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Aśoka's dharma policy: The status of early Buddhism and its relationship with other Indian traditions

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Abstract:

King Aśoka of the Maurya period (321-185 BCE) is considered a Great Emperor of India. He is the first man in the history that unified the Indian subcontinent. Despite of academic controversies as to whether the King is "really a Buddhist," for Buddhist history, Aśoka is "a Buddhist" who has great merit in the development and propagation of Buddhism.

He zealously supports the Sangha and have the missionaries sent to the different parts of the Indian subcontinent and outside. With his patronage, Buddhism has become a religion of the world from the third century BCE. During his reign, Buddhism attained the brightest point in Indian religious history. It became the national religion when Aśoka was applying ethical principles of Buddha's teaching to rule his subjects in a practical way.

With such primary points, the article aims to critically understand the status of Buddhism in the Maurya dynasty with special attention on analyzing the Dharma policy of the King. This hopes to shed some light on the question of how Buddhism, a religion of the "other world," is able to convey its spiritual messages to this world of conflict and disharmony.

Keyword: Aśoka's dharma, Buddhist history, Indian traditions, Great Emperor of India

Introduction

Aśoka's Dharma policy, including his life and career, can be found and studied by the mutual support from two main sources, archaeology and literature, in particular, Asoka's edicts and Buddhist literature. As the archaeological source, his edicts are those inscriptions written on minor rocks and rock pillars. A sketch of his life is found in Buddhist sources such as the *Divyāvadāna*, *Ashokavadāna*, etc. and especially *Mahāvamsa* of Sri Lanka. In the Buddhist source, Aśoka is recognized as a devout Buddhist King, who has made great contributions in defending and spreading Buddhism to different parts of Indian and outside.

Through his edicts, we can apprehend Asoka's religious and social policy, also called Asoka's Dharma, on the issues of the leadership of the country, and how he deals with religious diversity while still patronage Buddhism as his main belief. Therefore, discussing the Aśoka's Dharma policy will show the status of Buddhism in particular and religion in general during the Asoka's empire. In doing so, we can get a clue of how Aśoka successfully applied and adapted the Buddha's teaching to fit the contemporary conditions of his time.

The Asoka's edicts are enormous efforts in addressing the problems of religion and society at the time. The society during Asoka's ruling was often referred as a prosperous society. However, at the time when Aśoka ascended to the throne, the political, religious and social situation is still complicated. There existed conflicts on the political, religious, racial and cultural issues.

Religions, in particular, were still not in harmonious relation due to the mindset influence of Brahmanism orthodoxy, and non-orthodox of Jainism, Buddhism, *Ajivika*, etc. At that time, Buddhism and Jainism were still believed as unorthodox by Brahmins. There appeared a division between Brahmanas and Samanas, between what was called 'orthodox' and 'unorthodox'. The diversity of Maurya's society has been recorded in the archeological, historical and literary sources. In order to unify, manage, and control successfully such a kind of society, it is likely to use power as its obligation. However, in the case of Aśoka, for dealing with his society, he requires a spiritual ideology that able to reconcile the diversity of society, instead of his political power. Thereby, Buddhism was considered a legitimate choice for such a social, religious reality.

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In applying Dharma policy, Aśoka aims at maintaining his kingdom and harmonizing his subjects. He requests religious people to lead a life in harmony with each other, and religious peoples of this faith should respect other beliefs. This is the universal principle of ethical action, the basis of a civilized culture. Although based on the spiritual policy initiated from the Buddhist philosophy, the Aśoka's Dharma did not promote in favor of a particular religious belief, or express the teaching in name of a particular religion. Aśoka used the shared concept "Dharma", rather than the mere religious designation like Brahmanism, Jainism, or Buddhism.

The Dharma of Brahmanism is understood as rules and duties that one must obey. These rules and functions exist equated with the caste division and the connection with the gods. The Dharma of Buddhism, even during the Aśoka period, is primarily understood to be the teaching of the Buddha. Whereas, the Aśoka's Dharma primarily directed at two of the fundamental issues: state morality and human morality. The state morality is the principle in which Aśoka has implemented the methods of ruling the country with the desire to create an equal society, harmony in both spiritual and material life. The human morality is what he advises people to consciously practice righteousness (Dharma) in their own life to experience the goodness and happiness. According to the inscription on the Pillar Edicts II, the Dharma means "little evil, much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness, and purity ^[1]." Professor Robert Thurman divides Asoka's Dharma into the five central points, such as beyond the individual gain, nonviolent (*ahimsa*), emphasis on education and religious pluralism; social public policy, political decentralization ^[2].

