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ASOKA AND ENGAGED BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

Our attention is focused on the Buddhist deeds that King Asoka performed when he became a Buddhist about 261-260 BCE. His Buddhist acts include reorganizing the Buddhist Sangha, the construction of stupas to direct pilgrims to Buddhist holy locations, and the erection of stone pillars for Buddha's monument. Asoka significantly contributed to the Sangha by establishing the Pataliputra Council, one of its governing bodies. We look at Asoka's Dhamma policy to see what it says about the rights of humans and animals. The practice of applying the teachings of the Buddha to daily concerns to find solutions to such challenges is known as engaged Buddhism.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the reign of Asoka, the Dhamma policy was essential in reducing tensions between a wide variety of religions. Surprisingly, the Dhamma Policy emphasizes tolerance, which people of all religious beliefs can agree with. Forbearance may be broken down into two distinct categories: tolerance for persons and tolerance toward people's opinions. Because Asoka was the one who put the Dhamma into practice, the primary focus of this chapter will be on the issues raised. The principle of social responsibility underlies Dhamma's policy. The Dhamma's approach is based on moral values, and each faith should be shown the same respect. We can call that is engaged Buddhism in his time. Research will be conducted extensively on the history of Emperor Asoka and the Maryan dynasty, with an emphasis on the following facts war, trade, agriculture, and economic activity, socioeconomic problems, post-war conflicts, the need to unify to develop society.



2. Asoka became a great Buddhist Follower

Emperor Asoka was a member of the Mauryan dynasty. He was the grandson of Chandragupta, the first king of the Mauryan dynasty, and he ruled for 36 years. Chandragupta got his start in the political world around the year 321 B.C. Asoka was a devout adherent of Buddhism, as shown by several edicts inscribed into rock surfaces during his reign. Later in his life, Asoka converted to Buddhism. Unexpectedly, he became a Buddhist in the first year of his rule, the ninth year of his reign. This marked the beginning of his power. During his fight with the country of Kalinga, he was responsible for a significant amount of death and devastation, and he felt awful about what he had done. Following that event, the only thing that continues to direct the king's life is his observance of the Buddhist precepts.

Emperor Asoka was widely regarded as one of the most influential leaders in history. His influence in India has resulted in a variety of different effects. It is common knowledge that the government of India has adopted the Asoka emblems, and it is also common knowledge that the concepts of Asoka lie at the core of a significant amount of contemporary Indian political philosophy. Throughout Indian

history, he was both an aggressive and a peace-loving ruler. His hand was covered in blood due to the fight; his mind was distracted by the need to conquer and possess, but on the other side, he was a king of shame, a king of preaching peace via the teachings of the Buddha with all of his power.

3. Engaged Buddhism through Asoka's Dhamma Policy

Applying the Buddha's teachings to one's everyday life to resolve societal difficulties is the practice known as engaged Buddhism. As some academics have done, it is challenging to assert that engaged Buddhism is an entirely new kind of Buddhism. The method of Buddhism is more courageous and dignified, even though some people want to spend their retirement years free from disturbance and noise. Even if he meditates in a distant place, a monk practicing Buddhism is expected to have a certain amount of initial material conditions supporting spiritual attainment. While the Buddha could not liberate his own life from his day's social and economic restraints, he did inspire others to do so.

As we can see, Asoka was entirely of contrasting elements and perspectives. In the present day, the conflict continues, and military national leaders continue to exist, and innocent civilians, have been slain in numerous countries around the world. Buddhism is practised in our world, yet no policy or global leader has ever been able to end war or resolve complex disputes like Emperor Asoka. The intellectual arrives at the following five hypotheses on the nature of problem-solving principles:

First, given the interconnected nature of the world's problems, it is only possible to address them in collaboration. Ahimsa, which translates to "non-killing", is the second principle that may serve as a valuable basis for finding solutions to problems. Third, the human ability to develop mentally, physically, and cognitively leads to the belief that the issues may be solved. Fourth, to identify and implement solutions, it is necessary to understand the world as it already exists, devoid of illusions, and rely on all scientific and humanist information available. Fifth, the propagation of universal friendliness, compassion for those suffering, the sharing of joys, and a solid determination to improve the quality of life for all people are all aspects of Buddhism that may contribute to alleviating human suffering.

The question that must be answered is how Buddhism and the world's leaders can work together to find a solution to the global challenge. This challenges the world's leaders, Buddhists, and especially the Buddhist Sangha. Due to the complexity of this subject, substantial investigation is required. This thesis aims to illustrate how Emperor Asoka successfully implemented Buddhist thought after the end of the conflict and the struggle.

