it is *saṅkhāra-dukkha* as well as *dukkha-dukkha* of both the mental and physical types. There is a simile which is quite wonderful,

Sorrow is like the cooking [of oil] in a pot over a slow fire.

Lamentation is like its boiling over from the pot when cooking over a quick fire. Despair is like what remains in the pot after it has boiled over and is unable to do so any more, going on cooking in the pot till it dries up. (XVI, 53)

The ninth and tenth also parallel each other and are both suffering only because they are a basis for suffering. These are association with the unloved, that is “meeting with disagreeable beings and formations (inanimate things)” and separation from the loved, parting “from agreeable beings and formations (inanimate things)” (XVI 54, 55). These are also extremely general categories; the unloved and loved could anything which, it seems, is external to oneself. Buddhaghosa uses both technical language and suggestive language to describe these merely objective types of *dukkha*. Then, there is a

way in which the eleventh state is the opposite of and even more general than the preceding two. While association with the unloved and separation from the loved are types of examples of getting something that one does not want, the eleventh state is called “not to get what one wants: [it is] the want itself of some unobtainable object... It is manifested as disappointment. It is suffering because it is a basis for suffering” (XVI, 56).

The twelfth and final state of used to illustrate the noble truth of suffering is really the most general and the most technical. “In short the five aggregates [as objects] of clinging,” are *dukkha*. Buddhaghosa elaborates:

It is impossible to tell it [all] without remainder, showing each kind of suffering, even [by going on doing so] for many aeons, so the Blessed One said ‘In short the five aggregates as objects of clinging are suffering’ in order to show in short how all that suffering is present in any of the five aggregates [as objects] of clinging in the same way that the taste of the water in the whole ocean is to be found in a single drop of its water. (XVI, 60)

The five aggregates (*khandha*), materiality (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhāra*; used much more restrictively than in the sense of “formed objects”), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*), are the five components making up all of experiential reality. They form the foundation of *all* types and examples of suffering, including all those listed above. If the aggregates are clung to they become “aggregates

as objects of clinging” (*upādāna-kkhandha*). Buddhaghosa gives many kinds of craving and ways of classifying its types. Many of these begin with six types of craving: that for “visible-data...., sound, etc. (Vbh. 136).” And here, by a simpler way of classifying its objects: “craving for sense desires, craving for becoming, or craving for non-becoming.” (XVII 233-238), but we do not need to give them in much detail since they all have the same basic nature. Using clinging for sense desires as our example, Buddhaghosa says,

What is sense-desire clinging? [It is] lust for sense desires, greed for sense desires, delight in sense desires, craving for sense desires, fever of sense desires, infatuation with sense desires, committal to sense desires... [and while] craving is the aspiring to an object that one has not yet reached... clinging is the grasping of an object that one has reached. These states oppose fewness of wishes and contentment and so they are the roots of... suffering. (XVII, 242)

Since clinging to the aggregates gives rise to all the types of sufferings listed in the list above, which together represent all three types of *dukkha*, when the aggregates are clung to they possess the characteristic of *dukkha-dukkha*, and, since they are formed *dhammas* always changing and subject to rise and fall, whether clung to or not *always* have the characteristics of *viparin)āma-dukkha* and *saṅkhāra-dukkha*. At the conclusion of the essay, we’ll look again at craving and craving and its role in the production of suffering and argue that even when craving is eliminated some forms of *dukkha* remain.

As we've seen, the second and third of the three types of *dukkha* in the technical definitions include objects which would likely not be included in the first type. Basically, *dukkha-dukkha* is defined in phenomenal terms, it is "intrinsic suffering" because it is phenomenally painful. This difference is pretty fundamental to a full understanding of *dukkha* and its function in the *Visuddhimagga*. Earlier, when defining the three types of *dukkha*, we mentioned the technical term *vedanā*, "feeling." *Vedanā* is the second of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness. "It has as its characteristic what is felt, what is experienced as the "taste (stimulus)" of the object' (Pm. 462)" (XIV, n. 34), and "What is said to have the characteristic of being felt is feeling itself" (XIV, 125). We turn now to a fuller examination of *vedanā* in order to draw out the subtleties and consequences of the objective/phenomological divide in the *dukkha*.

There are many ways to classify the types of *vedanā*. Two of these, "according to kind" and "according to individual essence," are relevant to our study. These two ways of drawing dividing lines between types of feelings are also, like *dukkha*, objective and phenomenal, respectively. Classed according to kind, feelings are of three types, unprofitable, profitable, and indeterminate. Profitable states are those which lead ultimately to the decreasing of craving (*tan)hā*) and *dukkha*, while unprofitable states lead to their increase. For indeterminate states it is not possible to determine whether they lead to a decrease or increase of *tan)hā* and *dukkha*. Classed according to individual essence, which is by far the most common way of speaking about feelings in the *Visuddhimagga*, they can counted as five: pleasant, bodily and mentally, unpleasant, bodily and mentally, and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant, though these are reduced to

three fundamental types: pleasant, unpleasant, and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant. The facts that the objective description of feelings does not appear as often in the *Visuddhimagga*, and that the definitions of the feeling aggregate, unlike with *dukkha*, are *always* essentially phenomenal in nature, are evidence that Buddhaghosa primarily thought of and used the concept of *vedanā* in its phenomenal aspect. For example, the key aspect of the definition above, “taste,” is pointing straight to the phenomenal aspect of *vedanā*. References to the “flavor” of experience makes use of deeply suggestive language to evoke our recognition of a very basic component of our reactions and relationships to all events and objects, not the aspect of our relationships to them which are more complex, emotional, or intellectual, but those which give us the simple impression of our experience as either pleasant, painful, or neutral. Because of this we should also primarily work with *vedanā* as phenomenal entities, specifically when we are examining its relationship to *dukkha*. (XIV 125-128, 197-209, n. 54, 56)

So how does *vedanā* relate to *dukkha*? We saw above that

bodily and mental painful feeling [*vedanā*], are called intrinsic suffering ... [bodily and mental] pleasant feeling[s] (*vedanā*) are called suffering in change because they are a cause for the arising of pain when they change... [and] equanimous feeling (*vedanā*) and the remaining formations of the three planes are called suffering due to formations because they are oppressed by rise and fall.

(XVI, 35) [* “formations” here is being used as “formed objects,”

is does not refer to category of “formations” in the system of the five aggregates, which is distinct from the “feelings” category.]

While suffering in change and suffering due to formations do not “have suffering as [their] individual essence... [and thus are] called suffering indirectly,” *dukkha-dukkha* “does have suffering as its individual essence,” thus it is called “intrinsic suffering” (XVI, n. 9). *Viparin)āma-dukkha* is directly defined in terms of the changing nature of objects, and indirectly in terms of the suffering that can occur when something that we like changes (much like “separation from the loved” above), and *sañkhāra-dukkha* is hardly justified as a member of the triad of suffering at all. It’s important that we’re clear of the difficulty of coming to a precise understanding of *sañkhāra-dukkha*, at least if we are simply looking at the contents of the *Visuddhimagga*. But luckily, the most important aspects of *dukkha*, and those relevant to our study are made explicit: *sañkhāra-dukkha* is not phenomenal, it does not feel bad, it is most associated with neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant (or “equanimous”) *vedanā*, and describes an objective characteristic of objects-in-themselves.

So, as we’ve seen, those things which are felt as uncomfortable, unpleasant, painful, etc. are *dukkha-dukkha* and are unpleasant *vedanā*. Unpleasant *vedanā* and *dukkha-dukkha* are equivalent terms; what we learn about unpleasant *vedanā* will apply equally to *dukkha-dukkha*. We’ll return to this point at the end of the essay when we apply our insights to the question of whether and to what extent there is suffering for the *arahant*.

For now we've completed our analysis of technical presentation of the concept of *dukkha*, throughout the most theoretical contexts of the *Visuddhimagga*. Buddhaghosa's philosophical motivations in these types of writings come to the fore in the elaborate, cohesive conceptual framework of the range of fairly exacting definitions of *dukkha* and their exemplification in specific sorts of human experiences. We've seen in the theoretical presentations above that the language used by Buddhaghosa is primarily technical, and non-phenomenal, though that in these contexts suggestive, phenomenal language occurs as a support to it. This had been supportive of Buddhaghosa's philosophical intentions in these passages. We've also seen that the technical language is founded on a way of discussing *dukkha* which attributes it to objects-in-themselves. Although *dukkha-dukkha* is directly tied to *subjective*, unpleasant feeling, the other two types of suffering are not, but are better understand as *objective* elements of *dukkha*. This directly supports the contingent view of *dukkha*. That formations change, and that they are continuously oppressed by rise and fall, does not appear to depend on the presence of the subject. They are inherent to the objects which possess them. As we turn our attention now to the presentation of *dukkha* in Buddhaghosa's concentration and insight meditation instructions, we'll see now that the same is not true when *dukkha* is being discussed and utilized in more practical contexts.

Dukkha and Meditation

Meditation practices are divided in the *Visuddhimagga* between those intended for the development of concentration (*samādhi*), and those developed for the purpose of insight (*vipassanā*). The *Visuddhimagga* contains explicit instructions and delineations

of the results, varieties, stages, obstacles, and remedies for those obstacles, for both concentration meditation techniques as well as insight meditation techniques.

