

Chapter IV

ASOKA AS PATRON OF BUDDHISM

IV.1. Asoka and the Reform of Buddhist *Samgha*

Buddhism originated in India and in its early period was only a small sect followed in some parts of India. It was not until the time of Asoka that Buddhism came to acquire the character of a pan-Indian and politically significant religion.¹ During the same period it was carried beyond India by the missionaries of King Asoka. In other words, during Asoka's time Buddhism grew in strength and spread throughout India, and after the Third Buddhist Council Buddhism became the state religion of Asoka's empire.

From the account of *Xuan-zang* (600-664CE)² we know that Asoka not only sent Buddhist monks to his neighbor countries but also built many monasteries at that place for the benefit of the Buddhist *Samgha*.³ We also with some amount of confidence accept the traditions of the *Mahāvamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* that about the time of Asoka, Buddhism made its way to the

¹ K. T. S. Sarao, *The Decline of Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2012, p. 182.

² See footnote 79, p. 112.

³ N. Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1978, p. 129.

countries of *Kasmīra-Gandhāra*, *Mahiṣamaṇḍala*, *Vanavāsī*, *Yona*, *Mahārāṭṭha*, *Himavantapadesa Suvāṇṇabhūmi*, and *Laṅkādīpa*.⁴

Although Buddhism by the time of Asoka had divided into many schools,⁵ with the many practices and philosophies, Asoka did not lend his support to any particular sect. It is clear that the *Dhamma* preached in his edicts is mainly ethical and lacks the specific colouring of any school of Buddhism. He encouraged leading a righteous household life rather than the life of a monk or an ascetic. He, further, respected and supported to all Buddhist monks and other recluses both of inside and outside India.⁶

Asoka further, was an adherent of Buddhism only as a supporter, or at most as an *upāsaka*.⁷ He, therefore, had no doubt Buddhistic leanings, in his exhortations so far as they have been found in the edicts; there were the evidences of his actively helping the propagation of Buddhism. It is clear that Emperor Asoka showed a bias for a particular religion and even proclaimed himself to be a Buddhist *upāsaka*, and paid visits to the monasteries or Buddhist holy sites, the religion automatically received an impetus and its propagation by the Buddhist monks then became easy. Asoka was a passive propagator of Buddhism and during his time, Buddhism probably made its way throughout his kingdom, reaching also places beyond his rule.⁸

⁴ *Mhv.*XII, 3-8; (Tr.) Wilhelm Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2006, p. 82; *Dpv.* 8, 4-13; Hermann Oldenberg, *The Dīpavaṃsa: An Ancient Buddhist Historical Record*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2006, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 159-160.

⁵ At time of Asoka, Buddhism was divided into at least three principal sections or schools, viz., *Theravāda*, *Sarvāstivāda*, and *Mahāsaṅghika*.

⁶ N. Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India*, *Op.Cit.*, p. 247.

⁷ *Upāsaka* (Skt.). A Buddhist layman. One of the four divisions of the Buddhist community consisting of monks (*Bhikṣu*), nuns (*Bhikṣuṇī*), laymen (*Upāsaka*), and laywomen (*Upāsikā*). In the early tradition layfolk became Buddhist by taking refuge in the Buddha, *Dharma* and *Samgha* through recitation of the three refuge formula. They were also required to adopt the Five Precepts (*Pañca-sīla*).

⁸ Viz., the kingdoms of the *Yavanas*, *Kambojas*, *Gandhāras*, *Pitenikas* in the west, and *Colas*, *Pāṇḍyas* as far as *Tāmrparṇi* on the south.

In context of this chapter, we will study the contribution of Asoka to Buddhism in which he rises as patron of this religion, in both material and psychical matter.

IV.1.1. Asoka and his Contribution to Buddhist *Samgha*

Both the Northern and the Southern Buddhist sources accepted the role of King Asoka in the contribution to Buddhist *Samgha*. Especially the Sri Lankan Pāli sources portray Asoka's munificence to the faith as a factor contributing to the infiltration of heretics and undesirables to the point that the traditional monastic life patterns and practices were totally disrupted for as long a period as seven years. Such disruption causing schisms and disunity had come to the emperor's attention. His solution had been to exercise royal authority and the result initially was tragic. But eventually, with direction and instruction from the *Samgha* itself, Asoka had undertaken or supervised the interrogation of each member of the *Samgha* and the expulsion of all those who failed to identify orthodoxy. The process of expulsion was one of removing their yellow robes and getting them to put on white lay clothing.⁹

The authenticity of this record of the Northern sources is amply borne out by the three versions of the Schism Edicts or the Minor Pillar Inscriptions found at *Allahabad*, *Sārnāth* and *Sāñchī* (MPE I-II). These Schism Edicts recorded the role of King Asoka in unifying of the Buddhist *Samgha*, as well as promulgated a royal decree which he as the emperor commanded should be brought to the attention of *Bhikkhus* and *Bhikkhunīs* and also to the lay devotees. In the *Sāñchī* version, he spoke of his contribution to the Buddhist *Samgha*:

⁹ The robes of a Buddhist monk are yellow-coloured, and when he is given white robes, it means that he is defrocked.

“The Saṃgha of monks and of nuns has been made whole and entire, my sons and grandsons continuing as long as the sun and the moon endure. Whosoever breaks the Saṃgha, be he a monk or a nun, shall be clad in white raiment and compelled to live in what is not a residence (of the mendicants). For my desire is what is it? That the Saṃgha may remain whole and entire and may be of long duration.”¹⁰

In similar words Asoka expressed his contribution to the preservation of Buddhist *Saṃgha* in the *Sārnāth* inscription:

“Thus orders King Priyadarśin, Beloved of the gods: ...Pāṭaliputra... the Saṃgha may not be divided by anyone. But whosoever breaks the Saṃgha, be it a monk or a nun, shall be clad in white raiment, and compelled to live in what is not a residence (of the mendicants). Thus should this order be respectfully communicated to the Saṃgha of the monks and the Saṃgha of the nuns.

Thus saith beloved of the gods: One such document has been deposited in (your) office in order that it may be accessible to you. And deposit just another such document so as to be accessible to the laity. And these laity should come every fast-day, in order to assure themselves of that same order. And certainly on all fast-days as each Mahāmātra¹¹ comes in his turn (to the headquarters) for fast, he should assure himself of that same order and understand it. And so far as your jurisdiction goes, you must set out on tour with this specification (of

¹⁰ “[Saṃghe samage kaṭe bhikhunaṃ ca bhikhuninaṃ ca puta-papotike chaṃdaṃ-sūriyike]. Ye kenapi Saṃghaṃ bhākhati [Saṃghe bhetave] bhikhu vā bhikhuni vā se pi cā odātāni dusāni sanamddhapayitu anāvāsasi āvāsaviye [vāsāpetaviye]. [Ichhā hi me kinti? ‘Saṃghe samage cilathitike siyā ti]. [Hevaṃ iyaṃ sāsane bhikhusaṃghasi bhikhunisaṃghasi ca vimnapayitave].” (PE of Sāñchi). D. R. Bhandarkar, *Asoka*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1955, p. 343; Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Asoka, The Righteous: A Definitive Biography*, Sri Lanka: The Central Cultural Fund, 1993, p. 603.

¹¹ The term *Mahāmātra* must be understood to mean “a high official” or “dignitary” only. This is also clear from the fact that in the *Dhauḷi* and *Jaugada* Separate Edict I, *Nagaravyāvahārikas* also have been called *Mahāmātras*.

order). So too in all fortified towns and (the) district sub-divisions, you must cause (subordinates) to go out on tours with this specification (of order).”¹²

Asoka, thus, proceeded to give through these edicts three specific orders:

1. Disruptors of unity should not be admitted to the *Samgha*. No heretical monks should be admitted into the *Samgha*.

2. Any *Bhikkhu* or *Bhikkhunī*, who causes disunity in the *Samgha* should be made to wear white clothes and reside in non-monastic residences.

3. Not only should the *Mahāmātras* exhibit this edict in places accessible to official and lay devotees but also on specified days draw their attention to it. In addition, *Mahāmātras* were required to go themselves and also send their subordinates on circuit in their areas of jurisdiction to ensure that instructions in these edicts were properly carried out.

The purpose of these instructions was to ensure that the *Samgha* remained united and flourished for a long time. The tone of the edicts and their contents do compel us to conclude that Asoka considered his role in disciplining the *Samgha* and purging it of heretics and dissidents to be a royal duty demanding an imperial decree and corresponding executive action through the administrative machinery. At one stage, some Asoka scholars were even inclined to think quite erroneously that the emperor functioned as a

¹² “Devānaṃpiye ānapayati: [Pāṭa.....] Saṃghe samage kaṭe Saṃghasi no lahiye. Ye kenapi Saṃghaṃ bhākhati [Saṃghe bhetave] bhikkhu vā bhikkhuni vā se pi cā odātāni dusāni sanamddhapayitu anāvāsasi āvāsapiye [vāsāpetaviye]. [Hevaṃ iyaṃ sāsane bhikkhusaṃghasi bhikkhunisamghasi ca vimnapayitave]. Hevaṃ Devānaṃpiye āhā: Hedisā ca ikā lipī tuphākantikaṃ huvati saṃsalanasi nikkhitā. Ikā ca lipiṃ hedisameva upāsakānantikaṃ nikkhipātha. Te pi ca upāsakā anuposathaṃ yāvu etam eva sāsanaṃ visvaṃsayitave. Anuposathaṃ ca dhuvāye ikike mahāmāte posathāye yāti etam eva sāsanaṃ visvaṃsayitave ājānitave ca. āvate ca tuphākāṃ āhālē savata vivāsayātha tuphe etena viyaṃjanena. Hemeva savesu koṭaviṣavesu etena viyaṃjanena vivāsāpayatā.” (Sanārth Inscription). D. R. Bhandakar, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 340-341; Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 603-604.

lay head of the Buddhist *Samgha*. So involved had Asoka been in safeguarding the *Samgha*. Thus, the Schism Edict testifies to the authenticity of the Sri Lankan Pāli sources as regards Asoka's role in the preservation of the Buddhist *Samgha*, as well as its relation to the Third Buddhist Council.

It can be said that Asoka's contribution to the *Samgha* is the highlighting spiritual qualities of piety and self-effacing dedication, as demanded by sectarian norms governing *Avadānas*. But there is a sequence in which the various incidents are enumerated.

According to the Southern Buddhist tradition, in the fifth to seventh regnal years, urged or inspired by the *Samgha*, Asoka embarks on a massive building programme aimed at dotting his dominions with eighty-four thousand *stūpas* and monasteries for the *Samgha*. Inauguration of all monasteries takes place simultaneously. The emperor has come to the conclusion that he had surpassed all patrons of Buddhism hitherto through his generosity - estimates at ninety-six crores.¹³ In the seventh regnal year, Asoka was declared to be only a giver of material requisites; to become an heir to the faith, he has to get a child ordained. At his wish, *Mahinda* and *Samghamittā* volunteered to be ordained.

Besides, in the seventeenth regnal year Asoka sent a minister to *Asokārāma* to ensure that the *Uposatha*¹⁴ ceremony is conducted. When *Bhikkhus* refused to do so on account of ecclesiastical reasons, he meted out summary capital punishment. Asoka's younger brother *Tissa* who was a

¹³ Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁴ Pāli equivalent of the Sanskrit term *Posadha*, indicating the day preceding the four stages of the moon's waxing, that is the 1st, 8th, 15th, and 23rd nights of the lunar month. In particular, these days were utilized by the pre-Buddhist reforming communities for the expounding of their views, a practice that early Buddhists adopted. Buddhists also utilized one or other of these *uposatha* days for the recitation of the *Prātimokṣa*, the set of monastic rules which are contained in the *Sūtra-vibhaṅga* of the *VinayaPiṭaka*. On the *uposatha* days laymen take upon themselves the Eight Precepts (Skt., *Aṣṭāṅga-śīla*, Pāli, *Aṭṭha-Sīla*), known on that occasion as *uposatha* vows.

