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IV. PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Asoka And Buddhism — A Reexamination:
Presidential Address Given on the
Occasion of the
Fourth Conference of the IABS
Madison, Wisconsin, August, 1980*

by *A.L. Basham*

It is generally agreed that Asoka was among the great kings of the world, and indeed many would say that he was the most noble and altruistic ruler the world has known. Moreover, he is the only pre-Muslim ruler of India whose name is familiar to non-specialists in the West. His great fame in the English-speaking world seems to have been mainly due to H. G. Wells, whose *Outline of History* was almost compulsory reading for intelligent teen-agers in the 1920s and '30s, since it was the work of a progressive writer who then enjoyed great prestige, and was one of the earliest general histories of mankind to give reasonable coverage to the history of the civilizations of Asia. Wells emphasized Asoka as a ruler far ahead of his time, with a vision of perpetual peace throughout the world.¹

In fact, when all is said, we know very little about Asoka's personality and motives. We have, admittedly, a number of fairly brief documents from his hand, but these are intended to project his public image, and do not show us the real man with the intimacy with which we know, for example, Akbar, thanks to the writings of both his friends and his critics, and to the accounts of foreign

travelers. Our knowledge of Asoka, such as it is, depends on three main sources.

The first of these sources, and the most authoritative, is the series of inscriptions, the so-called Edicts of Asoka,² many of which are not really edicts at all. Some, indeed, are imperial commands, and seem to have a legislative character, but others are rather general pronouncements of policy and normative recommendations to his subjects, a form of propaganda representing an early form of the posters to be seen in almost every country in the world at the present time, urging us to save energy, preserve the environment, and throw our litter into the trash-bin. These documents have the advantage that they form the only literature on Asoka which is strictly contemporary with the emperor himself, and they appear to represent his own words.

Our second source is the Theravāda tradition, preserved in the chronicles of Sri Lanka.³ These texts record legends about Asoka's early life and his conversion to Buddhism, but their primary interest in Asoka is due to the fact that it was through his intervention that Buddhism was brought to the island and established itself there.

The third source is the *Asokāvadāna*,³ preserved in the Buddhist Sanskrit text *Divyāvadāna*⁴ and also existing in Chinese versions. The various versions were studied by Przyłuski, in whose remarkable monograph, *La légende de l'empereur Açoka*,⁵ it is shown that a cycle of stories about Asoka, on which this text is based, probably existed well before the Christian era and was compiled for the first time at Pāṭaliputra, in the Kukkuṭārāma Monastery, which had been much favored by the emperor.⁶

A few other sources, such as the records of Chinese pilgrims,⁷ the *Rājatarāṅginī* of Kalhaṇa,⁸ and the *Purāṇas*,⁹ tell us a little more about Asoka, but they are later than the main documents, and there is not much of importance that we can gather from them that is not to be found in the earlier sources.

One of the most remarkable features about these three sources, when we compare one with another, is that they have very little in common. The highest common factor of the three is merely that Asoka was a mighty Indian ruler, whose capital was Pāṭaliputra and who adopted a new and enlightened policy as a result of his conversion to Buddhism. Almost everything else is missing in one source or another. The Kalinga war, which, according to the

13th Rock Edict, was the main factor in Asoka's conversion to Buddhism, is not mentioned either in the Theravāda tradition or in the *Aśokāvadāna*, which, since it was transmitted mainly in Mahāyāna circles, we shall refer to as the Mahāyāna tradition, though it was not originally a Mahāyāna work. Asoka's own account of his remorse, incidentally, is so striking that it is hard to believe that it made no impression on the compilers of the stories in the two Buddhist traditions. Yet nothing like it is mentioned in either. This is particularly surprising in the case of the *Aśokāvadāna*, since this tradition grew up in northern India, at the time when Asoka's own inscriptions were still easily intelligible. One would expect the compilers of this cycle of legends to have recorded the story of the Kalinga war and Asoka's repentance and embroidered it with many supernatural incidents. Instead, they ignored it. From the point of view of the Mahāyāna source, Asoka was converted from his former evil ways not by the horrors of war, but by the patience under torture of a Buddhist monk.¹⁰ The Theravāda tradition, on the other hand, ascribes his conversion to a seven year old *samaṇera* named Nigoha.¹¹ As further examples of unexpected omissions we may cite the absence of any reference to the Third Council at Pāṭaliputra in the Edicts or in the Mahāyāna tradition, together with the sequel of this Council, the sending out of missionaries and the conversion of Sri Lanka. These events are mentioned only in the Theravāda tradition, while the rather discreditable account of Asoka's old age and death is found only in that of the Mahāyāna.¹²

