

**Buddhagosa's Understanding of Meditative Praxis:
with special reference to the 'Seven Stages of Purification' (*satta-visuddhi*)**

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It is well known that the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosa is an exposition of the 'Seven Stages of Purification' (*satta-visuddhi*). The mystery of adopting this spiritual path by Buddhaghosa has not yet been resolved, as the only two instances of exposition concerning this method of treading the path leading to the final liberation, *nibbāna* are found in the Pāli Canon: one is the *Rathavinīta-sutta* (M I 145-151) where these seven purifications are described as successive stages leading to the final goal with each stage constituting the basis for the next stage – this is compared to seven chariots that are used as a relay to cover a long distance to quickly reach the destination; the other is the *Dasuttara-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya* (D III 288) where the seven stages are enumerated as part of the nine stages of purification. This *Dasuttara-sutta*, with two additional 'factors' '*vijjā-pārisuddhi-padhāniyaṅga*' and '*vimutti-pārisuddhi-padhāniyaṅga*,' describes the scheme for the attainment of liberation, *nibbāna*. Both *sutta*-s have their parallels in the Chinese translations of the *Tripitaka* (T I 56a and T I 238c).

Discussing the background story of the *Rathavinīta-sutta*, Bhikkhu Anālayo observes: "... the seven purifications could have been a list of purifications commonly practiced and aspired to among the various contemplative and philosophical traditions in ancient India" (Anālayo: JCBS, Vol. 3, p.135). If his observation is valid, an intriguing question may be raised: Why did Buddhaghosa adopt this concept of 'seven stages of purification' (*satta-visuddhi*) as the main structural scheme for his *Visuddhimagga*? The *Vimuttimaggā*, which was available before Buddhaghosa's time, adopts the scheme of the Four Noble Truths for the progress of insight (Anālayo: Fuyan Buddhist Studies, No. 4, p. 8). This fact suggests that the meditative praxis of the Mahāvihāra tradition, at least by the adoption of the seven stages of purification, became somewhat different from that of the Abhayagiri school.

This paper attempts to examine the reason why Buddhaghosa adopted the seven stages of purification as the representative Theravāda (Mahāvihāra) tradition of meditative praxis. Our methodology is initially to compare and contrast the *Visuddhimagga*'s scheme of the seven stages of purification with similar discussions in his other commentaries. This investigation will bring to light the relationship between Buddhaghosa's understanding of the meditative praxis and that of the Mahāvihāra. A further comparison with other different Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions prevalent in India at the time may also be made.