

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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BUDDHAGHOSA

Born India, c. 5th century CE

Died India, c. 5th century CE

Life

From the limited sources available, we can only suggest that Buddhaghosa was born somewhere near Bodh Gaya in north India around the 5th century CE. Although he was born into a Hindu family, Buddhism was very influential at the time, having spread from a minor sect into a major religious movement that was popular with wealthy merchants and kings. It is possible that one of these kings commissioned Buddhaghosa to go to the island of Ceylon because we know that he spent many years there compiling the Buddhist scriptures written in the Pali language. Known as the *Tripitaka* ('Three Baskets'), this compilation is still regarded as the canonical collection for Theravada Buddhism. Buddhaghosa also wrote authoritative commentaries on these voluminous works of philosophy and theology. Legend has it that after twenty years of work, he returned to Bodh Gaya, although some literary evidence exists to suggest that he lived in south India during his final years. His best-known commentary is the *Visuddhimagga*, or *Path of Purification*, a comprehensive summary and analysis of the Theravada understanding of the Buddha's path to liberation.



(fragment of Pali text written on birch bark, date unknown)

Achievements Buddhaghosa's main legacy is that his compilation of the Buddhist scriptures remains the authoritative edition of Theravada texts. These texts were inscribed on palm-leaf manuscripts, which, although long-lasting, are not immune to ants and heat. In other words, without him, the classical text of early Buddhism may never have been so authoritatively compiled. These texts later enabled scholars from other countries to come to Ceylon in order to study the 'original texts', which led to a revitalisation of Buddhism in Burma and India. In recognition of this immense achievement, many legendary biographies of Buddhaghosa were written in later centuries, although they are not considered historically accurate.

List of works

Visuddhimagga (*Path of Purification*, an analysis of the Buddha's path to enlightenment)

Tripitaka (*Three Baskets*, a compilation of Pali language Buddhist texts, with his added commentary)