Of the three sources it is obvious that the most important, at least from the point of view of the historian, is the first, the Edicts. We are justified in believing that these represent the words of Asoka himself. They do not necessarily reflect his inmost thoughts, but at least they show us what he wanted his subjects to believe about him. Moreover, from them we can gather something about the state of affairs in his empire, and his relations with Buddhism.

In the 1st Minor Rock Edict, which is generally thought to be the oldest of the series, Asoka tells us that he had openly embraced Buddhism some three and a half years previously, but that a year before he had "approached the *saṅgha*," and had exerted himself more strenuously in the faith, so that the gods, who for a long time had not associated with men, were now mixing freely with them.¹³

The passage bristles with obscurities, and each version of the text differs somewhat from every other. At its face value this inscription shows us that Asoka was a man of his time, believing implicitly in the existence of supernatural beings who showed their satisfaction with men by descending to earth and manifesting themselves to them. On the other hand one is tempted to associate this passage, and a similar one in the 4th Rock Edict, which speaks of heavenly manifestations such as divine chariots and balls of fire,¹⁴ with certain passages in the *Arthaśāstra*,¹⁵ where the king is advised to allow himself to be seen associating with persons disguised as gods, and otherwise to produce fraudulent supernatural phenomena, in order to strengthen his prestige. We cannot be sure that Asoka did not himself descend to such cheap means of propaganda, but our overall impression of him is of an honest and sincere man, who, for all his love of *Dhamma*, would not propagate it by fraud, and we can only give him the benefit of the doubt.

This is believed to be Asoka's first propaganda pronouncement, and one asks why he did not begin more impressively and dramatically, telling his subjects at the outset about his remorse for the Kalinga war in the moving terms of the 13th Rock Edict. We can offer no answer to this question, except to suggest that either Asoka's feelings about *Dhamma* became even more intense and emotional as time went on, or his expertise as a propagandist increased with the years. Certainly the two Minor Rock Edicts cannot have been very effective as propaganda in favor of the new policy.

The main body of the series consists of the fourteen Major Rock Edicts, which show a rather different personality. Here Asoka is more peremptory and authoritarian in his commands, and at the same time more confident of the success of the policy of government by *Dhamma*. The very first edict commences with a stern command — "Here no living creature is to be slaughtered for sacrifice."¹⁶ Thus Asoka's first concern appears to have been for *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism. The figure of 100,000 animals, which he declares were formerly slaughtered daily for the palace kitchens, is quite incredible, unless it includes such creatures as small fish, and this casts some doubt on the estimates in the 13th Rock Edict of the number of people affected by the Kalinga war.¹⁷ A proneness to exaggeration in number and quantity is to be

noticed in many ancient Indian sources, including the Buddhist scriptures.

In the 2nd Rock Edict Asoka records his social services in the form of the provision of medical aid for men and animals and improved facilities for travelers.¹⁸ Here he first shows his ecumenical attitude, for he declares that these services have been inaugurated not only among his own subjects but also in the Tamil kingdoms of the South as far as Tambapamni (Sri Lanka?), and in the lands of the Greek king Antiochus and the neighbors of Antiochus. The passage suggests an early version of modern programs of aid to developing countries, and one wonders whether it was at all effective outside the limits of the Mauryan empire. This reference to Antiochus and his neighbors links up with the better known passage in the 13th Rock Edict,¹⁹ where we are told that victories of *Dhamma* have already been won in the West. Through these victories of *Dhamma* Asoka had conquered Antiochus, Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander, all the most important kings of the Hellenistic world. As far as we can gather from the inscriptions he was ignorant of the very existence of China. In any case, if we consider the geopolitical condition of the world in the middle of the third century B.C., it is clear that Asoka was the most powerful ruler of his time, and he seems to have been well aware of the fact.