Bhikkhu in the monastery intervened. The king, being informed of the slaying of *Bhikkhus*, became concerned over his moral responsibility. After the teachings of *Thera MoggaliputtaTissa*,¹⁵ the king interrogated the members of the *Samgha*, identified heretics and ordered them to be expelled, i.e. to be clad in white clothes and sent out of monastic residences. After the purge, Asoka informed *Thera MoggaliputtaTissa* that the faith was now purified.

As regards the contribution of King Asoka to the *Samgha* there was a building programme, according to which eighty-four thousand *Vihāras* or monasteries were built. The Chinese travellers who had been shown many *stūpas* as founded by Asoka in various regions of the Indian sub-continent invariably speak in terms of complexes consisting of a *Stūpa* and a monastic residence. The cost of the eighty-four thousand monasteries is consistently given as ninety-six crores, even though the Northern Buddhist sources at some stage apply this figure as the sum-total of Asoka's contribution to the *Samgha* over his lifetime.

Asoka, infact, initiated a widespread monastery construction campaign, as is suggested more than once by *Xuan-zang*. The very fact that the memory of his building programme had been preserved that long is in itself remarkable. The recent archaeological surveys of the Indian sub-continent had enabled several vestiges of Asoka constructions to be identified. For example, P. Brown shows that "relics of a typical Asokan character" exist in the *Stūpa* hall of *Bairat* in *Rajasthan* and *Stūpa* No.4, the Temple of *Sāñchī*.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Moggaliputta Tissa* is a senior monk who presided over the council held during the reign of Asoka. Due to prosperity enjoyed by the *Samgha* as a result of Asoka's patronage, a number of corrupt monks were admitted. In protest, *Moggaliputta* withdrew to live in solitary retreat for seven years, and on his return Asoka assembled all the monks to be questioned by himself with *Moggaliputta* in attendance. The heretical monks were expelled and *Moggaliputta* later celebrated the third council with 1,000 *Arhats* in attendance. *Moggaliputta* died at the age of 80 in the 26th year of Asoka's reign.

¹⁶ Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu) Taraporevala*, Bombay: University of Bombay, 1956, pp. 15-22.

B. Rowland refers to “a simple hypaethral shrine erected by Asoka to enclose the *Bodhi* tree at *Bodh-Gaya*, which was replaced during the age of the *Kushan* with a Buddhist skyscraper.”¹⁷ He also said that the *Stūpa* of *Svayambhunath* and *Bodhinath* were originally built by the Mauryan king. John Marshall suggested that the *Dharmarājika*, *Hathial Stūpa* and *Bhallar Stūpa* in *Taxila* owe their origin to Asoka.¹⁸

It is possible that a large number of monastic complexes was inaugurated simultaneously on a certain day in the seventh regnal year of Asoka. But Asoka seems to have continued similar building operations later on as indicated in Pillar Inscription II (Nigali Sagar Pillar). It is inconceivable that his activities in building or establishing Buddhist monasteries in his empire were confined to just three years.¹⁹

Giftng the empire to the *Samgha* and redeeming it with various donations could have been a symbolic act. Whether this practice was started by Asoka, we are unable to establish. But his example has been followed by later Buddhist kings. It is symbolically accomplished in daily services in Tibetan monasteries.

Besides contributing to the Buddhist *Samgha*, Asoka was also a patron to the heretics. It is supported by the fact that a million units of money he donated to the faith attracted heretics who preached their own views and continued to follow their own practices. Those who could not find entry to the *Samgha* through correct means, shaved their heads themselves and donned yellow robes.²⁰ RE. VIII, stated that Asoka during his pilgrimages

¹⁷ Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India: Hindu-Buddhist-Jain*, Penguin, 1956, p. 92.

¹⁸ John Maeshall, *A Guide to Taxila*, Cambridge, 1960, p. 102.

¹⁹ Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Asoka, The Righteous: A Definitive Biography*, *Op.Cit.*, p. 157.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

was of the habit of visiting recluses and *Brāhmaṇas* and making gifts to them; and seeing elderly persons and making provision of money for them.²¹

All the Buddhist sources, thus, agree that Asoka was the foremost patron of Buddhism. The Buddhist traditions also concur that with his identification with Buddhism, as exemplified by the construction of so many *Vihāras*, Asoka came to be known as *Dhammāsoka*, “Asoka the Righteous.”

Asoka also contributed to the development of Indian art and architecture and in this field his contribution was both significant and lasting. He apparently gave the lead in adopting more durable building materials, namely stone and brick in preference to timber which had hitherto been widely used. It can be said that the use of more expensive and durable building materials is a proof of the patronage Asoka extended to Buddhist *Samgha*.

IV.1.2. Asoka and the Third Buddhist Council

It can be said that the reform of the *Samgha*, which was initiated by the great emperor Asoka, and the Third Buddhist Council, which took place at *Pāṭaliputra* under his patronage about 242 BCE,²² have been considered the most important for understanding Asoka’s role in the history of Buddhism. The Third Council has been a major subject in the discussions concerning the history of Buddhist *Samgha*. In *Pāli* sources, such as *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, this Council is said to have been presided over by the *Thera MoggaliputtaTissa* with assemble of one thousand *Arhat* Monks. As we know, *MoggaliputtaTissa* is known as the fifth *Thera* and the Patriarch of the *Pāli* School.²³ However, the considerable difficulties for a coherent

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²² *SBE*. X., p. xxxvii.

²³ *Pāli* School is also called *Theravāda* or *Sthaviravāda* School.

interpretation of the references to this assembly in the *Pāli* sources and in the so-called northern sources led some scholars to the conclusion that two different Councils were held in *Pāṭaliputra*, because the differences between the two main traditions are too basic for them to refer to one and the same convocation. They argued that the earlier assembly, which was of a more general character, was confused by the *Pāli* tradition with a sectarian meeting of the *Pāli* School held during the reign of Asoka. Their interpretation of the sources has subsequently been accepted by most recent Buddhologists.

Some scholars proposed new interpretation of the Minor Pillar Edicts of *Sārnāth*, *Kosambi* and *Sāñchī*, which are also known collectively as the evidence of schism within the *Samgha*. They claim that the evidence of these inscriptions not only corroborates the historicity of the purification of the *Samgha* and of the Council as recorded in the *Pāli* traditions, but also confirms that as far as Asoka was concerned he was an adherent of the *Theravāda*. Whereas others claim that the Council was held long before these edicts were issued. And some others said that the Council immediately followed the purification of the *Sāsana*.²⁴ They had carefully compared the versions of the edict and thereby improved our knowledge of the inscriptions.

According to *Dīpavaṃsa* many non-Buddhists entered the *Samgha*, because the Buddhists received great gain and honor. Due to the impurity of the *Samgha* at that time, the *uposatha* ceremony did not take place for seven years. The holy, well-behaved and conscientious monks did not attend the *uposatha*, evidently, because some *Ājīvikas*²⁵ and other *Tīrthikas*²⁶ had

²⁴ (Pāli; Skt., *Śāsana*). A term used by Buddhists to refer to their religion. It has a range of possible translations, including teaching, doctrine, and as *Buddha-śāsana*, the teachings of the Buddha, especially in the context of their historical continuity as religious tradition.

²⁵ *Ājīvikas* is a heterodox sect founded by *MakkhaliGosala*, a contemporary and rival of the Buddha. *Makkhali* was for six years the itinerant companion of the Jain leader *Mahāvīra*, before they parted company after a disagreement. In matters of belief they differ: whereas the Jains, along with Buddhists, accept the

entered the *Samgha*. The *Dīpavaṃsa* also informs us that at the time of 236 years after the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Lord Buddha, there were sixty thousand (60,000) monks living in the *Asokārāma*,²⁷ which was, of course, of great importance because it was the royal monastery built by Asoka himself in his capital. The record returns to the fact that *Ājīvikas* and other *Tīrthikas* ruined the *sāsana*, but wore the yellow robes of the Buddhist monks. Therefore, *Thera MoggaliputtaTissa*, having strengthened the *Theravāda*, convened the Third Council in order to purify the Buddhist *Samgha*.²⁸

Also from the *Dīpavaṃsa*, at that time a great schism arose among the *Theravādins*. We are told how Asoka patronized the *Samgha*, and how sixty thousand non-Buddhists entered the *Samgha* for material gains and honor. The *Upasatha* ceremony in the *Asokārāma* was interrupted, and the minister who tried to enforce its performance caused some of the holy monks to be killed. In order to rebuke the *Tīrthikas*, sixty thousand (true) Buddhist monks assembled, presided over by *Thera MoggaliputtaTissa*. We also learn that the

doctrine of *Karma*, the *Ājīvikas* denied the existence of free will. At the time of the Buddha the *Ājīvikas* were an important sect and remained so for several hundred years.

²⁶ Term meaning a ‘ford-maker’ used in Buddhist sources as a general designation for all those philosophical schools and traditions that are non-Buddhist. The sense of the term is obscure, but connotes the idea of teachings promulgated with the aim of fording the stream of cyclic existence (*samsāra*).

²⁷ A monastery in *Pāṭaliputra*, built by and named after the emperor Asoka. The monastery was the site of the Third Council and the centre of events leading up to it.

²⁸ “...*Upāsakattaṃ desiṃsu khattiyā brāhmaṇā bahū, mahālābho ca sakkāro uppajji buddhasāsane, ...samppatte ca vassasate vassaṇṇaṃ chattiṃsa satāni ca saṭṭhi bhikkhusahassāni Asokārāme vasiṃsu te. Ājīvakā aññaladdhikā nānā duseṇti sāsanaṃ, sabbe kāsāyavasanā duseṇti jinasāsanaṃ. Bhikkhusahassaparivuto chaḷabhiñño mahiddhiko Moggaliputto gaṇapāmokkho akāsi dhammasaṃgahaṃ...*” (...Many Khatiyas and Brāhmins declared their intention of becoming lay disciples, and great gain and honour accrued to the faith of Buddha ... when a hundred years and (another) hundred and thirty-six had elapsed (after the Parinibbāna of the Buddha), sixty thousand Bhikkhus dwelt in the *Asokārāma*. *Ājīvikas* and sectarians of different descriptions ruined the Doctrine; all of them wearing the yellow injured the doctrine of the Jina. Surrounded by one thousand Bhikkhus, Moggaliputta, the chief of the school, who possessed the six (supernatural) powers and the great (magical) faculties, convened a Council). *Dpv.* 7, 34-39; Hermann Oldenberg, *Op.Cit.*, p. 157.

king destroyed the clerical attributes of those who had furtively entered the *Samgha*, i.e. he excluded them from the Buddhist *Samgha*.²⁹

The *Pāli* sources tacitly presuppose the continued existence of the schools which were different from the orthodox *Theravāda*. These schools originated for the most part before Asoka's time. The preceding observations confirm the following proposed reconstruction of the main historical facts concerning the *Samgha-bheda* edict of Asoka³⁰ and the Third Council: King Asoka was perplexed by the internal disorder of the *Samgha* and decided to carry out a purification of the *Samgha*. He did this by supporting, with his royal authority, the expulsion of dishonest monks by the disciplined monks in accordance with the rules laid down in the *Vinaya-Piṭaka*³¹ for the execution of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. After the individual *Samgha*, many of whom had been disunited as a result of *Samgha-bheda*, were reformed and reunited in this manner, he issued the so-called Schism Edict with the injunction

