

Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla-171005

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Two days International Conference
on
“Buddhaghosa: A Philosophical, Historical, and Critical Enquiry”

(13th and 14th November 2026)

Theme Note

The conference is on Buddhaghosa, a central figure in the Buddhist Theravāda exegetical tradition. The broad objective of the conference is to explore the works of Buddhaghosa, discuss and conceptualize his thought, and curate an intellectual image.

Traditionally, a number of works of the tradition are attributed to him: commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) on the Pali *Nikāyas*, commentaries on the *Abhidhamma* texts like *Aṭṭhasālinī* and an independent treatise *Visudhimagga*. Buddhaghosa can be seen as implicitly engaging and debating with his fellow Buddhist thinkers like Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, critiquing the positions of rival non-Buddhist schools like Sāṃkhya while creatively using grammarians like Pāṇini. Some of these aspects are implicitly present, others are explicitly engaged with while some others are only hinted but are not fully fleshed out. The aim of the conference is to present and re-present the philosophy of Buddhaghosa from multiple perspectives such as historical, conceptual, commentarial.

In the contemporary scholarship, a spectrum of positions can be found regarding the contribution of Buddhaghosa to the Buddhist thought. David Kalupahana quoting Rhys Davids says that Rhys Davids have said what can be said about him in a few sentences: “Of his talent there can be no doubt; it was equaled only by his extraordinary industry. But of originality, of independent thought, there is at present no evidence” (2006: 206). Kalupahana further accuses Buddhaghosa of adding unnecessary metaphysical elements to the largely empirical teachings of the Buddha (*ibid*: 211-12). Differently, for Heim, Buddhaghosa is one of the greatest minds in the history of Buddhism (2014: 4). Jonardon Ganeri sees Buddhaghosa as a “true innovator, a pioneer, and a creative thinker” (2018: 72) who moved “between India and Sri Lanka, between Sanskrit and Pāli, between Hinduism and Buddhism, in search of a fundamental theory

of mind” (ibid: 71). These positions evoke complicated ideas and further call upon complex sets of questions such as of authenticity with respect to tradition, analysing texts from the lens of historicism which brings in the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, the method of the modern reconstruction of ancient texts. Some of these themes are to be explored in this conference.

Further, Karunadasa (2010), while writing the rich philosophy of the *Abhidhamma* tradition, seldom takes his name but refers to him as one of the commentators (albeit an important one) in the long history of the *Abhidhamma* tradition. A focus on Buddhaghosa just as a commentator would undermine his distinctive contributions to the themes and debates in the Buddhist philosophy. Though, Buddhaghosa is a masterful commentator but a commentary is not a mere exegetical exercise but involves a creative engagement and reconstruction of the original text taking into account the socio-political as well as the inter-textual context (Ganeri 2011: 116). It is this richness that is to be explored with this conference. The objective is to bring out various dimensions of his philosophizing: the conceptual relation with the Pāli canonical texts, the intellectual landscape of the time, the reconstruction and reception of his work in the modern times.

When concepts are sowed within different frameworks, new thoughts can be reaped from them: the objective is an evaluation of his philosophy from the perspective of the classical, the colonial, and the contemporary. Framework here refers to a conceptual framework constitutive of concepts and its linkages within which a set of ideas and notions are understood, interpreted, analysed, and evaluated. Yosef Jabreen (1996) defines a conceptual framework as: “a network, or “a plane,” of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena. The concepts that constitute a conceptual framework support one another, articulate their respective phenomena, and establish a framework-specific philosophy. Conceptual frameworks possess ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, and each concept within a conceptual framework plays an ontological or epistemological role.” Further, it is noted that “A conceptual framework is not merely a collection of concepts but, rather, a construct in which each concept plays an integral role.”

A variety of aspects of the thought of Buddhaghosa are to be dealt with like metaphysical, epistemological, methodological, ethical: the contributions are to be a mix of descriptive, evaluative, and reconstructive. Though, there have been numerous books and conferences

dedicated to Buddhism in general, there isn't a platform dedicated to a classical Buddhist thinker. Thus, the proceedings strives to offer a reconstructive understanding as that of an intellectual historian as well as dealing with history of ideas. The study has a bearing on the methodology of philosophy as well as methodological issues in doing comparative philosophy.

Aims and Objectives

The proposed seminar aims to critically explore the philosophy and intellectual contributions of Buddhaghosa, one of the most influential figures in the Theravāda Buddhist exegetical tradition. Although traditionally known as a commentator on the Pāli canonical texts, Buddhaghosa's works represent a sophisticated philosophical engagement with Buddhist doctrine, interpretive methodology, and the broader intellectual debates of his time. The seminar seeks to revisit and reassess Buddhaghosa's role not merely as a transmitter of tradition but as a thinker who actively interpreted, systematized, and reconstructed Buddhist philosophical ideas.

