CHAPTER III

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHAGHOSA’S COMMENTARIES

Tradition ascribes to Thera Buddhaghosa the authorship of several exegetical works, which, as we know them are headed by the encyclopedic *Visuddhimagga*. He is said to have written commentaries on the whole of the *Vinayapitaka* including the *Patimokkha*, the four *Nikayas* and the seven books of the *Abhidhamma-Pitaka*. The commentaries on some of the important books of *Khuddaka Nikaya* are also attributed to him. Regarding Buddhaghosa Mrs. Rhys Davids says, "It may readily be granted that Buddhaghosa must not be accepted en bloc. The distance between the constructive genius of Gotama and his apostles as compared with the succeeding ages of epigoni needs no depreciatory criticism on the labour of the exegetists to make himself felt forcibly enough. Buddhaghosa’s philosophy is doubtless crude and he is apt to leave the cruces unexplained, concerning which an occidental is most in the dark. Nevertheless, to me his work is not only highly suggestive, but also a mine of historical interest. To put it aside is to lose the historical perspective of the course of Buddhist philosophy."

We are concerned herewith the works of Buddhaghosa as revealing the development of his own mind as a Buddhist
teacher and commentator. His thoughts prior to his conversion to Buddhism do not engage any attention here.

Before we discuss the question of the origin and development of Buddhaghosa's commentaries, a word about the nature of the commentary is necessary. A commentary means reading new meanings back into old texts according to one's own education and outlook. Its motive is to explain the words and judgements of others as accurately and faithfully as possible. This remark applies to all commentaries in Sanskrit as well as Pāli. The commentary or Bhāṣya as it is called in Sanskrit implies an amplification of a condensed utterances or aphoristic expressions which are rich in meaning and significance. We shall see in the account that we give below the development of the commentary literature among the Buddhists and the method of giving their own words that guided the great authors of the commentaries although it was always adopted by way of expansion of an authoritative text. We are confronted with the fact that the need for an accurate interpretation of the Buddha's words which formed the guiding principles of life and action of the members of the Saṅgha, was felt from the very beginning, even while the master was alive. But there is an advantage in referring the disputed question to the mentor himself for the solution. It is the first stage in the origin of the Buddhist commentaries.
Buddhagbosa after conversion to Buddhism wrote his first book नापोदया and his teacher Revata is represented as saying to his pupil Buddhagbosa "The Pāli Tripitakes only has been brought over here, no commentary is extant in this place. The divergent opinions of teachers other than the Theravādins do not likewise exist. The Ceylon commentary, which is free from faults and which was written in Sinhalese by thoughtful Mahinda with due regard to the methods of exposition, taught by the supreme Buddha, put up before the three councils and rehearsed by Sāriputta and others, is current among the people of Ceylon. Please go there and study it and then translate it into Māgadhi which will be useful to the whole world."²

From this it is evident that the commentaries were not to be found in India at the time of Buddhagbosa. They were all preserved in Ceylon. It follows further that the commentaries as they have come down to us, were not the original composition of either Buddhagbosa or his illustrious predecessor Mahinda. These commentaries as it appears from tradition, were originally the productions not of a single author but of a college of monks. Mahinda was merely a translator of these works into Sinhalese. Buddhagbosa retranslated them into Pāli.