²⁹ "... Nikkhante dutiye vassasate vassāni chattimsati, puna bhedo ajāyatha theravādānam uttamo... Titthiye niggahatthāya bahū buddhassa sāvakā, saṭṭhimattasahassāni jinaputtā samāgatā. Ekasmiṃ sannipātamhi thero Moggaliatrajo, satthukappo mahānāgo paṭhavyā natthi ṭṭiso... Therassa santike rājā uggahetvana sāsanaṃ, theyyasamvāsabhikkhuno nāseti liṅganāsanaṃ..." (When the second century and thirty-six years more had elapsed (since the Buddha's death), again a most dreadful schism arose in the Theravāda... In order to destroy the infidels, many disciples of Buddha, sixty thousand sons of the Jina assembled. At that convocation the son of Moggalī was the president, a great chief, similar to the Teacher; he had not his like on earth ... Having received the Doctrine from the Thera, the king destroyed the Bhikkhu emblems of those who had furtively attached themselves (to the *Samgha*). *Dpv.* 7, 44-53; Hermann Oldenberg, *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁰ *Samgha-bheda* edict (Schism Edict or MPE) is the group of Edicts which was founded in three places, namely in *Sārnāth*, *Saṅcī*, and Allahabad (*Kauśāmbī*) respectively, in which emperor Asoka would claim to have acted against schisms in the Buddhist *Samgha* and his measures to prevent and punish it. In these Edicts, Asoka appears in the role of the "Head of the *Samgha* and Defender of the Faith," as it were, but it must be noted that this role was not assumed by Asoka by an autocratic exercise of his sovereign powers, but was forced on him by the injunctions of the very faith he followed. The content of these Schism Edicts state by Asoka (in the same cases) as follows:

"Ye kenapi *Samgham* bhākhati [*Samghe bhetave*] bhikhu vā bhikhuni vā se pi cā odātāni dusāni sanamddhapayitu anāvāsasi āvāsaviye [*vāsāpetaviye*]..." (The *Samgha* may not be divided by any one. But whosoever breaks the *Samgha*, be it a monk or a nun, shall be clad in white raiment, and compelled to live in what is not a residence (of the mendicants)), *Sārnāth* Inscription, D. R. Bhandarkar, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 340-341; Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Op.Cit.*, p. 603.

³¹ One of the three divisions of the *Pāli* Canon, being the Basket (*piṭaka*) or collection of monastic life. The purpose of these scriptures is to regulate in all detail the life within the community of monks and nuns as well as their relationship with the laity. The collection, which is attributed to the Buddha himself, deals with the rules relating to individual conduct and with the legal procedures and formulae used by the community as a whole. The *VinayaPiṭaka* consists of the *Sūtra-vibhanga*, the *Skandhaka*, and the *Parivāra* (an appendix). The first is divided into *Pārājikā* and *Pācittiya* and the second into *Mahāvagga* and *Cullavagga*.

against a repetition of *Samgha-bheda*, saying that whoever splits the unity of the *Samgha* is to be expelled from it. He has to wear the white clothes of lay people and reside outside the monastic compound. In the *Sārnāth* version of the edict an additional injunction is engraved which prescribes that one copy of the edict must remain in the office of the *Mahāmātra*, another copy with the lay followers of Buddhism. The lay followers and the *Mahāmātra* in charge of the particular place were to go to the *Upasatha* ceremony in order to supervise the observance of the edict by the monks.

Thus, the purification of the *Samgha* consisted of the expulsion of monks and nuns who had violated the rules of the *Vinaya*³² and, thereby, of the restoration of unity within the *Samgha*. It did not entail an attempt to unite all *Samghas* in dogmatic questions in the way in which later *Theravāda* authors have interpreted this tradition. The Council in *Pāṭaliputra* was held after the purification of the *Samgha*, most probably under the patronage of the king and with the attendance of the monks from many parts of India. However, it cannot be considered as an all-Indian Buddhist Convention, nor were the decisions of the Council binding for all *Samgha* in the empire of Asoka. We may accept as an historical fact that *MoggaliputtaTissa* presided over this convocation, and that the earliest part of the now existing text of the *Kathāvatthu*³³ originated during *MoggaliputtaTissa's* time. However, most parts of this work are of much later origin, and *Buddhaghosa's* attribution of particular opinions to the various schools does not represent reliable

³² General term referring to monastic discipline, law, custom, and practice, the regulations concerning which are set out in the *VinayaPiṭaka*.

³³ "... *Nikkhante dutiye vassasate vassāni chattimsati, puna bhedo ajāyatha theravādānam uttamo... Desetvā thero abhidhammaṃ kathāvatthupparakaraṇaṃ, sakavādasodhanatthāya, sāsaṇaṃ dīghakālikāṃ. Arahantānaṃ sahaṣṣaṃ uccinitvāna nāyako varaṃ varaṃ gahevāna akāsi dhammasaṃgahaṃ.*" (... When the second century and thirty-six years more had elapsed (since the Buddha's death), again a most dreadful schism arose in the Theravāda ... After having promulgated the treatise called Kathāvatthu which belongs to the Abhidhamma, the presiding Thera, in order to purify his own doctrine and (to establish) the Faith for a long time, selected one thousand Arahats, choosing the best ones, and held a Council). *Dpv.* 7, 44-58; Hermann Oldenberg, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 158-159.

information from the period of King Asoka, but from a period much nearer to *Buddhaghosa's* time.

However, there is no doubt that it was King Asoka who performed the first purification of the *Samgha* by the power of the state, a practice which was persuaded in the history of the *Theravāda* community of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, and which has materially contributed to the survival of this tradition until the present day.

IV.2. Asoka and Buddhist Holy Sites

IV.2.1. Asoka's Pilgrimage to Buddhist Holy Sites

Asoka was not only an advisor or learns or knew about Buddhism but he was also a Buddhist monk in true sense. Though he was a king but his heart was full with the *Buddhavacana*. He was the follower of the *ahiṃsā* and *jīvedayā*. Therefore, after converting to Buddhism (261-260 BCE),³⁴ Asoka's heart became the home of compassion, right living, love and non-violence. He gave up hunting and eating meat. He put an end to the killing of animals for the royal kitchen. Realizing that it was not enough if he only lives a righteous life, he proclaimed that all his subjects also should live a life of righteousness. Asoka did not think of the good of only his subjects; he thought of the good of all mankind. He wished to win the hearts of people and to serve the world through religion and through good will and good action. He decided to dedicate his energy and all his powers and wealth to this goal. The first thing that Asoka did to spread righteousness among his people was to undertake a pilgrimage.

³⁴ Vincent A. Smith, *Asoka: The Buddhist Emperor of India*, reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2002, p. 28.

It is said that after his meeting with the *Thera Upagupta*,³⁵ Asoka resolved to go on a pilgrimage in order to honor all the places where the Buddha lived, and to mark them with signs, as a favor to future pilgrims. He asked *Upagupta* to act as his guide and together they set out.³⁶ Under the guidance of *Thera Upagupta*, Asoka visited Buddhist sacred places. His pilgrimage started with a visit to *Sambodhi*, the holy place where the Buddha obtained enlightenment. And he also visited other holy places during the pilgrimage. Asoka explained in his own words the purpose of his pilgrimage. “*Visits and gifts to the Brāhmaṇa and Śramaṇa ascetics, visits and largesse of gold to the aged, and visits to, instructions in Dhamma to, and enquiries about Dhamma of the provincials.*”³⁷

Radhakumud Mookerji, in his work “*Asoka*”, said that the first “pious pilgrimage” of King Asoka to the Buddhist holy sites took place earlier than the issue of his Edicts, in the tenth year of his coronation (i.e., 260 BCE.), when he first went to *Sambodhi*, the place of the Buddha’s enlightenment.³⁸ We may recall that Asoka undertook this pilgrimage as a result of his increased devotion to Buddhism following the *Kaliṅga* war of 262 BCE, when he became an *Upāsaka*. The fact of his visit to *Bodh-Gayā* and of his devotion to the *Bodhi* tree is also corroborated by a sculpture on the eastern gate at *Sāñchī*. We can learn about it from RE VIII:

³⁵ *Upagupta* is an important saint who resided in the region of Mathurā. In the *Sarvāstivāda* tradition he is the fifth patriarch after *Mahākaśyapa*, *Ananda*, *Madhyāntika*, and *śānakavāsin*, and in the Cha'n tradition he is regarded as the fourth. He features prominently in the *avadāna* literature (chapter 21 and 27 of the *Divyāvadāna* contain the fullest account of his life), and he is said to have lived during the time of Asoka, who held him in high esteem.

³⁶ See John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka: A Study and Translation of the Asokāvadana*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, p. 119.

³⁷ “*Bāmhāna-samaṇānam dasaṇe ca, dāne ca; thairānam dasaṇe ca, hiraṇṇa-patividhāno ca; janapadasa ca jānasa darsanam, dhammānusasī ca, dhamma-paripuchā ca tādopayā.*” (RE. VIII). D. R. Bhandarkar, *Op. Cit.*, p. 283. Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Op. Cit.*, p. 595.

³⁸ Radhakumud Mookerji, *Asoka*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972, p. 26.

“For a-long time past kings used to go out on tours of pleasure. Here there were chase and other similar diversions. Now, king Priyadarśin, Beloved of the gods, repaired to Saṃbodhi (Bodhi tree), when he had been consecrated ten years. Hence this touring for the Dhamma, here this happens, namely, visits and gifts to the Brāhman and Śramaṇa ascetics, visits and largesse of gold to the aged, and visits to, instructions in Dhamma to, and enquiries about Dhamma of, the provincials.”³⁹

Here Asoka tells us that up to the tenth year of his reign he, like the previous kings, used to find relaxation in tours of pleasure, where he indulged in hunting and other sports. Thus, Asoka went on his first pious pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites after the increase of his faith in Buddhism in 260 BCE.⁴⁰ It was followed by many other pilgrimages, on which both legends and inscriptions throw some light. Under the guidance of *Thera Upagupta*, Asoka visited the holy places of Buddhism at *Lumbinī* Garden where the Buddha was born, *Kapilavāstu* where he renounced the world, *Bodhi* tree at *Gayā* where he attained enlightenment, *Isipatana* where he first preached the *Dhamma*, *Kuśinagara* where he passed away, *Srāvastī* where he mostly lived and taught the *Dhamma*, and the *stūpas* of some of his chief disciples like *Sāriputta*, *Moggalāna* and *Ānanda*.⁴¹ At each of these places, true to his own words recorded in his RE VIII, the emperor gave largesse of gold and built a *stūpa*. The birthplace of the Buddha is identified with *Rummindei*, four miles inside the Nepal frontier, by the discovery of an Asokan Pillar bearing an

³⁹ “*Atikātaṃ aṃtaraṃ rājāno vihārā-yātāṃ ṇayāsu. Eta magavyā, añāni ca etārisāni abhīramkāni ahumsu. So Devānaṃpiyo Piyadasi rājā dasa-varsābhisito saṃto ayāya Saṃdodhiṃ. Tenesā dhamma-yātā. Etayaṃ hoti; bāhmaṇa-samaṇānaṃ dasaṇe ca, dāne ca; thairānaṃ dasaṇe ca, hiraṃṇa-patividhāno ca; janapadasa ca jānasa darsanaṃ, dhammānusaṣṭī ca, dhamma-paripucchā ca tādopayā.*” (RE. VIII). D. R. Bhandarkar, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 282-283. Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Op. Cit.*, p. 595.

