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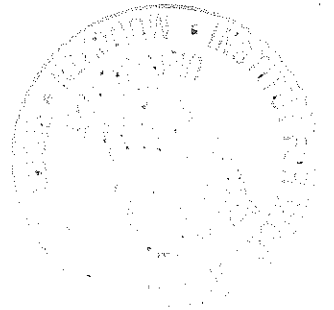
**A PHILOLOGICAL
APPROACH TO BUDDHISM**

The Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994

by

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VII. BUDDHISM AND AŚOKA

While re-reading recently a book on Buddhism by an eminent Buddhist scholar, I noticed the following statement: "This notion of establishing the *sāsana* or Buddhism in a particular country or a place was perhaps first conceived by Asoka himself. He was the first king to adopt Buddhism as a state religion, and to start a great spiritual conquest which was called *dharma-vijaya*.... Like a conqueror and ruler who would establish governments in countries politically conquered by him, so Asoka probably thought of establishing the *sāsana* in countries spiritually conquered by him."¹

In other publications I have seen such claims made as: "Aśoka was the first Buddhist Emperor", "Aśoka was connected with the popularisation of Buddhism, and with the enthusiastic promotion of religious activities such as pilgrimage and the veneration of relics through his involvement in the construction of stūpas and shrines",² and "Aśoka was the greatest political and spiritual figure of ancient India".³

Such comments are typical of the way in which Aśoka is described in books about early Buddhism. As I stated in the first lecture, I have spent a large portion of my academic life studying Aśoka's inscriptions, and I do not find that the picture of the man which emerges from his edicts coincides entirely with what we find written about him. So in this lecture I want to consider the part which Aśoka played in the history of Buddhism, and I shall compare what we learn about him from Buddhist texts with the information which we can get from his own inscriptions.

¹Rahula, 1956, pp. 54-55.

²Warder, 1970, chapter 8.

³Lamotte, 1988, p. 223.

It is probable that most people know about Aśoka from the information given about him in the Pāli chronicles, and in particular the Mahāvamsa, although many of the same stories are told in greater detail in Sanskrit and Chinese sources.

In the Mahāvamsa we read how, after the death of his father Bindusāra, Aśoka killed 99 of his 100 brothers, sparing only Tissa, and became the sole ruler of Jambudvīpa.¹ After hearing the Buddhist novice Nigrodha preach, he was established in the three refuges and the five precepts of duty, i.e. he became a Buddhist layman (*upāsaka*).² We are told of Aśoka being a firm supporter of Buddhism, to the exclusion of other religions. He stopped giving food every day to the 60,000 brahmins whom his father had fed, and in their place gave food to 60,000 bhikkhus. He gave orders for 84,000 *vihāras* to be built in 84,000 towns,³ of which the most famous was the one which he himself founded in Pāṭaliputra — the Asokārāma — and he built *stūpas* in the places which the Buddha had visited.⁴ He was persuaded, by the thought of becoming an heir of the doctrine,⁵ to allow his son Mahinda and his daughter Saṅghamittā to join the order in the sixth year of his reign,⁶ and Mahinda was subsequently sent as a missionary to Sri Lanka. At the time of the schism in the order he personally listened to the bhikkhus expounding their views and was able to decide who were orthodox and who were heretics. After the schism had been settled, the third *saṅgīti* was held under his patronage.⁷

The Mahāvamsa⁸ says that because of his wicked deeds, he was known as Caṇḍāsoka “fierce, or violent Aśoka” in his early days, but

¹Mhv 5.20.

²cf. Dip VI 55; Mhv 5.72.

³Mhv 5.79–80.

⁴Mhv 5.175.

⁵*sāsana* *dāyādo*, Mhv 5.197.

⁶Mhv 5.209.

⁷Mhv 5.280.

⁸Mhv 5.189.

later because of his pious deeds he was called Dhammāsoka. The change of name is, of course, intended to emphasise the difference between Aśoka as a non-Buddhist and as a Buddhist.

We get rather different information about Aśoka from reading his inscriptions.

