

D. The Dharma Support of Emperor Asoka



Emperor Asoka's pillar and brick stupa at Vesali: The pillar was erected behind a brick stupa, which was built to commemorate the event of a chief monkey offering honey to the Buddha. A short inscription was engraved on the lower portion of the pillar (Photo taken in January 2002).

Three centuries before the Common Era, the Northwest part of India was destroyed by the invasion of the Greek (Macedonian) Great Emperor Alexander. At that time, people in the middle part of India were living in hardship due to the fighting among local kings. Chandragupta stood up to liberate his country from the Greek and united the middle part of India. Emperor Chandragupta transferred the crown to his son Bindusara, who in turn transferred it to Asoka in 272 BCA. It was said that in the first few years on the throne, Emperor Asoka was very cruel. He was more powerful than his royal father. He united all five regions of India and made Pataliputra (Patna) of Magadha his capital.

One day, after finishing the last battle at Kalinga, Emperor Asoka repented when he saw too many people being killed on the battlefield. He later returned to

Buddhism and took refuge in the Three Jewels. In his steles remaining today, the Emperor engraved the following sentence:

"My most glorious and righteous victory was based on virtue, not on weapons"

After taking refuge in the Three Jewels, Emperor Asoka elevated Arahant Moggaliputta Tissa to be the nation's teacher. The emperor supported the spreading of Buddhism. He built many pagodas and Buddhist monuments. However, Emperor Asoka also supported the other religions with his whole heart. He often visited and helped virtuous monks and nuns regardless of their religions or beliefs. The emperor applied Buddhism in his government policies. He built public hospitals and supported social security programs.

Following the advice of Venerable Uppagutta, Emperor Asoka went on a pilgrimage to Buddha's holy places. He erected five pillars at the Lumbini Garden, the Uruvela Village, the Bodhi-Gaya, the Deer Park and the Sala Grove. He also built many stupas to worship the relics of the Buddha and His senior disciples such as Venerables Sariputta, Moggallana, Maha-Kassapa, Ananda, etc.

To Buddhism, the most important merit of Emperor Asoka is the Third Sangha Assembly. At that time, taking advantage of the emperor's support for Buddhism, many people asked to be ordained as Buddhist monks and nuns for gains although they were not interested in studying and practising the Dharma. As a consequence, Buddhism was expressed differently, even wrongly, and the Sangha were not living in harmony. There were divisions within the Sangha for many years. To solve the problem, Emperor Asoka consulted Arahant Moggaliputta Tissa. The nation's teacher screened the Sangha to exclude sabotaging persons. He then summoned virtuous venerables to make the Third Sangha Assembly with the wholehearted support of Emperor Asoka. The assembly met for nine months to verify the Dharma. When the verification was completed, Arahant Moggaliputta summarised the essences of different Buddhism schools and wrote a sastra, the Kathavattuppakanara. He also advised the emperor to send people to countries around India to spread the Dharma.

Emperor Asoka stayed on the throne for 47 years. During this period, he allowed his royal brother, prince and princess to be ordained as Buddhist monks and nun. After the Third Sangha Assembly, he sent many Sangha members to go spreading Buddhism to all areas of India as well as other countries such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Burma, Tibet, Afghanistan, Iran, Egypt, etc. Today, people can discover Buddhist holy places thanks to the stupas, pillars and monuments built by Emperor Asoka. The Buddhist delegation sent to Sri Lanka by Emperor Asoka, later, wrote the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings, in Pali; these became the first Buddhist books, and have remained until today.