

A Review of the Principal Patron of Buddhism: Great Emperor Ashoka

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ABSTRACT

The key factor contributing to Buddhism's current status in the globe is Emperor Ashoka's role. He is among the people who supported Buddhism. The third Buddhist council was held under his direction, which allowed Buddhism to settle into its current place in the world.

Presenting a comprehensive analysis of how Emperor Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism allowed him to rise to his current position is the aim of this work. There are three stages to the presentation of the content. Specifically:

1. To give a succinct overview of Emperor Ashoka;
2. To evaluate and explain the background of Emperor Ashoka's tight ties to Buddhism;
3. To assess the contribution of Emperor Ashoka to Buddhism.

Using an analytical approach, this study reviews and analyzes related historical texts and academic publications. Emperor Ashoka's life and accomplishments are examined, with particular attention paid to his support of Buddhism and its effects on society. The article has examined Emperor Ashoka's biography, his proximity to Buddhism, and his expansion of it. Through the investigation, it was shown that Emperor Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism let him to rise to his current position.

Keywords: Asoka, Buddhist Council, Mauryan Empire, Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism was preached by Gautam Buddha. He made an effort to share what he had learned with the public. However, three separate Buddhist councils were held following his Mahāparinirvāṇa. Emperor Ashoka sponsored the third council of Buddhists. Just as Emperor Ashoka became famous for his political patronage, he also became famous for his support of Buddhism. Like Emperor Ashoka, all great people who have done good things over the years have become immortal in history. Because his contributions to Buddhism's preservation or well-being are more significant than his other achievements. From being griefless, he became "dharmashoka." He is hence everlasting in the annals of history. Besides, he was eternal due to his other karma. This is assessed in light of the continuity of time, history, or era^[1].

Ashoka

Little is known about Ashoka's early years. Bindusara was his father's name. According to legend, Bindusara had 101 sons and 16 women. Sushima was Bindusara's oldest son. The youngest son was Tishya, and the second was Ashoka. In North Indian legend, Ashoka's mother was called "Subhadrangi," whereas in South Indian legend, her name was "Dharma." The names of Emperor Ashoka's five wives are discovered.

Karubaki, Padmavati, Asandhimitra, Mahadevi, and Tishyarakshita are specifically mentioned. There is no precise estimate of Ashoka's son count. Nonetheless, some of his sons' names are known. Mahendra, Tibur, Kunal, and Jalauk, specifically[2].

Ascension to the Throne

In 273 BC, his son Ashoka inherited the Magadha Empire following the passing of his father Bindusara. Four years later, however, Ashoka was crowned. With the aid of a minister named Radhagupta, Ashoka slaughtered 98 brothers and took the throne during the terrible war that followed Bindusara's death. Hence the name 'Chandashoka' for Ashoka. He later became interested in Buddhism and gained notoriety as "Dharmashoka" for his outstanding work in public welfare. There is no record of what happened during the first few years of Ashoka's rule. Like his forebears, he lived and governed the kingdom after taking the throne. Prince Yuvraj (Ashoka) was inherently fond of games, fun, and conflict. He implemented an empire expansion and friendly relations strategy with other nations throughout the first thirteen years of his rule. From Kāshmir in the north to the Pennar River in the south, and from the Syrian border in the west to the Brahmaputra river in the east, was the general extent of Ashoka's realm[3].

Historical Evidence[4]

There is a wealth of historical information accessible regarding Emperor Ashoka's reign. The evidence describing his reign is listed below. Specifically: 1. The script of Ashoka; 2. The Buddhist texts of Mahāvamsa, Dipavamsa, and Divyavabdana The inscription is the most significant of these components. Emperor Ashoka was the one who spread them. Inscriptions were contemporary record

The building of "Ashoka's Hell," a fabled torture chamber referenced in Buddhist writings, is still up for controversy. Another topic is Ashoka's Hell and Governance Complexities.

It highlights Ashoka's complicated personality as well as the difficulties of empire-wide rule.

- Imperial Growth and Cultural Development:
 1. The Mauryan Empire also reached previously unheard-of heights during Ashoka's rule.
 2. With the territorial expansion of the Indian subcontinent, the Mauryan Empire became one of the biggest and most powerful kingdoms of its era. The capital, Pataliputra, thrived as a center of trade, culture, and government.