For example, the story of his conversion in the chronicles is somewhat at variance with his own statements. The early history of Aśoka's involvement with Buddhism is told in the first Minor Rock Edict. Whereas, according to the Pāli sources, as I have just stated, he had already been converted to Buddhism, had 84,000 *vihāras* built, and had given permission for his son and daughter to join the order within six years of his consecration as king, nevertheless, we can calculate from Aśoka's own words that his conversion to Buddhism occurred fairly soon after the war in Kalinga, which he states in the thirteenth Rock Edict [RE XIII(A)] took place when he had been consecrated eight years. His conversion was presumably because of his remorse, not for his fratricide which seems to be disproved by the references which he makes to his brothers and sisters in the fifth Rock Edict [RE V(M)], but for the transportation of 150,000 persons, the killing of 100,000, and the death of almost that many, in Kalinga. The chronicles show no knowledge whatsoever of this carnage. At the time at which he promulgated the edict, he had been a layman for more than two and a half years, including a year when he was not very zealous — I assume that this means that after he had been converted to Buddhism, he had not been a very energetic Buddhist for a while — and then more than one year when he was zealous, after he had “approached the *saṅgha*” (which, perhaps, means that he went on a refresher course) with good results — “I have made good progress”, he says. When he issued the first Minor Rock Edict he was, therefore, at a point just short of the eleventh year of his reign. He issued the third Rock Edict in the twelfth year, so the first and second Rock Edicts, which are not dated, were issued either in the same year, or in his eleventh year.

As the story is related in the first Minor Rock Edict, however, there is no direct evidence that it was the Buddhist *saṅgha* he went to. Although in one version of the edict (the one at Maski) he is described as a *Budhaśake*, which Hultsch translates as “[I am] a Buddha-Śākya”, it seems fairly certain that the insertion of the word *Budh(a)* was done by a single local scribe to “correct” the word *upāsake* which he had already written. It is noteworthy that *Budhaśake* or its equivalent does not occur in any other version of the first Minor Rock Edict. All the other versions have the word *upāsaka*.¹

It is probable that the scribe, realising that, as I have just said, there is no indication of the sect in which Aśoka was an *upāsaka*, and wishing to make the situation clear to all readers of the edict, tried to insert the word “*Buddha*” before the word *upāsaka*, which he had just carved on the rock, with only partial success.

Nevertheless, confirmation that Aśoka had become a Buddhist is provided by the reference to his visit to the *bodhi* tree, which is described in the eighth Rock Edict [RE VIII(C)] as happening when Aśoka had been consecrated ten years. This must have been one of the first consequences of his conversion to Buddhism, and it perhaps coincided with his visit to the *saṅgha* which improved the quality of his religious life.

We can, in fact, be certain that, for Aśoka, *saṅgha* means the Buddhist *saṅgha*, because in the seventh Pillar Edict [PE 7(Z)], when he summarises all his achievements, he states that he has set up *mahāmātras* “ministers” of morality to look after the affairs of the *saṅgha*, the brāhmaṇas, the Ājīvikas, the Jains, and various other religious sects. In the context, with the other sects specified by name, the *saṅgha*, by a process of elimination, must be the Buddhist *saṅgha*.

There is, then, no doubt that Aśoka was a Buddhist layman, but there is no reason to believe that his mind was closed to other religions, and we read in the sixth Pillar Edict [PE 6(E–F)] that he had honoured

all sects with various forms of honour, and the best of these, in his opinion, was a personal visit to them. As we shall see, his sort of *dhamma* was moral and ethical, as opposed to spiritual, so that he could equally well have been a Jain layman.

The edicts give a great deal of information about the way in which Aśoka propagated his own *dhamma*. He writes, among other things, of *dhammathambhas* “dhamma pillars”, *dhammalipi* “dhamma writings”, *dhammamāṅgalas* “dhamma ceremonies”, *dhammadāna* “dhamma giving”, *dhammānuggaha* “dhamma benefit”, *dhammayātrās* “dhamma journeys”, *dhammasavana* “hearing the dhamma”, *dhammamahāmātras* “dhamma ministers”, *dhammavijaya* “dhamma victory”.

The problem is to know if Aśoka’s *dhamma* was the same as the *Buddha-dhamma*. He makes it clear that there is a difference between ordinary practices and institutions, and the *dhamma* version of them. A pillar is a *thambha*. It becomes a *dhamma-thambha* if Aśoka’s *dhamma* is carved on it. There were *mahāmātras* before Aśoka’s time. He was the first to institute *dhamma-mahāmātras* to propagate his *dhamma*. Before his time kings went on *yātrās*. He instituted *dhamma-yātrās*, so that he could practise his *dhamma* while on journeys. People performed all sorts of ceremonies (*maṅgalas*) — in case of illness, and at weddings, to get children, before going on journeys, etc. The *dhamma-maṅgala*, however, is the proper treatment of slaves and servants, honouring teachers, self-restraint with regard to living creatures, generosity to śramaṇas and brāhmaṇas, etc. [RE IX(G); cf. RE XI(C)].