One of the primary objectives of the seminar is to examine the conceptual richness of Buddhaghosa's thought by situating it within the wider intellectual landscape of classical India. This includes exploring his implicit and explicit engagements with other Buddhist thinkers such as Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, as well as his critical interactions with non-Buddhist traditions such as Sāṃkhya. Attention will also be given to the intellectual tools and linguistic frameworks that informed his work, including the influence of grammatical traditions associated with thinkers like Pāṇini.

The seminar also aims to address ongoing debates in contemporary scholarship regarding Buddhaghosa's philosophical originality and contribution. While some scholars view him primarily as a commentator who systematized existing teachings, others regard him as a creative and innovative thinker who developed a sophisticated theory of mind and philosophical method. By bringing together multiple perspectives, the seminar seeks to critically evaluate these interpretations and develop a more nuanced understanding of his intellectual legacy.

Another important objective is to explore the methodological issues involved in interpreting

classical philosophical texts. The seminar will examine how Buddhaghosa's works can be understood through different conceptual frameworks, classical, colonial, and contemporary, and how these frameworks shape modern reconstructions of Buddhist philosophy.

Further, the objective of the seminar is to develop a reconstructive understanding of Buddhaghosa's philosophical thought by approaching his works through the perspectives of intellectual history and the history of ideas. Rather than treating his writings merely as traditional commentaries, the seminar aims to examine them as intellectually rich texts that participate in broader philosophical debates and conceptual developments within the Buddhist tradition and the wider Indian philosophical milieu.

Overall, the seminar intends to foster a deeper engagement with Buddhaghosa's philosophy by integrating historical, conceptual, and methodological perspectives. It aims to contribute to the broader study of Buddhist philosophy, intellectual history, and comparative philosophy by highlighting the richness and relevance of Buddhaghosa's thought.

Significance of the Seminar

The proposed seminar is significant in that it focuses on Buddhaghosa, one of the most influential figures in the Theravāda Buddhist intellectual tradition, whose works played a crucial role in shaping the interpretation and transmission of Buddhist philosophy. Despite the centrality of his writings, scholarly engagement with Buddhaghosa as a philosopher in his own right remains relatively limited. The seminar seeks to address this gap by creating a dedicated platform for examining his thought from multiple philosophical and historical perspectives.

One important significance of the seminar lies in its attempt to reassess the philosophical status of commentary literature. In many traditions, commentaries are often viewed as secondary or merely explanatory texts. However, Buddhaghosa's works demonstrate that commentary can be a creative and intellectually productive activity that reconstructs and systematizes philosophical ideas. By examining Buddhaghosa's interpretive strategies, the seminar will highlight how exegetical writing can contribute to the development of philosophical concepts and debates.

The seminar is also significant for understanding the intellectual history of Buddhist philosophy. Buddhaghosa lived in a period marked by vibrant philosophical interactions among various Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions. His works reveal engagements—both implicit and explicit—with other thinkers and schools, including debates concerning metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and the theory of mind. Exploring these interactions can illuminate the broader intellectual landscape of classical Indian philosophy.

Furthermore, the seminar contributes to contemporary scholarship by bringing together diverse approaches to the study of Buddhist thought, including historical, conceptual, and comparative perspectives. It encourages critical engagement with modern interpretations of Buddhaghosa, ranging from views that portray him as a mere systematizer to those that emphasize his originality and philosophical creativity.

Finally, the seminar holds broader methodological significance for the discipline of philosophy. By examining how classical texts are interpreted, reconstructed, and situated within different conceptual frameworks, it contributes to ongoing discussions about the methods of doing philosophy, intellectual history, and comparative philosophy. In this way, the seminar aims to deepen our understanding of both Buddhaghosa's thought and the broader traditions of philosophical inquiry in which it is situated.

Call for Papers

A limited number of scholars of repute are invited for the IAS owned Seminar. Those interested in participating should send (preferably by email) an abstract (300 words) of the proposed paper in English along with their C.V. (One page) directly to Convenors **Dr. Sudeep Raj Kumar and Prof. Balaganapathi D.** Email: sudeepraj कुमार@hinducollege.ac.in , balaganapathid@gmail.com and copy to the Academic Resource Officer, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla on his Email seminar@ias.ac.in Tel: 0177-2831385

The abstract should clearly state the objectives, methodology, and relevance of the proposed paper including 4–6 keywords. The last date for submission of abstracts is **10th October 2026 by 05:00 PM**. The Institute intends to send Invitation letters to selected participants by the 15th October, 2026. It is the policy of the Institute to publish the papers not proceedings of the seminars it organizes. Hence, all invited participants will be expected to submit complete papers (in English), hitherto unpublished and original, with citations in place, along with a reference section, to the Convener and copy to the Academic Resource Officer, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla– 171005 by 31st October, 2026.

