

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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*Edited by*  
JONARDON GANERI

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## CHAPTER 9

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BUDDHAGHOSA ON THE  
PHENOMENOLOGY OF LOVE  
AND COMPASSION

.....

MARIA HEIM

BUDDHAGHOSA (fifth century CE) was the chief commentator in the Pali tradition. We know virtually nothing of his life except how legendary material remembers him. According to the Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Cūḷavaṃsa*, he was a learned Brahmin born near Bodh Gaya who became a Buddhist monk in order to learn the Abhidhamma system. His genius was recognized in his receiving the monastic name, *Buddhaghosa*, "the voice of the Buddha." He was said to have begun writing commentaries in India, but was sent by his teachers to the Mahāvihāra monastery in Sri Lanka to study and help preserve the ancient Sinhala commentaries. As the chronicle tells us, Buddhaghosa earned the confidence of the Mahāvihāran authorities through the composition of his *Visuddhimagga* and was entrusted with the enormous task of translating the Sinhala commentaries into Pali.<sup>1</sup>

Within the Pali intellectual tradition (called the "Theravada" in modern times, but more accurately referred to in premodern history as the "Mahāvihāra"), Buddhaghosa enjoys a stature second only to the Buddha himself. Buddhaghosa was drawing on a tradition already in place, of course, and one in which others also participated, but he was—at least as far as the textual record regards him—the leading intellectual light. The first of Buddhaghosa's two principal contributions to Pali literature involved editing, translating, and transmitting existing commentaries in ancient Sinhala into the Pali forms that were then preserved. We do not know just how much originality Buddhaghosa brought to this project, as the replaced Sinhala versions were subsequently lost. Moreover, scholars disagree over the extent to which the large body of commentarial work ascribed to him was in fact his, with some arguing that only the commentaries on the four *nikāyas* can be confidently attributed to him.<sup>2</sup> Others have argued that the large degree of textual overlap of portions of commentary across all three main branches of the Pali canon, and an organic and systematic logic across many of the commentaries, suggest his involvement

with the main Abhidhamma and Vinaya commentaries as well. Likely he was a senior scholar in a team of transmitters of earlier material, and the commentaries broadly ascribed to him may most accurately be referred to, as Lance Cousins puts it, the work of “the school of Buddhaghosa.”<sup>3</sup>

Buddhaghosa’s second main contribution is his own independent treatise entitled the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*). Although described in the *Cūḷavaṇṇisa* as a “brief summary” of the entire *tipiṭaka* through a commentary on two Sutta verses,<sup>4</sup> the text is quite long (nearly 800 pages in its English translation). In it we discern most clearly the systematic infrastructure of Buddhaghosa’s thought in how he organized a huge body of material into a methodical whole, and further, into a carefully mapped path of therapeutic practice and soteriology. The text describes itself as a commentary on two verses from the Sutta, the remnant of which is seen in the three key terms that structure the text as a whole. The verses mention three ideas: morality, the development of mind, and insight. These became the main organizing principles and topics of his text: first, he treats *sīla*, the restraint of wrongdoing that constitutes the moral life as the foundation for the rest of the path; second, he describes *samādhi*, the meditation techniques that comprise the concentration of mind that makes possible liberating insight; and finally, that very insight (*paññā*) which is the telos of the entire path.

To bring focus to Buddhaghosa’s distinctive method and philosophical practice with the substantial body of topics of moral and religious development that his work covers, this article centers on his psychology of love, broadly conceived. To be more precise, what I refer to as his psychology of love is described in a grouping of four experiences—loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—collectively called the “sublime abidings” (*brahmāvihāras*). Within the framework of the *Visuddhimagga* these occur together in his *samādhi* section where they are specific techniques for concentrating and cultivating the mind. His interest in these experiences is both phenomenological and therapeutic, we might say, in his meticulous description of human experience and crafting of techniques to direct and shape experience for the realization of freedom. By focusing on the sublime abidings we can come to see not only his distinctive approach to love and allied experiences, but also an illustrative example of how he approached human experience more generally.

I argue here that one of the chief contributions the school of Buddhaghosa makes to Indian thought, and one that has been little appreciated in the field, is its rigorously phenomenological orientation. Perhaps due to its geographical remove (based as it was in Sri Lanka), or perhaps because of a deliberate focus on very different intellectual concerns than those of other Buddhists of the period, the Pali tradition did not actively participate in the philosophical engagements of logic, epistemology, and metaphysics blossoming in India in Buddhaghosa’s day. Its intellectual foci were different, centered on developing ideas about how to read and interpret the Buddha’s words, how to expand the psychological and phenomenological analysis posited by the Abhidhamma, and how to shape that analysis into a path for practical and therapeutic development.

Before turning in earnest to Buddhaghosa’s treatment of the sublime abidings, it is useful to describe the general approach he takes to Buddhist teachings and how he

describes his contributions. As I read him and the earlier tradition that he is transmitting, his approach is best described as phenomenological practice. By this I mean that he did not take the Buddha’s doctrines as metaphysical or ontological statements about what exists or does not exist, but rather as analytical methods for exploring and transforming human experience. This is perhaps most evident and significant in his understanding of the Abhidhamma, a tradition that has often been assumed to be offering an ontological description of reality rather than, as I read it, an analytic method of exploring experience.<sup>5</sup> I share with Nyanaponika Thera a reading of the early Abhidhamma tradition as phenomenological, offering a descriptive account of experience through a distinctive methodology. This approach can be seen as entailing, as Nyanaponika puts it, “two complementary methods: that of analysis, and that of investigating the relations (or the conditionality) of things.”<sup>6</sup> Analysis of phenomena involves breaking down units of experience into their smaller constituents, while investigating the relations of things involves positing particular groupings and networks of phenomena to interpret the dynamic patterns of their interrelatedness and conditionality. Abhidhamma lists, including well-known groupings like the five aggregates or the twelve-linked dependent origination are not, for Buddhaghosa, doctrines laying down final reality, but rather analytic and heuristic tools for interpreting experience.