Aśoka’s *dhamma* is set out clearly in several inscriptions, e.g. in a concise form in the second Minor Rock Edict: “Obey one’s parents; obey one’s elders; be kind to living creatures; tell the truth”. All this is said to be in accordance with ancient usage (*porānā pakati*) — a third century B.C.E. version of “back to basics”. Elsewhere, in the third Rock Edict, a slightly expanded version of this is given: “Obedience to mother and father is good; liberality to friends, acquaintances, and relatives, to brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas is good; abstention from killing

¹See Norman, 1973, pp. 68–69 (= CP I, pp. 166–67).

animals is good; moderation in expenditure and moderation in possessions are good" [RE III(D)].

The series of seven edicts on pillars, which we call the Pillar Edicts, is devoted to an explanation of Aśoka's *dhamma*, with an account of how he himself has complied with it, by planting trees for shade by the roadside and digging wells and building watering-places for men and animals. Pillar Edict 1 tells of government by *dhamma*. Pillar Edict 2 states that *dhamma* consists of doing little sin, doing much good, showing compassion, making donations, telling the truth, and purity. Aśoka has done much good by not killing. Pillar Edict 3 tells of good and evil, and identified the latter as fierceness, cruelty, anger, pride, and envy. Pillar Edict 4 emphasises the need for equality of justice and the rehabilitation of prisoners. Pillar Edict 5 prohibits the killing of a number of animals which are specified by name. Pillar Edict 6 states that the aim is to bring happiness to all. All sects are to be honoured, especially by personal visits. Pillar Edict 7 seems to be a summary of all that Aśoka has done. He explains how kings in the past had sought to increase *dhamma*. Aśoka had decided to do it by preaching and instruction, and had instituted *dhamma*-pillars (*dhammathambhas*) and *dhamma*-ministers (*dhammamahāmātras*) to put this decision into effect. The *dhammamahāmātras* were concerned with all sects. *Dhamma* is defined again as: obedience to parents, obedience to teachers, respect to the old, and proper behaviour towards brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas, to the poor, and to slaves and servants. There had been an increase of *dhamma* as a result of Aśoka's legislation, e.g. about killing animals, but also because of an attitude of mind, i.e. personal conscience (*nijhati*). In this way the next world is gained.

Elsewhere, in the series of major Rock Edicts, we read that one must obey the *dhamma* and conform to it [RE X(A)]. The gift of the *dhāmma* is defined as the proper treatment of slaves, obedience to parents, etc., generosity to brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas, and non-killing. The *dhamma* gives endless merit [RE XI(E)].

Aśoka calls his edicts *dhamma*-writings (*dhammalipis*), and we can read them and see exactly what *dhamma* each *lipi* contains. We can see that his *dhamma* is exclusively a moral one, which is why we often translate *dhammalipi* as "rescript on morality". Aśoka promoted his *dhamma* widely, and instituted *dhammamahāmātras* to supervise it, *dhammathambhas* to carve it on, and had messengers (*dūtas*) to carry it all over India and even to the Greek kings to the West. Except in so far as the moral ideas are quite in conformity with Buddhist moral teachings, there is no hint of anything exclusively Buddhist in them, and in the insistence on non-killing (*ahiṃsā*) his thought closely resembles the Jain emphasis on this, and in fact parallels have been noted between the lists of animals declared inviolable in the fifth Pillar Edict and lists of animals in Jain texts.¹

In the Bairāt edict we find that, under his personal name of Priyadassi, Aśoka greets the Saṃgha, and wishes it well. He goes on to say that it is known how great is his faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṃgha. It is obvious that in this context Dhamma has its usual Buddhist meaning as one element of the Triratna, but other than this one reference, it is, in fact, very clear that Aśoka's references to *dhamma* do not refer to the Buddha's *dhamma*, and Aśoka's *dhamma* was not the same as the Buddha's *dhamma*.² The quotation I gave at the beginning of this lecture about establishing the *sāsana* in countries which he had spiritually conquered seems, therefore, to be based upon a misunderstanding of the nature of Aśoka's *dhamma*.