Buddhagbosa himself admits in his prologue to several commentaries,³ that he annotated those passages only which
were not commented upon by his predecessors, and the rest he only translated. All available evidence points to the fact that within the first decade of Buddha's enlightenment, Buddhist centers were established in various localities, adjoining many important towns and cities of the time, viz., Banaras, Rajagaha, Vesali, Nalanda, Pava, Ujjja, Cama, Mathura, Ulupi, and so on. At every one of these places grew up a community of Bhikkhus under the leadership and guidance of a famous disciple of the Buddha such as Mahakassapa, Mahakothiba, Sariputta, Mogallana and others. Following the code of conduct of the wandering Bhikkus or sophists they used to spend the rainy season in a royal pleasure garden or a monastery, after which they generally met together once a year at Rajagaha or Savatti or Belubama or elsewhere. Friendly interviews among themselves and occasional calls on contemporary sophists were not unknown. Among these various leaders of Bhikkhus, some ranked foremost in doctrine, some in discipline, some in ascetic practices, some in preaching, some in story-telling, some in analytical expositions, some in preaching, some in philosophy, some in poetry and so on. Among Buddha's disciples and followers there were men who came from Brahmin families having mastered the Vedas and the whole of the Vedic literature. It may be naturally asked what were those profoundly learned and thoughtful Bhikkhus doing all the time?
The Buddhist and the Jain texts tell us that the itinerant teachers of the time wandered about in the country, engaging themselves wherever they stopped in serious discussions on matters relating to religion, philosophy, ethics, morals and polity. Discussion about the interpretation of the abstract utterances of the great teachers were frequent and the raison d'etre of the development of Buddhist literature particularly of the commentaries, is to be traced in these discussions. There are numerous interesting passages in the Tripitaka, telling us how from time to time contemporary events suggested manifold topics of discussion among the Bhikkus, or how their peace was disturbed by grave doubts calling forth explanations either from the Buddha himself or from his disciples. Whenever some interested sophists spoke vehemently in many ways in condemnation of the Buddha or the doctrine and the order, whenever another such sophist misinterpreted Buddha's opinion, whenever a furious discussion broke out in contemporary brotherhood, or whenever a Bhikkhu behaved improperly, the Bhikkhus generally assembled under the pavilion to discuss the subject were exhorted by Buddha only to safeguard their interests. It was on one such occasion that Buddha was led to offer a historical exposition of the moral percepts in accordance with his famous doctrine. "One should avoid all
that is evil, and perform all that is good," that is to say an explanation of the precepts in their negative and positive aspects. This is now incorporated in the first thirteen Suttas of the Dīgha-Nikāya and is familiarly known as the Snālekhandha, the tract on morality lending its name to the first volume of the Dīgha. On another occasion Pātaliputta the wanderer, called on Samiddhi and informed him thus, "According to Saṇhā Gotama, as I actually heard him saying, "Karma either by way of deed or by way of word is no Karma at all, the real." "Karma being way thought or volition only. For there is an attainment of after having reached which one feels nothing." (In which transcends all sensible experience, pleasures and pains).

When a report of discussion that took place between Pātaliputta and Samiddhi was submitted to Buddha, he regretted that the muddle-headed Samiddhi had given one sided answer to the second point of the wanderer whom he had never met in his life, for the right and complete answer would in that case have been that, "he will experience either pleasure or pain or neither pleasure nor pain." But as regards Samiddhi's reply to the first point, he had nothing to say against it. The fact remains that the wisdom and following of Samiddhi, yet a junior learner, formed the argument of Buddha's longer analytical exposition of the all important
subject of Kamma which he termed the Mahākamma Vibhanga in contradistinction to his shorter exposition, the Gūlakherma vibhanga which was addressed to a young Brahmin scholar named Subba. Thus it can be established that the Mahākamma Vibhanga was the Suttabādis of the Abhidhamma exposition of the Sikkhāpādavibhanga which is incorporated in the second book of Abhidhamma Pitaka. But as a matter of fact, both these expositions have left their stamp on subsequent exegetical literature as is evidenced by the Nettipakarana and the Atthasālīni and other such works. Scanning the matter closely we can say that Buddhaghosa’s exposition of Kamma in his Atthasālīni is really the meeting place of both.

The Majjhima Nikāya contains many other illuminating expositions of Buddha notably the Salāvatana Vibhanga, the Āranavibhanga, the Dhamuvibhanga which have found their due places in the Abhidhamma literature, supplemented by higher expositions. They also have found their way into the later commentaries including the monumental works of Buddhaghosa. Then we have from Sariputta the Chief disciple of Buddha, a body of expositions of the four Aryan truths, the Saccavibhanga or Saccaniddeya which has found its due place in the second book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka where it has been
supplemented by a higher exposition based upon the Sutta exposition. Sariputta's expositions contain many of these stock passages or the older disconnected materials with which the whole of the Pitaka literature as we may reasonably suppose was built on. This piece of independent commentary has been tagged on to the Satipatthana Sutta which itself is a commentary and furnishes a datum of distinction between the Satipatthana Sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya and the Mahastipatthana Sutta in the Digha-Nikaya.