Nowhere in his edicts does Asoka use the word *cakravartin*, which suggests that in his day it was not very well known, or he would have certainly claimed to be such a charismatic ruler. The occurrence of this word in certain obviously late passages of the Pāli canon, such as the *Cakkavatti-sihanāda-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*,²⁰ seems to be a post-Asokan reflection of Asoka's regime. In this *sutta* the ideal *cakravartin* follows a policy very like that of Asoka, and he conquers the world without fighting, as Asoka believed he was doing. We suggest that this text was composed soon after Asoka's reign, to warn his successors of the evil results which would follow if they abandoned his policy of *Dhamma*. In any case, the 2nd and 13th Rock Edicts give ample proof that Asoka had not abandoned his imperial ambitions, and that he looked upon himself as the moral emperor of the world.

On the other hand, sources from classical Europe give us no information on Asoka's conquests through *Dhamma*. It is notewor-

thy that in Greek and Latin texts there are several references to Asoka's grandfather Candragupta, under the name Sandrocottus,²¹ and there is one to his father Bindusāra, under the otherwise unknown name Amitrochates,²² but there are no references whatever to Asoka himself. If Asoka really sent missions to the courts of the ambitious Greek kings, urging them to accept his moral leadership and adopt the policy of *Dhamma*, they must have made so small an impression that no contemporary author thought fit to record them.

Yet, from the 13th Rock Edict, it is very clear that some kind of positive action was taken:

And this is the victory that the *Devānaṃpiya* considers most important, namely victory through *Dhamma*. And that has indeed been won by the *Devānaṃpiya* here and on all the frontiers, even 600 *yojanas* distant, where are Antiochus the Greek king and the four kings beyond that Antiochus . . . [Here follow the four Greek names, and a list of peoples on Asoka's frontiers.] Even where the messagers of the *Devānaṃpiya* do not go, they hear of the *Devānaṃpiya's* practice, ordinances and injunctions of *Dhamma*, and they follow *Dhamma*.²³

Asoka could hardly have convinced himself of his own importance internationally unless a mission or missions of some kind had been sent to the Greek kings, and to other smaller kingdoms and tribes, and had presented documents in which Asoka explained his new policy and urged all rulers to follow it. Since there is no reference to such a mission in any classical source, and the very name of Asoka was apparently unknown in the West, we must presume that his attempts at winning over the Greek kings resulted in failure. Yet he states firmly and categorically that his missions have been successful. He has conquered Antiochus and the other Greek kings through *Dhamma*.

From this, assuming that at least one mission was actually sent, we are compelled to accept one of two assumptions. Either Asoka knew the real facts but concealed them from his subjects, giving the impression that the policy of *Dhamma* had been much more successful than was in fact the case; or the mission, inspired by sycophantic courtiers, gave a false account of its activities. Occasional travelers and envoys, coming to Pāṭaliputra from the West, might also have been persuaded to give false accounts of condi-

tions in their homelands to the emperor, so that he imagined that he had brought about a striking change in the Hellenistic world. The whole tenor of the inscriptions gives the impression that Asoka was thoroughly honest and intensely sincere. Probably, therefore, he fully believed that his missions had been thoroughly successful. When, in the Separate Kalinga Edict,²⁴ he says *save munise pajā mama* we must not overlook the fact that the word *prajā* has political overtones, and, as well as meaning "children and descendants," may also mean "subjects." In this passage it is obvious that Asoka's primary meaning is "All men are my children," but the secondary meaning should not be forgotten. He seems to have seen himself as the *paterfamilias* of an immense extended family, comprising every creature on earth.