Buddhaghosa’s school thus emphasizes method rather than doctrine, and analysis rather than metaphysical assertion.<sup>7</sup> For example, the *Atthasālinī*, an Abhidhamma commentary, is very explicit about its interpretative choices and argues that the *tipiṭaka* should be seen as methods (*naya*) for intellectual and religious practice, which are infinite in their study and application and likened to the ocean in vastness.<sup>8</sup> The Abhidhamma is said to be a practice of classification of categories that were present in the *suttas*, but which get fuller interpretative elaboration through its methods.<sup>9</sup> This text also notices that the Abhidhamma listings in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* are not exhaustive, and that they can be interpreted not as final accounts of ultimate reality but rather as methods to encourage further analysis of and additions to the phenomena they begin to list.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Buddhaghosa’s interest in language and scripture is pragmatic; his understanding of the two registers of language, conventional and ultimate, is quite different than the Madhyamaka interpretation of these as attempting to name reality or truth. For Buddhaghosa, the *sammuti/paramattha* distinction is a hermeneutic device to interpret the different kinds of speech the Buddha used to teach: he spoke with conventional (*sammuti*) discourse (*kathā*) in a colloquial idiom on those subjects and to whom it was appropriate, and ultimate (*paramattha*) discourse on topics and to those for whom a technical language was most fitting.<sup>11</sup> Ultimate teaching (*desanā*)—that is, the kind of discourse Abhidhamma texts specialize in<sup>12</sup>—is not an attempt to posit ultimate reality in some final, essential, or ontological way.

As well as phenomenological, Buddhaghosa’s approach may be described as therapeutic and teleological. His description of experience is offered in the service of changing and cultivating it, as the path imagery of the *Visuddhimagga* indicates. My approach to the four sublime abidings entails a careful reading of these experiences as descriptive of key features of Buddhaghosa’s interpretation of human experience, as well as

practices that are to be cultivated to achieve the soteriological ends to which his entire project is aimed.

## THE SUBLIME ABIDINGS

With these considerations of Buddhaghosa's methods in mind, and to demonstrate in practice how they work, this chapter charts his treatment of the definition, classification, and cultivation of the sublime abidings. These items are of substantial import in both the Pali tradition as well as Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions outside of it, but Buddhaghosa's treatment of them is among the most extensive in Indian thought.<sup>13</sup> These are four distinct but related experiences: loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*mudītā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). These items sometimes occur separately, or, in the case of equanimity especially, as part of other groupings, but for the most part they come as a package of four. They are called the four "immeasurables" (*appamañña*) in the Abhidhamma text, the *Vibhaṅga*, and referred to as the *brahmavihāras* in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and *Atthasālinī*. Buddhaghosa's chapter on them in the *Visuddhimagga*, which contains his lengthiest and most subtle treatment of them and is thus the main focus of my inquiries here, calls them *brahmavihāras*.<sup>14</sup>

Before turning to the *Visuddhimagga* and the architecture in which these experiences are understood, some definitions are in order. Why are they called "immeasurables"? The *Vibhaṅga* says that loving kindness is an experience that when cultivated pervades every direction, taking boundless beings as its object.<sup>15</sup> Love is to be gradually developed so that it encounters no limit and stops at no being. The *Sammohavinodanī* says that in addition to pervading limitless beings, loving kindness can pervade even just one being in an immeasurable way.<sup>16</sup> Love is also said to be a practice immeasurable in the sense of "familiarity" (*paṇa*), where the thorough mastery of it involves an ever-increasing expansion of habit and practice in a process that has no end.<sup>17</sup> These experiences are "dwellings" or "abidings" (*vihāra*), because they become *how one lives* (*viharati*).<sup>18</sup> And they are called "sublime" or "divine" (*brahma*) because those who inhabit these experiences are said to be the equals of the *brahmā* divinities in having most excellent and faultless minds<sup>19</sup> or, alternatively, because they were taught by the best of the *brahmā* divinities, that is, the Buddha.<sup>20</sup>

I argue that we can treat the sublime abidings as a multifaceted psychology of love because each of the four in its own way depicts aspects of what in English could fall into the broad category of love. One way to see this, at least initially, is to notice one of Buddhaghosa's descriptions of the four where he explains them through the context of parental love. He says that they are illustrated by a mother with four sons: a little one, a sick child, a youth in his prime, and an adult doing his own thing. Toward the little one she feels loving kindness, wanting him to thrive; toward the sick child, she has compassion, wishing him to be free of illness; toward the youth, she yearns that the happiness of youth endures long; and toward her grown-up son she feels equanimity, not worrying about each and every condition he experiences.<sup>21</sup> These experiences are easily

recognized, even ordinary, feelings we find in mothers; at the same time we can see how they might be cultivated further and their scope expanded. In addition, this way of framing the fourth abiding, equanimity, allows us to see it deployed in this context (and context is always important in this material) as a type of love. As the mother experiences equanimity toward her adult son, it is not indifference or apathy, but the composure or balance (lit., the "middleness," *majjhata*) of an onlooker who sees that there is nothing that needs to be done for him as he makes his own way in the world.<sup>22</sup>

While all four *brahmavihāras* are essential to his psychology of love, Buddhaghosa's most extensive discussion concerns loving kindness since it is in many ways the blueprint for how the other three are discussed, as well as the foundation for the development of the others in a linear sequence of practice. How then is loving kindness (*mettā*) defined? Loving kindness is fourfold: that which is loving in beings (our capacity to love); the act of loving; the state of loving, and the "freedom of a loving heart."<sup>23</sup> This last is highly relevant for the larger therapeutic practice in which these experiences are framed: they are principally about *freedom* from their opposites, in this case the hatred that, in the absence of the opposing force of love, controls and constricts experience. Loving kindness is the experience of having one's mind or heart (the word used can mean both) free from this shackling and enslavement. Its content is a specific thought—"may beings be happy"—a wish that particular, and eventually all, beings be free of hate, affliction, and distress.<sup>24</sup>