Although these principles were not drawn from the religion's texts, the *Dharma* of Aśoka is believed to relate to basic Buddhist ethical principles such as compassion, moderation, tolerance, and respect for life ^[3]. It teaches that children should be respectful of parents; pupils must respect their teachers; the owner treats properly with his subordinates and employees. One should be generous with friends, and love and help the poor, etc. The tolerance was also the idea of forgiving other people's faults, considering their injustice, showing compassion for the sinner, etc.

Rock Edicts number III and IV have recommended that everyone should have respected and be generous with the *Brahmanas* and *Samanas*, and be compassionate with all beings. Even himself, as a Buddhist, Aśoka often offered to other denominations, such as the Ajivika, a sect often clashed with Buddhism ^[4]. Rock Edicts number VII and XII also offer similar words. It calls for religious tolerance, not just with different religions but also with the other sects of the same religion, whose doctrine is different from one's own sect ^[5]. It reads that ^[6]:

Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it

should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honor other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore, contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

In a society where various religions exist, many disagreements and conflicts exist, religious tolerance is needed to keep the community in peace and for the happiness of the laymen. Aśoka says that his concern about the benefit of the whole world help him repay the debt to humanity. The ancient Indian society, before the invasions of Turkey Muslim, rarely mentioned religious conflict and violence, but language conflict was frequent. Therefore, in his Edict, Aśoka stated that religious tolerance could be in many ways, but first of all in the 'tongue'.

The other important point in Asoka's dharma is the non-violent spirit. Before becoming a follower of Buddhism, Aśoka had been known as a gruesome King or Chanda Aśoka. But after the battle of *Kalinga*, regretting of causing many innocents to death, he repented his cruel by taking refuge in Buddhism. He decided to rule his kingdom by the path of peace that renounce war and invasion. As the result, his subject praised him the Dharma Aśoka.

In the Rock Edicts number XIII, Aśoka talks about his invasion of *Kalinga* and the calamities he caused at that war. Renouncing the war to implement a new political path, he avoided warfare and violence, changed the warfare by peace and tolerance. The non-violence in his policy is not just about to say "no" with war and invasion; it is the abandonment of killing and sacrificing of even animal. Repetition in edicts is a recommendation to avoid sacrifices, so to stop the slaughter of animals. The Aśoka applied this advocacy firstly to himself, by reducing the killing of animals in the royal kitchen ^[7]. It is traditionally observed that this non-violent and un-harmful spirit is completely encouraged in Buddhism. As a Buddhist King, Aśoka has somewhat adopted this principle from the Buddha's teaching.

Another aspect of Dharma policy is raising the issue of social welfare. The welfare activities that Aśoka advocates include: open free care clinics, encourage to plan the medical trees, help the poor people, build roads, plant trees, set up nursing homes, and appoint social welfare workers ^[8]. The German sociologist Max Weber comments on these activities that, for the first time in Indian society, the concept of "social welfare policy" and "community benefit" has been appearing ^[9]. These welfare policies have been mentioned extensively in the Pāli texts. But with the Aśoka, he has made the teachings

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 1. Rock Edict, no. 2, Saying: "Everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Wherever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Wherever medical roots or fruits are not available I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals."

⁹ Weber, Max (Author), Donald Martindale (Editor), Hans H. Gerth (Translator). *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007.p. 242.

¹ Dhammika, S. *The Edicts of King Asoka: An English Rendering*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993. p. 16.

² Jones, Ken. *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism*. London: Wisdom Publications, 1989. p. 128.

³ Lamotte, E. *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śāka Era*. Paris: Peeters Press Louvain, 1988. p. 224 – 225.

⁴ Dhammika, S. *The Edicts of King Asoka: An English Rendering*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993. p. 2.

⁵ Ibid, p. 5, 8.

⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

of the suttas become the standard principles that make benefits for all of his society.

Another aspect of the Asoka's dharma is the connection of the political with spirituality. Asoka says that he is "Beloved-of-the-gods." This view is in line with the concept of the Buddhist kingship Cakkavatti (Universal Emperor): a legitimate ruler must have a "divine" lineage. As a devoted Buddhist, Asoka in his real life created a model of government that links two aspects of Dharma ruling together, between the position of a head of country and the position of representative for the gods. It is also noted that the concept of *Cakkavatti* in Buddhist sutta is thought to emerge from the time of king Asoka^[10]. The view of a great country topped by a *Cakkavatti* is co-existed beside a Sangha topped by a Buddha is a new political model of Asoka - a representative of secular life and a representative of the spiritual life. But Cakkavatti does not only have power in the secular realm, but is sanctified the position of a religious leader.