⁴⁰ Radhakumud Mookerji, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

inscription which states that it was set up to commemorate the birthplace of the Buddha. The inscription indicates that it was drafted and incised by the local authorities in commemoration of the emperor's visit and gifts to the place, and not directly by the emperor, like most other Edicts.

From his inscriptions we also learn that in the twentieth year of his reign Asoka undertook his second pilgrimage with his daughter and *Thera Upagupta*. During this pilgrimage he visited the ruins of *Vaishālī* and the places where Buddha used to rest. From *Vaishālī* Asoka traveled east and came to *Rāmagrāma*. He visited the *stūpa* at *Rāmagrāma* built by a king who had collected and preserved the relics of the Buddha after his death. They remind us even today of the visit of Asoka to those holy places. It is said that after the king has finished honoring all the places of pilgrimage to the holy sites of Buddhism, he returned to the place of the enlightenment of the Buddha at *Bodh-Gaya*.⁴² There, he made further offerings of his most precious jewels to the *Bodhi* tree.

From some pillar inscriptions of Asoka, thus, we gather that Asoka started on an extensive pilgrimage in 250 BCE.⁴³ Considering the locations of Asokan Pillars at *Lauriya-Ararāji*, *Lauriya-Nandangarh*, *Rampurwā*, *Rummindei* and *Nigliwa*, we are tempted to infer that they only mark the stages in the pilgrim's progress along the royal road from his capital *Pāṭaliputra*, to Nepal. At each of the major places of the pilgrimage, Asoka erected a *stūpa*, a commemorative monument, for himself and posterity to worship. In the *Aśokāvadāna* (The Legend of Asoka), the number of places visited by Asoka and *Upagupta* totals exactly thirty-two, the same as the

⁴² John S. Strong, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 125-126.

⁴³ Radhakumud Mookerji, *Op.Cit.*, p. 27.

number of distinguishing marks on the body of a Great Man (*Mahāpuruṣa*).⁴⁴ However, in a few cases there appears to have been an unnecessary doubling of places; this may reflect an attempt at some point to have come up precisely with the total of thirty-two. Thus, the place where the Bodhisattva mastered various martial arts is distinguished from the training hall where he practised the martial art, or again, the place where, as a child, he was shown to the fortune-teller *Asita*.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the thirty-two places of pilgrimage we can see not only various events in the life of the Buddha, but, once again, a systematic establishment of his whole person, his life as a great man of spirit. The thirty-two places, thus, set up for posterity by Asoka can, like the eighty-four thousand *stūpas*, be thought of separately and as a unit; they form a single macrocosmic “chronogram” that allows one to relive gradually, and then all at once, the whole life and person of the Buddha. However, at the same time they also recall the figure of the Great King. As is well known, the category of the Great Man is itself ambiguous; it implies either Buddhahood or great kingship. The pilgrimage of Asoka, thus, in symbolically reconstructing the body of a Great Man, would be establishing on the face of India not only the body of the Buddha but also the body of a great king, both of whom possess the thirty-two marks of the Great Man. Of course, Asoka does not have thirty-two marks of the Great Man himself.

On the other hand, the pilgrimage of Asoka goes beyond a simple retracing of the career of the Buddha; it is like the building of the eighty-four thousand *stūpas*, the establishment of a microcosm where Asoka himself can experience the presence of the Buddha. However, in this as we saw, the emphasis is almost exclusively on the physical form in which the Buddha

⁴⁴ See John S. Strong, *Op.Cit.*, p. 123.

lived the life that is being experienced. Asoka's pilgrimage, thus, really reconstructed the entire life of the Buddha in the sense that, as he moved physically from one place to another, he also retraced and remembered the events of his career. Especially his inscriptions in every Buddhist holy site are very important for the historical sources of Buddhism.

IV.2.2. Asoka's Stone Pillars and Inscriptions in Buddhist Holy Sites

After making the pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites, Asoka believed that the message of Buddha's *Dhamma* should not become stagnant like standing water. He wanted it to spread within India and outside, too. He wanted the people of the world to bathe in its pure steam and purify themselves. He, therefore, undertook a great task which could be enduring. He got the laws of *Dhamma* engraved on rocks and stone pillars both inside and outside the country. These inscriptions related to *Dhamma*, social ethics and moral living. It is said that Asoka proclaimed that his desire was that his message should reach the people of all lands and enable them to follow and propagate the *Dhamma* for the welfare of the world.

We get the information from both the *Pāli* and *Sanskrit* literatures that Asoka went on pilgrimage to thirty-two Buddhist holy sites, and in each and every site he built *stūpas* as well as stone pillars and inscriptions. But the number of the stone pillars in the Buddhist holy sites is not exact. However, through the evidence of archaeology suggests that there are the following Asokan monuments: the pillar at *Lumbinī*,⁴⁵ the pillar at *Vaishālī*,⁴⁶ pillar at

⁴⁵ *Lumbinī* is the name of the nice garden (now in Nepal country) where the *Sakyamuni* Buddha was born in the year of 264 BCE.

⁴⁶ *Vaishālī* or *Vaishali*, where the Buddha stayed and propagated his religion and where he set up the community of Buddhist nuns.

Bodh-Gaya,⁴⁷ the pillar at *Sārnāth*,⁴⁸ etc., of which the two pillars at *Lumbinī* and *Sārnāth* are very important from the point of view of the contents of inscriptions.

The pillar at *Lumbinī* carries the inscription known as “*Rummindei* Pillar Inscription.” In this inscription, Asoka makes it known that he came in person, in the 20th year of his coronation, to a place he called *Lumbinī*, to pay homage to the Buddha; for, as he twice mentions, this was the birthplace of the Buddha *Sakyamuni*. Moreover, we learn that he had a stone wall built and a stone pillar erected there, upon which pillar the inscription is engraved. Despite its extreme brevity, the text is rich in information of the utmost importance for the history of Buddhism:

*“King Priyadarśin, Beloved of gods, when he had been consecrated twenty years, came in person and did worship. Because here the Śākya Sage, Buddha, was born, he caused a huge stone wall to be made and a stone pillar to be erected. Because here Blessed One was born, the village of Luṃminī was freed from religious cesses and made to contribute one-eighth share (only, as land revenue).”*⁴⁹

The pillar at *Sārnāth* is one of the most important stone pillars that Asoka erected in the Buddhist holy sites. In the inscription on this stone pillar, Asoka mentioned his visit to this site. The inscription on the *Sārnāth* Pillar goes as follows:

⁴⁷ *Bodh-Gaya* (now in Bihar, India) where the Buddha practiced meditation and finally attained enlightenment, and became a Buddha in this world.

⁴⁸ *Sārnāth* is near *Varanasi* (Uttar Pradesh state, India) where the Lord Buddha preached his first sermon to the five ascetics of *Kodāṇṇa*. The Sutta that records this event is titled *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (The Foundation of the Kingdom of the Norm), SN. V. 420; Tr. F. L. Woodward, *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005, p. 356.

⁴⁹ “*Devānapiyena piyadasina lājina vīsati-vasābhisitena atana āgāca mahīyite: “Hida budhe jāte sakyamunī ti. Sīla-vigaḍa-bhīcā kālāpita silā thabhe ca usapāpīte. “Hida bhagavaṃ jāte” ti Luṃmini-gāme ubalike kaṭe aṭṭha-bhāgiye ca.”* (Lumbini Inscription), D. R. Bhandarkar, *Op.Cit.*, p. 337; Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Op.Cit.*, p. 603.

“Thus orders King Priyadarśin, Beloved of the gods: ...Pāṭaliputra... the Saṅgha may not be divided by any one. But whosoever breaks the Saṅgha, be it a monk or a nun, shall be clad in white raiment, and compelled to live in what is not a residence (of the mendicants). Thus should this order be respectfully communicated to the Saṅgha of the monks and the Saṅgha of the nuns...”⁵⁰

There are some other stone pillars that Asoka built in the Buddhist holy sites such as the stone pillar at *Bodh-Gaya*, at *Vaishālī* etc., but most of them have not preserved Asoka’s inscriptions. Nevertheless, their having been erected on the orders of Asoka is beyond the shadow of doubt. These stone pillars are very important in the history of Indian Buddhism; they mark the sites connected with the life and career of the Buddha and attest the development of his religion in India.

IV.2.3. The Erecting of Stūpas and Worship of the Buddha Relics

According to the Buddhist legends mentioned in both Sanskrit and Pāli literature, Asoka was the first venerator of Buddhist relics. His most famous legendary deed was his redistribution of the Buddha relics from the *droṇe* reliquaries into eighty-four thousand *stūpas*, which he had constructed throughout the southern continent of *Jambudvīpa*.⁵¹ As a result, for generations, Buddhist pilgrims coming across ancient *stūpas*, have thought of them as Asokan *stūpas*, and seen them apart of the original eighty-four

⁵⁰ “Devānaṃpiye ānapayati: [Pāṭa.....] Saṃghe samage kaṭe Saṃghasi no lahiye. Ye kenapi Saṃghaṃ bhākhati [Saṃghe bhetave] bhikhu vā bhikhuni vā se pi cā odātāni dusāni sanamddhapayitu anāvāsasi āvāsaiye [vāsāpetaviye]. [Hevaṃ iyaṃ sāsanē bhikhusaṃghasi bhikhunisamghasi ca vimnapayitave].” (Sanārth Inscription), D. R. Bhandarkar, *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341; Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Ibid.*, pp. 603.

⁵¹ *Jambudvīpa* (Pāli, *Jambudīpa*). The island of the *Jambu* tree. Name of the southernmost of the four great continents of traditional Buddhist mythology, corresponding to the known world at the time and most probably to be identified with the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia (especially when contrasted with *Tambapaṇṇi-dīpa*, or the island of Sri Lanka). The *Jambu* tree, from which the continent takes its name, is a vast tree thought to be located in the *Himalayan* region. Buddhas and Universal Rulers (*Cakravartin*) are said to arise only on this continent.

thousand. This has been true not only in India, but elsewhere in South and East Asia.

Also, accordingly some versions of the Asoka legend such as *Divyāvadāna*, *Aśokāvadāna*, etc., when he set out to gather all the Buddha's relics, he went first to the *dronē stūpa* built by *Ajātaśatru* in *Magadha*. Breaking it open, he took out the bulk of the *Śarīra*⁵² there, and then rebuilt the *stūpa*, leaving a token portion of relics for continued worship at the site. He then did the same with the next six *dronestūpas*, those at *Vaishālī*, *Kapilavāstu*, *Pāvā*, *Calakalpa*, *Viṣṇudvīpa* and *Kuśinagara*, but when he came to the last *dronestūpa*, at *Rāmagrāma*, he found that it was now underwater in the palace of the *Nāga* king. Asoka realized that the *Nāgas* were worshipping the relics in a much more fervent and grandiose way than he could ever hope to emulate, and so he decided to let them keep their relics. Accordingly, he returned to his capital with *Śarīra* from only seven of the eight *dronestūpas*.⁵³

After gathering together all the Buddha's relics at the seven of eight original *stūpas*, Asoka set out to accomplish his most famous legendary act: the redistribution and re-enshrinement of the Buddha's *śarīra* into eighty-four thousand *stūpas* throughout his kingdom as well as outside his country. According to *Aśokāvadāna*, after collecting the relics from the seven *dronē stūpas*, Asoka prepared for them eighty-four thousand reliquaries of different precious materials. Each of these is said to consist of a box, an urn and a cloth band presumably for tying down the lid of the urn. These were to be enshrined in eighty-four thousand *stūpas* that Asoka had built throughout his kingdom as far as the surrounding ocean, in towns and countries wherever

⁵² *Śarīra* is the *Sanskrit* of "body"; it means the relics of the Lord Buddha or saint, after his *Mahāparanivāna*, and normally enshrined in a *Stūpa*.