Compassion and the others are defined similarly as fourfold—as capacity, act, state, and the freedom each makes possible.<sup>25</sup> Compassion has the particular thought of wishing that those in misery be free of suffering; it is counter to and freedom from cruelty. Sympathetic joy is recognizing happiness in others and sharing in it; it is counter to and freedom from discontent or envy. Equanimity is experiencing a sense of neutrality and equality among beings, a quieting of resentment and approval, and freedom from attachment.<sup>26</sup> It is to be developed only upon the advanced achievement of the first three sublime abidings. As suggested above, *upekkhā* is neither indifference nor absence of feeling (indeed it *is* a feeling, *vedanā*), but rather a composed yet detached "looking on" at the world that is not marked by the joy (*somanassa*) that the others entail.<sup>27</sup>

## LOVE AS CONCENTRATION

To understand further what these experiences are, we must first understand how they are placed within Buddhaghosa's larger schema. Where the deeper psychological aspects of these experiences become most evident is within the meditative framework of concentration in which they are located and developed. While the other-regarding sentiments of love and compassion of the sublime abidings might seem at first glance to be matters of morality (*sīla*), they are in fact, for Buddhaghosa, matters of meditative training, and they belong properly to the concentration (*samādhi*) section of the *Visuddhimagga*. The modern reader may need to take special care to appreciate them not as *prima facie* moral values or virtues, but instead as particular practices of concentration and attention.

In defining these experiences primarily as methods for mental development for serious meditators, Buddhaghosa follows closely the Sutta and Abhidhamma texts, which situate them as part of the practices of the *jhānas*.<sup>28</sup> The *jhānas* are four advanced stages of contemplative experience developed through concentration on a series of calming meditation (*samatha*) subjects, which range from specific colors and physical objects (the *kasinas*) to disgusting things (that is, corpses, used for practices designed to dismantle lust and attachment to the body), and from recollections of the Buddha to mindfulness of death. These are all crafted to cultivate mental training by enhancing certain proclivities present but undeveloped in experience, and by dismantling tendencies that are not beneficial for the therapeutic regime articulated in the path as a whole. They are treated as targeted practices to bring about particular results; the particular subject of meditation prescribed to any given monastic depends on their psychological temperament as discerned by their teacher. The sublime abidings figure in this training practice of concentration as distinctive meditation subjects. By concentrating on each of them one attains gradually the first three of the *jhānas* (for reasons that will become clear shortly, only equanimity permits absorption in the fourth *jhāna*), and thereby arrives at the qualities of concentration and mental freedom the overall path provides.

The *jhānas* are four modes or levels of concentration that can occur while focused on these calming subjects. The Buddha describes them as follows:

Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered and abided in the first *jhāna*, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, I entered upon and abided in the second *jhāna*, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind without applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of concentration. With the fading away as well of rapture, I abided in equanimity, and mindful and fully aware, still feeling pleasure with the body, I entered upon and abided in the third *jhāna*, on account of which noble ones announce: "He has a pleasant abiding who has equanimity and is mindful." With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, I entered upon and abided in the fourth *jhāna*, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.<sup>29</sup>

These "absorptions" in concentration on whatever subject the mind is focused upon depict a step-by-step movement from "applied" and "sustained" thought at first to a second stage of focus free of such thinking; the third step, like the other two, contains a pleasure (*sukha*) compatible with or conditioned by clear mindful awareness and equanimity, but is free of rapture or joy (*pīti*). The final *jhāna* is a further refinement of awareness and equanimity wherein even pleasure is abandoned.

These four levels of concentration may be attained by focusing on the "earth" *kasina*, and in fact, this first *samatha* topic becomes Buddhaghosa's paradigmatic case for how the *jhānas* in general work. As one takes up an image of the earth (usually a circular physical sign of it that one has fashioned) and focuses concentration on it, the meditator gradually (through processes described in detail in chapter 4 in the *Visuddhimagga*)

progresses to these finer and more acute levels of sensory awareness. To sustain a focus on a single object over time until the mind is completely absorbed in it is to gradually be free of the "hindrances" that are the usual thoughts, feelings, and distractions clouding ordinary awareness. At a certain point when doing the earth *kasina* meditation, one need no longer focus on the concrete physical object and can create a "sign" (*nimitta*) or "counterpart sign" (*paṭibhāganimitta*) of the image in one's mind, untethered from the concrete object altogether and greatly expanded so as to pervade all of one's experience.<sup>30</sup> It becomes an entirely mental object, purified of gross materiality and particularity, with which the meditator gradually permeates the entire sphere of his experience, and then beyond it—in fact, expanding the sphere of his awareness boundlessly. The movement of the meditative experience is from concrete, physical, and particular to expansive and universal, and we will see the same trajectory, with the development of a counterpart sign and a gradual expansion and permeation of all experience, in the treatment of the sublime abidings.