Guidelines for submission

Font- Times New Roman

Font Size- 12

Paragraph spacing- 1.5

Bibliographical References

- Bibliographical references should be in a consistent style. For detailed instructions we refer to either of the following 3 books: *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *Hart's Rules*, or *Butcher's Copy-editing*. Please cross-check references to see that each reference makes sense and matches the relevant bit in the main text.

Books

- Single Author
Chaudhuri, Amit, *Afternoon Raag*, London: Heinemann, 1993. p72.

Surname, First name, *Title of Book*, Place of Publication: Publisher, (date) and page.

- Multiple Authors
Basu, Tapan, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, and Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts Saffron Flags (Tracts for the Times/1)*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993 and page.

Surname of first Author, First name of first Author and First name of second Author, Surname of second Author etc., *Title of Book*, Place of Publication: Publisher, (date) and page.

Edited Volume

- Single author
George, K.M. (ed.), *Modern Indian Literature: An Anthology, Plays and Prose*, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994 and page.
- Multiple authors
Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Empire Writes Back* [1989], London and New York: Routledge, 1995 and page.

Translated Volume

- Kemal, Yasher (trans. from Turkish by Thilda Kemal), *The Wind from the Plain* [1960], London: Harvill Press, 1989 and page.

Paper in Edited Volume

- Single Author and Single Editor
Masselos, J.C., 'The Khojas of Bombay: The Defining of Formal Membership Criteria During the Nineteenth Century', in *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims*, Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1973.

Surname, First name of Author, 'Title of Paper', in *Title of Book*, First name of Editor Surname of Editor (ed.), Place of Publication: Publisher, (date) and page.

- Single Authors and Multiple Editors
Salomon, C., 'The cosmogonic riddles of Lalan Faqir', in *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, A. Appadurai, F. Korom, and M. Mills (eds), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991 and page.

Surname of Author, First name of Author, 'Title of Paper', in *Title of Book*, First name of first Editor Surname of first Editor and First name of second Editor Surname of second Editor (eds), Place of Publication: Publisher, (date) and page.

Paper in Journal

- Single Author

Bouiller, V., 'The Nepalese State and Gorakhnathi Yogis: The Case of the Former Kingdoms of Dang Valley, 18th-19th Centuries', *Contribution to Nepalese Studies*, 20 (1), 1993, pp. 29-52.

Surname, first name, 'Title of Paper', *Name of Journal*, Volume number (Issue number), (date), pp. 000-0.

- Multiple Authors

Murty, M. N. and R. Ray, 'A Computational Procedure for Calculating Optimal Commodity Taxes with Illustrative Evidence from Indian Budget Data', *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 91(4), 1989, pp.655-70.

Surname of first Author, First name of first Author and First name of second Author Surname of second Author, 'Title of Paper', *Name of Journal*, Volume number (Issue number), (date), pp. 000-0.

Paper in Edited Journal

- Single author

Gaborieau, Marc, 'Life-Cycle Ceremonies among Converted Muslims in Nepal and Northern India', in Islam in Asia, Yohanan Friedmann (ed.), vol. I, *South Asia*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1984 and page.

Unpublished Papers/Mimeographs/Discussion Papers/Working Papers

Chander, P. and L. Wide, 'Corruption and Tax Compliance', mimeo, New Delhi: Indian Statistical Institute, 1989.

Surname of first Author, First name of first Author and First name of second Author Surname of second Author (1991), 'Title of Paper', mimeo, Place: Organization, (date).

Newspaper: Author's Last Name, First Name. "Title of Article." *Name of Newspaper* (City and Province/State of Publication, if not Included in Name), Date of Publication. <https://doi.org/DOI> Number or Name of Database.

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- Example: Schallhorn, Cathlyn. "Chicago." *Britannica*, December 17, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Chicago>
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 - Example: 1. Jack Caulfield, "A Step-by-Step Guide to the Writing Process," *Scribbr*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.scribbr.com/academic-writing/writing-process/>

If there is no author or date:

- Bibliography: "Title of Page." *Website Name*, accessed Month Day, Year. URL.
 - Example: "About the UvA." University of Amsterdam, accessed July 24, 2018. <http://www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva>
- Full Note: "Title of Page," *Website Name*, accessed Month Day, Year, URL.
 - Example: 1. "Catholic News Agency," accessed March 25, 2025, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/>

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