Concentration is the ability to focus the attention single pointedly on single object. In all of the stages of concentration, or *jhāna*, the meditator's mind is one-pointed. It is not distracted from his or her object of meditation, whatever it may be. As the meditator advances through the stages of concentration, the mental events of which he or she is conscious become subtler and subtler. In the first *jhāna*, the meditator's attention is firmly and undistractedly focused on a singly object, though he still has access to the use of discursive thought. In the second *jhāna* the discursive thinking falls away, and the meditator is left with an even more concentrated mind, suffused mental and physical joy. The stages of concentration meditation continue to become subtler and subtler. The fourth *jhāna* is characterized merely by equanimity and one-pointedness, all more coarse experiences of physical or mental joy, or even ease and happiness, have faded away. Beyond these four *jhānas*, called "fine material" because they involve focusing on a subtle mental image as the anchor for one's attention, are the four "immaterial states" (*arūppa-niddesa*) which do not involve focusing on a mental image and which continue in stages to become even subtler. These states begin with the base of boundless space in which the meditator's mind is absorbed into the experience of space itself in all directions, and continue up to the base of neither perception nor non-perception, a very subtle mental state, in which it is not appropriate to say that the meditator is aware of anything specifically, nor that he or she is completely unaware of anything at all. We will see in our analysis of the concentration meditation techniques that in this context *dukkha* is discussed virtually only in its phenomenal sense. Pain (as well as pleasure

[*sukha*]) is said no longer to be present in the stages of concentration from the fourth *jhāna* onward, rather these are characterized only by neutral feelings. Physical and mental distress or discomfort are considered obstacles to reaching the higher stages of concentration and their alleviation is a necessary side-assignment. Again, these references to pain (*dukkha*) must only refer to its phenomenal aspect, since *all* of the *jhānas* and immaterial states, being “formations” in the broad sense, must also be characterized by the objective aspects of *dukkha* as well.

The concentration techniques in the *Visuddhimagga*, though bringing many benefits of their own, are not presented as the goal of Buddhist practice. According to the whole Buddhist tradition, to ignore insight and develop concentration for its own sake would be to make a major mistake. Developing concentration can, however, provide a meditator with a very stable and acutely observant attention, one that provides a very good platform for insight practice. Insight practice is meant to lead directly to understanding (*paññā*) and the cessation of *dukkha* and its origin. The important understanding which gives rise to this cessation is the perception of the characteristics of impermanence, painfulness, and not-self in all observed psycho-physical phenomena. There are an extremely large variety of practices and protocols outlined in the *Visuddhimagga* for coming to this perception of things. As we will see below, some of these protocols range from highly analytical reflections which incorporate the use of memory, prediction, imagination, etc. while others advise a simple observation of the constituent phenomena which make up our present moment experiences. Buddhaghosa categorizes the constituents of experience in terms of the five aggregates, eighteen bases, and so on. To have studied this conceptual framework, reflected analytically up it, and

come to agree that it is in fact inclusive of all definable aspects of experience, before taking up the practicing of simply observing movement of the psycho-physical constituents themselves would be helpful in that there would already be some clarity and definitional borders (even if there are other ways to chop up phenomena), making the observation of phenomena easier.

According to Buddhaghosa, the non-analytical, meditative practice of observing psycho-physical phenomena progresses in distinct stages, called the eight knowledges (*ñāṇa*). These stages include: knowledge of arising and passing away, knowledge of dissolution, knowledge of appearance as terror, knowledge of danger, knowledge of dispassion, knowledge of desire for deliverance, knowledge of reflexion, and knowledge of equanimity about formations. At each stage the meditator comes to understand and face the consequences of living in a world that is seen to be deeply momentary, transient, which cannot offer lasting satisfaction based on any object, view, or attainment, and which is devoid of any lasting, self-defining core in any of its constituents. The psychological reaction to this can be tremendous (cf. knowledge of appearance as terror in which all objects that one becomes aware of are terrifying). At the point that the meditator reaches equanimity, he or she has become fully accustomed to these facts about reality. (From the point of view of the meditator, that is how these insights appear, as facts *about* reality. This whole paper is about exploring ambiguities in this way of looking at things, but as we are currently taking the meditator's perspective that is the language we will continue to use for now.) He or she is no longer bothered by the lack of permanence, ultimate satisfaction, self-defining core or ultimate control in and over the constituents of experience, and remains simply at rest, watching the flow of psycho-

physical phenomena without reactive retraction from or anxious reaching out for certain experiences. Beyond this the meditator reaches conformity knowledge (this and the following are not counted among the eight by Buddhaghosa), then change-of-lineage knowledge. He or she gains a first glimpse of *nibbāna* and earns the title of “noble person” (*ariya puggala*). Beyond this the meditator can re-cycle through the stages of insight in order to rise through the four ranks of the enlightened person, eventually arriving at the status of *arahant*, a “worthy one,” who is free from craving and (*allegedly*) all *dukkha* itself. (Although a very interesting question worthy of much further study, the issue of whether the phenomenal presentation of *nibbāna* in the *Visuddhimagga* is consistent, or whether it is also ambiguous and indeterminate, or whether we can actually make any justified phenomenal claims about *nibbāna* and its aftermath at all from the evidence in the *Visuddhimagga*, is not directly relevant to our study here. Rather we are focused on the first noble truth, *dukkha*, rather than the third noble truth, its cessation and the cessation of its origin. It is possible to make the claim that it is hard to distinguish the moment of *nibbāna*, itself, as anything different from unconsciousness, but that is a topic for another time.)

Our job here is to outline the presentation and use of the concept of *dukkha* according to Buddhaghosa’s various meditation instructions. This presentation will be different depending on the meditation technique being discussed. In the context of most of the concentration meditation exercises, *dukkha* is an obstacle to concentration or a potential element of experience which becomes eliminated at certain high stages of concentration. In his presentation of some of the concentration practices which include the use of visual perception and/or visualization, the purposeful perception of *dukkha* (we will see of

which types) is encouraged in order to spur the meditator on to practice more vigorously. And, in the context of insight meditation, *dukkha* is merely an inherent characteristic of all observable phenomena, simply waiting to be discovered amongst the constituents of interior experience and external objects. While these there ways of envisioning and experiencing *dukkha* are not inconsistent with each other, they do reflect Buddhaghosa's instrumental motivation in his explication of the meditation techniques. It is not important for him that *dukkha* here be given an obvious synthesis of all its functions and modes of appearing, but rather that it serve its soteriological purpose for the Buddhist meditator perceiving it in a particular meditation practice. This is both a descriptive and prescriptive task.

Buddhaghosa does not give much attention to exacting definitions of *dukkha*, which he does during technical philosophical analysis. Rather, his presentations of *dukkha* are mainly instrumental in that they are primarily intended to affect a specific change in the meditator's attitude or practice which is soteriologically beneficial, but which may not necessarily support the particular philosophical conclusions about *dukkha* which Buddhaghosa recommends. While for the most part the meditation instructions focus mainly on *dukkha-dukkha*, we will see that to some extent *viparināma-dukkha* is also represented, *saṅkhāra-dukkha* even less so.

Concentration:

There are forty meditation subjects outlined by Buddhaghosa as suitable subjects of meditation for the development of concentration. We will not go to far into any of them in this essay, because the practical details of working with the meditation subjects is

not directly relevant to the subject we are considering here: the relationship between *dukkha* and the development of concentration. However, just to set the context, it is helpful to say a brief word. The first of the forty meditation which Buddhaghosa outlines are the *kasin%as* (lit. “universal”), of which there are ten. The development of the *kasin%as* begins with the construction of physical objects or sensory appearances which are used to focus on a particular element of the universe. These ten (in the *Visuddhimagga*, whose list slightly different than the account in the Buddhist canon) are earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, light, and limited space. By setting up an image of one of these elements (for the earth *kasin%a*, a clay disk) and focusing on it, one trains ones attention. Eventually a mental image which conforms to the actual object appears; at this point the physical image is left aside and the meditator focuses on the mental image. Finally, an even more refined, more subtle mental “sign” (*nimitta*) emerges from the initial mental image. It is at this point that the meditator has attained the first major stage of concentration, the first *jhāna*, and can focus on the much more subtle sign to attain the higher stages of concentration as well. Other than the *kasin%as*, Buddhaghosa recommends ten foulness meditations on the human carcass in various states, ten “recollections” of exemplary figures, components, and ideals of the Buddhist doctrine and worldview, as well as of death, the body, the breath, and peace, or *nibbāna*. Further there are four *brahma-vihāras*, or “divine abidings,” meant to develop qualities of the heart and qualities of relationship with oneself and other sentient beings, the four immaterial states beyond the four *jhānas*, the perception of repulsiveness in nutriment (food and drink), and finally the fortieth is the definition, delineation, and perception of

the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) as they exist in our qualitative and sensory experience.

While the details of practice and of development are different for each set of meditations and for each meditation in particular many major threads are applicable to all the subjects of concentration meditation. As such, Buddhaghosa devotes by far the most space to the development of the earth *kasiṇā*, using it as emblematic for the development of all of the concentration meditation subjects.

In general, we can see from the description of the development of the earth *kasiṇā*, which applies also to the development of the nine other *kasiṇās* as well, and also in principle to the other thirty subjects used for concentration meditation, that the obstacles to the development and maintenance of one's concentration can all be considered particular examples of *events or circumstances which cause agitation*. The instructions provided by Buddhaghosa stick close to this principle: that the location and character of the setting, the personality and behavior of the companions, the meditator's own behavior and habits, the quality of the teacher, the general patterns of activity in the surrounding land-area and towns, and the general physical environment, type of wildlife, and weather should all contribute especially to calmness, and also to an persistent alertness. Those circumstances which cause agitation especially, or in which the appropriate support for practice cannot be readily obtained, should be avoided as they are unsuitable circumstances for concentration practice. We can see this principle borne out in many of the examples offered by Buddhaghosa, both in preparation for a period of intensive meditation practice as well as during it. External conditions which contribute to too much agitation or activity and which should be avoided before entering meditation

retreat have to do with broadly with the location for meditation, one's relationships, and with one's possessions and access to necessary supplies. Buddhaghosa lists "ten impediments," which may be obstacles to some meditators' meditation practice (III, 32).