A comparative catechism of important terms and passages of exegetical nature is ascribed to Sariputta and is familiarly known as the Mahasangita Suttanta of which Buddhist Sanskrit version exists in Tibetan and Chinese translations under the name of Sangiti Parijaya. The method of grouping various topics under numerical beads and of explaining by means of simple enumeration, invariably followed by Thera Sariputta in the singularly interesting catechism referred to characterises two of the older connections. The Samyutta and Anguttara and certain books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, notably the Puggala Pannatti the materials of which were mostly drawn from the Anguttara Nikaya. This is a fact which alone can bring home to us the nature of Sariputta's work in connection with the Pitaka literature. But Sariputta does not exhaust the list. We
have to consider other renowned and profoundly learned disciples of Buddha among whom some were women who in their own way helped in forwarding the process of development of the commentaries. For example, Thera Mahākaccāyana who was enjoyed the reputation of one who could give a detailed exposition of what was said by Buddha in brief. The Majjhima Nikāya alone furnishes four exegetical fragments written by Mahākaccāyana, which are of great value and form the historical basis of the three later works, two in Pāli and one in Buddhist Sanskrit literature which are ascribed to him. The few fragments by Mahākaccāyana that survive, are significant; they exhibit the working of the human mind in different directions. He confines himself to elucidating the inner significance and true philosophical bearing of Buddha's first principle.

Mahakotthita was another Thera who was an authority next to Buddha himself or Paṭisambhīda or methodology of Buddha's analytical system. He gives us the characteristic marks or specific difference of current abstract terms signifying the various elements of experience. He warns us at the same time against possible misconception and also reason, understanding perception, sensation and so forth are not entities. They are not dissociated, but all are inseparably associated in reality.
Mahākotṭhita’s explanation may be said to be the historical foundation of the Lekhanabāra in the Nettipakarana of Buddhaghoṣa’s commentary. We have similar constitutions from Moggallāna, Ānanda, Dhammadinnā, and Khemā.

The whole of the Abhidhamma Pitaka has been separately called by Buddhaghoṣa as Veyyakarana or exposition. We are told that this class comprises also the gāthālessa or prose suttas which are not found in the remaining eight classes of early Buddhist literature.29

The foregoing discussion has shown that the Vedallas need not be grouped as a separate class. There is no reason why the Cūla Vedalla and the Mahāvedalla Sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya should not be included in the Veyyakarana class. At all events it has been clearly proved that in the Tipitakas, excluding the Kāthāvatthu, which was composed in the 3rd century B.C., we have two layers, so to say of Veyyakarana, viz., the Sutta Bhājaniya and the Abhidhamma Bhājaniya, Khandha, Vibhanga, Niddesa but there are different systems of the same term, i.e., the suttas, containing terminology, definition, enumeration, or explanation whether with or without such names as Khandha, Vibhanga, Niddesa constitute the first great landmark in the development of Buddhist commentaries. The six Abhidhamma books largely based upon the suttas
is the second landmark. The third landmark is the works of Mahākaccāna. The Kathāvatthu which is a Buddhist book of debating on matters of theology and philosophy represents the fourth landmark. Milinda-Pañha (questions of King Malinda) which is a romantic dialogue between King Miander and Thera Nāgasena. This work may be regarded philosophically as a richer synthesis of the isolated movements of Buddhist thought than the former. The time when Milinda-Pañha was composed may be the fifth landmark in the history of Buddhist commentaries. Buddhaghosa's commentaries on the whole of Tripitakas, the works of Mahākaccāyane, the Kathavāthu, the Milinda Pañha, the Pannattivāda of teachers other than the Theravādins, certain Vitandavādins, Pakatiyāda and the views of Bhikkhus of Ceylon are the sixth landmark in the development of the commentaries.

To sum up, there is evidence enough to confirm the truth of the tradition that Buddhaghosa nor the Thera Mahinda nor the Theras of old were the originators of the commentaries. It can be said that the Buddha himself, his immediate disciples and their disciples all paved the way for the great Buddhaghosa for his great commentaries.
REFERENCES

1. Mrs. Rhys Davids / Buddhist Psychological Ethics, London, 1924, Intro, p.XIV.
4. Ibid., p.10.
11. Ibid., p.4.
12. The rendering is not literal though substantially faithful.
17. Ibid., pp.230-237.
21. Ibid., pp.260-266.


27. Ibid., Part I, p. 292.

28. Ibid., Ime dharmā samsatthā no visamsatthā ....

29. Ibid., Part I, p. 102.