Other examples of Asoka's exaggerated confidence in the success of his new policy are not hard to find. We are told that Asoka's descendents would continue to promote the policy of *Dhamma* even up to the end of the *kalpa*.²⁵ The conviction that the policy of *Dhamma* had changed the morals and conduct of the world seems even stronger in the Pillar Edicts, promulgated in the 26th and 27th years of Asoka's reign. In the 7th Pillar Edict he looks back on his career as a reformer with considerable complacency. His officers are all busily enforcing the new policy and the people are following it obediently. It will last for as long as the moon and sun.²⁶

The most remarkable evidence of Asoka's complacency comes from the brief Kandahar Edicts in Greek and Aramaic, which tell us explicitly that the fishermen of the king have ceased to fish and the hunters have stopped hunting, and all goes well throughout the kingdom.²⁷ The fact that the inscription opens with the statement that Asoka commenced issuing his edicts when he had been consecrated for ten years might give the impression that this is an early inscription, but we believe that it is later than the Pillar Edicts, and belongs to the last years of his reign, for in the 5th Pillar Edict Asoka bans only the killing of certain species of animals and forbids hunting and fishing only on a few days of the year. The fishermen and hunters referred to in the Kandahar Edict are unlikely to be gamekeepers and beaters in the royal hunting parks and reserved forests, but rather professional hunters and fishers who ranged the forested and waste land (*vivāta*) and were permitted to hunt or fish in return for a share of their bag or catch. All the forest and waste of the kingdom was in theory the

property of the king, and the fishermen and hunters of the king referred to in the Kandahar Inscription probably included all the professional hunters and fishermen in the kingdom, who were in much the same theoretical position as the share-croppers who worked much of the royal demesne.²⁸ Thus Asoka believed that the fishermen and hunters of his kingdom had accepted his new policy, either voluntarily or by compulsion, and had given up their old professions. This is intrinsically very unlikely, and most of his subjects must have known that hunting and fishing were still going on. In fact Asoka proclaims to the world not so much the success of his policy as his own naïveté and credulity. The inscription suggests that, now an old and tired man, he had fallen into the hands of crooked courtiers and counsellors who deliberately concealed the truth from him. He had lost almost all contact with reality and had no clear idea about the true state of his kingdom.

The Minor Pillar Edicts, must be, with the Kandahar Edict, among Asoka's final pronouncements, since many of them occur below the main series of Major Pillar Edicts. They confirm the Mahāyāna tradition that towards the end of his reign Asoka became even more deeply interested in the affairs of the Buddhist *saṅgha*. Among these short inscriptions there occurs an ordinance, in three surviving versions (Sarnath, Kosambi and Sanchi),²⁹ stating that the *saṅgha* should remain united for as long as the sun and moon endure, and that if any monk or nun should try to divide it, the local *mahāmattas* are to ensure that he or she is expelled from the Order. It is noteworthy that here it is the government officials, and not the senior monks, who are instructed to root out heretics.

Asoka's last surviving public pronouncement may have been the so-called Queen's Edict, which occurs only once, at the bottom of the inscribed portion of the Allahabad Pillar. In it Asoka instructs the *mahāmattas* to ensure that all religious gifts made by Kāruvāki, the second queen and mother of Tivara, are recorded to her credit.³⁰ One wonders what can have been the motive in engraving such a trivial pronouncement, which had no direct relation to the policy of *Dhamma* at all. In any case, it is clear that Kāruvāki, no doubt annoyed because her benevolence had not been duly recognized, had considerable influence with the emperor. The implications of this edict are to some extent confirmed by Mahāyāna tradition, which tells us that in his later years Asoka fell under the influence of his second queen, who tried to destroy the

sacred Bodhi tree at Gaya and who brought about the blinding of his favorite son Kunāla. The name of this queen, Tīṣyarakṣitā, has nothing in common with that of the queen of the edict, but it is possible that they are the same, since in ancient India members of royal families were known by various appellations.³² In any case, two of our main sources agree on two important points: (1) that Asoka's interest in the *saṅgha* increased as time went on and (2) that in his later life he came much under the influence of his womenfolk.

The last story about Asoka in the Mahāyāna tradition tells us that at the end of his reign he became so involved with the Buddhist *saṅgha* and squandered so much wealth upon it that he was virtually deposed in a palace coup.³³ We have no definite evidence to confirm this, except that Asoka's inscriptions suggest that towards the end of his reign he played a much more direct part in the affairs of the *saṅgha* than he had formerly. The story in the *Aśokāvadāna*, though obviously worked over to bring out the Buddhist moral of the vanity and transience of earthly glory, is not intrinsically improbable. Moreover, especially if we agree with Przyluski on the antiquity of the cycle of stories,³⁴ it is hardly likely that such a tale would have arisen if it had been common knowledge that Asoka had died while in full command of his kingdom.