For example, since physical pain (which is a type of *dukkha-dukkha*; it *feels* immediately painful) is agitating and makes a person uncomfortable, it is an obstacle to meditation practice. The conditions that tend to give rise to pain should therefore be avoided if possible and when pain arises nonetheless it is to be counteracted. This, along with the chance of prolonged physical weakness and death, is why sickness ought to be cured with medicine before intensive concentration meditation practice begins and while it is being undertaken (III, 50, IV 19). The same is true also if the meditator's teachers, close monastic companions, and immediate family are sick. If so, it is the meditator's responsibility to address these illnesses with medicine until either his "kin" are cured or they have died (III, 47-49). Socially, such duties serve to maintain the health and well-being of larger groups and institutions through the mutual support which they guarantee. Practically, accomplishing these duties allows the meditator to rest his mind more easily, not having to worry about the health of his close friends and family whom he cares for and who have cared for him. The worry which would come about if he were to enter meditation retreat while his companions, teachers, or relatives were in physical danger would only undermine his concentration practice anyway.

There are other examples of external conditions which may become an obstacle to meditation practice as well. While these examples might not necessarily count as experiences of *dukkha*, they support the thesis that all causes of mental agitation or activity, including *dukkha*, are obstacles to the practice of meditation, and should be

avoided if the meditation practice is to progress. A meditator's family is considered an obstacle if these relationships take up a major portion of his attention or affect him strongly, such that "he is pleased when they are pleased" (III, 35). If the meditator's attention and energy is given too much to the happenings of other people, then he (or she, but in this text always he) will not be able to focus interiorly to the extent required to do the subtle and persistent work of developing concentration. Likewise, in relation to the attempt to settle one's mind in meditation responsibilities to one's own monastic students or to the building of a new monastery building are both burdensome distractions.

Buddhaghosa advises the meditator to relinquish these responsibilities before undertaking a meditation retreat (III, 44-45). The first of these ten impediments is the "dwelling" in which the meditator will practice his meditation (III, 30). Buddhaghosa goes into much greater detail on what constitutes an inappropriate building and location than he does for the other impediments in a section on the eighteen faults of a monastery. Here again the principle remains that those conditions which lead to agitation and activity are portrayed simply as obstacles to meditation practice. Large monasteries, new monasteries, dilapidated monasteries, and famous monasteries all usually have much activity going on in and around them. Monasteries which are near a road, a city, or a port of entry, are surrounded by and involved with great amounts of traffic and trade. Monasteries near a pool of drinking water, plants with edible leaves, flowers, or fruits, trees good for timber, or arable fields often attract people to gather and utilize these resources and because property disputes and angry relations with neighbors can result when the monastery owns these lands. It is especially dangerous to live near edible leaves, flowers, and fruits, says Buddhaghosa, because the people who come to collect these are *women*, who, like sirens,

may sing while they work and seduce him and distract him away from his meditation subject (IV, 2-18). In other ways too a monastery can be a suitable location for meditation practice, but the specific conditions cited above should suffice to show the pattern: a monk or nun should have a place where they can relax in peace and general solitude and devote themselves without distraction to the meditation practice. Those locations which are not suitable due to their activity and tendency to distract the meditator and contribute to mental agitation do not support this endeavor.

Overall, the greater point here, in relation to our larger questions about the presentation of *dukkha* in the *Visuddhimagga* is that in these sections on the development of concentration, the concept and nature of *dukkha* is not being unpacked with strict, philosophical analysis. It is merely one of many types of events which contribute to agitation and slow or halt the meditator's progress. Buddhaghosa is not concerned with whether *dukkha* is objective and inherent to external and internal events and objects or whether it is only a subjective result of the state of one's mind. Buddhaghosa's task here is purely instrumental, purely soteriological. *Dukkha* does not need to be strictly defined or its types delineated (in fact, we have to do that for him when we point out that he must only be referring to *dukkha-dukkha*, rather than to the other two types). Instead *dukkha* is just an obstacle, and the meditator is advised to think about, relate to, and interact with it in *whatever* way is most conducive to decreasing agitation and supporting the concentration meditation practice.

This principle that agitation should be avoided through setting up the appropriate internal and external conditions supportive for meditation practice is grounded in Buddhaghosa's own list of the five "hindrances" (*nīvaranā*). These are lust, ill will,

stiffness and torpor, agitation and worry, and uncertainty. These hindrances are such obstacles to the meditation practice that as long as they are present it is not possible to attain even the first *jhāna*. The obstacles listed above all contribute to one or more of these hindrances (the responsibility for students: agitation; the sickness of loved ones: worry; the beautiful singing of women for a celibate renunciate: lust, and so on). We can see however, that *dukkha* itself is not on the list. Why is this? Although *dukkha-dukkha* of all kinds, physical and mental, which, remember, is what Buddhaghosa is probably discussing when he mentions “pain” (*dukkha*) in relation to concentration meditation and the *jhānas* certainly contributes to the hindrances it itself does not prevent the attainment of the first *jhāna*. Rather, Buddhaghosa says that physical pain cannot exist in the first *jhāna*, while the possibility of mental pain, or here “grief,” (*domanassa*) ceases in the second *jhāna*.

To briefly summarize the above, we’ve made a few points about Buddhaghosa’s presentation of *dukkha* in his instructions on practicing concentration meditation. *Dukkha* is not defined strictly as it is in the philosophical sections of the *Visuddhimagga*, in fact it is not even really defined at all. Rather it is spoken about pretty loosely, simply as pain of any sort, anything which *feels* immediately painful or discomforting. We walk away with *dukkha* as one example of one type of set of obstacles to the development of concentration. The cause of this *dukkha* only matters, if at all, to the extent that this helps us counteract it and avoid it in the future. *Dukkha* is not important as a concept in itself, and not worth bothering about to much technically; it’s just an impediment. It is not even really an essential or fundamentally obstructive impediment. Meditators can gain the first *jhāna* without overcoming the possibility of mental pain (though *physical* pain

cannot arise at this point). However once the second *jhāna* is obtained then that which feels immediately painful of any sort, physical or mental, is effectively suppressed during the attainment of the *jhāna*; the same is true in the stages of concentration past the second *jhāna* including the formless attainments.

Such is the predominant role of *dukkha* in the section on concentration meditation. However, in order to be thorough, we should also account for the somewhat different role that *dukkha* plays in the development of the four *brahma-vihāras*, the four divine abidings: lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), gladness (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Although each of these types of meditation brings about its own unique results and benefits, each are classed as concentration techniques and can also be used to attain the first few stages of *jhāna*. Thus, they are like all the other concentration techniques in that the five hindrances are obstacles to their development and must be overcome before the first *jhāna* is attained, including agitation and worry arising due to *dukkha*, and that pain itself becomes thoroughly suppressed at the achievement of the third *jhāna*.

However, *dukkha* also plays a more important and more specific role in the cultivation of lovingkindness, and compassion especially. Lovingkindness is a relationship one takes towards other beings when one wishes them to be happy and free from suffering; lovingkindness “is characterized here as promoting the aspect of welfare. Its function is to prefer welfare... Its proximate cause is seeing loveliness in beings. It succeeds when it makes ill will subside, and it fails when it produces (selfish) affection” (IX, 93). By developing this lovingkindness towards oneself, a benefactor, a dear friend, a neutral person, enemies, and all beings everywhere, and by “breaking down the

barriers” (IX, 40-43) the meditator himself or herself becomes “free from enmity through the abandonment of ill will and hostility,” which are the opposites of lovingkindness, and “free from affliction through the abandonment of grief,” or mental *dukkha*, which is an impediment (IX, 48). The desire and inclination to replace the mental and physical pain, *dukkha-dukkha*, of all beings with welfare is itself the development of lovingkindness.

Dukkha plays an even more central role in the development of compassion than in the development of lovingkindness. Compassion is “characterized as promoting the aspect of allaying suffering. Its function resides in not bearing others’ suffering. It is manifested as non-cruelty. Its proximate cause is to see helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering. It succeeds when it makes cruelty subside and it fails when it produces sorrow” (IX, 94). While lovingkindness is focused on the increase of well-being, compassion is directly focused on the decrease of suffering. As in the rest of Buddhaghosa’s presentation of *dukkha* in the context of the concentration meditation practices, it is not obvious what this “*dukkha*” refers to specifically. Compassion is depicted as an utterly natural response to *dukkha* in sentient beings and the language used to point it out is strongly phenomenal, evocative, and anecdotal: “Just as he [the meditator] would feel compassion on seeing an unlucky, unfortunate person, so her pervades all beings with compassion... on seeing a wretched man, unlucky, unfortunate, in every way a fit object for compassion, unsightly, reduced to utter misery, with hands and feet cut off, sitting in the shelter for the helpless with a pot placed before him, with a mass of maggots oozing from his arms and legs, and moaning, compassion should be felt for him in this way: ‘This being has indeed been reduced to misery; if only he could be freed from this suffering!’” (IX, 78).

Besides compassion, there is one other situation in the development of concentration which also uses *dukkha* constructively. Buddhaghosa speaks about it in his presentation of the earth *kasin%a*, but it applies equally to all of the meditation subjects. He says: “How does he [the meditator] encourage the mind on an occasion when it should be encouraged? When his mind is listless owing to sluggishness... then he should stimulate it by reviewing the eight grounds for a sense of urgency,” four of which are “the suffering of the states of loss,... the suffering in the past rooted in the round [of rebirths], the suffering in the future rooted in the round [of rebirths], and the suffering in the present rooted in the search for nutriment [i.e. food]” (IV, 63). Briefly, for it need not really concern us, the states of loss are various actually existing options or realms of rebirth which beings suffer greatly and have little or no opportunity to follow Buddhist teachings, the suffering of the past, future, and present, is simply the continued suffering which arises upon living in any realm of rebirth. The depiction of *dukkha* here is completely instrumental, Buddhaghosa is not making a statement about the *nature* of *dukkha*, but using the meditators personal knowledge of it, and the fear of the great suffering of the states of loss received by him from his Buddhist education to reinvigorate the mind when it has become bored, exhausted, or unmotivated. Basically Buddhaghosa is pointing to the helpful use of fear to arouse urgency and re-inspire diligent practice.

