SEANET SERIES
VOL. 16



Emerging Faith

Lessons from Mission History in Asia

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Emerging Faith: *Lessons from Mission History in Asia*

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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

Cover image: Kaleomokuokanalu Chock, flickr.com
Mike Riester, cover and interior design
Melissa Hicks, copyeditor

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-256-9 (paperback), 978-1-64508-258-3 (mobi), 978-1-64508-259-0 (epub)

Printed for the Asian market

24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019955124

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CHAPTER 1

Lessons from the Buddhist Mission History of King Asoka

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Asoka the Great ignited the most massive Buddhist missionary movement in human history. His reign over most of the Indian sub-continent from 268–232 BCE proved to be one of the most expansive periods of the teachings of Buddha not just in that region but throughout Asia. Asoka's personal commitment to Buddhism propelled a small localized movement into a world religion that spread peacefully across the face of the continent, where it remains strong today. His missiology as a Buddhist scholar and mobilizer can teach much to those committed to seeking and sharing truth in Buddhist contexts. This chapter explores Asoka's mission movement and lessons that can be learned from it.

Asoka became the first Buddhist emperor and contributed to the development of Buddhism in three important ways. First, he applied basic Buddhist principles to his rule through government and foreign policies. Second, and most significantly, he sent and supported missionaries throughout his kingdom and beyond in order to spread the teachings of Buddha. Third, Asoka was able to maintain Buddhism as a major religious tradition by maintaining positive interfaith dialogue with other religions.

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The Conversion of Asoka

Asoka (b. 304 BCE) was the son of King Bindusara and the grandson of King Chandragupta, the founder of the Maurya dynasty (321–187 BCE). His father reigned twenty-eight years and his grandfather reigned twenty-four years. Known as a violent warrior, Asoka was anointed as a king over an older brother when he was thirty-six years old. At the commencement of his reign, he murdered his ninety-nine half-brothers. Asoka came to the throne 268 BCE and died approximately 232 BCE (Gantam 1992:152).

Vincent Smith writes that the consequences of the Kalinga War completely changed Asoka, leading him to embrace the concept of non-violence. The Kalinga War may not have been his first, but certainly was the last war he led voluntarily. His grandfather had attempted to subdue this productive, artistic region (today known in India as Odisha) but had failed. Asoka's victory came at a devastating cost. Over ten thousand of his own men were killed, while one hundred thousand Kalingan soldiers fell. One hundred fifty thousand people were displaced and the Daya River ran red with blood. The violent process of claiming this area as part of his empire became a radical turning point in his own life and Asoka sought out a new personal path through the non-violent teachings of the Buddha.

After the triumphant conclusion of the Kalinga War and the annexation of the kingdom, Asoka issued two special edicts prescribing principles of how both the settled inhabitants and wild jungle tribes of the conquered provinces should be treated. These edicts were preserved in recorded form at two sites, Jaugada and Thauli (Smith 2002:25). Asoka had recorded that for more than two and a half years he had been a lay disciple, but that for more than a year prior to the publication of the edict he had become a member of a Buddhist order of monks (Sangha) and devoted himself with utmost energy to the winning of immense heavenly bliss for his people by his teaching.

Asoka developed a close association with many famous monks and began to exert himself to promoting the dharma. Asoka gave presents to monks of all levels. He admired the teachings of the Buddha and identified his own favorite texts which he recommended to clergy as well as to laity. One innovation brought by Asoka was the fixing in writing of the two-and-a-half-century-long orally transmitted Buddhist traditions.

Asoka expressed a desire to visit the holy places of his religion and went on pilgrimages to visit these sites. The first place he visited was Lumbini garden, the birthplace of Buddha. He erected his first consecrated monument or stupa there in honor of the Buddha. Stupas became important in the popularization of Buddhism because of the relics they contained and the locations on which they were built. His next visit was the Boddhi Tree at Boddh Gaya (Smith 2002:251). He later

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introduced the ceremony of bathing the Boddhi Tree. Asoka also visited the sites of Buddha's first sermon and Parinirvarna (the place of Buddha's death). During his pilgrimage Asoka erected 84,000 stupas.

Records of Asoka's life are chiefly inscribed stone pillars which are found scattered in various parts of India and provide important information about his reign and policies. Asoka built shrines and monasteries, inscribing Buddhist teachings on pillars in many places (Smith 2002:27). The memory of Asoka's twenty-first regnal year (249 BCE) is preserved on the Remindental and Nieliva Pillars in Trarai, now part of Nepal. These records prove that Asoka visited the "Lumbini garden," the traditional place of the birth of Gautama Buddha, and also paid reverence to the Stupa of Konakamans for Kanakamuni, the "Former Buddha" which he had enlarged six years earlier (Smith 2002:39). This record states that Asoka erected thirty or more monuments at the expense of much labor from a distance of 120 miles. Ten of these inscribed pillars still exist; one is known as the Delhi Topra Pillar (Smith 2002:123).

Asoka built stupas, temples, and stone pillars engraved with his edicts everywhere in his kingdom. These were visible Buddhist teachings available to the public. In this way, people were impacted by Asoka's witness to the faith. Asoka showed how to live the Buddhist life correctly according to the ethics of Buddhism and influenced people to adopt Buddhist teachings as an ethical way of life. Perhaps the most significant impact Asoka left on his community was his personal conversion from a violent murdering individual to a life of Buddhist ethical standards.