Thus, if we are compelled to give a general judgement on Asoka and his regime, we must conclude that, though he was a very good man, he was not altogether a good king. Carried away by his new faith he increasingly lost touch with reality, until ultimately he was dethroned, and the great Mauryan empire broke up, largely as a result of his intensely moral but thoroughly unrealistic convictions. In India itself, except in Buddhist circles, he was soon forgotten, a mere name in the Purāṇic king-lists. The strong central control of the Mauryas soon gave way to quasi-feudal conditions under the Śuṅgas, and regimes of this type, in various forms, were usual for the next two thousand years. Asoka almost passed into oblivion until the nineteenth century, when his inscriptions were deciphered.

Nevertheless, it is certain that, despite his failures, Asoka did have an important effect on later generations, mainly thanks to his support for Buddhism. Although literary evidence may suggest the contrary, it seems that before Asoka Buddhism was a comparatively unimportant feature in the religious life of India. Little or

no faith can be placed on the accounts in the Buddhist scriptures of very large numbers of monks, nuns and lay followers during the Buddha's lifetime. Between the *parinirvāṇa* and the time of Asoka we have but scanty evidence of what was happening to Buddhism. Archaeological evidence is virtually lacking, but after Asoka it is abundant. There is a tradition, maintained by both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, of a council of Vesāli one hundred years after the Master's death. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*,³⁵ generally agreed to be pre-Mauryan, contains passages which suggest some contact with Buddhist ideas. Possible influence is even stronger in the case of the *Maitrī Upaniṣad*,³⁶ but that text is evidently the latest of the thirteen early Upaniṣads, and we believe it to be post-Mauryan.³⁷ Other than these, there is little positive evidence as to the state of Buddhism before Asoka.

One of our main reasons for believing that Buddhism was a comparatively minor factor in the religious life of India before Asoka is that the older Jaina scriptures, though they may mention Buddhism very occasionally, do not appear to look on the Buddha and Buddhism as serious rivals to Mahāvīra and Jainism. From the point of view of the Jainas their most dangerous rivals were Gosāla and the Ājīvikas. In the Pāli texts the situation is similar. References to Mahāvīra (under the name Niggantha Nātaputta) and Jainism certainly occur, but they are considerably fewer than those to Gosāla and the Ājīvikas. These facts suggest that in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. the Ājīvikas were the strongest of the *śramaṇa* sects.

Further indications of the comparative insignificance of Buddhism before Asoka can be found in the stories of the *Asokāvadāna* itself, confirmed by other sources. After his conversion Asoka is said to have broken open seven of the *stūpas* containing the ashes of the Buddha, to have divided the fragments of bone and ash into 84,000 minute portions, and to have sent these to all parts of his empire, to be interred under new *stūpas*.³⁸ *Stūpas* said to have been founded by Asoka were numerous in the days of the Chinese travelers, but they mention few pre-Asokan *stūpas*, except for those traditionally raised in the Tarai area by the tribes who shared the ashes of the Buddha's funeral pyre. It seems that the cult of the *stūpa* in Buddhism began in this area, the scene of the Master's birth and death. Evidently even before the reign of Asoka the Buddhists were strong enough here to take over the *stūpa* of

some long-dead saint or hero, whom they identified as a former Buddha, Konāgamana.³⁹

Our impression is that before Asoka this was the main center of Buddhism, and that elsewhere it may have been comparatively uninfluential; but no doubt monasteries and Buddhist communities already existed in the sacred sites of Gaya and Sarnath and in the larger centers of population. We may assume that with the development of Pāṭaliputra as a large city, perhaps then the largest city in the world, a Buddhist monastery or two were established there, as the traditions confirm. It seems, reading between the lines of the various accounts, that the monks of the local monasteries gained the confidence of the young Asoka, and gradually attracted him towards Buddhism. The Kalinga war finalized his conversion.