Throughout the section on the development of concentration, *dukkha* is discussed first and foremost of the phenomenal type, that is, *dukkha-dukkha*, which is consistent with the rest of the presentation of *dukkha* relative to the concentration meditation techniques. But here *dukkha* serves not as an *obstacle* to the development of concentration, but as the *inspiration* for it. The perception of suffering is purposefully

cultivated including the suffering in *oneself* as well as in others. The human, social benefits of this practice is that it decreases the desire to hurt others and makes one more apt to behave in ways that help oneself and others as well. It is not however, that one intends to cultivate the experience of suffering, but merely to perceive and focus on it wherever it *already* exists. What was said about the relationship between *jhāna* and *dukkha* in general still holds: physical pain is an obstacle to the achievement of the first *jhāna* and is overcome upon attaining to it. Mental pain (grief) is an obstacle to the second *jhāna* and is overcome upon attaining to it. Buddhaghosa says that because compassion meditation is not divorced from joy (mental pleasure; because its motivation and nature is joyful in that its aim is freedom from suffering) the highest *jhāna* that can be attained through compassion meditation is only the third *jhāna* (joy must be overcome in order to attain to the fourth). Since one can attain the third *jhāna* with compassion meditation it is possible, according to Buddhaghosa, to overcome the possibility of personally experiencing physical or mental pain, while still holding as one's object of meditation freedom from suffering for others.

As we've seen, the relationship between *dukkha* and the development of concentration is not defined primarily in specific ways for each technique. Rather, *dukkha* has a broad, and fairly stable, though not well defined character, at least in comparison to the technical precision of the theoretical sections of the *Visuddhimagga*, throughout the much more practical section on concentration. This entire section displays the instrumental, rather than philosophical, concern of Buddhaghosa quite clearly. Each detail is eminently practical (even to the point of being banal). The language used to describe *dukkha* is thus not technical at all, but rather suggestive; it

helps the meditator find something in his or her own experience which is either to be avoided, counteracted, or, more rarely, used constructively for the benefit of his or her concentration meditation practice. Since this presentation of *dukkha* is not philosophical, we cannot use it to shed light on the previously outlined debate between the inherentist and contingent positions. Even if we wanted to we could not use it for this purpose because there is nothing here which addresses that topic, except perhaps in the most indirect and insubstantial way. The *dukkha* that is presented is virtually always phenomenal, the *dukkha-dukkha* type. But even this is not stated explicitly, a fact which serves to reinforce our argument that Buddhaghosa's intention here really is other than his intention in the philosophical passages which define *dukkha* in the minutest detail. We know that the *dukkha* of the development of concentration is phenomenal because Buddhaghosa's examples always point to things which immediately *feel* negative. It's really quite obvious that Buddhaghosa is using language to remind the meditator of what pain is like and to evoke some natural response to pain in him or her. The section on concentration meditation, and even more fundamentally the section on insight meditation, as we will see presently, is a soteriological text. While it certainly does not intend to mislead, its primary purpose is to give the meditator whatever practical information and tools are useful for the eventual clear-seeing and unraveling of *dukkha-dukkha*, and its causes.

Insight:

While the development of concentration is given much attention in the *Visuddhimagga*, it is the development of understanding (*paññā*) which is the most

important element of Buddhist practice. It is understanding which deals with the nature of suffering and its causes and which frees one from them (XIV, 3). Understanding, however, comprises a much larger category of analyses and practices than I wish to cover here. It includes highly technical, extremely detailed, philosophical delineations of all elements of material objects, the constituents of physical and mental experience and their reactions, the chain of causation and how it gives rise to each of these constituents as well as suffering from birth to death and from lifetime to lifetime, as well as all of the stages of insight and particular realizations which are held to befall meditators pursuing this particular framework and course of behavior, study, and practice. The more philosophical portions of the understanding section of the *Visuddhimagga* were our major source for the theoretical accounts of *dukkha*. As we saw there, Buddhaghosa's philosophical motivation led him to give a very technical, coherent view of the types of *dukkha*, which promoted the conclusion that *dukkha* is in fact an *inherent* characteristic of all objects and events in themselves. As such, the meditator's development in concentration or insight must be seen as irrelevant to the existence of *dukkha*, for if *dukkha* really is a *fundamental* characteristic of objects necessarily following from their impermanence, then the perceptual shifts induced by meditation practice, no matter how dramatic, could not possibly alter it.

Since this section deals with *dukkha* in relation to meditation instructions and descriptions of meditative insight, I will only focus on the more particularly practical or meditative elements of the understanding section. Here Buddhaghosa's instrumental motivation is primary, his outline of the meditation instructions is intended to directly support Buddhist monastic's effort, through meditation, to get free of suffering. Or, at

the very least it serves this function rhetorically (which simply means that we can talk about Buddhaghosa painting a pretty picture of monks and nuns meditating diligently and using the *Visuddhimagga* in part to help guide them through some of the experiences they have as a result, and still discuss our questions about *dukkha*, without getting into the empirical, historical question of whether meditation was actually a widespread practice in Sri Lanka and Indian Theravāda Buddhism in the fifth century C.E. and whether it played a prominent role in doctrine formation and Buddhaghosa's descriptions of the stages of insight). This practical motivation and style clearly affects his characterization of *dukkha*. The emphasis here is squarely on the experiences of persons, rather than the nature of objects. Virtually *all* of the discussion of *dukkha* here, it can be demonstrated, must refer to the phenomenal type of *dukkha* (if we wish to reconcile this presentation with the philosophical one at all), which was only one of three types outlined in the theoretical sections. This instrumental presentation of *dukkha* firmly supports the contingent view, in which suffering is held merely to be an accidental, not-necessary, component of the human condition, which can thus be eliminated. If so, then it necessarily *cannot* be a fixed feature of the very nature of objects-in-themselves.

Buddhaghosa considers the theoretical analyses of *dukkha* mentioned above to be previous and preliminary to the more fully flowered stages and nuances of insight which are much more readily associated with meditation practice proper rather than intellectual reflection or study. I consider the difference to be what one is primarily doing with the mind. Those instances in which the analytical, cognitive faculty is heavily engaged, for example when memory, comparison, and questioning are involved, to be "intellectual," whereas those processes leading to insight which are characterized primarily by a simpler

observational style of investigation to be roughly “meditative,” though these two modes of understanding exist more as two poles on a spectrum rather than absolutely opposed techniques. Both are thought to contribute to the Buddhist soteriological goal, but it is only the latter which Buddhaghosa refers to as “insight” (*vipassanā*). In order to narrow the body of information on insight practices and their relationship to *dukkha*, which is quite large and complex on its own, I will not be giving a comprehensive overview of their entire range and instructions, but merely cite a few examples which pertain most directly to the display of *dukkha* in the context of insight practice and draw my general arguments from these. This is the same method as was used earlier in the coverage of the concentration techniques.

We will begin with an insight method called “comprehension by groups.” To give a taste of the detail of the delineation of this as well as the other meditation practices, we will list all of the groups on which the meditator is meant to focus one by one. It is not exactly helpful, but we cannot convey the full sense of this practice and Buddhaghosa’s style without doing so. These groups are:

1. The states that occur in the doors [of consciousness] together with the doors [the senses] and the objects [of each sense].
2. The five aggregates.
3. The six doors [the five plus the sense by which we perceive mental events].
4. The six objects [the five normal objects of sense perception plus mental events].
5. The six kinds of consciousness [for each type of sense perception].
6. The six kinds of contact [between the sense doors and their objects].
7. The six

kinds of feeling [pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, associated with each of these contacts]. 8. The six kinds of perception. 9. The six kinds of volition. 10. The six kinds of craving [for each sense object]. 11. The six kinds of applied thought [about each sense object]. 12. The six kinds of sustained thought. 13. The six elements. 14. The ten kasinas. 15. The thirty-two bodily aspects. 16. The twelve bases [another way of dividing human psychological processes]. 17. The eighteen elements [which divide objective features of the world]. 18. The twenty-two faculties. 19. The three elements. 20. The nine kinds of becoming. 21. The four jhanas. 22. The four measureless states. 23. The four [immaterial] attainments. 24. The twelve members of the dependent origination. (XX, 9)

Each of these groups, and each of their sub-components, become the object of meditation, and are to be “directly known” (XX, 10) in this way:

Any materiality whatever, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near – he defines all materiality [etc., including the entire above list] as impermanent... painful... [and] not self: this is [each] one kind of comprehension. (XX, 6, 13)

And, now focusing just on their painfulness (a translation of *dukkha*), why are they painful: “And all that [materiality, etc.] is ‘painful in the sense of terror’. In the sense of terror because of its terrifyingness; for what is impermanent brings terror... So this is also painful in the sense of terror” (XX, 16). Then, Buddhaghosa lists forty aspects of this *dukkha* which are meant to help the meditator come to greater certainty about his perception of *dukkha* in everything he can observe (actually only nearly everything, the unformed *dhammas*: time, space, nibbāna, are not included here). We will mention only a few in order to just give the flavor. Similar long lists are given on the meanings of impermanence and not-self, but we will not address those here. The meditator is instructed to reflect on *dukkha* thus: “By means of what forty aspects does he [the meditator] enter into the certainty of rightness?” (Ps.ii,238). [Seeing] the five aggregates... as ‘painful’... and also as a “boil,” “dart,” “calamity,” “affliction,” “plague,” “disaster,” “menace,” and “subject to sorrow, to lamentation and to despair,” among others, each of these similes being elaborated with further explanation and imagery (XX, 18, 19). And so “when a man comprehends the [materiality, etc. in this way] his comprehending as impermanent, painful and not-self, which is called ‘inductive insight’, is strengthened” (XX, 20).