That same quotation also seems to be wrong when it talks about countries being spiritually conquered by Aśoka, at least if, by spiritual conquest, it is referring to Aśoka's *dhamma-vijaya*. As I understand the situation, Aśoka expanded his empire by force, but thereafter devised the principle of victory by morality, and commended it to his successors.

¹See Norman, 1967B, p. 26 (= CP I, pp. 68–69).

²See Lamotte, 1988, p. 228.

It seems to me that the guiding principle of Aśoka's teaching was non-killing (*ahiṃsā*), presumably as a result of his remorse over the killing in Kalinga. His very first Rock Edict is concerned almost entirely with the prohibition of killing in daily life, including the killing of animals for sacrifice and for food.

In the thirteenth Rock Edict he tells the story of how, after the victory in Kalinga, with all the death and suffering this involved, he had a great desire for morality (*dhamma*) [RE XIII(C)]. It pained Aśoka that those who did obey his *dhamma*, including brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas (J), suffered nevertheless (G). His hope for the forest dwellers is that they too (like him) may repent (of past killing?) and not kill (in the future) (M–N). What he now wished for was a *dhamma*-victory, and this consisted of security for all creatures, self-restraint, equanimity, and gentleness (O). Messengers were sent to preach this everywhere, including the Greek kingdoms to the West (Q). His conquest by morality (*dhamma*) is promulgated in the hope that his successors will not think of another (military) victory, by force of arms which would entail slaughter, similar to that in Kalinga, and that in their own victory there will be mercy (*khanti*) and light punishment (*lahudaṇḍatā*) (X).

And so it seems to me quite certain that the messengers (*dūtas*) who were sent to the Greek kings were not charged with the propagation of Buddhism. It would seem clear that they were sent in an attempt to persuade the rulers, probably despotic rulers, of the neighbouring states that they too should give up their desire for conquest by war, and should try to institute the reign of peace and tranquillity, based upon the principles of Aśoka's *dhamma*. In these circumstances, to talk, as some do, about the Aśokan missionary expansion of Buddhism among the Greeks, seems to me to be a mistake.¹ Certainly we have no evidence from the Greek side which indicates that any Buddhist missionaries had arrived among them c. 250 B.C.E.

It will be clear from what I have said so far about Aśoka's *dhamma* that those who talk of him making Buddhism the state religion are very wide of the mark. In his edicts, Aśoka says little or nothing about Buddhism. There is no reference to any of the basic tenets of Buddhism, e.g. *samsāra*, *mokkha*, *nibbāna*, *anattā*, the eightfold path or the four Noble Truths. In the Separate Edicts he stated that his aim was the happiness of all (SepE I), and a number of inscriptions include the statement that his aim was that his people may attain happiness in this world, and heaven in the other world. His boast was that he had mixed men with gods, a statement which has been variously interpreted. I take it to mean that he had succeeded in bringing men to heaven, where of course they will be reborn as gods, i.e. mixed with other gods. This seems to me to be far from the idea of an endless series of rebirths which we normally associate with Buddhism.

His general failure to mention Buddhism has been variously explained. It was perhaps due to ignorance, i.e. although he was nominally an *upāsaka*, he had very little knowledge about Buddhist doctrines. Alternatively, perhaps he knew about Buddhism, but he thought it would be favouring one sect unduly, and thus destroying the impartiality which he aimed to show elsewhere, if he referred to it in detail. It is also possible that he thought that it was irrelevant to his purpose in publishing his edicts, namely to spread knowledge of his own personal *dhamma*, which was intended to bring peace to his empire and enable all his subjects to live in harmony with each other.

One of the more bizarre explanations I have come across is the view that what Aśoka conveys in his edicts is the state in which Buddhism was in his time. Hultsch says, "Aśoka's dharma is in thorough agreement with the picture of Buddhist morality which is preserved in the ... Dhammapada. Here we find Buddhism *in statu nascendi*" — perhaps, 'in its infancy'.¹ He goes on to say, "In one important point Aśoka's inscriptions differ from, and reflect an earlier

¹See Norman, 2004.

¹Hultsch, 1925, p. xlix.

stage in the development of Buddhist theology or metaphysics than, the Dhammapada: they do not yet know anything of the doctrine of *Nirvāṇa*, but presuppose the general Hindu belief that the rewards of the practice of *dhamma* are happiness in this world and merit in the next world."¹ Hultzsich's statement raises an interesting question about the nature of Buddhist theology. Is it possible that the doctrine of *nirvāṇa* is a later stage in its development? I cannot believe that that is so, and I therefore think that Hultzsich's reason for Aśoka's failure to mention *nirvāṇa* cannot be correct.