With great influence from Buddhist morality, Asoka sought supports from the Buddhist Sangha to maintain the morality of his country. The royal family and the Sangha have implicitly relied on each other. Although the Sangha is not involved in political life, it's task is able to establish a moral society by spreading the moral values. King Asoka has supported the Sangha by donating necessities, building the monasteries, temples, stupa, etc., and sending at least nine groups of missionary abroad. The Asoka once said that he was a member of the Sangha, even he was not a monk. Although he was not the leader of Sangha, in some cases he was able to intervene in some activities of the Sangha. Buddhist sources refer to the King's efforts to "purge the sangha^[11]." Unfortunately, as Buddhism is patronaged by Asoka, many persons entered into monastery to receive the offerings of the king, and their activities gradually infringed Buddhist precepts, and made a division in Sangha.

The contributions of Dharma policy are particularly important, not only to the poor but also to religions, especially Buddhism. The construction of monasteries, temples, offerings to the Sangha, on the one hand, expresses the conviction of Buddhists, but on the hand, it is intended to create dependence and make the recipient loyal to the King. Asoka is said to do many important patronages for Buddhism. He supported the establishment of Buddhist centers, and convened the third Buddhist Council. He also had nine missionary groups sent to different parts of the subcontinent India and outside.

Not just taking refuge in and supporting the Sangha, Asoka also allows his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta to leave the family and become a Bhikkhu and a Bhikkhuni. This shows that even in the royal family, Asoka has also created this parallel relationship. And the Sangha also helped the royal family to establish peaceful relations with its neighbors. The spread of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is a case.

It is interesting that this model of dharma policy has been followed by other Buddhist countries. The kings or leaders of the Theravada Buddhist countries when taking the throne or taking office often do the same. Theravada Buddhism is said

to use the mutual model between the Buddhist Sangha and the King. Thailand's kings in the past and even today make a similar relationship. The king not just plays a secular role but also spiritual role in the Sangha. The kings of Sri Lanka in the past also formed a similar model of leadership. Some of Asoka's policies, such as the prohibition of killing, the development of the temple into big educational institutions, etc., are also applied by Kings of such countries as Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Some Indian historians have blamed Asoka's Dharma policy of peace and non-violence for leading to the rapid decline of the Maurya dynasty after his death. Besides, some words in the edicts attributed to his anti-Brahmanism, which causes religious conflict. However, these opinions have recently been re-evaluated, because there is no evidence that the pursuit of peace policy has made Asoka weaken the military capabilities and defense of the kingdom. His edicts show respect for all religions, without the blaspheming of the Brahmanism as condemned.

The above information shows that the edicts of Asoka had so much to do with Buddhism. Buddhism not only developed in many parts of the Indian subcontinent, but also became a world religion at his time. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the image of an ardent Asoka for the development and spread of Buddhism has embodied in Buddhist texts such as *Mahāvamsa*, *Dīvyāvadāna*, *Ashokavadāna*, etc. Although not referring in the particular Buddhist texts or terminology, Asoka's dharma policy apparently "borrowed" from the Buddha's teachings. Though not criticizing or refuting the Brahmanical tradition of ritual, the policies such as abandon of ritual sacrifice and slaughter animals did not bring satisfaction to Brahmanism as these activities often observed in their rituals.

King Asoka is great in many ways for his successful policy. Not only the greatest of the Mauryan Kingdom in India is he, but also one of the famous rulers in the world^[12]. He still becomes a model of leadership in India and many other parts of Asia, despite of his devotion to spreading the Buddha's teachings for justice and goodwill of all people. Despite the fact that Asoka is a Buddhist king and Buddhism get much patronage from kingdom, despite the fact that Buddhism got a dominant position; with the Dharma policy, Buddhism seems not to express its exclusive attitude, not to promote a intolerance towards other traditions of Brahmins and Jaina. As late Indian President Jawaharlal Nehru shows^[13], in making such a policy, Asoka can be seen as a peace activist, not only for Buddhist community, but for the community of all religions, for the public good, for happiness and peace.

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¹⁰ The concept of the Cakkavatti has appeared in the Psli texts, such as the Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta, Dīgha Nikaya (The Lion's on the Turning of the Wheel). However, this is believed to be a later addition, because, before the Asoka period, India was a collection of Emirates, without a vast subcontinent with geographic boundaries from this coast to another coast. The sea referred to is just the foundation for the concept *Cakkavatti*, who unifies a vast territory.

¹¹ The Mahavamsa, p. 32 – 34.

¹² Sastri, K.A. Nilakanta. Age of the Nandas and Mauryas. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988. p. 247.

¹³ See. Nehru, Jawaharlal. The Discovery of India. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004. p. 136

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