Asoka is aware that the study of politics has developed into its

independent discipline, moving outside the purview of religious instruction. The state is the natural tool for political expression, and it is customary for the monarch to assume leadership responsibilities for the state. The public good and the national good are seen as being synonymous, even though royal authority is not subject to arbitrary interpretation. Buddhism was not only an additional faith that existed in the background of civilization. It resulted from a massive movement for change that impacted many different facets of life, ranging from individual perspectives to social ideas. As a knowledgeable king, Asoka would have been required to respond to such a dramatic new turn of events, especially after the struggle. Reconsidering the life of Emperor Asoka, one of the world's most amazing rulers, to lend an awakened voice to the process of making our world a better place has become an appealing topic and a popular assignment for academic scholars worldwide. This is because the life of Emperor Asoka is said to have been an essential factor in the development of Buddhism.

4. The contribution of Asoka to Engaging Buddhism

Asoka, the most powerful of the Mauryan emperors who dominated the ancient Indian subcontinent, plays a crucial role in both the historical and legendary accounts of the early Buddhist community's development into a global religion. He is known as the "Great Asoka". The historic reign of Asoka, which lasted from around 268 to 232 BCE, laid essential structural foundations for the eventual growth of the South Asian empire and the transregional Buddhist network. His teachings and legacy continue to significantly influence Buddhist politics and ceremonies, even in modern times. In the form of proclamations made in Asoka's voice and written on rocks and stone slabs, historians can access beneficial data in recreating Asoka's history. In addition, ornately carved pillars have been found throughout what was once the kingdom of Asoka. This empire stretched from the central region of India to the Northwest Frontier province of Pakistan.

The first written documents to have survived from South Asia, were inscribed in the vernacular language (*Prakrit*) of Magadha (Northeast India). In this region, Asoka resided and ruled. He was modified appropriately in several areas where they were etched or erected (one of them also appeared in Aramaic and Greek). Asoka intended for them to be read out loud, declaring to all his people in a language that they could understand his laws, rules, choices, and religious-political philosophy. The Dhamma (Pali; Skt., *Dharma*; Pkt., *Dhama*) or "righteousness" is the fundamental concept that underpins the philosophy expressed in these inscriptions. Asoka said that he attained his rule by upholding this ideal. This dhamma should be associated with the mainly Buddhist sense of the word, which means doctrine, truth, and the teachings of the Buddha. Alternatively, it could imply Asoka's secular philosophy.

It is much debated and unresolved, as is whether he was genuinely or exclusively Buddhist in personal practice, given his generous support of non-Buddhist (*Brahmanical*, *Jain*, and *Jivika*) and Buddhist practitioners. However, it is evident that, at least during the ninth year of his reign, Asoka firmly supported, and was supported by, the teachings and practices of the Buddha's disciples, and following mythical narratives predominant honor him as a prototypical patron of Buddhist monks and institutions.

Asoka claims that his guilt inspired his devotion to Dhamma for the misery he inflicted by conquering Kalinga (c. 261 BCE) in eastern India (now Orissa and eastern Andhra Pradesh) during his ninth year as king. From then on, he sought "righteousness conquest" (*Dhamnavijaya*) and, from the thirteenth year of his coronation, managed the kingdom via "righteousness ministers" (*Dhammamahammatas*), enacting laws and policies that, as previously said, showed Asoka's piety and sincerity. In his practice, he informs us that he

became a Buddhist lay devotee (*upasaka*) in his ninth regnal year but did not begin to exert himself severely until eighteen months later. His inscriptions (and other archaeological evidence) attest to that effort: he built stupas and provided additional financial support to the Sangha and monasteries, intervened in monastic disputes (and recommended which texts monks, nuns, and follow lay-people should study), and made pilgrimages to worship at sites significant in the Buddha's life. The Buddhist ethos that underpins Asoka's dhamma policy is visible. His inscriptions advocate kindness to all creatures, including plants. he attempted to eliminate the killing of all living beings in his dominions; he protected and planted forests and medicinal herbs even outside his domains.

He promoted respect and obedience toward parents, elders, teachers, Brahmins and mendicants, and royal authority; he encouraged liberality, truthfulness, and faith; he also exaggerated. Though the Mauryan Dynasty (317–180 BCE) did not last long, Asoka's wish that his "sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons will cause the practise of dhamma to grow until the aeon of destruction" came true in this and several other ways. Asoka's life and deeds remained foundational for subsequent South Asian and Buddhist political and religious history.