These are the instructions for the practice of comprehension by groups. (We can see now why Buddhaghosa held the highly intellectual analyses of formations to be a necessary prerequisite to carrying out this type of meditation practice, for if the meditator had not previously identified, defined, and come to a thorough understanding of each of the above categories of perceptual faculties, types of consciousness, psychological and external physical constituents, and meditative states he could not possibly then go on to

identify these in practice and note their characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and not-self.) As we can see, they essentially involve investigating each of the components of experience and coming to the “full-understanding” that suffering (and impermanence and not-self) as “terror” is implicit within them. We might question whether the “terror” here is merely rhetorical, or whether it is actually a state of deep fear as we normally conceive it. I would argue that it is probably both. During a later stage of insight, called “Knowledge of Appearance as Terror,” it is suggested that the meditator becomes deeply afraid of all events of which the meditator becomes conscious (XXI, 29-31, 33, 36). Since the above examination and set of instructions for comprehension of groups does not refer only to that particular stage of practice, then the use of “terror” must in some ways be rhetorical. However, we can also see that many of the descriptions of the suffering perceived in the comprehension by groups, and there are more, have the character of being highly evocative, emotional depictions of bad-feeling phenomenal states themselves, or of objects which we immediately associate with painful states. This is our first example that here in the presentation on insight, as in the presentation on concentration, “suffering” is used in the phenomenal sense, referring to the type of *dukkha* that in the theoretical account is the only one that feels bad, *dukkha-dukkha*.

Although the phenomenal meaning is primarily intended in the insight sections of the *Visuddhimagga*. However, while it is primary, it is not the *only* way that *dukkha* is presented. When giving a more elaborate commentary on each of the forty epithets, some of which are listed above, Buddhaghosa at one point uses technical terminology which he used in the theoretical discussions of *dukkha*. This technical language only occurs in his elaboration on the term ‘painful,’ as in “[Seeing] the five aggregates... as ‘painful,’” (XX,

18). He says: “He [the meditator] comprehends each aggregate [components of mental and physical experience]... as painful because of oppression by rise and fall and because of being the basis for pain” (XX, 19 italics original). The language of “oppression by rise and fall” is exactly how Buddhaghosa described suffering due to formations. This is important because it reminds us that we should not make any hard and fast distinctions between the motivation, word use, and meaning between the theoretical accounts and the practical accounts of *dukkha*, rather only generalizations can be made. And while this is *the* commentary on the use of ‘painful,’ a translation of ‘*dukkha*’, in the comprehension by groups, there are also many other of the forty epithets which stick much closer to the phenomenal account.

Another pair of insight meditation practices focus first on material and then immaterial formations. The method here is essentially the same as above, but the isolated subset of reality on which the meditator focuses is different. As Buddhaghosa says: “Another [meditator] comprehends formations by attributing the three characteristics [impermanence, *dukkha*, and not-self] to them through the medium of the material septad and the immaterial septad” (XX, 45). As above, these instructions, though situated within Buddhaghosa’s instrumental project, also use theoretical language to define *dukkha*:

Since arisen formations have arrived at presence, and when present are afflicted by ageing, and on arriving at ageing are bound to dissolve, they are therefore painful because of continual oppression, because of being hard to bear, because of being the

basis of suffering, and because of precluding pleasure. (XX, 47
 italics original)

Likewise, from paragraphs 47-75 Buddhaghosa encourages the contemplation of all materiality as painful *because* they are impermanent. This focus on “continual oppression,” etc. are all familiar from the theoretical reports on *dukkha*, especially the “continual oppression” which is so similar to “oppression by rise and fall” of suffering due to formations (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*). Likewise the definition of *dukkha* as arising directly and necessarily from impermanence is also a feature of Buddhaghosa’s theoretical description of suffering. However, even here Buddhaghosa is being somewhat soft with words. Pleasure here probably refers to pleasant experiences, *sukha-vedanā*. If so, then *dukkha* does not preclude pleasure at all, certainly not universally or permanently.

Moving on from the “comprehension knowledges,” we will now place our attention on some of the stages of insight themselves. Buddhaghosa says: the meditator “passes on from comprehension knowledge and begins the task of attaining that of contemplation of rise and fall,” (XX, 93) the first of the eight “knowledges” or stages of meditation proper. Here it is most obvious that the technique involved is meditative, i.e. observational, as Buddhaghosa instructs (quoting from the Pat)isambhidāmagga, a canonical text): “contemplation of rise and fall... is expressed thus: ‘Understanding of contemplating present states’ change is knowledge of contemplation of rise and fall’ (Ps.i, 1)... [likewise] of ‘present feeling... perception... formations... consciousness... eye...(etc.)...’ (Ps.i,54). In accordance with the method of this text he [the meditator] sees

the characteristic of generation, the birth, the arising, the aspect of renewal, of born materiality, as ‘rise’, and he sees its characteristic of change, its destruction, its dissolution, as ‘fall’” (XX, 93-95). Observing the present activity of all mental and material events, the meditator is said to discern their characteristic movement, first coming into existence, existing momentarily, and dissolving into non-existence again.

The description of how the meditator at this stage of insight practice perceives *dukkha* again emphasizes the present-centered observational technique of the meditation practice and presents *dukkha* as something immediately knowable. Buddhaghosa says:

The truth of suffering becomes evident to him through seeing rise according to instant owing to his discovery of the suffering due to birth...The truth of suffering becomes evident to him too through seeing fall according to instant owing to his discovery of suffering due to death (XX 100).

It is not clear in this passage whether *dukkha* is being discussed with suggestive language or technical, whether its characterization is closer to the looser, more intuitive, and decidedly subjective characterization of the instrumental writings or to the more analytical, technical, and precise definitions of the philosophical sections. While the fact that the *dukkha* is supposed to be immediately apparent to the meditator suggests a phenomenal quality (after all, everyone can recognize *dukkha-dukkha* right away), the fact that this suffering is so intimately connected to rise and fall or birth and death

themselves suggests a closeness with suffering in change or suffering due to formations, despite that these are not clearly characterized by bad feeling.

However, the following passage on the same stage of insight, knowledge of rise and fall, gives a much more direct, suggestive description of *dukkha*:

The characteristic of pain does not become apparent because, when continuous oppression is not given attention, it is concealed by the postures [that is, as we shift from one posture to another we avoid feeling the discomfort inherent in each, we cover it over, see n. 3]... when the postures are exposed by attention to continuous oppression, the characteristic of pain becomes apparent in its true nature (XXI, 3-4). The concealment of the pain [in shifting from posture to posture] is exposed (XXI, n. 3). The five aggregates are painful because... of continuous oppression. The mode of being continuously oppressed is the characteristic of pain (XXI, 7).

The *dukkha* described here is simply physical pain, physical pain which everyone has felt when they've been forced to sit or stand in one position without moving for too long; long-airplane-flight-pain. Because of these two passages it seems legitimate to say that knowledge of rise and fall contains both philosophical and instrumental uses of the concept of *dukkha*.

Another set of insights which arises during the progression of meditation practice is called the Eighteen Principle Insights. Though these are not stages of meditation as are

the eight knowledges beginning with knowledge of rise and fall, they are said to be particular transformations of perception which arise naturally in the course of meditation practice. Such transformation occurs partially during the meditation on the material and immaterial and is completed during the later stages proper (XX, 89, XXII, 112). Of these eighteen insights the three most important for our purposes are:

(1) the abandoning of the perception of permanence, through the means of the contemplation of impermanence; (2) of the perception of pleasure, through the means of the contemplation of pain; (3) of the perception of self, through the means of the contemplation of not-self. (XXII, 113)

We mention them here because the commentary on these insights makes a vital and explicit distinction between “seeing as” and “seeing that.” Above, in some of our descriptions of the way that the meditator perceives formations “as” a terror, or “as suffering,” it might be wondered whether Buddhaghosa is saying anything about the things being perceived at all, or whether they are simply appearing in a particular mode, i.e. as terror, which has no bearing on their actual natures. However, the *Paramatthamañjūsā*, the commentary on the *Visuddhimagga*, written by the Indian monk Dhammapāla, which is also considered authoritative by the Theravāda tradition (Buddhaghosa, xxx) makes the important clarification that such a seeing or contemplation “as impermanent” is the same as “the contemplation of what is impermanent... It is the name for the kind of insight that occurs in apprehending the impermanence in dhammas”

(I, n. 38 italics mine). Finding it important to make the exact distinction that we are discussing explicit, the Paramatthamañjūsā makes clear that for the whole Theravāda tradition after him, what Buddhaghosa means is that impermanence is an inherent aspect of formations, which requires a simple ‘seeing that’ it is so, and not an imputative ‘seeing as.’

It is fairly intuitive to come to this conclusion on impermanence, but what about *dukkha*? The Paramatthamañjūsā goes on to say succinctly “the same method applies below [to suffering and not self],” (I, n. 38). The perception of “objects that are painful” as “pleasant” is a “perversion of perception” and is to be abandoned by the meditator travelling along the path of insight (XXII 53). Why is this important: because it gives us the strongest example of the inherentist position on *dukkha* being advocated in the section on insight meditation technique and results. To see that something is *dukkha* in the way that it is impermanent is to not just make a claim about what the meditator experiences subjectively, but also about the object he or she perceives. It explains that the reason the meditator experiences *dukkha* is that all formations really *are dukkha*. Thus, to perceive pleasantness in any formation is a perversion of perception. Here, as in the philosophical sections, *dukkha* is inherent to formations.

Finally, we need to look at the successive stages of awakening themselves, from the first instance of attaining *nibbāna* to the total and final eradication of all of the causes and supports of *dukkha*. It is this component of the presentation of the techniques and progression of insight which displays its final results and intentions and which thus truly defines its fundamental character and relationship with *dukkha*. The last of the eight knowledges, “knowledge of equanimity about formations,” is closely followed by the

process called “insight leading to emergence” and the first attainment of *nibbāna*. This culmination of the meditative path can be set in motion while contemplating formations as impermanent, painful, or not-self, though all three of them must have been seen in formations at some point in the progress through the stages (XXI 83-84, 88, 129). There are four stages of enlightenment, each causing the abandoning or weakening some wrong-ideas and some supports of *dukkha*. One set of these things which are abandoned are the fetters (*samōyojana*): “the ten states beginning with greed for the fine material [i.e. greed for the fine material, greed for the immaterial, conceit (pride), agitation, ignorance, false view of individuality, uncertainty, adherence to rites and rituals, greed for sense desires, and resentment], so called because they fetter... beings to suffering” (XXII 48). These states of mind exist consequent on craving and ignorance, the causes of suffering, lead to suffering, and imply the holding of incorrect beliefs about the world (wrong views, *micchā-dit*)*hi*). They are naturally destroyed in accordance with one’s attainment of the stages of *nibbāna* “in such a way that they never occur again” (XXII, 122).