⁵³ John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007, pp. 126-127.

there is a population of at least one-hundred thousand (100,000) persons. The distribution of the relics to the *stūpas* was undertaken not only by ministers or the king's men, but also by supernatural beings of *Thera Yakṣas*, who here are seen to be under Asoka's command.⁵⁴

Unlike the *Aśokāvadāna*, the *Pāli* sources does not mention directly Asoka's link with the project of collection of the relics from the *drone stūpas*. Instead, it gives the information not of eighty-four thousand *stūpas* but of eighty-four thousand monasteries (*vihāras*).⁵⁵ These, however, also presumably have *stūpas* associated with them, and in time, the *Pāli* traditions were to make this connection explicit.⁵⁶ The *Pāli* sources also mentioned that in accomplishing the construction of these monasteries, Asoka called not only the help of *Thera Yakṣas*, but also the cooperation of local kings, who were ordered to build the eighty-four thousand monasteries, while he himself, undertook the construction of the great central monastery in his capital, *Aśokārāma*.⁵⁷

It is said that, besides erecting the *stūpas* for worship of all the relics of the Buddha, Asoka was also considering to build a *stūpa* for the worship of

⁵⁴ John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka*, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 219-221.

⁵⁵ “*Asokārāme ṭhito rājā Jambudīpaṃ avekkhati, bhikkhuiddhānubhāvena Asoka sabbattha passati. Addasa vihāraṃ sabbaṃ sabbattha mahiyaṃ kataṃ, dhajaṃ ubhopiyaṃ pupphaṃ toraṇaṃ ca mālagghiyaṃ... pamodito haṭṭhamano pekkhanto vattate mahe samāgate bhikkhusaṃghe bhikkhunī ca samāgate. Mahādānaṃ ca paññattaṃ dīyamāne vanibbake caturāsītisahassāni vihāre disvāna pūjite... Channavutikoṭṭiyo ca vissajjetvā mahādhanam caturāsītisahassāni ārāmā kāritā mayā. Pūjāya dhammakhandhassa buddhaseṭṭhassa desite; cattāri satasahassāni devasikaṃ pavattayi...*” (The king standing on the Asokārāma, looked over (the whole of) Jambudīpa; by the Bhikkhus' magical power Asoka saw everything. He saw all the Vihāras built all over the earth, the raised flags, the flowers and arches and garlands... Delighted, glad, looking at thee festivals which were being celebrated, at the assembled fraternities of Bhikkhus and the assembled Bhikkhunīs and the beggars receiving rich alms which were prepared for them, seeing all the eighty-four thousand Vihāras, which were honoured (by festivals of consecration)... By expending ninety-six kotis, a great treasure, eighty-four thousand monasteries have been erected by me in honour of the (84000) sections of the Truth taught by the most excellent Buddha). *Dpv.* 7, 3-11; Hermann Oldenberg, *Op.Cit.*, p. 155.

⁵⁶ John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, *Op.Cit.*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Buddha *Konākamana*.⁵⁸ In the *Nigliya* Inscription we find the following account:

“King Priyadarśin, Beloved of gods, when he had been consecrated fourteen years, enlarged the *stūpa* of Buddha *Konākamana* to double its size. And when he had been consecrated (twenty) years, he came in person, did worship, and had (a stone pillar) erected.”⁵⁹

According to the Buddhist tradition, these eighty-four thousand *stūpas* were symbolic of the eighty-four thousand sections of the Buddha’s teachings, and Asoka had them built in eighty-four thousand towns all over his kingdom. The spread of the *stūpas* thus is symbolic of the spread of the *Dhamma*, and even more specifically, of the spread of the Buddha’s body of *Dhamma*, his *Dhammakāya*.⁶⁰

After completing the construction of these *stūpas*, Asoka ordered a great festival to be celebrated in all eighty-four thousand *stūpas* at once. Lavish gifts were made to members of the *Samgha*, and the *vihāras* were decorated with garlands of flowers, strings of lamps, and other appropriate adornments. In these events, sermons were also preached, and the eight precepts observed. Asoka himself then visited all of the *stūpas* and made offerings to them with much gold, silver, copper and various ornaments.⁶¹ Finally, the completion of all eighty-four thousand *stūpas* actually marks

⁵⁸ Name of one of the twenty-four Buddhas and the third predecessor of Gautama Buddha.

⁵⁹ “*Devānampiyena Piyadasina lājina chodasa-vasābhisitena Budhasa Konākamanasa thube dutiyam vaḍhite, sābhisitena ca atana āgācha mahīyite. pāpīte.*” (*Nigliya* Inscription), D. R. Bhandarkar, *Op.Cit.*, p. 340; Ananda W. P. Guruge, *Op.Cit.*, p. 603.

⁶⁰ *Dhammakāya* (Pāli., Skt, *Dharma-kāya*). The Truth Body, one aspect of the “three bodies of the Buddha” (*trikāya*), which functions as the ground for the other two aspects, namely *Sambhoga-kāya* (Enjoyment Body), and *Nirmāṇa-kāya* (Emanation Body).

⁶¹ John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, *Op.Cit.*, p. 145.

Asoka's change from Asoka-the-Fierce (*Caṇḍāśoka*) to Asoka-the-Righteous (*Dharmāśoka*).⁶²

Asoka underwent inner transformation which is attested by his worship the Buddha's relics as well as their distribution throughout his empire for the welfare and happiness of all human beings. It can be also said that Asoka's distribution of the relics into eighty-four thousand *stūpas* and the very idea of erecting those *stūpas* that symbolize the eighty-four thousand sections of the *Dhamma*, bring to mind the Buddha's use of his divine eye in the second watch of the night of his awakening, as well as his reappearance in this world after his descent from the *Trāyastriṃśā*⁶³ Heaven. Finally, Asoka's auto-cremation, in which his body burnt as a torch in honor of the Buddha's relics for seven days and nights, recalls the event of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Lord Buddha.⁶⁴

It can be said that, no legendary act of Asoka was as famous as that of his construction of the eighty-four thousand *stūpas* over the relics of the Lord Buddha. For centuries pilgrims visiting the holy sites of India ascribed almost every *stūpa* they came cross to the reign of Asoka, and Buddhist rulers in as far as Japan always looked up to Asoka as the *stūpa* builder par excellence, some even seeking to emulate his legendary construction of eighty-four thousand of them. The building of the *stūpas* does not only symbolize the reconstruction of the Buddha's body, it also represents Asoka's own establishment as *Dhamma* king, that is, his *Dhammalogical* understanding of

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶³ *Trāyastriṃśā* (Skt.; Pāli *Tāvatiṃsa*). A heavenly realm located, according to traditional cosmology, on top of Mountain Meru above the realm of the four great kings who guard the cardinal points. *Śakra* (Pāli, *Sakka*) is the king of both these worlds. Occasionally sages visit this realm and according to tradition the Buddha spent some months there teaching the Abhidharma to his mother when she was reborn in this heavenly realm. The name 'thirty-three' derives from the fact that this world is the residence of the 33 gods of Hinduism, an ancient mythological notion originating in Vedic times

⁶⁴ John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha, Op.Cit.*, p. 149.

his kingship.⁶⁵ For the dedication of a *stūpa*, much like the consecration of a Buddhist image, marks the moment when the Buddhist mesocosm “comes alive” when the Buddha is thought to be present in it. For this reason, the dedication of the eighty-four thousand *stūpas* must take place simultaneously since it is collectively that they represent the Lord Buddha.⁶⁶

To sum up, Asoka, as a Buddhist king, discovered or established certain cosmological settings in order to relate to the Buddha in the world. The eighty-four thousand *stūpas*, the thirty-two places of pilgrimage, each provides in its own way a focus, a structure where Asoka can ritually and experientially relate to the Buddha. The same, of course, would be true for any Buddhist devotee encountering a *stūpa*, or a place of pilgrimage. What is different in the case of Asoka is that he goes beyond mere worship of already existing ritual centers; he is a builder of macrocosms. He does not just go to the places of pilgrimage; he establishes them, as a favor to posterity. He does not simply worship the relics of the Buddha, he goes and gets them, and reorganizes them into the grand scheme of the eighty-four thousand *stūpas*. Here, then we can see another important dimension of Asoka’s kingship: in his building of the eighty-four thousand *stūpas*, in his marking of the thirty-two places of pilgrimage, in all of these macrocosmic activities, Asoka is motivated by more than his own personal religious self-interest.

IV.3. Asoka and the Mission to Spread Buddhism Abroad India

IV.3.1. Asoka and the Buddhist Mission to Sri Lanka

According to traditional Buddhist history, Buddhism was introduced to *Sri Lanka* about the middle of the third century BCE. This happened during the

⁶⁵ John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 118.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

twelfth year of Asoka's reign, and historically in the year of 256 BCE.⁶⁷ It was *Mahinda* or *Mahendra*,⁶⁸ the son of King Asoka, who came to Ceylon with four other monks. His purpose in bringing them was evidently to confer the *upasampadā*⁶⁹ on anyone who desired to get it. In his party, which was composed of seven, there were two who were his close relations, *SumanaSāmaṇera*, the son of his sister *Samghamittā*, and *BhaṇḍukaUpāsaka*, the son of his mother's sister's daughter. Their inclusion in the party signified, perhaps, a particular intimacy with and friendliness toward Ceylon.⁷⁰ The form of Buddhism that was introduced was regarded as orthodox and preserved in its original form by the Elderly Monks. Hence this school of Buddhism came to be known as *Theravāda*, the doctrine of Elders.

The *Pāli* chronicles record that the first meeting of *Thera Mahinda* and the king of Ceylon, *DevānampiyaTissa* (247-207 BCE),⁷¹ who was on a hunting expedition, took place on the *Missaka-pabbata*, now known as *Mihintalē*, about eight miles to the east of *Anurādhapura*, on the full moon day of the month of *Jeṭṭha*. *DevānampiyaTissa* who had already heard of Buddhism from his friend Asoka, received the Buddhist missionaries with the greatest kindness and regard. During their first conversation, *Mahinda*, in order to gauge the king's intelligence and capacity to understand, put to him some questions. This test, which can be regarded as the first intelligence test recorded in history and, though simple and easy at the first glance, required a clear and acute mind to answer. *Mahinda* was convinced that *DevānampiyaTissa* was intelligent enough to understand the Buddha's

⁶⁷ See P. H. L. Eggermont, *The Chronology of the Reign of Asoka Moriya*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1956, pp. 183-184.

⁶⁸ In later Sanskrit sources and in the reports of the Chinese pilgrim *Xuan-tsang*, there are references to an Elder *Mahendra* who has been sometimes identified with *Mahinda*.

⁶⁹ (Skt.; Pāli). The higher ordination that confers full admission as a member of the *Samgha*.