His post-Mauryan successors absorbed and refined Asoka's imperial policies, thereby establishing Asoka's empire as the model for which all following rulers tried to rebuild. Asoka inherited a large domain in northern India from his father, Bimbusāra (c. 297–268 BCE). His grandfather was the founder of the Chandragupta Mauryan Dynasty (c. 317–293 BCE), whose court was visited by Alexander the Great's diplomats. However, Asoka was the first known Indian ruler of any dynasty to extend the empire across the subcontinent. He expanded its frontiers northwest into what is now eastern Afghanistan, reigning from his capital Pāliputra (now Patna). He maintained diplomatic contacts even farther afield, sending delegations to kings in the far south and Sri Lanka and across the eastern Hellenistic world, elevating Asoka to the ranks of the most powerful monarchs of his day. More essential than military conquest in this expansion – particularly after his eight-year reign – were Asoka's creative techniques for demonstrating and preserving his imperial overlordship, always in the framework of his declaration of the Dhamma.

The practice of building stone inscriptions, which must have required significant mobilization of resources, was one of the important imperial initiatives whose importance is frequently neglected by researchers. The technology of preparing and inscribing various surfaces is sophisticated. The attempt to broadcast the same messages in a local idiom, which functioned across such a vast territory, demonstrated enormous internal organization and vision and was unprecedented in Indian history.

This method enabled Asoka to physically and permanently identify his authority over the several territories whose surrender he gained, allowing him to address the people of these regions personally and make them feel safe under his single royal roof. For more than two millennia, the vast corpus of south Asian epigraphs that now constitute the most crucial primary evidence for south Asian history continued Asoka's discourse in stone. For more than five centuries after Asoka, this lithic discourse even used essentially the same alphabet and language.

Several Buddhist holy sites of Asoka were built or visited, such as Bodhi Gayā, Sārnāth, Amarāvati, Bhārhut, Lumbinī, Vaishali, Srāvastī, Kusināra were developed and improved for more than 500 years after his death by influential Buddhist monks and wealthy laypeople, including a string of Asoka's imperial successors. In the late nineteenth century, Buddhists regained

these locations, which remain significant places of devotion.

In the same way, even after Hindu disciplinary orders came to dominate the ideology of Indian imperial formation in the third century B.C., numerous additional Asoka imperial strategies. It persisted into modern times with widely divergent content, such as engaging in imperial processions to the various regions and holding festivals and conspicuous displays in them, summoning kings and other representatives of those regions to the imperial court, and constructing imperial fortresses.

It is possible to argue that Asoka's founder position in imperial wars involving successive monarchs asserted his life and legacy politically and religiously relevant, independent of their correspondence or lack thereof with the real Asoka. These claims arose in monastic and nunnery communities favored by powerful monarchs and were textualized as the renowned Asoka stories, a second key mechanism by which he continued to influence political and religious thought long after his inscriptions had become unreadable antiques.

According to Asoka folklore, Asoka was a terrible monarch who was transformed into Dhammāsoka (Righteous Asoka) after being charmed by the Dhamma of the Buddha. Asoka established a huge Buddhist kingdom, ceremonially abdicated authority to the Sangha, and left his imprint on it via the building of stupas and the conduct of Buddhist liturgies. He also funded a Dhamma recitation led by a selected patriarch, who disseminated the Dhamma and Asoka's imperial legacy throughout Asia, specifically to some favored locations foretold by Buddha to be of enormous importance in later history.

Asoka's Dhamma-policy effect is still felt today. He evolved as an example of values worth copying worldwide, even beyond the cultural and theological contexts to which the actual and mythical Asoka belonged. These values are globalism, religion, interfaith interaction, diplomacy over violence, sympathy for the poor, devotion to truth and liberty, personal integrity, and environmentalism. Asoka has been likened to Constantine, Marcus Aurelius, Charlemagne, Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Saint Paul, and others.

Furthermore, previous kings achieved their imperial careers via military means. Still, Asoka was the one and only who vanquished others with the heart of compassion, following the Lord Buddha's teachings. It has been lauded by twentieth-century luminaries such as H. G. Wells, who said, "the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star" among all the great monarchs of history. It can display more that Asoka exemplified the type of secular federalism that India adopted upon independence (an Asokan pillar capital with four lions serves as India's official seal). Asoka often appears in academic and popular Indian and Buddhist history interpretations, from scholarly monographs to comic books.

5. CONCLUSION

The Dhamma of Asoka, which encourages tolerance, may be practiced by those who adhere to various traditions. The involved Buddhist movement advocates for a compassionate attitude toward social justice and social involvement in multiple situations. This is what the engaged Buddhist movement is all about. We can speculate on the future of Buddhism if there were another monarch on the level of Asoka. By examining the spread of Buddhism and various aspects of Asoka's dhamma policy, we better understand the significance of Asoka's dhamma strategy in contemporary engaged Buddhism. His whole dhamma strategy has had a considerable influence, both individually and collectively, on subsequent Indian culture and post-modern society. It should emphasize that Asoka's dhamma policy is not just for discussion but for putting into action and practicing in the present world. Conversely, we can achieve peace, freedom,

joy, and well-being in this world and the next by following the Asoka Dhamma Policy's straightforward advice.

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