Buddhaghosa says that the achievement of the first stage of *nibbāna* “dries up the ocean of suffering of the round in the beginningless round of rebirths” (XXII, 14). This section must be speaking rhetorically of course since the all ten fetters are not abandoned until the achievement of the fourth stage of awakening. Buddhaghosa’s descriptions of the freedom from suffering at this stage are functioning quite purely instrumentally, with little concern for technical accuracy. The point is simply to convince and inspire the Buddhist monk or nun that the end of suffering is possible,

worth striving for, and that it occurs at the attainment of *nibbāna*. The discussion of the results of attaining the first stage of *nibbāna* inspires faith and action.

Then, after attaining the first stage of awakening, if the meditator wishes to move on to attaining the higher stages and abandon the remain fetters, then he or she “works over and turns up that same field of formations, classed as materiality, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, with the knowledge that they are impermanent, painful, not-self, and he embarks upon the progressive series of insights.” So, the eight knowledges or stages of meditation occur again, just as before, and, just as before, by attending to formations and finding that they are characterized by impermanence, *dukkha*, and not-self the meditator again makes progress in insight (XXII 22, 25, 28). The attainment of the fourth and final stage of *nibbāna* leads to the ending of craving, manifested both as aversion and attachment, and ignorance, the root causes of suffering according to the second noble truth.

These last points about continuing to experience *dukkha* in formations even after the attainment of (at least) the third stage of awakening gets right at the crux of the ambiguity between the contingent and inherentist positions. So at this point we should ask ourselves whether the presentation of the meditation instructions in general clearly supports either the inherentist or the contingent views of *dukkha*. On the one hand, the frequent use of language resembling, and in some cases identical with, that of the philosophical presentation of suffering lend support to its general thrust towards the inherentist view. In addition the fact that the highly enlightened meditator must repeat the stages of insight and again see that all formations are *dukkha* suggests that the perception of suffering never really goes away, that even the enlightened meditator is

aware of suffering. However, it seems clear that the overall picture of the intention and results of the practical instructions point in the opposite direction. The fact that the stages of insight are said to lead inevitably toward the abandoning of the causes of *dukkha* necessarily supports the contingent view. After all, one way of putting the contingent view *is* that it is possible to eliminate some or all suffering, because what is contingent is contingent upon its causes, eliminate the causes and you eliminate the that which arises from them. Moreover, one way of putting the inherentist view is that it is impossible, at least in some sense, to eliminate *dukkha*, because it is absolutely part and parcel of the very fabric of objective reality. If insight is the very process by which suffering decreases, then the process and methods of insight cannot function without the view that suffering is primarily a subjective phenomenon which is not fixed, is not essential or fundamental, and which can be altered. Buddhaghosa's meditation instructions are themselves basically practical and only function with this instrumental motivation as their backing. Likewise, the *dukkha* of the meditation instructions could only possibly be primarily that of the contingent view, otherwise the whole section on insight (and on concentration) could have no serious value situated within the context of the four noble truths, containing as it does the truths of suffering and its end.

We've seen that the support offered by the insight section for the contingent view comes from instrumental presentations of *dukkha*, as well as the supposed results of moving through the stages of insight practice. The strongest claim about the instrumental motivation of the insight section is of the latter type: the fact that suffering is overcome upon attainment of the stages of *nibbāna*. Here again, though, we must be careful not to confuse simplicity and clarity with absolute accuracy. As we will discuss again below,

we cannot say definitively that “the meditation instructions absolutely and universally support either the contingent or the inherentist views. Ambiguity is the name of the game here, and in fact this is the primary thesis of this essay: that Buddhaghosa’s dialogues about the nature of suffering are, in fact, ambiguous and contain multiple potential perspectives on the nature of suffering and its relationship with subjects and objects. In the next chapter we will argue for and point out the simultaneous existence of *both* the inherentist and contingent views in Buddhaghosa’s thought more clearly, and in the conclusion to this essay we will return to the question of whether or not the enlightened meditator is in fact free from suffering.

Theoretical and Practical in Application: Are arahants free from suffering?

By now we’ve completed our direct investigation into the meanings and uses of the term *dukkha* in both the generally theoretical and generally practical sections of the *Visuddhimagga*. We’ve seen how there are two different types of language used, technical and suggestive, which are generally used to embody two different, though not utterly distinct, modes and motivation of writing, the philosophical and the instrumental. And we’ve seen how the philosophical mode with its precise, technical explication generally supports an inherentist view of *dukkha* and attributes the types of *dukkha* to objects-in-themselves, lending support to the characterization of *dukkha* as one of the three fundamental characteristics of formed objects. On the other hand, we’ve also seen that the instrumental mode of writing, with its suggestive language, generally focuses on the subject, the individual person experiencing *dukkha*, and so lends support to the contingent view which holds that *dukkha* is an accidental element of existence which can

be eliminated upon eliminating its causes. In this section of the essay we'll highlight the tensions present between these views in an analysis of the diverging consequences they have for understanding the state of the *arahant*, or “worthy one,” the highest soteriological ideal of Buddhaghosa’s Buddhism. In order to do this we’ll have to gain at least a shallow understanding of the cause of suffering which is supposed to be eliminated, and relate it to what we’ve learned about the nature of the three types of suffering, to what we know about *vedanā*, and to results of eliminating this underlying cause of suffering according to both the inherentist and contingent perspectives.

On *dukkha* and its cause, Buddhaghosa says this: “the truth of suffering... the prior craving that originates it by being its root-cause is the truth of origin; the non-occurrence of both is the truth of cessation” (VII, 27). Buddhaghosa reinforces this in the description of the truths, when he says that the three most fundamental types of craving (*(tan)hā*), craving for sense desires, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming should be understood as one “in the sense of its generating the truth of suffering.” With this model with the cessation craving comes the cessation of suffering (XVI 61-63). The *arahant*, being free even of the “inherent tendency” toward craving, is totally free of suffering.

Another major theoretical source on craving (*(tan)hā*) and in the *Visuddhimagga* is the analysis of the chain of dependent origination (*(pat)icca-samuppāda*). Simply, dependent origination charts the complex mutual conditioning of all psychophysical events, both momentarily and from lifetime to lifetime (XVII, n. 48). It attempts to explain something very similar to the meshwork of mutual conditioning of meaning and definition that I outlined above in my “correspondence theory” between the characteristic

of not-self and the suffering due to formations. However, while the correspondence theory discussed mutual conditioning in terms of meaning and definition, the dependent origination discusses the mutual conditioning necessary for each of each of its components to come into existence in the first place. (An interesting discussion might be had about whether these two things are different, really.) Each link in the dependent origination is a necessary, though not sufficient (XVII, n. 40), condition for the other links, and most directly for the link immediately following it. Dependent origination is also used to outline the causal, endless (and beginningless), cyclical, chronologic chain of conditions connecting the actions of past lifetimes (or moments) and results of the present lifetime (or moment), and actions of the present lifetime (or moment) with results of future lifetimes (or moments) (XVII, 296ff.).

Taken from a canonical reference, the full dependent origination is listed thus:

With ignorance as condition there are [volitional] formations; with formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality; with mentality-materiality as condition, sixfold base; with the sixfold base as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, becoming; with becoming as condition, birth; with birth as condition there is ageing-and-death, and sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; thus there is the arising of this whole mass of suffering. This is called the dependent origination. (XVII, 2)

We can see that the proximate condition for the arising of craving is something we have already looked at, feeling (*vedanā*). Feeling is the necessary, though not sufficient (XVII n. 40), basis for the occurrence of craving. If craving is present, then feeling certainly is, but if feeling is present, craving may or may not be. If the existence of feeling does not depend and is not determined by the existence of craving, then we can say that all persons have the capability of feeling the entire range of feeling types, pleasant, unpleasant, and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant, whether craving is present or not.

The next point to make is obvious. If the whole range of feeling types can arise even when craving is absent, and, as we established above *dukkha-dukkha* is equivalent to unpleasant *vedanā*, then *dukkha-dukkha* is not eliminated just because craving is absent. Here we have a contradiction: on the one hand Buddhaghosa wants to inspire Buddhist meditators and encourage them to practice toward the cessation of suffering, and that it comes about with the cessation of its cause, craving. On the other hand, Buddhaghosa needs to reconcile his technical definitions of *dukkha* with his technical definitions of the aggregate of feeling. So far Buddhaghosa needs to say that craving → *dukkha-dukkha* = feeling. But this contradicts the highly technical system of dependent origination and his analysis of it which puts forward something more like feeling → craving → *dukkha*. The theoretical account of the relationship between feeling, craving, and *dukkha* is internally inconsistent, and because of this cannot support the claim that the elimination of craving leads to the elimination of all suffering.

In the theoretical context of the discussion of the four noble truths (XVI, 62-74), Buddhaghosa uses exceedingly technical language to discuss the cessation of suffering

and *nibbāna*. However, the discussion of the cessation of suffering and the four stages of awakening that occurs at the end of the discussion of the stages insight meditation (XXII, 1-91) uses much more suggestive language and is set in a generally practical context. Here we see one example in which the ambiguity produced by Buddhaghosa's two motivations, philosophical and instrumental, results in two different ways of speaking and that lead to internal contradictions in the text. We could probably find no more important topic to apply this ambiguity to, than to the possibility of freedom from suffering. It is held up by Buddhaghosa and by Buddhism generally as the highest goal and motivation in the religious life. We are not here arguing that such a thing is or is not possible, that question is also valuable but it is not the purview of this essay to address it. We have, however, shown that, even if we stay completely within Buddhaghosa's own discussion of the topic, using the terms as he uses them, we find that Buddhaghosa, makes two *internally* inconsistent statements: his instrumental program speaks with confidence that total freedom from suffering is possible and occurs with the elimination of craving, and the philosophical program, which neatly defines suffering, and is helpful for us to know exactly what the meditator is supposed to eliminate in the first place, admits that we cannot totally eliminate suffering at all.