This basic prototype of focused concentration is important for interpreting Buddhaghosa's treatment of the sublime abidings because, as he says, it is the model for the work he does with them as meditation subjects.<sup>31</sup> Buddhaghosa recommends that the choice of meditation subject be determined by one's teacher, the "good friend" whom one loves dearly, who knows one well, and from whom only helpful advice is forthcoming.<sup>32</sup> By studying a student's temperament, the teacher will advise on the choice of meditation subject; generally speaking, all people can benefit from practicing two particular meditation subjects: loving kindness and death (suggesting that we all need to address our antipathies with loving kindness and generate urgency about practice by awareness of impending death).<sup>33</sup> But beyond that, one's temperament (greedy, hating, deluded, faithful, intelligent, or speculative) will determine the subject for one's practice.<sup>34</sup>

When setting out to practice loving kindness concentration (the sublime abiding Buddhaghosa treats first and most exhaustively as a paradigm for the other three, and thus our main focus), Buddhaghosa recommends that one consider the practical advantages of becoming pervaded with loving kindness, chief of which is that one becomes forbearing and ceases to be the "prey" of one's own hatred. As in the earth *kasina* practice, one begins with a concrete and particular object—here a specific person whom one knows—on which to focus one's concentration of love. Choosing this first object on which to concentrate love is tricky. He recommends against starting with someone the mediator dislikes, likes too much, or is neutral toward; nor should one begin with a hostile person or a person of the opposite sex. The feelings one has toward such persons can be distracting for various reasons, making it taxing to begin. A meditator will also not make progress focusing love on a deceased person: the object of this meditation must be real, particular, and alive. With whom, then, should one start? Buddhaghosa recommends that one start with oneself. Since the content of loving kindness concentration is the thought "may this being be happy," and Buddhaghosa suggests that this is an easy and uncomplicated wish we all have for ourselves, starting with oneself allows smooth entry into the practice.

Having pervaded one's own self with thoughts of friendliness and good will, the meditator wishing to progress in the practice that Buddhaghosa comes to call "breaking

down barriers," will move beyond self to direct loving kindness to a dearly loved friend, then to a neutral, and finally to a hostile person. It is at this latter point, however, that Buddhaghosa anticipates potential obstructions in the practice; when contemplating an enemy one may well become distracted by resentment, which crowds out the potential for love. This situation requires an extensive set of techniques to remedy, for resentment and anger are, it seems, often quite hard to dislodge.

## TECHNIQUES FOR DISPELLING RESENTMENT

When trying to dismantle anger and hatred for one's enemy, one should first recall the Buddha's admonishing about hate and anger—"to repay angry men in kind is worse than to be angry first"<sup>35</sup>—and then recall that anger toward the enemy only gratifies that enemy since it makes the hater ugly and unfortunate. If this does not work to dismantle the resentment, one should endeavor to discern something "controlled and pure" in the enemy's character, which can be calming when remembered. Surely the enemy must have some decent quality that can be the basis of an incipient admiration? But what if they lack any redeeming quality? Then Buddhaghosa recommends compassion as the only response, since a person so wanting in any self control will suffer tremendously in this life and the next. And feeling compassion for such a person can pave the way to loving them<sup>36</sup>

Should these techniques fail to rid the meditator of distracting anger, one may try additional practices. One may reprove oneself at how unattractive and destructive to oneself one's anger is and how anger is, in fact, one's true enemy. One can recall that anger is bad mental karma, perilous for one's future condition, and counter to the therapeutic path one is on. But if the anger still does not subside (for how persistent and intransigent are our grievances against others!), one should "review the virtues of the Buddha's previous conduct" by recalling specific *jātaka* stories from the vast numbers of previous lives in which the Bodhisatta cultivated the perfections, particularly the perfection of forbearance.<sup>37</sup> Recalling the Bodhisatta's extreme forbearance—his complete forsaking of resentment even when his limbs were torn off by violent kings and he was pierced and punctured by wicked torturers—puts one's own continued nurturing of petty grievances to shame.

Should this practice not suffice, the meditator can change course and reflect on the nature of the round of rebirths and our own and others' participation in it. By the very infinite nature of *samsāra* and the fact that all beings have been cycling through it from beginningless time, we can infer that at various times all beings must have been, in some previous life, our mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, and so on. His language here, translated sensitively by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, is suggestive:

This person, it seems, as my mother in the past carried me in her womb for ten months and removed from me without disgust, as if it were yellow sandalwood, my urine, excrement, spittle, snot, etc. and played with me in her lap, and nourished me,

carrying me about on her hip. And this person as my father went by goat paths and paths set by piles, etc. to pursue the trade of a merchant, and he risked his life for me by going into battle in double array, by sailing on the great ocean in ships and doing other difficult things, and he nourished me by bringing back wealth by one means or another thinking to feed his children. And as my brother, sister, son, daughter, this person gave me such and such help. So it is unbecoming for me to harbor hate for him in my mind.<sup>38</sup>

These considerations depict a striking cognitive therapy that may well radically alter the meditator's relationship with the "enemy." If, in fact, this person was once my mother, she would have done very tender and nurturing things for me. This is not an abstract idea, but a very concrete and specific thought—she would have "removed from me without disgust, as if it were yellow sandalwood, my urine, excrement, spittle, snot, etc." Such selfless acts of care of a mother to her baby or the hardships a father undertakes for his children are at once commonplace and yet vital to our capacities for love. And by allowing a range of family relationships of care to be imagined (brother, sister, son, or daughter), Buddhaghosa makes it possible for perhaps all of us to retrieve some memory or trace of being the recipient of such acts of care, even those for whom such associations with these archetypal models of ideal parenthood may be problematic.

Having depicted these services so poignantly, the work of this contemplation is done: Buddhaghosa need only intimate that it is "unbecoming" to continue harboring hate. It is worth noting how this technique, in just a few short sentences, radically shifts the meditator's subjectivity in two key ways. First, by being encouraged to observe the unseemliness of their hate in the face of such tender nurturance, the meditator must look at themselves a different way, newly sensitive to the ugliness of their current feeling. And second, the contemplation has forced the meditator to see themselves, even if momentarily, as a vulnerable baby or child, entirely dependent upon a caregiver's nurture to survive. Recognizing one's incapacity exposed in the total dependence and helplessness of the human infant—and promoting tenderness toward that vulnerability—may well be important conditions for being loved and loving.