⁷⁰ Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Sri Lanka: The Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1993, p. 49.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

teachings, and proceeded at once to preach the *CūlahatthipadopamaSutta*⁷² to him. This *Sutta* is regarded as the first sermon of *Mahinda*. The *Sutta* gives the idea of the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Samgha*, and describes how one is converted to Buddhism and becomes a monk. It also describes in detail the simple and holy life of a monk, the sublime qualities he practices and possesses, the things from which he abstains, the various stages of development of his life and his obtainment of *Arahatship*. The *Sutta* also contains almost all the principles of the Buddha's teachings, such as the "Four Noble Truths", etc. It is said that, at the end of the sermon *DevānampiyaTissa* and his retinue expressed their willingness to embrace Buddhism.

On the pressing invitation of the king, *Thera Mahinda* and his followers made their residence in the royal pavilion of the *Mahāmegha* Park. When the king learnt from *Mahinda* and his followers that it was genial and comfortable, he offered the *Mahāmegha* Park to the *Samgha*, pouring water from a vase over the hand of *Mahinda* as a token of the gift. After the acceptance of the *Mahāmegha* Park offered to the *Samgha*, *Mahinda* set about to plan the headquarters of Buddhism which in later times became the famous *Mahāvihāra*,⁷³ the great center of Buddhist culture and learning in Ceylon, the foundation of *Theravāda*.⁷⁴ He was also keen to see a son born in *Sri Lanka* of *Sri Lankan* parent, become a monk in *Sri Lanka*, study the

⁷² *CūlahatthipadopamaSutta*, English translates as "Lesser Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint." (Sutta No. 27), MN. I, 175-185; (Tr.) I. B. Horner, *The Collection of The Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004, pp 220-230.

⁷³ (Pāli). Literally 'Great monastery'. For many centuries a monastery (*vihāra*) was the main seat of the ancestral branch for present-day *Theravāda* Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It was founded by King *DevānampiyaTissa* (247-207 BCE) in his capital of *Anurādhapura* on the site of the *Tissārama*, given to visiting missionaries from Asoka's court and it included many buildings and shrines.

⁷⁴ Walpola Rahula, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 52-53.

Vinaya in *Sri Lanka* and recite it in *Sri Lanka*, so that the root of the *Sāsana*⁷⁵ would go deep. The idea behind this was to see that the region of the Buddha should secure a firm hold in Ceylon and continue to develop for the benefit of the people though the idea is quite contrary to the Buddha's teachings. The establishment of the *Sāsana* was the ultimate goal in establishing the *Samgha*. The aim was to give a national touch to the whole issue and make religion a part of the *Sinhala* national identity. This may have been the intention of the commentator but put in to the mouth of *Mahinda* for his own defense.

A few days after his arrival in the city *Thera Mahinda* left *Anurādhapura* and went to *Missaka-pabbata* there king's nephew *Mahā-Ariṭṭha*, the minister, with fifty-five others entered into the *Samgha*. At this time, thus, there were altogether sixty-two monks in the *Missaka-pabbata* to spend the first *vassa*⁷⁶ season. The King *DevānampiyaTissa* had the caves prepared for their living in the hill covered with trees which was an ideal setting for the meditating monk. These caves were prepared by devotees who at the beginning were members of the royal family. Meanwhile the sub-queen *Anulā* and her companions had expressed a desire to enter into the *Samgha* as nuns, and on *Mahinda's* suggestion, the king dispatched to the court of Emperor Asoka an embassy to bring the *Therī Samghamittā* along with the southern branch of the *Bodhi* tree. After *Therī Samghamittā* arrived in Ceylon, *Anulā* and her companions observed the "ten precepts" in a nunnery

⁷⁵ *Sāsana* (Skt., *Śāsana*). A term used by Buddhists to refer to their religion. It has a range of possible translations, including teaching, doctrine, and as "*Buddha-sāsana*", "the teachings of the Buddha", especially in the context of their historical continuity as religious tradition. In the *Pāli* Canon it is said that the Buddha's decision to admit women reduced the lifespan of the *śāsana* from 1,000 to 500 years.

⁷⁶ (Skt., *Varṣa*). The annual rain-retreat undertaken by Buddhist monks for a three-month period during the monsoon season, which normally lasts from June to October. The custom of remaining in one place was instituted by the Buddha, and arose due partly to the practical difficulties of travel in that season, but also to ethical concerns about causing injury to the tiny creatures that become abundant after the rains.

known as the *Upāsikā-vihāra* which had been built for them on one side of the city.⁷⁷

After the rainy season, *Mahinda* suggested *DevānampiyaTissa* to build a *stūpa* to enshrine the relics of the Buddha. This *stūpa* became the first *stūpa* to be built in Ceylon. The relics of the Buddha brought from India were kept at the *Missaka-pabbata*. The collar bone of the Buddha was worshiped in the *ThūpārāmaDāgāba*.

When *Samghamittā* arrived in the Island with the branch of the *Bodhi* tree, queen *Anulā* and her companions joined the order of *Bhikkhunīs*. The former *Upāsikā-vihāra* was improved and enlarged with several additions and was called *Hatthālhaka-vihāra*. And *Samghamittā* also lived in this nunnery. The planting of the branch of *Bodhi*-tree was performed with a great ceremony. Representatives from all parts of Ceylon, from the north as well as from the south of the country were present on the occasion. It was said that, Asoka himself had sent a large number of families to attend on the *Bodhi*-tree. Subsequently the saplings of this *Bodhi* tree were planted in *Anurādhapura* and its vicinity and in *Jambukolapaṭṭana* and in the village of *TivakkaBrāhmaṇa* in the north, in *Kājaragāma* in the south, etc. Later, some thirty-two saplings were distributed all over Ceylon.

We can say that the bringing of the branch of the *Bodhi* tree, the relics and the alms-bowl of the Buddha further strengthened the great cultural link between India and Sri Lanka. The planting of the *Bodhi* tree was symbolic of the establishment of Buddhism and Buddhist culture in Ceylon. The relics of the Buddha were regarded as the Buddha himself, and their enshrinement was as good as Buddha's residence in Ceylon. The alms-bowl of the Buddha was

⁷⁷ Walpola Rahula, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 56-57.

kept within the king's palace, and it became a national palladium of the Ceylon.⁷⁸

According to *Mahāvamsa* within a few years, the monks increased in such a large number that the king had to establish several more monasteries such as the *Issarasamanaka* and *Vessagiri* around the city of *Anurādhapura* and *Jambukolapaṭṭana* in *Nāgadīpa* and *Tissamahārāma* in the extreme north and south of Sri Lanka. The records of this *Mahāvamsa* also says that many hundreds of monasteries were established in the island.

The information from the Island also give us that, *Mahinda* came to Ceylon when he was at the age of thirty-two. He departed of his life at the age of eighty at *Cetiyaṭṭabbata* while spending rainy retreat there during the eighth year of King *Uttiya* (200 BCE), *DevānampiyaTissa's* younger brother and successor to the throne. *Stūpas* enshrining his relics were built at *Anurādhapura*, *Cetiyaṭṭabbata* and several other places in Ceylon. *Samghamittā* died in the following year at the *Hatthāḷhaka* nunnery at *Anurādhapura*.⁷⁹

It can be said that, the arrival of *Mahinda* in the island can be regarded as the beginning of *Sinhalese* culture. He brought to Sri Lanka not only a new religion but also a whole civilization then at the height of its glory. He introduced art and architecture into Ceylon along with *saṃghārāmas* and *stūpas*. He can be regarded as the father of the *Sinhalese* literature. *Thera Buddhaghosa* says that *Mahinda* brought to Ceylon the commentaries of the *Tripitaka* and put them into *Sinhalese* for the benefit of the people of Ceylon. He, thus, made *Sinhalese* a literary language and inaugurated its literature. It is probable that he introduced the Asokan alphabet as well. And *Samghamittā*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

also with her influence over the women of the Ceylon in moulding their life and character was equally great. Thereafter, Buddhism became the religion of state and the monks became the mentors and counselors of the ruling king on spiritual and social matters. According to the *Viyana*, it was the duty of the monks to side with the kings. The ultimate aim of the monks was anyhow the well-being and happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world. The influence of the monks on political and social matters was so great that a concept developed to say that “a king could live within the Buddha’s command.” Thus, it became clear that only a Buddhist had the legitimate right to be a king of Ceylon. By the tenth century it became to be believed that not only a Buddhist, but also *Bodhisattva* could become king of Ceylon. Following this example, even the *Tamil* rulers in the country contributed their share of patronage to the development of the Buddha *sāsana*. Therefore, it is relevant here to discuss even though briefly the role of the *Samgha* in matters of politics and society in ancient *Sri Lanka*.

IV.3.2. Asoka and Buddhism in South-East Asian Countries

Though all the Buddhist traditions refer the introductory of Buddhism into the countries of South-East Asia was by Asoka, through his missionaries. But, unfortunately it seems to lack historical evidence, except in the case of country of Sri Lanka. In the legend, the countries outside India except Sri Lanka are indicated only by descriptive names. The legend of *Thera Sona* and *Uttara* in Burma and Thailand (*Siam*) seems to have been borrowed from the stock-legend of *Theravāda* Buddhist source to give a faked antiquity to Buddhism in these countries.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhism in East Asia*, Delhi: Originals, 2004, p. 23.

However, the countries of South-East Asia such as Burma, Thailand and sometime Vietnam, etc., all claimed that their Buddhism was related to the legend of *Thera Sona* and *Uttara* who spread Buddhism there after the Third Buddhist Council on the orders of King Asoka. Moreover, the evidence of the Asoka's inscriptions such as RE. II, V, and XIII also suggests that Asoka dispatched organized bands of zealous missionaries to carry the message of the Buddha not only to every nook and corner of *Jambudvīpa*, but also to *Tambapanni* (Ceylon) as well as to the countries of *Greekpotentates*, *Antiochus*, *Ptolemy*, *Antigonos*, *Makas* and *Alexander*.

Based on the accounts available in *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, we have to assess and interpret the traditional story of the mission of *Sona* and *Uttara*, allegedly sent by Asoka to spread Buddhism in the land of *Suvannabhūmi*, later identified with Burma, Thailand and sometimes Vietnam. And this tradition to which these countries later refer is the starting point of the history of Buddhism there.

In the *Mahāvāṃsa* we find that after the Third Buddhist Council, *Thera MoggaliputtaTissa*, the teacher of Asoka and the president of the council, sent religious missions for the propagation of the teachings of the Buddha in the adjacent countries. In the list of the *Theras* who were sent to different countries on missionary work, we find mentioned the names of *Thera Sona* and *Uttara* who were sent to the land of *Suvannabhūmi*.

