

Emperor Asoka: The Pioneering Patron and Propagator of Buddhism in Ancient India

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Abstract

Emperor Asoka, who ruled the Mauryan Empire in the 3rd century BCE, played a pivotal role in the propagation and development of Buddhism. This research paper examines Asoka's multifaceted contributions to Buddhism, including his personal conversion, the establishment of a social and political order based on Buddhist principles, the spread of Buddhism through missions, and the construction of Buddhist monuments. By analyzing historical evidence, such as Asoka's edicts and archaeological findings, this paper highlights the significant impact of Asoka's reign on the growth of Buddhism from a regional sect to a major world religion. The paper concludes that Asoka's patronage and policies were instrumental in the development of Buddhism, setting the stage for its eventual spread across Asia and beyond.

Key Words: Asoka, Mauryan empire, Monuments, Patronage , Propagation , Policies.

Introduction

Emperor Asoka, the third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty, is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in the history of Buddhism. His reign, which lasted from c. 268 to 232 BCE, marked a turning point in the growth and development of Buddhism. Asoka's personal conversion to Buddhism, following the conquest of Kalinga, led to a profound change in his approach to governance and his relationship with the Buddhist community. Through his patronage, missionary zeal, and the establishment of a social and political order based on Buddhist principles, Asoka played a crucial role in transforming Buddhism from a regional sect to a major world religion.

This research paper aims to explore Asoka's multifaceted contributions to Buddhism, focusing on four key areas: his personal conversion and patronage of Buddhism, the establishment of the Ashokan Dhamma, the spread of Buddhism through missionary missions, and the construction of Buddhist monuments. By examining historical evidence, such as Asoka's edicts and archaeological findings, this paper seeks to demonstrate the significant impact of Asoka's reign on the development and spread of Buddhism.

The study of Asoka's contributions to Buddhism is crucial for understanding the religion's early history and its eventual emergence as a pan-Asian faith. Asoka's reign represents a unique convergence of political power, personal devotion, and religious patronage, which collectively helped to shape the course of Buddhism's growth and expansion. By exploring the various facets of Asoka's engagement with Buddhism, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of his role in the religion's development and its lasting impact on the religious and cultural landscape of ancient India and beyond.

The Kalinga war served as a catalyst for Asoka's spiritual transformation, leading him to question the use of violence as a means of expanding his empire and asserting his authority. In the Rock Edict XIII, Asoka expresses his deep regret for the loss of life and suffering caused by the war, stating, "The Beloved of the Gods, conqueror of the Kalinga, felt remorse on account of the conquest of the Kalinga because, during the subjugation of a previously unconquered country, slaughter, death, and taking away captive of the people necessarily occur, whereat His Majesty feels profound sorrow and regret." This candid admission of remorse and self-reflection marks a significant departure from the traditional portrayal of victorious rulers in ancient times, highlighting Asoka's unique approach to leadership and his growing commitment to Buddhist principles.

Asoka's Dedication to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha Following the Kalinga war, Asoka embarked on a journey of personal and spiritual transformation, dedicating himself to the study and practice of Buddhism. His conversion to Buddhism is attested to in his own words, as recorded in the Minor Rock Edict I at Bairat-Calcutta (Bhabra). In this edict, Asoka declares himself an upāsaka, or lay devotee, committed to the Buddha, the dharma (Buddha's teachings), and the sangha (the Buddhist monastic community). This declaration marks Asoka's formal embrace of Buddhism and sets the stage for his subsequent efforts to promote and support the religion throughout his empire.

Asoka's Patronage and Support for the Buddhist Community

As a patron of Buddhism, Asoka provided extensive material support to the sangha, demonstrating his commitment to the growth and development of the Buddhist community. He constructed numerous monasteries, stupas, and other religious structures throughout his empire, creating a network of Buddhist institutions that served as centers of learning, practice, and propagation of the faith. These construction projects not only provided the necessary infrastructure for the Buddhist community to thrive but also served as visible symbols of Asoka's patronage and the growing prominence of Buddhism within the Mauryan Empire.

One of the most significant examples of Asoka's patronage was his sponsorship of the Third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra (modern-day Patna) around 250 BCE. The council, which brought together hundreds of Buddhist monks from across the empire, aimed to reconcile disputes within the sangha and codify the Buddhist canon. Asoka's support for the council demonstrates his deep concern for the unity and integrity of the Buddhist community and his commitment to preserving and promoting the authentic teachings of the Buddha. The council's proceedings and the resulting codification of the Buddhist scriptures played a crucial role in establishing a common foundation for the Buddhist faith and facilitating its spread beyond the borders of the Mauryan Empire.