It may be, however, that even this technique is not up to the task of fully removing resentment, and so Buddhaghosa supplies additional strategies. One might at this point recall the benefits of loving kindness, chiefly, "the freedom of a loving heart," that foster easy sleep and sweet dreams; a person liberated from their own hatred finds themselves loved and protected by all, calm, able to concentrate, unconfused, and headed toward the *brahmā* realm after death.<sup>39</sup> While these prudential considerations appeal to the many benefits of being a loving person, even they may not be enough to dispel one's irritation. So Buddhaghosa recommends a further technique called "resolution into elements." This entails breaking down the enemy into the five aggregates that constitute a person, or further, into the material components of the body (head hair, body hairs, nails, etc.) to ask with which part one is angry. If a person may be seen as nothing more than a heap of constantly changing material and mental phenomena, then the anger directed at them can find no footing or basis on which to fix.<sup>40</sup> Note that this technique

relies on a technical “Abhidhammic” method of analysis. This is the first time we have seen Buddhaghosa utilize “ultimate” language in this context; elsewhere Buddhaghosa suggests that understanding the sublime attitudes normally requires a “conventional” idiom.<sup>41</sup>

As a last recourse, should any of the previous strategies fail to dispel the stubborn hatred that can obsess one, Buddhaghosa recommends either the receiving or the giving of a gift to one’s enemy. Here again he invokes a concrete and poignant example, telling briefly of a certain monk furious with another who made him repeatedly shift meditation cells. The angry monk gave the monk he was angry with his own precious almsbowl, itself a gift given him by his mother, whereupon the resentment that had been dogging him vanished. The “supreme power”<sup>42</sup> of generosity is incompatible, it seems, with nurturing hatred.

Lest these various techniques for dispelling hatred be seen as a digression from the purposes at hand, that is, cultivating concentration with loving kindness as an object of focus, we may rather suggest that these strategies of removal and dispelling are the *chief* work of love as it is conceived here. Much, perhaps all, of the morality, concentration, and wisdom Buddhaghosa refines in the *Visuddhimagga*, entails *removal* of hindrances, obstructions, confusions, and toxic experience: moral restraint is a matter of desisting from breaking the moral precepts and avoiding the ten bad actions; meditation is removing the toxic and distracting thoughts and feelings that ordinarily cloud the mind; and insight is the dismantling of ignorance. Much of love, then, is precisely this gradual yet persistent, nitty-gritty, brass-tacks work of removing hatred.

## LOVE AS FREEDOM: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

In the spirit of removal and dismantling, we learn that the next stage of developing the *jhāna* of loving kindness is “breaking down barriers” (*simasambheda*). Having successfully allayed one’s resentment for the hostile person our meditator should reinforce their loving kindness toward each of the four categories of objects—oneself, the beloved friend, the neutral, and the enemy—until they encounter no distinctions, barriers, or limits in how they feel about them. The meditator knows that they have successfully broken down barriers by the following test. Suppose one is with the other three and they are all seized by bandits who demand that the meditator choose one among them to make a blood sacrifice. We might think that the right answer is to offer oneself to the bandits, a kind of self-sacrifice conveying one’s love for the others. Instead, Buddhaghosa says that the monastic who has successfully broken down all barriers would be unable to offer anyone; only in this way has one achieved full and complete impartiality toward self and other.<sup>43</sup> There is no ethic of self-sacrificial love in Buddhaghosa’s thought.

At the success of breaking down barriers, which is in fact the arising of and access to the “sign” (*nimitta*) of this *jhāna* practice, the meditator’s experience lifts off from the particularities of these four people (just as the contemplation on the earth *kasina* goes beyond the actual physical earth disk one has made), and becomes directed towards “beings” undifferentiated and no longer particularized. At this point the first *jhāna* is realized, and, with further cultivation, the second and third *jhānas* will follow.<sup>44</sup> The movement of the experience is from concrete and particular to expansive and universal, described by Buddhaghosa as an “extraordinary transformation” (*vikubbana*) that is made evident in experience that “pervades” (*pharivā*) all directions with loving kindness.<sup>45</sup> This expansive and unimpeded feeling, and more, a whole way of living (*viharati*), is precisely what is meant by freedom in this material: one has freed oneself of the “slavery” (*dāsabya*) of one’s own defilements,<sup>46</sup> which otherwise condition and constrain one’s experience.

Additionally, the idea of pervading love in all directions has important experiential qualities in how one embraces others. The commentary glosses a line in the *Vibhaṅga* that mentions the pervading of love in a manner that is “everywhere, identifying oneself with all, the world possessing all beings.” He says that “identifying oneself with all” refers to “a sameness with self, without making the distinction ‘this is another being,’ and so taking beings [otherwise] divided into low, average, or prominent, friendly, hostile, or neutral, and so on, as oneself.”<sup>47</sup> This is an image of likeness or sameness with the other that counters our usual tendencies to classify and rank others, and further, to see them instead as *not other* than oneself. While Buddhaghosa (importantly) does not expand on the potential moral implications of this vision of equality of self and other and of the dismantling of differences among beings, other thinkers may see in this exercise a resource for cultivating the affective conditions helpful for constructing an ethic of social equality and justice.<sup>48</sup>

## COMPASSION, SYMPATHETIC JOY, AND EQUANIMITY

The remaining sublime abidings offer their own distinctive experiences of freedom: compassion frees us from cruelty (*viheṣā*), sympathetic joy from discontent (*arati*), and equanimity from passion (*rāga*).<sup>49</sup> They are dealt with more briefly than the meditation on loving kindness since they are built upon its foundations, and if meditators encounter hindrances in their regard for beings stemming from annoyance, they are instructed to go back to the loving kindness contemplation to dismantle them. Still, each of the remaining three has its distinctive phenomenology and therapy.

