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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. ARTICLES

1. The Mongol Khans and Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, by *Sechin Jagchid* 7
2. From Mādhyamika to Yogācāra, an Analysis of MMK, XXIV. 18 and MV, 1.1-2, by *Gadjin m. Nagao* 29
3. Dynamic Liberation in Yogācāra Buddhism, by *Alan Sponberg* 44
4. Yogācāra and the Buddhist Logicians, by *Alex Wayman* 65

II. SHORT PAPERS

1. Sambodhi in Aśoka's 8th Rock Edict, by *A. L. Basham* 81
2. Can Meditational Practice be Measured? A Report on a Quantitative Survey, by *Jacques Maquet* 84
3. Nirvana and Metaphysical Experience, by *Ismael Quiles* 91

III. BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

Reviews:

1. World Conqueror and World Renouncer, by *S. J. Tambiah* 99
2. Comparative Ethics in Hindu and Buddhist Traditions, by *Roderick Hindery*. 103
3. Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice, by *Minoru Kiyota, assisted by Elvin W. Jones* 106
4. Chandi Borobudur: A Monument of Mankind, by *Dr. Soekmono* 108

Obituary:

1. Paul Demiéville, by *Alexander W. Macdonald* 110

Sam̐bodhi in Aśoka's 8th Rock Edict.

by A. L. Basham

Aśoka's 8th Rock Edict (Girnar version) reads . . . *rājā dasa-vasābhisitto sam̐to ayāya sam̐bodhiṃ*. All other versions substitute a verb derived from the Sanskrit root *kram* with the prefix *niṣ* for this and other occurrences of derivatives of the root *yā* in the edict. Thus we must assume that the original document on which the inscriptions were based contained *niṣkram*. Why the Girnar scribe substituted *yā* is not clear.

Earlier scholars (Senart, Bühler, Smith) believed that this meant that Aśoka had taken a solemn Buddhist vow, or had even entered the Order. Nowadays it is almost universally accepted that Aśoka is telling his subjects that he made a pilgrimage to the Bodhi Tree at Gayā. This interpretation seems to have been first made by D. R. Bhandarkar (p. 294).

Eggermont (pp. 79-81) strongly supports this now conventional explanation. The objection that the famous tree is not generally referred to as *Sam̐bodhi* he overrules by adducing one reference from a *Jātaka* (iv.26), already noted by others, and six from the *Dīpavaṃsa*. The latter text also contains 22 passages where the tree is referred to as *Mahābodhi* or *Bodhi*. He fits this interpretation into the brilliant chronological scheme which he has devised for Aśoka's reign.

In our view there are strong arguments against the now conventional interpretation:

i) Admitting that, in texts produced in Sri Lanka several centuries later, the Bodhi Tree was occasionally referred to as *Sam̐bodhi*, would it have meant this to the average educated Indian of c.250 B.C., who had no special knowledge of Buddhism? Probably not. He would have interpreted it as meaning that Aśoka was in search of enlightenment.

ii) Geographical factors suggest that Aśoka, as a recent and

very devoted convert, would have made several trips to the Bodhi Tree in the two years between his conversion and the hypothetical visit mentioned in the 8th Rock Edict. Gayā is about 100 kilometres from Pāṭaliputra and Aśoka could have visited it on horse- or elephant-back, or in a chariot, with only one or two nights away from his palace. If the phrase refers to a pilgrimage or ceremonial visit it is surprising that he waited so long before making it, and thought fit to record it thus. This, incidentally, is the only specific reference to Buddhism in the Major Rock Edicts, if we accept Aśoka's *Dhamma* as Righteousness generally, and not the Buddhist *Dhamma*.

iii) Because the Girnar version is among the best preserved versions of the Major Rock Edicts its readings tend to be favoured by historians. The occurrence of *kram* in all the other versions, however, makes it virtually certain that this and not *yā* is the correct reading. The same verb is used earlier in the edict with reference to the pleasure trips which kings formerly made. Between the two verbs there are definite shades of meaning. *Niṣkram* puts the emphasis on departure, rather than arrival. *Yā* on the other hand, indicates arrival at a specific goal, unless the failure to arrive is explicitly stated. Aśoka intended to tell his subjects that he had set out for *Sam̐bodhi* but had not yet arrived there.

iv) Bloch objects (p.112,n6), that to take *Sam̐bodhi* in a psychological or spiritual sense would imply that at the time of Aśoka a doctrine which only appears in Mahāyāna texts was already current. This objection is hardly serious. We cannot tell how long it took for Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines to become formally codified in literature; nor can we tell how much editing the earlier oral sacred texts of Buddhism underwent before they were committed to writing. We must remember that, even according to the Theravāda tradition, there were no written Buddhist texts at the time of Aśoka.

While we cannot reject the interpretation of *Sam̐bodhi* as the sacred tree at Gayā out of hand, we believe that the weight of the evidence is strongly in favour of the older interpretation being correct. In the evolving Buddhism of the times the custom already existed of devotees making a solemn vow to aim directly for enlightenment. Nirvāṇa, on the other hand, is mentioned nowhere in Aśoka's edicts, and we may conclude that

the vow was made with largely altruistic motives, like the Great Resolve of the Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna.

Some confirmation of this interpretation may be gathered from Aśoka's Minor Rock Edict (Bloch, pp.145-51), where he declares that he had been an *upāsaka* for more than two and a half years, but had not made much progress, until, over a year before, he had 'drawn near to the *Samgha*,' after which he had made much progress. This drawing near to the *Samgha* may be linked in some way with his 'setting out for *Sambodhi*.' Perhaps, in the course of his spiritual journey, he submitted himself more closely than before to the discipline and pastoral care of monks among whom Mahāyāna ideas were already developing.

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