In addition to his construction projects and sponsorship of the Third Buddhist Council, Asoka also provided financial support to the sangha through regular donations and grants. He ensured that the monasteries and other Buddhist institutions were well-maintained and that the monks and nuns had access to the necessary resources for their spiritual practice and daily needs. Asoka's patronage of Buddhism helped to establish the religion as a major force in the

Mauryan Empire, attracting a growing number of followers from all strata of society and setting the stage for its eventual spread across Asia.

Establishment of Buddhist Communities and Transcending Cultural Boundaries

The dispatch of missionary missions during Asoka's reign was a strategic move that helped to extend the influence of Buddhism beyond the borders of the Mauryan Empire. By establishing a network of Buddhist communities in different regions, Asoka laid the groundwork for the eventual emergence of Buddhism as a pan-Asian religion. The success of these missions can be attributed to several factors. First, the missionaries were well-versed in the teachings of the Buddha and were able to effectively communicate the core principles of Buddhism to new audiences. Second, the missionaries were skilled in adapting the teachings to the local cultural and linguistic contexts, making the Dhamma more accessible and relevant to the people they encountered. Third, the establishment of Buddhist monasteries and other institutions in the regions visited by the missionaries provided a solid foundation for the growth and development of Buddhist communities. These institutions served as centers of learning, practice, and propagation of the faith, attracting new converts and supporting the long-term sustainability of Buddhism in these areas.

The success of the Ashokan missions also demonstrates the appeal of Buddhist teachings and their ability to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. The core principles of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the practice of meditation, proved to be universally applicable and attractive to people from diverse backgrounds. The emphasis on personal transformation, ethical conduct, and the alleviation of suffering struck a chord with individuals seeking a more meaningful and fulfilling way of life. In this way, the Ashokan missions played a crucial role in the transformation of Buddhism from a regional sect to a global religion. By establishing Buddhist communities in different parts of Asia and beyond, Asoka helped to create a vast network of believers united by a common set of values and practices. This network facilitated the exchange of ideas, texts, and practices, contributing to the rich diversity and adaptability of Buddhism as it spread across the world.

Construction of Buddhist Monuments and Their Significance

Asoka's patronage of Buddhism found physical expression in the construction of numerous Buddhist monuments throughout his empire. These monuments, which included stupas, viharas (monasteries), and pillars, served as tangible symbols of the emperor's commitment to Buddhism and played a significant role in the development of Buddhist art and architecture. The construction of Buddhist monuments during Asoka's reign was a massive undertaking that required significant resources, planning, and organization. Asoka's patronage of these projects demonstrates his deep commitment to the promotion and support of Buddhism, as well as his understanding of the importance of physical structures in the propagation and preservation of the faith. The monuments constructed during Asoka's reign served multiple purposes. First and foremost, they were places of worship and pilgrimage, where Buddhists could gather to pay homage to the Buddha, meditate, and listen to the teachings of the Dhamma. The stupas, in particular, were built to enshrine the relics of the Buddha or his disciples, serving as powerful reminders of the Buddha's physical presence and the continuity of his teachings.

Second, the monuments functioned as centers of learning and practice, where monks, nuns, and lay followers could study the Dhamma, engage in spiritual practices, and participate in the life of the Buddhist community. The viharas, or monasteries, provided living quarters for the sangha and served as important hubs of Buddhist intellectual and cultural activity. Finally, the monuments served as visible symbols of the growing prominence and influence of Buddhism within the Mauryan Empire. The scale and grandeur of these structures, as well as their widespread distribution across the empire, demonstrated the strength and vitality of the Buddhist community and the extent of Asoka's support for the religion.

The Construction of 84,000 Stupas

One of Asoka's most notable contributions to the development of Buddhist architecture was the construction of 84,000 stupas across the subcontinent, as mentioned in Buddhist texts such as the Asokavadana and the Mahavamsa. According to these sources, Asoka ordered the construction of these stupas to enshrine the relics of the Buddha and to mark important sites associated with the Buddha's life and teachings. While the exact number of stupas constructed during Asoka's reign is likely to be an exaggeration, archaeological evidence suggests that there was indeed a significant increase in the construction of Buddhist monuments during this period. The remains of numerous stupas, many of which bear the distinctive characteristics of Mauryan architecture, have been found throughout the Indian subcontinent, from the Ganges plain to the far reaches of the empire. The construction of such a large number of stupas would have required a massive mobilization of resources and labor, as well as a high degree of organization and planning. Asoka's ability to undertake such a vast project demonstrates the extent of his power and influence, as well as his deep commitment to the promotion and support of Buddhism.