Compassion meditation starts not with a beloved friend, neutral, enemy, or oneself, but rather with a person in abject misery. One should seek out and behold “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 and a mass of maggots oozing from his arms and legs, and moaning.”<sup>50</sup> Again, one must start with immediate and natural feelings evoked by the concrete object of this contemplation: who could fail to be moved by such a sight? But Buddhaghosa notes that it may be difficult to come by the helpless and wretched object of compassion just described (we must hope such sights are rare). If the meditator cannot locate such a person—and one must attend to the actual *sight* of this suffering—he should seek out a convicted criminal, an evil-doer eating his last meal before being led to the gallows. That the person is an evil-doer is not an obstacle to compassion; in fact, it is further condition for it. It is not just undeserved suffering that will easily stir our compassion, but perhaps even more so that of the convicted criminal awaiting untold torment in future lives for his crimes. From there one gradually expands one’s compassion outward to a sphere embracing eventually all beings, which entails recognizing more and more subtle forms of suffering that sooner or later it is our lot to experience. Even those apparently fortunate among us will not evade, eventually, the loss of our loved ones, health, and, ultimately, lives.<sup>51</sup> Like the others, this meditation requires a great deal of attention, but here it is attention in particular to suffering in all its forms and the development of a strong yearning to ameliorate or eradicate it.

What about sympathetic joy? When trying to arouse sympathetic joy one takes the joy one feels when something good has happened to a loved one and extends the scope of that feeling to a neutral person and then an enemy.<sup>52</sup> This exercise counters the envy and discontent that normally afflict us and replaces these with happiness. It is an active and expansive quest for happiness and joy in the experiences of others through attending to their successes and triumphs. One should look for happiness in the world and come to share it. I have elsewhere compared this experience to Adam Smith’s treatment of the moral sentiment of sympathy, in its shared interest in the joy found in fellow feeling.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, and only on the firm foundation of mastering these first three, the *jhānic* practitioner may turn to equanimity. In a fascinating way this experience pulls back from the happiness and pleasure taken in the forms of love developed in the first three, which are now considered “dangers because they are associated with desires for beings (such as ‘may they be happy’), because their practices have proximity to aversion and attraction, and because they retain a solid connection to joy.”<sup>54</sup> Equanimity still entails looking on, but one does so with an impartiality that brings peace (*santa*); it is not looking away in apathy or indifference, although we may have reached the edges of what we can mean by “love.” The breaking down of barriers it effects is coming to see all beings—dear and despised alike—as neutrals.<sup>55</sup> Only in this state is the fourth *jhāna*, itself an experience of equanimity, attained.

The foregoing accounts of the sublime abidings offer highly textured phenomenological description, with close attention to their affective and somatic dimensions. For example, Buddhaghosa is deeply interested in the feeling valences of these experiences in their deliveries of joy, happiness, and peace. And somatically,

we learn that loving kindness toward those we dearly love “makes the heart swell”<sup>56</sup> and compassion causes “the trembling of the heart.”<sup>57</sup> These experiences are also to be known by various hermeneutic devices and glosses that are extended to describe their phenomenology. According to a standard fourfold definitional tool of the Pali exegetes, each sublime abiding has a particular characteristic, function, way it manifests in experience, and proximate cause. For example, compassion’s characteristic is “effecting the removal of suffering,” its function is “not bearing another’s suffering,” its manifestation is “the absence of cruelty,” and its proximate cause is “seeing the helplessness of beings overcome by suffering.” Further, “it succeeds when it allays cruelty, but fails when it generates grief.”<sup>58</sup> This last is important in that compassion must not slide into grief or sorrow at the other’s suffering, but is about the successful subsiding of grief.

Finally, additional phenomenological intricacies are parsed in a distinction between “near” enemies and “far” enemies of each experience. A near enemy carries the sense of a neighboring experience that the abiding is in danger of falling into, while the far enemy is an experience counter to and incompatible with it that must be eradicated before it can find a footing. In accordance with what we have just seen, compassion’s near enemy is grief or sorrow (it may come close to sorrow, but is lost if it becomes sorrow), while its distant enemy is cruelty. The near enemy of loving kindness is sensual desire (*rāga*), since both loving kindness and desire involve seeing good qualities; its enemy, as we might expect, is hatred. Sympathetic joy is imperiled by its near enemy, sensory joy based on valuing earthly goods for oneself instead of joy based on wanting good things for others; and its far enemy is discontent. Lastly, equanimity is threatened by ordinary indifference as its close enemy, and attraction and aversion as its distant enemies.<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that the sublime abidings are, perhaps first and foremost, “four kinds of attention to beings,” as the *Atthasālinī* puts it.<sup>60</sup> This attention is realized through careful *looking at* and *seeing* specific beings in their concrete reality. The techniques described in these pages require a discipline of vision, eyes making contact with a real person. While each sublime abiding is further cultivated by imaginative practice based on this attention to the other, it begins with careful study of the person in front of one and his or her particular conditions. As the techniques for looking closely develop they allow the falling away of the obscuring blinders that disfigure our experience of others and which are based on our resentments (or cruelties, jealousies, passions, and so on) and the distortions these engender. The work of love is training attention in a manner that clears away the hindrances and obstacles that block love and, ultimately, freedom.

The triad of connections linking *attention*, *love*, and *freedom* on these pages recalls Iris Murdoch’s philosophy of love. She too is interested in “good vision,” which she

defines as “unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention.”<sup>61</sup> Such vision is a system of attention whose direction is “outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world.” And for her too “the ability so to direct attention is love.” Even more striking for our purposes is her connecting the vision consisting of love to the exercise of freedom: “it is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists.” Freedom is seeing clearly in a manner not conditioned, narrowed, or obscured by “the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images,” “itself a powerful system of energy,” that can perhaps best be counteracted by the “attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love.”<sup>62</sup> Buddhaghosa too thought that since we are long used to the “slavery” of the defilements, only the rigorous work of love, seeing others differently, can emancipate us.