Now, one may ask, we've shown that according to Buddhaghosa's theoretical account, unpleasant *vedanā*, and thus *dukkha-dukkha*, remain even after craving has been eliminated, we have not said anything about the other two types of suffering. This is a good point. But, before we go on and address it briefly, it should be pointed out that this is not actually the thesis of this essay. All we intended to show was that there are two primary motivations in Buddhaghosa's writing, and other related sets of pairs in style and

content of presentation, which lead to ambiguities or outright contradictions in the *Visuddhimagga*. This has already been demonstrated. Now, it is still good to ask the question, what about *viparin)āma-dukkha* and *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, suffering in change and suffering due to formations, is there a contradiction there as well?

The simple answer is no, not really. There were two important moments in Buddhaghosa's thought that led us to conclude the theoretical and practical discussions concerning *dukkha-dukkha* do not support each other: the contradiction between the two theoretical accounts, one saying that suffering arose due to craving which arose due to feeling, the other saying that feeling and suffering overlapped with each other. However, for the other two types of *dukkha* there is no problematic overlap between negative *vedanā* and their own technical definitions. Above we saw that *viparin)āma-dukkha* was most associated with those formed objects which have a *pleasant* feeling, and that *saṅkhāra-dukkha* was most associated with those formed objects with have a *neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant* feeling (XVI, 35). One way to possibly resolve this is to remember in the theoretical accounts all three types of suffering, but especially these two, are used to refer to characteristics of objects-in-themselves. No matter what happens to the Buddhist meditator, even if he or she eliminates craving, these characteristics are inherent to formed objects and cannot change unless objects change. The arahant might be right to say: "Yes, that pleasant feeling is still characterized by *viparin)āma-dukkha*, it certainly still has the potential to cause suffering in others once it changes for them, but it is not a potential for suffering *for me*." The distinction between the object itself retaining its attribute of suffering, even while the arahant is not subject to that suffering, is accurate but not readily obvious. If we wanted to take this further and help Buddhaghosa revise

and reconcile his instrumental claims and philosophical discussions we might start by saying that perhaps the *arahant* can become free from all instances of *dukkha* arising from craving, but not from other instances. This might go a long way towards saying the kinds of things that Buddhaghosa says now. For example it might turn out that this revised third noble truth includes all instances of suffering in change and suffering due to formations from the *arahant's*, subjective perspective, as well as some amount of unpleasant *vedanā* / *dukkha-dukkha* as well. This would require evidence from the text of course, but it might not be a dead-end.

Conclusion

To conclude this essay, let's first go back and discuss a methodological issue involving the set of paired terms used to divide Buddhaghosa's thought and writing style, and then suggest some potential areas of progress which build off this research.

At the outset of this essay we delineated a number of terminological pairs: "philosophical" vs. "instrumental," "inherentist" vs. "contingent," "theoretical" vs. "practical," "objective" vs. "phenomenal" (for types of *dukkha*), and "technical" vs. "suggestive," which have been very useful for highlighting some conflicting threads within Buddhaghosa's writing. But perhaps it is possible to take these distinctions too strictly. The following are some questions that we might like to ask in reference to these categories.

Are some of the pairs not mutually exclusive? For example, it seems likely that someone might wish to argue that Buddhaghosa wrote both instrumentally as well as philosophically simultaneously. Even if this is not the case, it is very probable that some

of Buddhaghosa's philosophically-motivated writings had an instrumental-type effect on his readers, shaping their meditative experiences or giving them categories to discard or affirm some meditative experiences, for example.

Next, does the general correspondence I've drawn between language use, context in the surrounding text, and Buddhaghosa's motivation really hold water? Can technical language be used instrumentally in the context concentration meditation instruction? On the face of it, this seems at least possible. Further, perhaps Buddhaghosa thought that the pursuit of philosophical accuracy and truth was intimately related to attaining *nibbāna*, in which case the philosophical and instrumental motivations would overlap. These methodological questions point to some degree of arbitrariness in the categorical division we've set up and the delineations and relationships between them, and it would be helpful to get a better understanding of just how clear these distinctions can be made. However, it is also the case that despite some possible permeability in their borders, these categories have been useful for illuminating quite meaningful insights into subtle ambiguities and contradictions in Buddhaghosa's thought.

Finally, let's turn our attention to opportunities for further research to build of our investigation and conclusions.

First, there is an important empirical question to be addressed. Recent essays in religious studies, particularly those by Robert H. Sharf ("Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religions," "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," to name a few), have questioned the prominence of meditation practice in various Buddhist traditions and specifically the centrality and importance of "experience," including meditative experiences, at all.

Depending on one's persuasion, one might first regard such a claim as quite welcome or obviously false, or anywhere in between. If one agrees with Sharf then one could argue that this essay is infused with a major misrepresentation of the *Visuddhimagga* which unduly assumes that its "instrumental" portrayal of *dukkha* really refers to specific, formal meditation instructions, practices, and goals as opposed to mere rhetoric, performance of mastery of earlier texts on the part of Buddhaghosa, an injunction toward cognitive analysis and philosophical study, or that, even if it did refer to meditation, it does not matter much for the study of the history of the religion because not many people were meditating anyway. If such were true then the arguments of this essay would stand on a weak foundation.

As far as I can see, the fact that at least two and of the eight folds of the eight-fold path indubitably involve meditation or some sort of purposeful modulation of attention (i.e. right mindfulness and right concentration), and that a third, right understanding, is distinguished from right thought, suggests that Buddhist soteriology from the very beginning considered meditative development and permanent shifts in perception and level of confusion and suffering to be the absolute core of their whole project. Not to say it did not happen, but it would have been a major change for meditation practice to have fallen out of mainstream relevance to the Buddhist tradition completely, especially given that meditation of one sort or another has been, and is, current in every Buddhist tradition in every country and culture in which it exists. On these bases, this study was conducted from the standpoint that meditation instruction and practice really were significant parts of the Buddhist soteriological project when Buddhaghosa was writing and really did inform the "practical" sections of the *Visuddhimagga*.

Luckily, this question of the historical relevance of meditation in Buddhism, and for this project, in Indian and Sri Lankan *Theravāda* Buddhism around the 5th century CE, is largely an empirical one which archaeologists, anthropologists, and textual scholars have the ability to address. And if most scholars of Buddhism really are simply *assuming* as Sharf has it (Sharf, 98-99), that meditation was as central in ancient Indian Buddhism as it tends to be in the modern, Western practice of Buddhism, and if there is a significant number of professional scholars with serious doubts about meditation's historical role, then an authoritative study into just this question should be conducted. It could only benefit the field to feel more conclusive about how to relate to meditation techniques, rigorous meditative training, and meditative experience in relation to Buddhism's development in India and beyond.

Beyond this foundational, empirical point, there are other potentially valuable lines of research that follow from our study of *dukkha*. One obvious and important further inquiry is into the way *dukkha* is presented, not just in the *Visuddhimagga*, but in the corpus of Buddhaghosa's writings in total. The traditional count of Buddhaghosa's writings include twelve commentaries beyond this, covering all three baskets of the Pāli canon, two on books of the *Vinaya*, seven on books of the *Suttas*, and three on books of the *Abhidhamma*. Whether all of these texts can be accurately attributed to Buddhaghosa is debated (Buddhaghosa, xxix-xxx), but it is clear that his writings extend far beyond the *Visuddhimagga*. A look only at his depiction of *dukkha* in the *Visuddhimagga* then, while valuable and an excellent basis for further research, cannot appropriately claim to give insight into Buddhaghosa's thought in general over his entire life, nor shed more than a partial light on the scholarly thought of *Theravāda* Buddhists in Sri Lanka and

India at the time. Further investigation into Buddhaghosa's conception of *dukkha* should take into account more of his writings.

Another very relevant question is the mirror of our covered topic: "How is pleasure presented in the *Visuddhimagga*?" There are many instances and varieties of pleasure (*sukha*) and pleasant *vedanā* in the *Visuddhimagga*, from the unwholesome and mistaken pleasures of sensual craving, to the warm, gracious pleasantness of the four *brahma-vihāras*, the divine-abidings, to the various forms of mental and physical blisses of the first four *jhānas*, to the 'bliss-only-because-they-are-not-pain' of the immaterial attainments beyond the four *jhānas* of subtle form, and, of course, the big-daddy of all research into Buddhist soteriology: *nibbāna* itself. All of these are considered pleasurable, broadly defined, and could perhaps be valuably scrutinized in light of our distinction between Buddhaghosa's philosophical and theoretical motivations for writing. For example, perhaps Buddhaghosa makes distinctions between objective and phenomenal aspects of *sukha* similar to those of *dukkha*. Then again, *dukkha* and *sukha* serve very different functions in Buddhist thought and their presentations may not parallel each other at all. It would be possible to do another study of equal length on just the presentation of pleasure in the *Visuddhimagga*; and in fact, such a study would be necessary to give a fully rounded presentation of these two fundamental, polar elements of human life.

Appendix: The World is not Bad: Toward a more Life-embracing Buddhist Attitude

In the *Visuddhimagga* Buddhaghosa encourages Buddhist practitioners to take seriously the possibility of experiencing life without suffering. In our final analysis we found that Buddhaghosa does not believe that “everything is suffering” in a colloquial sense... and this is good news! In many of the ways that *dukkha* is a meaningful aspect of our personal, psychological lives it is added to our experience due to craving and aversion, and it can be eliminated, not all suffering is necessary. But no object in existence, being impermanent, can support eternal well-being, and pain, even with the ending of craving and aversion, continues to arise. On the other hand, so does pleasure.

What then, should we do, how should we relate to freedom from suffering? Let's reassess our stance toward pleasure and the sensual richness of life.