The redirection of Asoka's life through his conversion to Buddhism is clearly evidenced in an inscribed stone pillar known as Minor Rock Edict II, erected soon after the Kalinga War. The evidence of personal transformation is striking when compared with Minor Rock Edict I, created a few months earlier. The earlier edict appears to be that of a zealous blood-thirsty leader boastfully displaying his powerful political pursuits forever in stone. After the Kalinga War, Minor Rock Edict II provides the most concise summary of what would become the driving force of Asoka's life: the Dharma Law of Piety. It details the duties of compassion, almsgiving, truth, purity, gentleness, and saintliness. No student of the edict can help but be struck by the purely humane and practical characteristics of the teaching (Smith 2002:29). Many summaries of the Dharma Law of Piety are found in subsequent edicts that survive on carved pillars today.

Asoka the Buddhist Ruler

Asoka's purpose in life evolved to propagate the Dharma Law of Piety to all levels of society. David Burnett describes that Asoka, in his edicts, defined the main principles of dharma as non-violence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience

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to parents, respect to Brahmins and other religious teachers and priests, liberality toward friends, humane treatment of servants, and generosity towards all. It suggests a general ethic of behavior to which no religious or social group could object. It also could act as a focus of loyalty to wield together the diverse strands that made up the empire. The importance of non-violence was repeatedly stated in Asoka's edicts. His respect for life was based on the belief that all beings had feelings. Needless killing was prohibited and laws were passed against the butchering of pregnant and nursing animals.

Asoka demonstrated how the previously inconsistent roles of monk and monarch could be reconciled in practice. Vincent Smith writes that Asoka was both monk and monarch at the same time (2002:5). It was during this period that the Buddhist tradition began to reflect the ideal of a Buddhist emperor known as Cakkavattin or Dhammaraj (Dharma King) (Hazra 1982:36). Asoka regarded administration as his sacred duty where he was always on duty as the Dharma King.

“ Asoka believed Buddhism to be the way of spiritual development for all and had the Buddhist scriptures translated into many dialects. ”

Dharma for the people

Asoka visited scholars and encouraged them to teach people to keep the dharma (Burnett 1976:82). He contributed to the expansion of Buddhism through maintaining the Law of Piety as a significant religious tradition in the Mauryan Empire (Hazra 1982:46). He instructed people about Buddhism through stone edicts for the educated, stories and symbols for the uneducated, and as mentioned earlier, numerous stupas and shrines. This allowed everyone in the Mauryan Empire, regardless of religion, status, or education level, to have access to the teachings.

Asoka believed Buddhism to be the way of spiritual development for all and had the Buddhist scriptures translated into many dialects. During his administration he established a set of special officers acquainted with the Buddhist teachings on the sources of happiness and pain to exhort the people of the provinces along with the learned faithful, so that they might attain happiness in this world and in the next.

A fundamental principle of his belief was that all people are essentially equal and should observe the dharma, including himself. This meant avoiding sin and seeking to do good. All people were encouraged to have compassion for all living beings, to speak the truth, to act with forbearance and patience, and to help those

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in need. Asoka spread his views on the dharma in two ways, through regulations concerning the dharma and quiet contemplation of the *sadharma* (good deeds). He trusted the virtue of kindness, generosity, truthfulness, obedience to parents, and justice (Burnett 1976:82).

Asoka demonstrated his zeal for Buddhism by his promotion of the Dharma Law of Piety, his references to the canon of Buddhist teachings, the tone of his language, his pilgrimage to holy places and by his active control over the Sangha. His personal devotion to the teachings of Buddha, however, did not negate goodwill to other sects. His edicts repeatedly encouraged the duty of almsgiving to Brahmin as well as Buddhist ascetics. The king declared that all people were his children. He proclaimed his impartial consideration for all faiths, including Jains and Ajivikas, and he implored people to abstain from demeaning the faith practices of neighbors. He was well versed in all creeds and impacted many religions. From Rock Edict XIV (257–256) it is clear he understood that he was commanded to perform rightly towards all faiths. The Pillar Edict of 243 BCE goes further and insists on the necessity for every person to have a definite religious creed, "I devote my attention to all communities, for all denominations are reverent to me with various forms of reverence" (Smith 2002:60).

The well-known statement that "all are my children" occurs frequently in the edicts, as well as the simile that the officers of the state are to subjects as nurses are to children, looking after their well-being. He emphasized judicial procedures and the need for impartiality before the law and introduced a respite of three days for those condemned to death. Doubtless the administrator in him did not permit the abolition of capital punishment in spite of the precepts of dharma (Madan 1999:149).

It was his humanitarian and paternal administration which made Asoka among the noblest of kings. The prime objective of Asoka was to promote the material and spiritual welfare of all in this life and the next. For material welfare, he ordered liberal charity for the needy, protection of the interests of all people, protection against injuries, reduction of punishment to criminals, and release of old men or fathers of many children from prison. Asoka declared freedom for prisoners twenty-five times within the twenty-six years of his reign.

Sangha unity

Asoka played a leading role, through his new administrative machinery of *Dharmama-hamatras,* to prevent schisms in the Buddhist Sangha (Smith 2002:22). During King Asoka's time the assemblies of Buddhist monks were held and unity of the Sangha was central.

Asoka endeavored to bring discipline into the Sangha and tried to purify it as far as possible. In lending his authority to the expulsion of dissidents, Asoka was

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