Buddhaghosa suggests that further techniques are required to dismantle our resentments through deploying devices that can alter our perspectives in various ways. We might take a long view of the trajectory of time and its implications for relationships, for example, by imagining the possibility of the other as one’s caregiver in a previous life when one was a vulnerable infant. This radically destabilizes the sense of the other as, in some fixed and final way, an enemy, and equally importantly, the sense of oneself as autonomous and self-contained. Another device for destabilizing our reifications of others is the dismantling of the “selfhood” of the other, when one sees that a person is nothing more than a collection of changing parts on which it becomes very difficult to affix one’s grievances. Finally, Buddhaghosa, ever the pragmatic and humane realist, allows that all of these devices to shift perspective and imagination could fail, and should that happen, one can always give a gift. This physical act of giving something precious to an “enemy” profoundly and almost mysteriously unseats one’s resentment.

The foregoing treatment of Buddhaghosa illuminates not only a nuanced and systematic psychology and therapy of love, but is intended also to illustrate this early Pali phenomenological approach. This orientation constitutes a rather uncommon and easily overlooked scholarly enterprise in the history of thought in its rigorously *ameta-physical* phenomenological practice. One of Buddhaghosa’s major contributions to Indian philosophy is his teaching us to read him, and the Abhidhamma tradition on which his school commented, in phenomenological terms, rather than as ontological commitments.

An important dimension of recognizing Buddhaghosa’s philosophical contributions requires expanding our sense of the scope of philosophical discourse in premodern South Asia. While the contestatory environment of epistemological, metaphysical, and theological debate in India produced an analytic rigor perhaps unmatched in other philosophical contexts, these were not the only sites for philosophical expression in India. By focusing on one of India’s foremost phenomenological traditions, we gain entry to another mode of philosophical inquiry, one that explores with great sensitivity and nuance the subtle workings of experience.

## ABBREVIATIONS

A	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
AA	<i>Aṅguttara-aṭṭhakathā (Manorathapūraṇī)</i>
D	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
DA	<i>Dīgha-aṭṭhakathā (Sumangalavilāsini)</i>
Dhs	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī</i>
Dhs-a	<i>Dhammasaṅgaṇī-aṭṭhakathā (Atthasālinī)</i>
Kv-A	<i>Pañcappakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā</i>
M	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
MA	<i>Majjhima-aṭṭhakathā (Papañcasūdanī)</i>
S	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vibh-a	<i>Vibhaṅga-aṭṭhakathā (Sammohavinodanī)</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>

## NOTES

1. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 37.215–248; see Wilhelm Geiger, trans., *Cūḷavaṃsa: Being the More Recent Part of the Mahāvāṃsa*, trans. from the German by Christian Mabel Duff Rickmers (London: Pali Text Society, 1929), 22–26.
2. Lance Cousins, “The Case of the Abhidhamma Commentary,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36/37 (2015): 392.
3. Cousins, “Case of the Abhidhamma Commentary.”
4. *Cūḷavaṃsa* 37.235; see Geiger, *Cūḷavaṃsa*, 25.
5. There are many examples of scholars assuming (rather than arguing) that the Pali Abhidhamma is an ontological statement of reality, as for example, Westerhoff, when he conflates all Abhidharma/Abhidhamma traditions and describes them as united by a “common core of philosophical principles” that include: an effort to identify “primary existent objects” as “ultimately real” and to identify these ultimate reals as things that have “an intrinsic nature,” that is, “properties [they have] independent of anything else,” which “exist no matter what, without depending on the existence of any other dharma or on any conceptualizing mind”; Jan Westerhoff, “Metaphysical Issues in Indian Buddhist Thought,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven Emmanuel, pp. 129–150 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 130. For another recently published and quite typical example, see Amber Carpenter (*Indian Buddhist Philosophy* [Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013]), which also collapses all Abhidharma/Abhidhamma traditions and reads them through a Madhyamaka critique of *dharma* ontology.
6. Nyanaponika Thera, *Abhidhamma Studies: Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998), 21.

7. This school referred to itself as “Analysts” (“Vibhajjavāda”) (Vibh-a 130; Vism 522, 711). In so describing themselves it is not clear whether they were simply indicating a proper name for their sectarian identity, or if they were suggesting something distinctive about their method “as those who advocate analysis.” Rupert Gethin suggests that the former is more likely (“Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin? Buddhist Identity in the Pali Commentaries and Chronicles,” *How Theravada is Theravada?* ed. Peter Skilling et al., pp. 1–63 [Chiang Mai, Silksworm Press, 2012], 15). Chandra Shekhar Prasad, on the other hand, thinks that something of the Vibhajjavādins’ “indifference to metaphysical speculations,” as against the more metaphysical leanings of the Sarvāstivādins, is implicit in their choosing this term to identify themselves (“Theravāda and Vibhajjavāda: A Critical Study of the Two Appellations,” *East and West*, 22, no. 1/2 [March 1972]: 101–113, quotation 112). On Vibhajjavāda as a sectarian name, see also Lance Cousins, “On the Vibhajjavādins: The Mahīṃsāsaka, Dhammaguttaka, Kassaiya and Tambapaṇṇiya Branches of the Ancient Theriyas,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2001): 131–182.
8. Dhs-a 11. See also Pe Maung Tin, trans., *The Expositor (Atthasālinī)* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1999), 14. All abbreviations are those of the Pali Text Society, and all translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own, but I also include the page number of the English translations of these texts.
9. Dhs-a 2–3. See also Tin, *Expositor*, 4.
10. Dhs-a 132, as just one example of where the commentary adds phenomena (*dhamma*) to an existing *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* list of phenomena. See also Tin, *Expositor*, 174.
11. DA.ii.383; KvA.34; see also MA.i.137–39 and AA.i.94–95.
12. Dhs-a 21. See also Tin, *Expositor*, 26.
13. The four experiences are mentioned and described variously in other ancient Indian traditions such as the *Yoga Sūtras* (1.33; 3.23), the Jain *Tattvārtha Sūtra* of Umāsvāti (Maurice Winternitz, “Problems of Buddhism,” *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, n.s. 2, no. 1 [1936]: 53), and the medical text the *Caraka Saṃhitā* (Dagmar Wujastyk, *Well-Mannered Medicine* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], 110).
14. Vism IX. The material in this chapter of the *Visuddhimagga* contains the fullest expression of his treatment of these experiences; when dealing with the *brahmavihāras* the commentaries refer the reader to the *Visuddhimagga*’s discussion or quote sections from it. There are also shorter commentaries on them in *Sammohavinodanī* (chapter 8) and the *Atthasālinī* (chapter 8). Buddhaghosa is also influenced (as he explicitly states on several occasions, such as Vism 309) by the canonical *Paṭisambhidāmagga*’s chapter 14.
15. Vibh 272; see Paṭhamakyaw Ashin Thiṭṭila, trans., *The Book of Analysis (Vibhaṅga)* (London: Pali Text Society, 1969), 357.
16. Vibh-a 377; see Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli, trans., *The Dispeller of Delusion (Sammohavinodanī)* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1986), 113.
17. Vibh 272; Vibh-a 378 and Vism 309. This sense of a mind pervading all directions and inhabiting them with loving kindness is from the Suttas on which the Abhidhamma text and commentaries are clearly relying (as, for example, D.i.251).
18. Vism 309; see Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli, trans. *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, 5th ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), 301.
19. Vism 320; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 313.
20. Dhs-a 192; see Tin, *Expositor*, 258.
21. Vism 320; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 314.
22. Vism 321; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 314.