The 84,000 stupas also had a profound symbolic significance. In Buddhist numerology, the number 84,000 is associated with the idea of completeness and perfection, representing the totality of the Buddha's teachings. By constructing 84,000 stupas, Asoka was symbolically enshrining the entire corpus of the Buddha's teachings and making them accessible to people throughout his empire.

Ashokan Pillars and Their Inscriptions

Another significant aspect of Asoka's architectural patronage was the erection of several monolithic pillars bearing his edicts. These pillars, known as the Ashokan pillars, were carved from single blocks of sandstone and often topped with elaborate capital sculptures, such as the famous Lion Capital of Sarnath, which has become a national emblem of India. The Ashokan pillars were erected at strategically important locations throughout the empire, such as along major trade routes, at pilgrimage sites, and in the vicinity of important Buddhist monasteries. The pillars served as powerful symbols of Asoka's authority and his commitment to the Dhamma, as well as his support for the Buddhist community.

The inscriptions on the Ashokan pillars, written in Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts, are among the most important sources of information about Asoka's reign and his policies. The inscriptions, which include the Major Rock Edicts, the Minor Rock Edicts, and the Pillar

Edicts, cover a wide range of topics, from Asoka's personal religious convictions to his instructions for the administration of the empire and the promotion of the Dhamma. The inscriptions on the Ashokan pillars provide valuable insights into the emperor's vision for his empire and his efforts to create a just and harmonious society based on the principles of the Dhamma. They also demonstrate Asoka's skill as a communicator and his ability to use written language as a tool of governance and propagation of his ideas.

The Impact of Buddhist Monuments on the Development of Buddhism

The construction of Buddhist monuments during Asoka's reign had far-reaching consequences for the development of Buddhism and its transformation into a major world religion. The stupas, viharas, and pillars constructed under Asoka's patronage served as focal points for the growth and expansion of Buddhist communities throughout the empire and beyond.

First and foremost, the monuments served as centers of Buddhist learning and practice, attracting monks, nuns, and lay followers from different regions and providing them with spaces for study, meditation, and community life. The monasteries, in particular, became important hubs of Buddhist intellectual activity, where scholars and practitioners could engage in the study and interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. Second, the monuments played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of Buddhist teachings and practices. The stupas, which enshrined the relics of the Buddha and his disciples, served as powerful reminders of the Buddha's physical presence and the continuity of his teachings. The monasteries, with their libraries and scriptoria, facilitated the collection, copying, and dissemination of Buddhist texts, ensuring the survival and spread of the Dhamma.

Third, the monuments contributed to the development of Buddhist art and architecture, which became important vehicles for the expression and communication of Buddhist ideas and values. The artistic and architectural styles developed during Asoka's reign, such as the Mauryan polish and the use of stone as a medium for sculpture, set the stage for the later evolution of Buddhist art in India and beyond.

Conclusion

Emperor Asoka's reign marks a turning point in the history of Buddhism, as his multifaceted contributions helped to transform the religion from a regional sect to a major world religion. Asoka's personal conversion to Buddhism, following the Kalinga war, set the stage for his subsequent efforts to promote and support the religion throughout his empire and beyond.

Asoka's establishment of the Ashokan Dhamma, a social and political order based on Buddhist principles, created a conducive environment for the growth and development of Buddhism within the Mauryan Empire. By emphasizing the common ethical foundations of different religious traditions and promoting social welfare initiatives, Asoka fostered a sense of unity and stability that contributed to the success of his reign and the spread of Buddhist ideas and values.

The dispatch of missionary missions to various regions, including Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Gandhara, and the Greek-speaking territories, played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism beyond the borders of the Mauryan Empire. The success of these missions laid the

groundwork for the eventual emergence of Buddhism as a pan-Asian religion, with a strong institutional basis and a shared sense of identity and purpose. The construction of numerous Buddhist monuments during Asoka's reign, including stupas, viharas, and pillars, served as tangible symbols of his commitment to Buddhism and contributed to the development of Buddhist art and architecture. These monuments facilitated the preservation and transmission of Buddhist teachings and helped to establish Buddhism as a visible and accessible religion across the Indian subcontinent. In conclusion, Asoka's reign represents a watershed moment in the history of Buddhism, as his personal devotion, political leadership, missionary zeal, and patronage of Buddhist monuments collectively helped to shape the course of the religion's development and spread. Asoka's vision of a society based on the principles of the Dhamma, his commitment to social welfare and religious tolerance, and his efforts to promote the spread of Buddhism continue to inspire and influence Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike to this day.

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