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*The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind,
Intention, and Agency*

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A Review of *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency*

Dhivan Thomas Jones¹

The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency. By Maria Heim. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, ISBN 978-0-19-933104-8 (paperback), \$35.00.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading. The main title, “The Forerunner of All Things,” alludes to the first *pada* of *Dhammapada* stanzas one and two, “Mind is the forerunner of all things” (*manopubbāgamā dhamma*). A reader might therefore expect an explanation of this provocative thought, and a discussion of “mind” (*manas*). However, although there is some discussion of mind, it is not at all the focus of the book. The subtitle, “Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention and Agency,” suggests a study of the great fifth-century Theravādin commentator, Buddhaghosa, but again he is not the focus of this book. He is more like the special guest, or preferred commentarial perspective, in a book the theme of which, as the cover blurb (if not the title) makes clear, is “intention” (*cetanā*). There is also some discussion of “agency,” to which I will return in my conclusion.

Heim introduces her theme by quoting the Buddha’s well-known words: “it is intention (*cetanā*) that I call action (*kamma*); intending, one

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acts by body, speech and mind' (A.iii.415)" (3), noting how, in its religious context, this identification of action with intention "ethicized the universe" (quoting Richard Gombrich). What remains is to discuss what the Buddha meant by "intention." Heim next discusses Pierre Hadot on how to read ancient authors, and brings in Foucault to help explain how Buddhaghosa is more an authorial function than an actual author, but because neither Hadot nor Foucault studied ancient Buddhist texts their appearance feels a little forced (and they do not reappear). Happily, Heim moves on to her main theme, discussing past translations of *cetanā*, and settling on "intention" as "a volitional process that intends, initiates, and directs action toward fulfilling a goal" (21), and then contrasting this conception with comparable Western conceptions of will, especially contrasting it with the Augustinian notion of the "free will," the aims and assumptions of which notion are quite different to the Buddhist notion of "intention."

Thence follow the four chapters of the book, each exploring "intention" in a different kind of Theravādin Buddhist literature, namely, *Sutta*, *Abhidhamma*, *Vinaya*, and narrative (such as *Jātaka*). To this reviewer's mind, the strength of this book is the lively pursuit of the theme of intention across and between such different genres, noticing how the identification of action with intention plays out in each. The first chapter explores the role of intention in the *suttas*, how it stands at the center of a complex construction (*saṅkhāra*) of experience: "*cetanā* works with and arranges our psychological factors, motivations, and feelings to create all of our experience in *saṃsāra*" (80). Such intention can be good (*kusala*), bad (*akusala*), or neither, resulting in corresponding experiences and corresponding *kammic* results. An interesting conundrum that follows from this analysis is that *arahants* have put an end to *kamma* and its results, yet *arahants* surely have intentions. The commentators explain such intentions as *kiriya*, meaning that they do not involve action or result.

However, although the concept of *cetanā* in relation to kamma and rebirth is admittedly difficult, I was not entirely convinced by some details of Heim's account. On page 39 we learn that Buddhaghosa glosses *cetanā* at A.iii.415 like this: "here *cetanā* should be taken in the sense of arranging, in that it collects everything together". (The Pāli is *idha sab-basaṅgāhikā saṃvidahanacetanā gahitā*.) In the process of explaining this thought in relation to the three "doorways" of body, speech, and mind, Heim goes on to say on page 41 that Buddhaghosa specifies "that *cetanā* is the accumulating of what should be collected together at the three doorways of action." However, how can intention have the function of "accumulating"? What can this mean? In a note, Heim explains "'accumulating' is a specialized sense of *āyūhana*, connected with the processes of 'making a heap, making a pile' (*rāsiṃ karoti piṇḍaṃ karoti*)." Heim goes on to explain, "accumulating indicates a key function of *cetanā* of gathering together other mental factors in initiating action." Still unsure about what this meant, I consulted the sources that Heim gives in this note for the specialized sense of *āyūhana* as "accumulating." She cites Margaret Cone's *Dictionary of Pāli*, Vol. 1, page 323. But the definition of *āyūhana* given there is not "accumulating" but "thrusting towards; exertion, straining after; pursuance, working at." Heim also cites a note in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (note 2 on page 342) in which he explains that *āyūhana* acquires a technical sense of "accumulation" in the commentarial literature, although it means "being strained." Bhikkhu Bodhi does not explain, however, what "accumulation" means or why *āyūhana* should mean it. Heim also cites Devdas, *Cetanā and the Dynamic of Volition in Theravāda Buddhism*, pages 345–349, in which the author discusses how to understand in what sense the function of *cetanā* is *āyūhana*. Devdas concludes, however, that the translation (i.e. by previous translators like Ñāṇamoli) of *āyūhana* as "accumulation" is misleading because it has the connotation of a "heaping up" of kamma, which was denied by the Theravādins. Instead, she says, "the translation of *āyūhana* as 'accumulation' should be interpreted, not as appropriating and preserving something so that it continues to exist, but as the production of a multiplicity of deeds that entail manifold karmic conse-