23. Literally, “the liberation of mind that is loving kindness” (*mettā cetovimutti*). Vibh 272; see Thiṭṭila, *Book of Analysis*, 358.
24. Vism 309–310; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 302.
25. Vibh 273–276; see Thiṭṭila, *Book of Analysis*, 359–362.
26. Vism 318; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 310–311.
27. Dhs-a 196; see Tin, *Expositor*, 196.
28. The four *brahmavihāras* are first mentioned in the *suttas* (though they are not called such) in many occurrences, all formulaic in their presentation (see, for example, D.i.251); the group of four acquires the label “*brahmavihāras*” in the *Theragathā* (67), *Petakopadesa* (138), and the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* (Dhs 251).
29. Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikāya)* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 104–105 (M.i.21–22).
30. Vism 125–126, 152–153; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 124–125, 148–149.
31. Dhs-a 192; see Tin, *Expositor*, 257.
32. Vism 98; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 98.
33. Vism 97; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 97. Buddhaghosa says that meditations on the disgusting (corpses) are recommended by some authorities as generally useful (since presumably people generally are afflicted by physical desire).
34. Vism 101–102; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 101.
35. Vism 298, quoting S.i.162; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 291.
36. Vism 299–300; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 292.
37. Vism 302; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 294.
38. Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 298 (Vism 305).
39. Vism 305, quoting from A.v.342; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 298.
40. Vism 306; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 298–299.
41. MA.i.139.
42. Vism 306 (*mahānubhāvaṃ*); see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 299.
43. Vism 307; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 299–300.
44. Vism 307; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 300. The first three *brahmavihāras* will not go to the fourth *jhāna*, entailing as it does a certain equanimity that these, still containing pleasure (*sukha*), do not contain (Buddhaghosa discusses this matter in Vism 322; Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 315).
45. Vism 308; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 300.
46. Vism 305; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 298.
47. Vibh 272 (*sabbadhi sabbattatāya sabbāvantaṃ lokanti*); see Thiṭṭila, *Book of Analysis*, 358. Vibh-a 377 (*sabbattatāyāti sabbesu hina-majjhimukkaṭṭha-mitta-sapatta-majjhattādi-ppabhedesu attatāya ‘ayaṃ parasatto’ti vibhāgaṃ akatvā attasamatāyāti vuttaṃ hoti; atha vā sabbattatāyāti sabbena cittabhāvena īsakampi bahi avikkhipamānoti vuttaṃ hoti*); see Nāṇamoli 1996, 113–114. Alternatively, he suggests, “identifying oneself with all” can mean entirely suffusing “one’s mind without being distracted from outside, even by something small.”
48. Although he does not use Buddhaghosa, Jay Garfield attempts just such a constructivist project of taking Buddhist ideas of compassion as a foundation for a moral outlook on which to build a liberal account of human rights (*Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross Cultural Interpretation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 186–205).
49. Vism 318; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 311.
50. Translated by Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 306–307 (Vism 314).

51. Vism 315; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 307.
52. Vism 316; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 308.
53. Maria Heim, "Toward a Wider and Juster Initiative: Recent Comparative Work in Buddhist Ethics," *Religion Compass* 2 (2007): 107-119.
54. Vism 317; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 309 (*sukkhitaṃ hontūti ādivasena satta-kelāyana-manasikāra-yuttattā paṭighānunaya-samīpacārittā somanassa-yogena oḷārikattā ca purimāsu ādinavaṇi*).
55. Vism 317; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 309.
56. Vibh-a 378; see Nāṇamoli, 1996, 114.
57. Dhs-a 192; see Tin, *Expositor*, 258.
58. *Dukkhāpanayanākāra-ppavatti-lakkhaṇā karuṇā para-dukkhāsahana-rasā avihimsā-paccupaṭṭhānā dukkhābhībhūtānaṃ anāthabhāva-dassana-padaṭṭhānā. Vihimsupasamo tassā sampatti sokasambhavo vipatti* (Vism 318; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 310).
59. Vism 319; see Nāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, 311-312.
60. Dhs-a 195 (*catubbidhoyeva sattesu manasikāro*); see Tin, *Expositor*, 262, who translates this as "the fourfold work of the mind in relation to others."
61. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 64.
62. Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 65.

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