Title of Ashoka[5]

The monarchs of each state in ancient India frequently assumed the title of regional king. When a monarch came to power, he took on a title. That title was what defined his actual position. However, it has persisted in modern culture in a distinct form despite being in ancient India. Rank or title are still used to assess or quantify power. Although they might not even be aware of its history, many who use these titles attempt to project their own authority or level of respect. However, it does exist, sometimes in an open or hidden form. Emperor Ashoka, however, also used the same title and gave a more comprehensive presentation of history. Because if people at the highest level of the society, country or state did karma, it is easily focused. Basically, 'Ashoka became king and assumed the titles 'Devanam Piya' and 'Devanam Piya Piyadasi.

Kalinga War

The most significant political event in Emperor Ashoka's reign was the Kalinga War. Parts of the modern districts of Ganjam and Orissa were once part of the Kalinga kingdom. Kalinga joined Magadha under the rule of the Nanda monarchs. It is likely that Kalinga gained independence following the collapse of the Nanda dynasty. Chandagupta Maurya ruled over the Kalinga kingdom, which was a stronghold with 700 war elephants, 1000 cavalry, and 60,000 infantry. 'With the Kalinga war, a new chapter in Magadha and Indian history began. In actuality, the period of religion commences and the Digvijay phase concludes[6].

Kalinga War and a Pivotal Shift

An important turning point in Ashoka's life and reign occurred during the Kalinga War in 261 BCE.

Estimates indicate that 150,000 people died on the Kalinga side and 100,000 on the Mauryan side during the battle between the Mauryan Empire and the state of Kalinga. Ashoka was profoundly impacted by the fallout, which led to discussions about the ethics of war and the human cost of conquest[7].

State Policy

A huge empire was passed down to Ashoka. His dominion grew even more after Kalinga was conquered. Ashoka implemented successful policies to ensure this enormous empire was run well. During his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya's reign, Mauryan governance was extremely concentrated. This was altered by Ashoka, who imposed the principles of a patriarchal state. He liked to liken the state's people to his own offspring. One of the main tenets of Ashoka's government was this charitable understanding of royal obligations. Ashoka instituted a number of administrative improvements in accordance with this concept of royal duty[8].

Ashoka's Attraction and Adoption of Buddhism

Legend has it that Ashoka was impressed and drawn to Buddhism after hearing his niece Nigrodha Sramana read "Appamada Vagga," and he became a devout Buddhist. Buddhism was embraced by Ashoka during the eighth year of his rule. After being initiated by the Buddhist monk Upagupta, he eventually accepted Buddhism, which initially drew him in. In Ashoka's private life, his conversion is also evident. Emperor Ashoka's practice of pilgrimage was prompted by his dedication to Buddhism. All things considered, Emperor Ashoka's journey and such kind deeds are quite admirable. The core tenets of Ashoka's philosophy were devotion to elders, love toward family members and servants, goodwill toward all living things, Brahminism, charity to the impoverished, honesty, charity, and purity in life. The Dhamma's ability to improve human existence is evident from Ashoka's ideas. That tone has been echoed by all religions. The Dharma Victory Policy of Ashoka To effectively govern the kingdom, a monarch may occasionally need to enact some liberal measures. Consequently, the state is at peace[9].

On the other hand, it frequently interferes with interests in some areas. Therefore, many people believe that Ashoka's policy of religious conquest endangered the interests of the Mauryan Empire. Occasionally, some measures weaken the state's motivation. Even while it may be adopted for admirable causes, it leads to precisely this kind of circumstance. Sometimes, this has positive long-term effects. After achieving that outcome, it becomes palpable. In actuality, his internal governance and religious policies caused this empire to become militarily weaker. Abul Fazl's 'Ain-e Akbari' and Kalhan's 'Rājataranginī' document Emperor Ashoka's role in promoting Jainism in Kāshmir. One of the most significant issues is human freedom. It becomes much more crucial if it involves religious freedom. Because there is peace in the state if they are allowed to practice their own religion. In the event of an exception, though, that action must be taken. The technique was successfully adopted by Emperor Ashoka. It is well known that "he had no fear of personal affairs and all people of all castes lived in peace in his empire." Emperor Ashoka's ability to demonstrate his religious generosity is evident. People in his kingdom would not have been able to enjoy their freedom of religion if he hadn't demonstrated that. In essence, it is mostly determined by the king's or state government's decision[10].