quences and bring about rebirth” (348), and, most usefully, “*āyūhana* signifies the mind’s function of striving to garner the necessary mental resources in order to produce an abundance of goal-oriented acts” (348–349). Devdas hence preserves the sense of “striving” which is the actual meaning of *āyūhana*. And with Devdas’s help I began to understand how, according to Buddhaghosa, the function of intention is an effortful straining or striving that arranges and collects mental factors, whereas I could not understand how it is an “accumulating.” Heim restates the view that *cetanā* means *āyūhana* in the sense of “accumulation” on page 49 and in note 44, again with what seemed to me insufficient discussion of the problems involved, both in the Pāli and regarding what “accumulating” means in relation to “intention” in English.

The second chapter, on intention in the *Abhidhamma*, offers a useful introduction to the *Abhidhamma* project as a “moral phenomenology” of mind and mental events, with special attention to the manifestation of intention as that which organizes experience and action. The function of intention is said to be *āyūhana*, again translated here “accumulating,” despite the fact that, as Heim goes on to explain (104), intention is said to be like a landowner who takes strong men (the other mental events) and energetically puts them to work. I would have thought it obvious that this energetic organizing and striving is exactly the function of intention as *āyūhana*, which thus might not be best translated “accumulating.” It is also curious to notice that Heim attributes the simile of the landowner and his men to Buddhaghosa, whereas the text itself (*Aṭṭhasālinī* 111) attributes the simile to the “ancients” (*porāṇā*). In this way, even Buddhaghosa’s appearance as a special guest interpreter is here something less than it seems, because Buddhaghosa, as a commentator, was the culmination of a long commentarial tradition, from which he did not necessarily try to distinguish himself.

The third chapter, on intention in the *Vinaya* literature, shifts to the role of intention in the life of a monastic, especially in regard to the role of intention (deliberate action) in assessing culpability for breaking

the rules of conduct. Heim shows her strengths as an interpreter of the role of stories in presenting the context for the establishment of rules, as she discusses the four *pārājikas*, or rules the breach of which lead to exclusion from the monastic order (killing, stealing, sexual intercourse, and boasting of unattained spiritual attainments). Buddhaghosa appears in this context as a sympathetic commentator upon a tradition that aimed to instill a moral education. Heim's attentive interpretation of the stories associated with each rule brings out how they present, not grossly unethical monks and nuns, but monastics who have, for one or another reason, understandably, though mistakenly, thought it best to act in a way which the Buddha then decides to rule against. In this way the *Vinaya* literature becomes a resource for the communal training of intentions.

Heim's attractive and sympathetic hermeneutic of *Vinaya*, an otherwise difficult genre, continues in her fourth chapter on stories. She shows how the extensive collection of stories attached to *Dhammapada* and *Jātaka* verses illustrates the Buddhist teachings in subtle ways: "the most essential way narratives may be said to develop our understanding of intention action is that they render actions *intelligible*" (183). She develops this theme through an interpretation of several delightful stories. A point to which she often returns is how intention, in these stories, is a "dialogical phenomenon" (189), an organization of experience initiated as much by others as by oneself. This is a powerful insight, though surprisingly Heim does not relate it back to a discourse (A.ii.158–160) she had discussed in chapter one (40–45) in which the Buddha teaches that one's experience may be touched by the intentions of others, and on which Buddhaghosa had usefully commented that people do things "aroused and commanded by others" (44).

The book's contribution to a discussion of Buddhist ethics is to show how intention, for Theravāda Buddhism, or at least for the texts she discusses, is interwoven with past actions, present mental events, an educative moral culture, and a dialogical play of one's own intention

with that of others. Buddhist ethical discourse does not, therefore, concern or encourage the moral autonomy of a sovereign rational agent, or assess morality in those terms. Although this seems a very reasonable interpretation, Heim's engagement with Western philosophical ethics amounts mostly to pulling out some quotes from authors like Iris Murdoch (219–220) against a philosophical view that she does not like. There is some attempt at comparative philosophy here, but no argument as such. Heim makes clear her antipathy to the interpretation of *cetanā* as a sovereign will, comparable to the conscience of a rational agent, and she criticizes unnamed Buddhist scholars who propose such a thing (30). However, who are these straw men? If they exist, I should think they would point out how the Buddha himself pointed out our autonomous agency (A.iii.337–338), in contrast to the idea that we are determined by past *kamma* (A.i.173–174), and how the conception of action as intention (*cetanā*) surely puts the Buddha's teaching into some kind of relationship with modern traditions of ethical thought (like existentialism) extolling individual freedom and responsibility.

In conclusion, Maria Heim's new book is a rich exploration of the concept of "intention" (*cetanā*) across four genres of Theravādin literature. Its main strength is its breadth of concern and the connections that emerge from a broad approach. It is perhaps less astute on matters of philosophical and scholarly detail, and will disappoint anyone expecting a study of Buddhaghosa.