It is not wholly clear what form of Buddhism Asoka believed in, but it is evident that it was different from any form existing nowadays. It was certainly not the modern rationalist Buddhism of intellectual Theravāda, neither was it the quasi-theistic Buddhism of Mahāyāna and Tantrism. We have no evidence, moreover, in the inscriptions of even rudimentary forms of the profound Mahāyāna metaphysical systems of later times; but Asoka's reference to his "going forth to Sambodhi" in the 8th Rock Edict may indicate the very beginning of the concept of the *bodhisattva*.⁴⁰ The inscriptions contain no reference whatever to *nirvāṇa*, and we must conclude that, if the monks had already elaborated the doctrine of *nirvāṇa*, either Asoka did not know of it or, more likely, he considered it too abstruse to mention in his public pronouncements.

The Bairat Edict, the only one specifically addressed to the *saṅgha*, shows that the formula of the Triple Jewel (*triratna*) was already used by the Buddhists as a confession of faith.⁴¹ The same document shows that some kind of a canon already existed, though the identification of the seven scriptural passages listed is far from certain. Moreover it is evident that, at the time of the promulgation of this edict, Asoka's attitude towards the Buddhist Order was thoroughly erastian. After greeting the monks and expressing his faith in the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *saṅgha*, Asoka declares: "Whatever, sirs, has been spoken by the Lord Buddha was well said, but I now propose to state passages indicated by me, in order that the true *Dhamma* may last long." Then,

after enumerating the seven chosen passages, he goes on to say that he desires that as many monks, nuns and layfolk as possible should listen to these passages and meditate upon them. No doubt in choosing the seven passages Asoka was advised by a senior monk, but that a mere layman should have the temerity to instruct the Buddhist clergy on what texts they should study cannot but have aroused irritation. Probably few monks acted on Asoka's instructions in this matter.

The Minor Pillar Edicts, ordering the *mahāmattas* to ensure that dissident or heretical monks should be expelled from their monasteries, have already been mentioned. They give even stronger evidence of Asoka's erastianism. The Sarnath version of this edict seems to show that a copy of it was sent to every significant Buddhist monastery in the land, and that the *mahāmattas* were required to attend the monastic ritual on each *uposatha* day, in order to ensure that the king's orders were understood and carried out. Asoka's precedent in making himself the virtual head of the church was followed by many Buddhist kings of later times. Indeed, Buddhism has flourished most vigorously under those kings who have taken most interest in it. Buddhist kings, following the advice of senior monks, have in the past regularly acted as arbiters of orthodoxy. These three Minor Pillar Edicts are the ancestors of the *kātikāvatas* of the pious rulers of Sri Lanka, who from time to time took it upon themselves to purge the *saṅgha* of heresies and malpractices.

Though Asoka's noble vision of a world at peace, with himself and his descendants as its moral leaders, never materialized, it is wrong to suggest that his regime had no effect whatever on later history. For over twenty years the people of India were subjected to constant propaganda in favor of non-violence, vegetarianism, and moral behavior. This cannot have been completely without effect. When we compare the India described by Megasthenes with that of Fa-hsien, we note that striking changes took place in the seven hundred years dividing the days of the two travelers. In the time of Candra Gupta II, if we are to believe Fa-hsien,⁴¹ the death penalty had been abolished and vegetarianism was almost universal, at least among the higher classes. The urbanity and mildness of Gupta administration contrasts strikingly with the stern efficiency of the Mauryas, as described by Megasthenes. Asoka's reforms must have been partly responsible for these changes.

Moreover, even though Asoka's missionary activities in the realms of the five Greek kings were apparently completely futile, the numerous missionary monks listed in the Theravāda tradition, as going forth to various lands and regions after the Council of Pāṭaliputra, may have had some success; and we may be sure that at least one of the victories of *Dhamma* that Asoka claimed to have won was in a sense real and lasting. There is ample confirmation, mainly of an archaeological nature, of the statements of the chronicles of Sri Lanka that the island was converted to Buddhism in the time of Asoka. Whether or not the main missionary campaign was led by Asoka's son Mahinda, the fact that Buddhism virtually began in Sri Lanka in the latter part of the reign of Asoka is certain. Through Asoka a new faith, after over two centuries of preparation, commenced its long and successful career as one of the great religions of the world.

*Editor's note: Owing to a broken arm, Prof. Basham was unable to complete the footnotes to his address, which, in any case, are not essential to his discussion.