Acceptance of Buddhism with Ashoka's Edicts[11]

- A Journey of Transformation and Adoption of Buddhism:
 1. After enduring the tragedies of battle, Ashoka had a life-changing experience that led to his conversion to Buddhism.

- The emperor adopted a philosophy of compassion and non-violence, abandoning violence. This signaled a significant change in his policies as he promoted moral and ethical behavior and aimed to govern on the basis of Dharma.
- Ashoka's Edicts and Governance Principles: 1. To spread his newfound ideals, Ashoka carved edicts on rocks and pillars across his empire.
- 2. Known as the Edicts of Ashoka, these directives attested to his attempts to create a society that was more just and compassionate by expressing his dedication to justice, tolerance, and the well-being of his subjects.

Contributions to Buddhism

- Buddhism Promotion and Patronage:
 1. Ashoka fully embraced Buddhism and became a devoted follower of the religion, actively attempting to spread its teachings.
 2. He built Ashoka Pillars, the most famous of which is located in Lumbini, where Buddha was born. With its four lions, the Lion Capital of Ashoka became a famous emblem of the empire. • Lion Capital of Ashoka: 1. The emperor's emblem became recognizable due to the Lion Capital's four lions.
 3. The national symbol of India, this sculpture at Sarnath symbolizes Ashoka's dedication to Buddhism and moral governance.

Ashok, a lay follower of Buddhism, undertook a pilgrimage lasting 256 days to sacred Buddhist sites in northern India. Buddhism gained from the political support that Hinduism had previously enjoyed, similar to the favor Christianity would later receive under Constantine the Great. Like other pious rulers such as Jeroboam, Ashoka was not a revolutionary figure; instead, it was Buddhism that evolved rather than the political landscape of India. In subsequent years, Ashoka integrated his Buddhist beliefs with practical initiatives aimed at alleviating human suffering, which aligned with the Buddha's original intentions. He initiated the construction of wells, irrigation systems, and roads, established rest houses along these routes, built hospitals, created public gardens, and cultivated medicinal plants. Despite these humanitarian efforts, Ashoka retained a strong military presence and continued to operate a secret police force and an extensive network of spies inherited from his powerful administration. He maintained control over Kalinga and did not permit the return of the many individuals taken from there. He proclaimed his desire to treat all his subjects with kindness, a sentiment typical of monarchs, and extended a conciliatory gesture to the people of Kalinga by erecting a monument that stated: 'All men are my children, and I, the king, forgive what can be forgiven.'

King Ashoka shifted his foreign policy from one of expansionism to a focus on coexistence and peace with neighboring states, thereby simplifying the administration of his empire by avoiding further conquests. Aligned with his Buddhist beliefs, he expressed a commitment to ensuring the safety, tranquility, and happiness of all living beings within his domain. He declared that his conquests would now be aimed solely at uplifting the human spirit and promoting 'right conduct' among individuals. Additionally, he cautioned other powers of his dual nature as both compassionate and formidable. Believed by many to be an early adherent of Buddhism, King Ashoka sought to address these challenges by constructing towering pillars, approximately 50 feet high, throughout the Magadha region, which had become the heart of the first Indian empire, the Mauryan Dynasty (322-185 B.C.E). Inscribed on these pillars, woven into the narrative of Buddhist compassion, were the accomplishments of King Ashoka.

Ashoka the Great is recognized as the first significant leader to embrace Buddhism, thereby becoming a major benefactor of Buddhist art. His profound conversion to Buddhism occurred after he witnessed the devastation caused by his conquest of Kalinga. He embraced the Buddha's teachings, known as the Four Noble Truths,

which outline the essence of dharma (the law): Life is suffering (with suffering equated to rebirth), the origin of suffering is desire, the root of desire must be transcended, and upon overcoming desire, suffering ceases (again, suffering equated to rebirth). Those who fully comprehend the Four Noble Truths can attain Enlightenment, thus breaking free from samsara, the perpetual cycle of birth and rebirth. Additionally, Ashoka committed to adhering to the Six Cardinal Perfections (the Paramitas), which are ethical guidelines established posthumously to the Buddha, offering direction for practitioners to engage in a compassionate Buddhist lifestyle. While Ashoka did not mandate that all his subjects convert to Buddhism, nor did Buddhism become the official religion of his empire, his patronage facilitated its extensive and rapid dissemination.