The missionaries were in nine groups assigned to nine different regions and they tally perfectly in the different sources. In the *Dīpavaṃsa* version (Chapter VIII), we have the following list of names:⁸¹

⁸¹ “*Gantvā Gandhāraṇḍisayaṃ Majjhantiko mahā isi kupitaṃ nāgaṃ pasādetvā mocesi bandhanā bahu. Gantvāna raṭṭhaṃ Mahisaṃ Mahādevo mahiddhiko coditvā nirayadukkhena mocesi bandhanā babu. Athāparo pi Rakkhito vikubbanesu kovido vehāsaṃ abbhuggantvāna desesi anamataggiyaṃ.*”

1. *Thera Majjhantika* and four others to the *Gandhāra* region
2. *Thera Mahādeva* to *Mahisamandala*
3. *Thera Rakkhita* to a region not named
4. *Thera Yonakadhammarakkhita* to *Aparāntaka*
5. *Thera Mahādhammarakkhita* to *Mahāraṭṭha*
6. *Thera Mahārakkhita* to *Yonaka* (or *Yavana*) region
7. *Thera Majjhima*, *Durabhisāra*, *Sahadeva* and *Mūlakadeva* to the *Himalayan* region
8. *Theras Sona* and *Uttara* to *Suvaṇṇabhūmi*
9. *Thera Mahindra* and four others to *Ceylon (Lankā)*

In the *Mahāvamsa* version (Chapter XII), we find a similar list of names:⁸²

1. *Thera Majjhantika* to *Kashmir* and *Gandhāra*
2. *Thera Mahādeva* to *Mahisamaṇḍala*
3. *Thera Rakkhita* to *Vanavāsa*

*Yonakadhammarakkhitathero nāma mahāmati aggikkhandhopamasuttakathāya Aparantakaṃ pasādayi. Mahādhammarakkhitathero Mahāraṭṭhaṃ pasādayi Nāradakassapajātakakathāya ca mahiddhiko. Mahārakkhitathero pi Yonakalokaṃ pasādayi kālakārāmasuttantakathāya ca mahiddhiko. Kassapagotto ca yo therō Majjhimo Durabhisaro Sahadevo Mūlakadevo Himavante yakkhagaṇaṃ pasādayuṃ. Kathesuṃ tattha suttantaṃ dhammacakkappavattanaṃ. Suvaṇṇabhūmiṃ gantvāna Sonuttarā mahiddhikā niddhametvā pisācagaṇe mocesi bandhanā bahu. Laṅkādīpavaraṃ gantvā Mahindo attapañcamo sāsanaṃ thāvaram katvā mocesi bandhanā bahu.” Dpv. 8, 4-13; Hermann Oldenberg, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 159-160.*

⁸² “*Theraṃ kasmīragandhāraṃ, majjhantikapesayi; Apesayī mahādeva-ttheraṃ mahisamaṇḍalaṃ. Vanavāsīṃ apesayi, therāṃ rakkhitānāmakāṃ; Tathā aparantakaṃ yona-dhammarakkhitānāmakāṃ. Mahāraṭṭhaṃ mahādhamma-rakkhitathera nāmakaṃ. Mahārakkhita therāṃ taṃ, yona lokapesayi. Pesesi majjhimaṃ therāṃ, himavantaṃ padesaṃ; Suvaṇṇabhūmiṃ there dve, soṇamuttara meva ca. Mahāmahindattheraṃ taṃ, therā iṭṭhiyaṃ uttiyaṃ; Sambalaṃ bhaddasālaṃ ca, sake saddhivihārike. Laṅkādīpe manuññaṃhi, manuññaṃ jinasāsanaṃ; Patīṭhāpetha tumhe'ti, pañca there apesayi...” Mhv. XII, 3-8; (Tr.) Wilhelm Geiger, *Op.Cit.*, p. 82.*

4. *Thera Yonakadhammarakkhita* to *Aparānta*
5. *Thera Mahārakkhita* to *Yona* country
6. *Thera Mahādhammarakkhita* to *Mahāraṭṭha*
7. *Theras Soṇa* and *Uttara* to *Suvaṇṇabhūmi*
8. *Thera Majjhima*, *Sahadeva* and *Mulaka* to the *Himalayan* region
9. *Thera Mahinda* and four other *Theras* (*Iṭṭhiya*, *Uttiya*, *Sambala* and *Bhaddasāla*) to *Ceylon*.

Meanwhile, *Samantapāsādikā* gives the following list:⁸³

1. *Thera Majjhantika* to *Kashmir* and *Gandhāra*
2. *Thera Mahādeva* to *Mahisamandala*
3. *Thera Rakkhita* to *Vanavāsa*
4. *Thera YonakaDhammarakkhita* to *Aparānta*
5. *Thera Mahā-Dhammarakkhita* to *Mahārattha*
6. *Thera Mahā-Rakkhita* to *Yona* country
7. *Thera Majjhima* to the *Himalayan* country
8. *Theras Sona* and *Uttara* to *Suvarṇabhūmi*
9. *Thera Mahinda* and four others (*Itthiya*, *Uttiya*, *Sambala* and *Bhaddasīla*) to *Ceylon*.

⁸³ *Vinaya-Commentary: Samantapāsādikā: Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Vinaya Piṭaka*, (Eds.) J. Takakusu & M. Nagai, Vol. I, London: PTS., 1924, (reprint, 1975), pp. 63-64 & 67.

The countries to which the missions are said to have assigned were both within the limits of Asoka's empire and outside. They are all vaguely described by *Thera Buddhaghosa* as "Border Tracts" (*PaccāntimaJanapada*). The *Yona* country, the *Himalayan* country and the *Aparānta* (Border country) are purely descriptive names, supplemented by the proper names, viz. *Mahārattha*, *Mahisamandala* and *Vanavāsa*. These last were the regions within India. The first of the three stands for modern Maharashtra, the second either for Mysore or for the ancient *Mahīsmati* (in the Madhya-Pradesh), and the third for a district of North Karnataka, all in southern India, across the Vindhya hill-range.⁸⁴

Two missions are said to have been assigned outside India, i.e. one to Ceylon, and the other to *Suvarṇabhūmi*. Ceylon is well-known in the ancient and modern geography of *Sri Lanka*, but *Suvarṇabhūmi* has completely disappeared from it. It means the *Suvarṇabhūmi* (Land of Gold) to which *Theras Sona* and *Uttara* were sent.

Some scholars have argued about the location and identification of land of *Suvarṇabhūmi*. The name occurs not only in Indian literature, but also in Greek, Latin, Arabic and Chinese. The two traditional names of *Suvarṇabhūmi* (Gold-land) and *Suvarṇadvīpa* (Gold-island) referred to over sea countries, and were familiar to Indians from a very early time. *Suvarṇabhūmi* and *Suvarṇadvīpa* were geographical designations which are applicable to Burma, Malay Peninsula and Malayan Archipelago (modern Indonesia).⁸⁵

Thus, the historicity of the mission to the Greek countries and Ceylon as also to the *Himalayan* countries and *Kashmira*, *Gandhara*,

⁸⁴ Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhism in East Asia*, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 18-19.

⁸⁵ See R. C. Majumdar, *Suvarṇadvīpa*, Part I, Calcutta, 1938, p. 43.

Mahisanandala, *VanavasaAparanta*, and *Maharattha* has been proved. But as there is no mention of *Suvannabhūmi* in the Asokan epigraphs, so some scholars have been doubtful about the authenticity of the mission of *Sona* and *Uttara* to Burma, Thailand and Vietnam. Their argument is that besides the single reference in the Ceylonese chronicles, the historicity of which they are rather chary to admit, there is no corroborative historical and archaeological evidence to prove the authenticity of the *Sona-Uttara* mission.

However, the value of the Ceylonese chronicles as source book for the history of Buddhism not only in India, but also in farther India, has been recognized by other schools that have made a specialized and unbiased study of the chronicles. Their conclusions have been amply verified by later archaeological discoveries in the countries concerned. These discoveries enable us to assert that the legendary story of *Sona* and *Uttara* mission to the land of *Suvannabhūmi* is true in its main outlines. If we leave out the literary embellishments and the abundance of miraculous elements in the *Mahāvamsa*, a feature which is common to all literary works of a hagiographical nature, there is nothing absurd in the story of *MoggaliputtaTissa's* mission to *Suvannabhūmi*.⁸⁶

In Burmese and Siamese Buddhist legends, *Thera Sona* and *Uttara* are claimed to have been the pioneers of Buddhism in these countries and, as the traditional field of their mission was *Suvarṇabhūmi*, the Buddhists of Burma and Siam point to certain definite localities within their regional borders as representing the *Suvarṇabhūmi* of ancient tradition. These legends are to the following effect.

⁸⁶ D. C. Ahir, *Buddhism in South-East Asia: A Cultural Survey*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication, 2001, pp. 70-71

When *Anawrahta*, the first Buddhist ruler of Burma, annexed Lower Burma round the middle 11th century CE, he found Buddhism thriving in its capital city, *Thaton*. He brought from there to his own capital, *Pagan*, some fragments of *Theravāda* scriptures along with a large party of *Mon* monks. This *Mon* seat of Buddhism in Lower Burma came to be regarded by the Burmese as *Suvarṇabhūmi* and is recorded as such in Burmese chronicle. This scripture contains the account of the arrival of the missionary *Theras Sona* and *Uttara* in the reign of *JotakumaSiridhammāsoka*, grandson of king *Upadeva* (ancient king of *Thaton*) and claims that the *Theras Sona* and *Uttara* were sent on mission to *Suvarṇabhūmi*, only *Thaton* should be understood by *Suvarṇabhūmi*.⁸⁷

Meanwhile, *Siamese* (Thai) also claimed that *Sona* and *Uttara* were the first apostles of Buddhism in their country. Different localities in *Siam* are believed to represent the venue of their missionary activities. Accordingly of a local legend, the place of the present city of *Prapatom* was covered in ancient times by another, no longer existing, called *Chaisuri* or *Sirichai* and that ancient city is said to have been visited by *Sona* and *Uttara* in *Siam*. The town of *Sapunburi* also had the ancient name of *U-tong* which is the *Siamese* equivalent of *Suvarṇabhūmi*. The name *Suvarṇabhūmi* occurs also in the stele of *RamaKhamheng* as of a place lying to the east of *U-tong*.

According to *Siam* Buddhist tradition as well as *Vietnamese* Buddhist tradition, however, *Thera Sona* and *Uttara* brought Buddhism to their respective countries in the third century BCE. From the archeological finds at *Nakon Pathom* (Thailand), such as the *Dhamma-Cakra*, the Buddha footprints and seals, as well as inscriptions in *Pāli*, it is clear that the first

⁸⁷ P. M. Tin and G. H. Luce (Trs.), *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, Rangoon, 1960, p. 49.

form of Buddhism introduced into Thailand was *Theravāda* Buddhism. It was taken from India to *Nakon Pathom* of *Suvannabhūmi* by the two *Therasona* and *Uttara* at the injunction of Emperor Asoka. According to Vietnamese Theravāda tradition *Sona* and *Uttara* visited *Oc Eo* (Vietnam) at the same time, but there is no evidence to corroborate this legend. Some scholars, therefore, suggest that *Suvaṇṇabhūmi* was a name given to an extensive land-block of South-East Asia extending from Burma to Indonesia and that the name now survives only in modern *Sapunburi* (ancient *U-tong*) of *Siam*.

However, the Pāli work *Sāsanavaṃsa* (the history of the Buddha's religion) written by a Burmese monk *Paññāsvāmī* of *Maun Daung* in 1861, gives the account of the spread and development of Buddhism in “nine places”: *Siṃhala*, *Suvaṇṇabhūmi*, *Yonaka* country, *Vanavāsa*, *Aparānta*, *Kashmir* and *Gāndhāra*, *Mahimsaka* (*Mahisamandala?*), *Mahārattha* and China. It leaves out the *Himalayan* country and adds China, making up the total number of nine. It further gives the following explanations of the above geographical names: *Mahārattha* is said to lie near the *Siyama* (*Siam*) country where *Dhammarakkhita* preached the doctrine and make his audience “drink the essence of deathlessness”, Burma is identified with *Aparānta* where the elder *YonaRakkhita* made all the inhabitants of the *Mranma* country (Burma) do the same, the kingdom of *Haripunjiya* (in northern Siam) is identified with the *Yonaka* country, and *Sirikhetta* (in Lower Burma) with *Vanavāsa* (in Inida).⁸⁸ But this interpretation is not accepted by scholars.