A world denying philosophy is, for our purposes, simply one that thinks "the world is bad." We could get specific about what I mean by "world" and "bad," but I think working with an intuition is fine. Such philosophies are inherently pessimistic and usually contribute to cynicism and internal conflict. They are to be rejected. The Buddhist position is, rather, "suffering is bad," and the whole point of Buddhist practice is the elimination of suffering. At a zoomed-in, high resolution analysis of suffering in the *Visuddhimagga*, we find that Buddhaghosa is not life-denying, pessimistic, or anti-worldly. He does not leap along with the absolute inherentists from "suffering is bad," to "and the world is suffering," and on to "thus, the world is bad." That relieves Buddhaghosa of our ire against world-denying philosophies.

However, with a larger-scale, lower resolution perspective, the perspective with which we usually engage the Buddhist teachings, Buddhaghosa's Buddhism does indeed smack of anti-life pessimism. But it is not the fact of suffering which gives this taste, and it really is like a taste, or better, a smell emanating from Buddhaghosa's text. Rather, it is the context, backdrop, and what happens between the lines that gives us this aggressive sense. The two major underpinnings of this implicit world-denial are the metaphysical interpretation of *nibbāna* as the ending of all becoming and of all participation in the cycle of life and death, and the renunciate, mendicant, ascetic ideal of ancient India. For Buddhist practitioners who have chosen to live *in* the world such metaphysical claims and ascetic ideals are no longer appropriate. For all of Buddhist history monks and nuns have served as the bearers of the tradition and generally as its spiritual and scholarly

elites. But the values of monasticism are not our values. For if we continue to embrace the old ideal of the world-renouncing Gautama Buddha and his followers as *our* ideal, then we will subtly but undoubtedly be impressing upon ourselves an image which we have already chosen not to become, that in fact we cannot become. We establish a subtle conflict, a basic in-fighting within ourselves in which we are already lesser practitioners, unable to fully dedicate ourselves like our monastic, and Asian, predecessors. This inner conflict actually only contributes to our unease, to our sense of failure and existential unworth, and lack of safety. Taken to an extreme we make ourselves out to be failures from the beginning.

When I say the attitude of the *Visuddhimagga* is life-denying, and this applies in varying degrees to *Theravāda* Buddhism specifically and to Buddhism generally, I mean that it holds a negative view on being alive which is over and above what is justified by Buddhaghosa's theoretical discussion of *dukkha*. Characteristic of this is the oft-repeated list of things that all aggregates are devoid of: lastingness, beauty, pleasure, and self (XVI, 85). All things are totally devoid of beauty, really? Devoid of pleasure, really? This just simply is not the case, and as far as pleasure goes, Buddhaghosa does not believe it either. Here's another example: Buddhaghosa's description of the period in the womb during the birth process:

Here the suffering classed as 'rooted in the descent into the womb', and so on, is this: When this being is born in the mother's womb, he is not born inside a blue or red or white lotus, etc., but on the contrary, like a worm in rotting fish, rotting dough, cess-pools,

etc., he is born in the belly in a position that is below the receptacle for undigested food (stomach), above the receptacle for digested food (rectum), between the belly-lining and the backbone, which is very cramped, quite dark, pervaded by very fetid draughts redolent of various smells of ordure, and exceptionally loathsome. And on being reborn there, for ten months he undergoes excessive suffering, being cooked like a pudding in a bag by the heat produced in the mother's womb, and steamed like a dumpling of dough, with no bending, stretching, and so on. So this, firstly, is the suffering rooted in the descent into the womb. (XVI 37)

Buddhaghosa probably did not know from first-hand memory what it was like to be in the womb when he wrote this. It is dogma and imagination, useful in some situations, but certainly not a healthy basis for one's general relationship with the birth or other biological processes. Another way of thinking about the period in the womb is that it is absolutely the most intimate, loving, safe place for the young organism to grow. It is nurturing; it is home. I argue that for many people, a recognition of the messiness of life, literal and figurative, and an embrace of it, will be more supportive of a life of variety, of openness, of sensitivity, of tenderness, and of appreciation than any cynical and exclusionary attitude based on the foulness of life. This is the movement to a more life-embracing, rather than life-denying, attitude and foundation for practice.

The ideal of the renunciate disposition is this: after seeing that craving for things is the cause of suffering, retreat from the *things themselves*. The attainment of cessation

(*nirodhasamāpatti*) is another good pointer to this attitude, and the misleading descriptions of “spiritual” achievements that can result from it. The attainment of cessation, defined as “the non-occurrence of consciousness and its concomitants,” is said only to be available to those who have reached the third and fourth of the four successive stages of awakening and who have mastered the four fine-material *jhānas* and the four formless attainments (XXIII, 18). Thus it is a rare and exalted meditative ability. According to Buddhaghosa, those who have access to cessation seek to attain it because “being wearied by the occurrence and dissolution of formations, they attain it thinking, ‘Let us dwell in bliss by being without consciousness here and now and reaching the cessation that is nibbana’” (XXIII, 30). Can we not see already that the whole stance of the tradition is that it is ‘wearying’ to be alive, to have exterior and interior objects and experiences come and go, that what is better than all of that, better than any temporary, experiencable thing at all, is to be “*without consciousness*”!? And what might it mean that this cessation is *nibbāna*? The commentary to the *Visudhimagga* says that this means “as though reaching nibbana without remainder of past clinging [after dying]” (XXIII, n. 13). So to be without consciousness or mental content is similar to the bliss and final peace of *nibbāna* after death. But if in the attainment of cessation there is no consciousness nor concomitants of consciousness, no mental event or content, no experiences or knowing at all, then how can this be said to be “bliss,” which is a word usually (in English and in the *Visuddhimagga*) to be reserved for those experiences which have a pleasant feeling. The commentary gives us the answer here as well: “‘*In bliss*’ means without suffering” (XXIII, n. 13, italics original). According to the *Visuddhimagga* and its commentary, the *only* reason the attainment of *nirodhasamāpatti*

is bliss at all is because it lacks suffering, which of course it does, there is not *any* kind of experience.

Such should lead us to reflect, and ask ourselves, “do the teachings I receive from my Buddhist teachers, the way in which I absorb and apply the teachings, my own Buddhist practice, and the way it leads me to relate to the world, contribute, even subtly, to an attitude of antagonism toward worldly things, to relationship, responsibilities, family, taxes, being alive, etc.?” If so, we should inquire into whether this is the healthiest attitude for us to hold at this time and in our situation for the betterment of our world and for our own liberation from unnecessary suffering. Especially if we’ve chosen to live as householders and not monastics, bearing such an attitude can contribute to a subtle resentment of our own lives and a cynicism about the effectiveness of the Buddhist teachings. This is not helpful. On the basis of this attitude, our relationships with others, our jobs, our contribution to the world, the continued development of Buddhism in the West, and, again, our own contemplative practices, *all* suffer. We fight against ourselves, tie energy in knots, resist our current situation, push and pull and strain ourselves to fit to an ideal we cannot achieve. Or maybe we do not even really believe that the renunciate ideals are worthwhile but absorb them anyway because they exist as the implicit message of the spiritual containers in which we receive the (otherwise very helpful) teachings. The hermetic, renunciate ideals are not helpful if they force you to adopt a stricture which is fundamentally not natural to you, and that you are not, in fact, deeply motivated to embody. This underlying conflict and lack of motivation will undermine your practice.

Just as we concluded above for pain, pleasure as well arises indefinitely in life even for *arahants*. We must admit it: pleasure will never be absolutely stricken from our

lives. It is a natural and inevitable part of the life process. What a radical conclusion this leads to: pleasures are fundamentally unproblematic. The unfortunate failure of the renunciate attitudes of modern, Western Buddhists is that they use the virtues of awareness, patience, forbearance to foster the mistaken beliefs that pleasure and engagement with the bounty and sensual joy of the world is wrong or detrimental to finding freedom. Hardly! Craving might be “unwholesome,” but not pleasure. If anything, pleasures are naturally somewhat wholesome, because they are exactly what they are, pleasurable! An attitude of trying to “get out of this dirty world” fosters the subtle pessimism which clouds our lives off retreat; we interpret home life as somehow less spiritual. A celebratory attitude of life-engagement is the antidote for this, and, lucky us, we are already alive.

We have to remember that the end point of Buddhist soteriology (for both the “*Hināyana*” and “*Mahāyāna*”) is to leave the cycle of rebirth. Whether, the rhetoric goes, we “get out” and leave everyone else behind, or whether we wait and try to get everyone out together, the goal is still to stop coming back to this world. This was not something unique to Buddhism, it was deeply and intimately tied to the conceptions of suffering, freedom, and time pervasive in Indian culture and religious thought when Buddhism originated and grew. Even if the goal is to get *everyone* “out” of sam%*sāra*, not to be reborn again, this still implies a fundamentally negative attitude about all that is associated with birth, and life, in general. To be born is to have particular experiences: to have growth and becoming, to have change and relationship, to have fear and hope, goals, achievements, and failures, at least to some extent, and, yes, even death, because such are all natural conditions of the human body and mind. To free oneself and others from the

cycle of birth and death, when understood metaphysically, which is how this doctrine *was* understood and taught in ancient India, is also to “free” oneself from all of life. Why would one want to do that *unless* he or she held life to be, overall, a negative experience?

Forgive me for being general, and thus not quite accurate, but Buddhist monasticism is an outdated, Eastern religious structure. It is dying here in the West, and if we build our own spiritual practice on the ideals, structures, and teachings of a context aiming for renunciation and monasticism, then we will inevitably do ourselves and everyone else a disservice by not really addressing where *we* are and what *we need* to get free. And what might we need, what might be *our* most effective spiritual path? I say we *embrace* life. Let's *engage* in life. Not because there is anything inherently or existentially bad or less effective about the mendicant or monastic lifestyle or predisposition, that is not my argument, but because we are *already* choosing to engage in all aspects of life. We *already* see the value of not fundamentally excluding the world of work, relationships, money, complexity, and variety. We already enjoy it and seek to be more inclusive than our monastic predecessors were. This is life! This is as spiritual as it gets.

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