One of the initial artistic initiatives undertaken by Ashoka involved the construction of pillars that are now dispersed across the territory of the former Mauryan empire. These pillars range in height from 40 to 50 feet and are crafted from two distinct types of stone—one for the shaft and another for the capital. Typically, the shaft is hewn from a single block of stone. Workers extracted and transported the stone from quarries located in Mathura and Chunar, situated in the northern region of India within Ashoka's dominion. Each pillar weighs approximately 50 tons. Currently, only 19 of the original pillars remain, many of which are in a state of disrepair. The first of these pillars was unearthed in the 16th century. The design of the pillars reflects Buddhist teachings, with most being adorned with sculptures of animals. Each pillar is crowned with an inverted lotus flower, a prominent symbol in Buddhism, representing the journey of the practitioner who, despite the trials of life and the cycle of rebirth, can attain Enlightenment by adhering to the Four Noble Truths. This flower, along with the animal that rests above it, constitutes the capital, the uppermost section of the column. Most pillars feature either a lion or a bull, depicted in either a seated or standing posture.

The Buddha was born into the Shakya clan, also known as the lion clan, which symbolizes royalty and leadership in various cultures. The animals depicted in art are typically round and carved from a single stone. Some pillars featured edicts, or proclamations, that were translated in the 1830s. Since the 17th century, a total of 150 Ashokan edicts have been discovered, engraved on rocks, cave walls, and pillars, all of which delineated his kingdom that extended across northern India, south to the central Deccan plateau, and into regions now recognized as Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. These rocks and pillars were strategically placed along trade routes and in border cities to ensure that the edicts could be read by the maximum number of individuals. Additionally, they were erected at pilgrimage sites, including Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha attained Enlightenment, Sarnath, the location of his First Sermon, and Sanchi, home to the Mahastupa, the Great Stupa of Sanchi, which serves as a burial mound for a revered individual.

Upon the death of the Buddha, he was cremated, and his ashes were distributed among various stupas, which subsequently became sites of pilgrimage for Buddhist followers. Several pillars were inscribed with dedicatory texts that not only date them but also identify Ashoka as the benefactor. The inscriptions were written in Brahmi, the script from which all Indic languages evolved. A number of edicts located in western India are inscribed in a script closely related to Sanskrit, while a pillar in Afghanistan features inscriptions in both Aramaic and Greek, reflecting Ashoka's intent to connect with the diverse cultures within his realm. Some of these inscriptions are secular, with Ashoka expressing remorse for the Kalinga massacre and assuring his subjects of his commitment to their welfare. Others highlight Ashoka's philanthropic efforts, emphasizing his dedication to the well-being of his people.

Ashoka's aspiration for peace remained unaffected by famines or natural calamities. His reign was not challenged by significant migrations, and no neighboring rulers attempted to encroach upon his territory—likely due to their respect for the strength of the Mauryan dynasty. This enduring peace fostered economic growth. Ashoka softened the stringent laws established by his grandfather, Chandragupta, abandoning the royal pursuit of hunting in favor of religious pilgrimages. He began to support charitable initiatives and actively promoted Buddhism, emphasizing principles of non-violence, vegetarianism, generosity, and compassion towards all living beings. To disseminate these values, Ashoka had edicts inscribed on rocks and pillars at key locations across his empire, conveying messages of compassion such as 'honor your parents' and 'be generous to your friends and family.'

Through his edicts, he instilled hope regarding the soul's survival after death and emphasized that virtuous conduct could lead to heavenly salvation. Reflecting the evolving nature of Buddhism, at least one of his edicts referred to Siddhartha Gautama not just as the teacher he perceived himself to be, but as 'the Lord Buddha.' Ashoka urged his subjects to refrain from consuming meat and participating in immoral gatherings. He mandated that his local officials, including governors, regularly inspect their regions to ensure adherence to ethical conduct. Furthermore, he instructed the public to recite his edicts on designated days throughout the year. Ashoka's support for Buddhism enhanced its stature, facilitating its spread across his empire. This led to an increase in vegetarianism and possibly a rise in compassion towards others. He did not advocate for a vengeful deity but instead promoted tolerance for all.