Thus, if we accept the tradition that the “nine missionaries” mentioned in the Ceylonese chronicles were sent by Asoka, *Therasona* and *Uttara* will no doubt be the forefathers of Buddhism in Burma, Siam and Vietnam.

⁸⁸ See B. C. Law, *The History of the Buddha's Religion* (Ed. and Tr. from *Sasanavaṃsa*), London: Luzac & Co. LTD, 1960, pp. 54-59.

Therefore, since Asoka was ruling in third century BCE, it can be reasonably argued that Buddhism first appeared in Burma, Thailand and Vietnam as well as the countries of South-East Asia in the third century BCE.⁸⁹

IV.3.3. Asoka and the Spread of Buddhism in Northwest India

Asoka's role in the expansion of Buddhism in Northwest India, as well as in Afghanistan was also quite remarkable, especially after the Third Buddhist Council (242 BCE),⁹⁰ when missions led by well-known monks were despatched to proselytize Buddhism in distant parts of the country and outside northwestern fringes of the empire.

From the Ceylonese chronicles we learn that *Thera Majjhantika* led a mission to *Kashmir* and *Gandhāra* and *Thera Mahāraksita* (or *Mahārakkhita*) was made responsible for the propagation of *Theravāda* Buddhism in *Yovana* (*Yona*) or Greek country.⁹¹ It is noteworthy that two missionaries were sent to the north and northwestern region of India unlike the other regions where only one mission was sent. We have seen that during the Second Buddhist Council (377 BCE)⁹², a century after the passing away of the Buddha, a branch of the *Mahāsaṅghika*⁹³ had already made its firm establishment in *Udyāna* after being separated from the Early *Theravāda* group. They probably had established some centers in *Gandhāra*, the eastern region contiguous to *Udyāna*. It appears that their strong position in the

⁸⁹ D. C. Ahir, *Buddhism in South-East Asia, Op.Cit.*, p. 81.

⁹⁰ *SBE*. X., p. xxxvii.

⁹¹ "... *Theraṃ kasmīragandhāraṃ, majjhantikamapesayi Mahārakkhita therāṃ taṃ, yona lokamapesayi....* " *Mhv.* XII, 3-5; (Tr.) Wilhelm Geiger, *Op.Cit.*, p. 82; Also, *Dpv.* VIII, 4-9; Hermann Oldenberg, *Op.Cit.*, pp. 159.

⁹² *SBE*. X., p. xxxvii.

⁹³ The adherents of the self-styled 'Majority Community' or 'Universal Assembly', a school of Buddhism which originated in the schism with the *Sthaviras* that occurred after Second Council of Vaiśālī and possibly just prior to the Third Council of Pāṭaliputra. The dispute that led to this schism seem to have largely concerned with interpretation of the *Vinaya*, in respect of which on side took a more liberal approach. This school went on to become one of the most successful and influential forms of Buddhism in India, giving rise to several sub-schools in later years such as the *Ekavyāvahārika*, the *Lokottara-vāda*, and the *Bahuśrutīya*.

Northwestern region was known to Asoka and also probably to the members of the Third Buddhist Council. We also learn that *Thera YonakaDhammarakkhita* who hailed from Afghanistan, was one of the leaders of the mission sent to *Aparānta* country⁹⁴. It is likely that he had the knowledge of the popularity of the *Mahāsaṅghikas* in his own country, and maybe he himself requested to send two missionaries to north and northwest region instead of only one.

We also know that this whole region was under the Mauryan Empire and Asoka, too, must have known about the popularity of the *Mahāsaṅghikas* in that region. That perhaps they being very strong and popular there it was considered expedient to send two missionaries to this region instead of one as elsewhere. As we know, the early *Theravāda* Buddhism was patronized by King Asoka, and perhaps the capital *Nagaravihāra* of *Udyāna* also might have become a center of the activities of *Mahāsaṅghikas* during his time. Three epigraphs of Asoka from *Udyāna* area, and also inscribed relic-casket of the Buddha from *Bimran*, a village near to modern town of Jalalabad have been found. *Xuan-zang* informs us that there was a *stūpa* built by Asoka in *Nagaravihāra*. Since according to the legend Asoka built eighty four thousand *stūpas* and monasteries throughout his country, the *stūpas* in *Udyāna* and in Afghanistan must have been included in this number.

It is also noteworthy that Asoka's epigraphs have been discovered only from two of Afghanistan, *Jalalabad* and *Kandahar*. The edicts of Asoka found in the *Jalalabad* area, are three in number, two precisely from *Laghman* and one from *Pu-e-Dauranta*, near the town of *Jalalabad*. However, they are fragmentary and written in Aramaic script and language. The two *Laghman* edicts are almost identical and may be the MRE., which

⁹⁴ See Radhakumud Mookerji, *Op.Cit.*, p. 34.

Asoka got inscribed in the sixteenth year after his coronation (c. 253 BCE). In these edicts, Asoka preaches non-violence and advocates vegetarianism. The *Pu-e-Dauranta* edict is different from the two *Laghman* edicts and may be regarded as an abstract of the contents of his PE. V and VII, and RE. XIV found elsewhere in India. It also refers to non-killing of living beings.

The discovery of Asoka's epigraphs in this region stands as a testimony to the fact that Asoka took special interest in cultural and religious activities of this place. We have earlier discussed that *Udyāna* or *Nagaravihāra* was a great stronghold of the *Mahāsaṅghikas*; during the time of Asoka *Thera Mahārakkhita* arrived here to spread early *Theravāda* or *Vibhajjavāda* schools of Buddhism. Asoka provided all the facilities for the propagation of this Buddhist school and probably a monastery was built near the town by him for *Thera Mahārakkhita* and his party. He also built some *stūpas* and other shrines there. Therefore, almost all Chinese pilgrims to India mention the *stūpa* of Asoka in *Nagaravihāra*. The present "Asoka *Burji*" or "*Tapa-Ashrak*" stands as the testimony of the cultural and religious activities that he carried out in this region.

It can be said that the religious activities of Asoka and his zeal to support Buddhism are well-known; especially after the Third Buddhist Council when the missionaries led by famous Buddhist monks were sent to distant parts of his kingdom and abroad. Here it is remarkable to note that *Thera Majjhantika* led his mission to *Gandhāra* and *Thera Mahārakkhita* to *Yavana* or Greek country, both to North-west region. Thus, the dispatch of two missionaries to the North-west region instead of one is of conspicuous significance. We have discussed above that the *Mahāsaṅghikas* had already established their strongholds in *Udyāna* and probably had become more powerful than the Early *Theravāda* center established at *Kapiśa*. It appears

that probably in order to counteract the influence of *Mahāsāṅghikas* and at the same time to boost the Early *Theravāda* Buddhism already established at *Kapiśa* and elsewhere, the exigency was felt to send two missionaries to this region instead of one.

No doubt, *Kandahar* was an important center during the *Mauryan* period. Significantly, three inscriptions of Asoka have been found from *Kandahar* alone. One of them was discovered from *Shahr-i-kona* (the old city) inscribed on a boulder at the foot of the hill called *Chehl-Zina* which is complete. It is *insitu* bilingual and biscriptal inscription written in Greek and Aramaic languages and scripts. In this, Asoka exhorts “piety” and “non-killing of living beings.” It is a MRE. of Asoka. The second edict is a fragmentary, written in Greek script and language. It is engraved on a rectangular piece of porous limestone block. It contains the text of the end of RE. XII and the beginning of RE. XIII. The third inscription of Asoka is also fragmentary one, written in the Aramaic script on a stone block. It was bought in the bazaar of *Kandahar* and its find-spot is unknown. It contains only seven lines, a part of the PE VII in a mixed *Aramaic* and *Prakrit* languages.

The fact that the epigraphs discovered from *Kandahar* indicates its great importance during Asoka’s time. The use of Greek and Aramaic scripts and languages also indicates that *Kandahar* was settled by Greeks or *Yonas* and *Kambojas* or Iranians, who are referred to many a time in the inscriptions of Asoka.⁹⁵ The Greeks or *Yonas* were no doubt settled in many parts of Afghanistan since the time of Alexander-the-Great and *Kambojas* or Iranians probably even earlier. Asoka in his inscriptions mentions them in the context

⁹⁵ *Yonas* and *Kambojas* (Greek and Iranians) are referred to in Asoka’s RE.II, V, and XIII.

of his policy of *Dhamma* and the appointment of *Dhamma-mahāmātra* officials.

Buddhism appears to have been introduced in *Kandahar* during Asoka's time. He being a zealous Buddhist took several measures to spread the religion. During his time the third Buddhist Council was held, a great milestone in the history of Buddhism. On this occasion missionaries were sent to many countries for the propagation of Buddhism. *Thera Mahārakkhita* was sent to *Yona* country along with some other monks to spread Buddhism, the early *Theravāda* or *Vibhajjavāda* School, which Asoka followed and supported. *Thera Mahārakkhita* had been successful in his mission of *Yona* country. *Yona-Ratha* or *Yona-Loka* is often identified with those parts of Afghanistan where Greeks had settled, particularly in the central and southern parts of the country. *Kapiśa* and *Balkh* were also the regions inhabited by Greeks.

At that time *Kandahar* was the headquarters of border-military-force of *Mauryans*. A good number of Indian military personnel might have been there in the camps. And some might have hailed from Magadha or somewhere close. So we can guess that they might be the first who brought the message of Buddhism there before *Thera Mahārakkhita* arrived. But the actual proselytism began with his missionary party.

The advent of Buddhism in Northwest can be traced back to the efforts of *Thera Mahārakkhita* and his party. Later some monasteries, shrines and *stūpas* were erected with the support of King Asoka and Buddhism began to flourish in *Kandahar* where it remained a predominant religion for many centuries. But unfortunately it finally decayed after the advent of Islam in about 10th or 11th century CE. At present, there are extremely few materials on the history of Buddhism in this region, but Buddhism definitely flourished

there as elsewhere in Afghanistan. Many Afghan sites still carry their ancient Buddhist names, and the remains of monastic establishments are extant there.

To conclude this chapter, we can say that Asoka is really the great King in the world who was largely responsible for the spread of Buddhism beyond India's borders and its emergence as one of the world's great religions. He sent emissaries as far as Greece to the west, and China to the east. He practised tolerance and respect for other religious disciplines, promoted peace instead of war, and established schools, hospitals, and orphanages for his people. He was living proof that it is possible to rule a great nation with kindness and open-mindedness, promoting peace and goodwill.

Asoka therefore, became a role model for all kings throughout Asia, such as in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and China etc. Furthermore, his model styles of the relationship between the king and the *Samgha* is later to be used by the Buddhist country of *Theravāda*. The kings of Thailand in the past and even today is followed these symbols of relationship. The king is not only secular role, but also its role in the *Samgha*. The support base established Buddhist scriptures compiler, and the introduction of Buddhism to purify the *Samgha*, all thanks to the support of the king. The kings of Sri Lanka, in the past had created a relationship like that. Some of Asoka's *Dhamma*-policy such as prohibiting killing, developing the monasteries becomes the centers of public education ... is also applied by the kings in countries of Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

Therefore, if the great Asoka couldn't indicated the Buddha's historical place, preaching the Buddha's doctrine into the different countries, Buddhism would fully disappeared from the world. Asoka's Buddhism is about a survive up to present day after Muslim attacked in India although they

destroyed many valuable Buddhist scriptures. However, we are still fortunate to have Buddhism because Buddhism was established outside of India like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, China and so on. Thus, Asoka is one person who made Buddhism as a International religion.