Legacy and Lasting Influence

Beyond the boundaries of his empire, Emperor Ashoka left behind a lasting legacy that is exemplified by his efforts to advance more moral and compassionate administration as well as his profound influence on the development of Buddhism. The Ashoka Chakra, a significant symbol on the Indian national flag that stands for the values of justice and Dhamma, continues his legacy.

Patronage of Third Buddhist Council^[12]

The most significant Buddhist council in history was the third one. By supporting the third council, he played a key role in the establishment and spread of Buddhism following the Buddha's Mahāparinirvāṇa. This assembly completes the Tripiṭaka, the sacred text of Buddhism. It was primarily held 236 years after the council was presided over by Moggaliputta Tishya Thera and Buddha's Mahāparinirvāṇa. The book 'Kathavatthu' was written by Moggaliputta Tishya Thero. 'Abhidharma Piṭaka', the third section of Tripiṭaka, is related to it. Tripiṭaka evolved from "Dvipiṭaka" for this reason. The council was first held in the seventeenth year of Emperor Ashoka's rule. Emperor Ashoka called for the third Buddhist council, according to "Sāmāntapāsādikā," "Kathāvatthupparakaraṇa," and "Sinhalese History," to stop infiltrators of other religions from corrupting Buddhism. He dispatched a Dharma Ambassador to nine different locations after the conclusion of the third Buddhist council, according to Sinhalese history. As previously stated, the aim was to spread Buddhism. "Mahendra-Sinhalese, Majjhāntikā-Kāsmīra and Gāndhāra, Mahādeva-Mahismandala, Raksita-Vanvāsā, Dharmaraksitā-Aparantaka, Mahā-Dharma-Raksita-Mahārāstra, Mahāraksita Greek, Majjhima-Himālaya, Sona and Uttara-Burma and Thailand are among them. It is stated that his preaching was not restricted to various regions of India; it also continued in far-flung Asia, Africa, Europe, and other continents. Buddhism was being spread by his daughter Saṃghamitra and son Mahendra. In essence, by sending sons and daughters to propagate Buddhism, Emperor Ashoka established a beautiful example. Buddhism consequently gained popularity extremely rapidly.

Service to Buddhism

The most notable of these was Ashoka's service to Buddhism. Emperor Ashoka constructed a number of stupas and monasteries to preserve the memory of Buddhism and erected pillars on which he wrote his comprehension of the religious teaching, as pillars and stupas hold the traditions of Buddhism. He took decisive action to maintain Buddhist discipline and quell dissent among the Saṃgha. He came to see the importance of studying the texts. A course of study of the scriptures was given for this and the disciples. Because of this, they can learn accurate information by studying authentic scriptures. Naturally, being aware of this presumption will help them proceed in the days to come. A major part of maintaining any religion is done by its adherents. It's still possible for false information to be associated with a religion if adherents don't practice and uphold it. Followers must therefore be crucial in this respect. Ashoka, the Emperor, took this matter very seriously^[13].

CONCLUSION

In light of the explanation above, it might be claimed that karma determines a person's status in history. One of the rulers who ruled over the Indian subcontinent and is remembered throughout history is Emperor

Ashoka. The kingdom and its political history were long. In particular, he was able to establish a strong reputation in the political history of the Indian subcontinent. The history of Buddhism cannot be told without Emperor Ashoka, just as the history of the Indian subcontinent cannot be written without him. Due to his patronage of the third Buddhist council, preservation of the Tripiṭaka, and dispatch of Religion Ambassadors to many nations, he was the only monarch who was able to firmly establish Buddhism. As a result, Emperor Ashoka is among the select few monarchs who will live on in Buddhist political history. whose solid collaboration has allowed Buddhism to achieve such success in the contemporary world. Buddhism thus spread throughout the world under Emperor Ashoka's support[14].

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FOOTNOTES

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