On the face of it, the situation appears to be very similar to that found in Sri Lanka and described by Richard Gombrich.² He reports, "But most Sinhalese villagers do not want *nirvāṇa*. . . . They say that they want to be born in heaven." They do, at least, know about *nirvāṇa*. Aśoka gives no hint of ever having heard about it. Although the villagers' statement may seem strange, it is in fact quite in conformity with the statement which we find at the end of the Alagaddūpama-sutta of the Majjhima-nikāya,³ where the Buddha states that those bhikkhus who act in accordance with the *dhamma* and with faith, will gain awakening (*sambodhi*), while those who merely have faith in, and love for, the Buddha will attain heaven. The villagers know about *nibbāna*, but prefer the heaven which they will gain because of their love of the Buddha. Aśoka makes no mention of loving the Buddha. For him, heaven is gained by doing the things which he specifies in his *dhamma*. The statement is not even put in the context of acquiring good *karma*. He makes it clear that this is, in itself, the *summum bonum*: "What is more important than gaining heaven?" he asks in the ninth Rock Edict [RE IX(L)].

The strongest indication of his connection with Buddhism is the edict at Bairāt, which I have already mentioned, and we should note that the one place where he actually refers to the Buddha's teaching is in this

¹Hultzsich, 1925, p. liii.

²Gombrich, 1971, pp. 16–17 (quoted by Southwold, 1985, p. 30).

³M I 142.

edict addressed to the *saṅgha*. In it he says that everything said by the Buddha was well said, and he commends seven texts by name to the *saṅgha*. He refers to the Buddha's teaching as the *saddhamma*, which perhaps was an intentional action to distinguish the Buddha's *dhamma* from his own. We must hope that Aśoka was preaching to the converted. If his exhortation had been intended for the common people, it would presumably have been in a Rock Edict. There is the problem that we cannot be certain of the identity of some of the texts, but since we sometimes find that the commentaries, e.g. that on the Sutta-nipāta, know of some texts under other names,¹ it is perhaps not altogether surprising that we cannot recognise all of Aśoka's choices.

In his statement in the eighth Rock Edict [RE VIII(C)] that *dhamma* journeys (*dhammayātrās*) have replaced the pleasure trips that kings used to take, Aśoka says that he went to the *bodhi* tree, but he says nothing about the need for others to go on pilgrimage to sacred places, or about pilgrimage as a religious activity. As a result of his visit, he defines a *dhammayātrā* as an opportunity to travel around in order to put his *dhamma* into effect. He says precisely what it entails: giving audiences and making distributions to śramaṇas and brāhmaṇas, giving audiences and distributing money to old people, giving audiences to the country people and preaching to them and answering questions about his *dhamma*.

What we read of Aśoka's own visits to sacred places does not encourage us to think that he thought that they were very important. It is interesting to note that of the four places which are sacred to Buddhists — where the Buddha was born, achieved *sambodhi*, gave his first sermon and died — we have only first-hand evidence of Aśoka's visit to two of them. Although the Aśokāvadāna tells of Aśoka being taken on a conducted tour of these four places and others, Aśoka himself states that he went to the *bodhi*-tree in his tenth year, and to the Buddha's birth-place at Lumbinī, where he had a pillar erected, ten years later, in his

¹See Norman, *GD* II, p. xxvii.

twentieth year. To some extent, of course, this is an argument from silence. Perhaps Aśoka did visit the other places, as the texts say, and did raise pillars there. If so, they are now lost. The discrepancy in the dates, however, is less easily explained.

We should note that the visit to *sambodhi* has been interpreted by some as meaning that Aśoka was so proficient a practitioner of Buddhism that he actually gained *bodhi* himself. Such an interpretation would imply that meditation, *bodhi* and *nirvāṇa* were, in fact, known to Aśoka, even though there is no trace of that knowledge in the edicts. Even as recent a writer as Jules Bloch toyed with this idea, but then decided that “go to *sambodhi*” is philologically unlikely as a way of saying “gained awakening, became a Buddha”, and he concluded that it means “visited the site of the *bodhi* tree”.¹

We have an inscription which tells us that in his fourteenth year Aśoka enlarged the *stūpa* of the previous Buddha Koṅkamaṇa. It is not clear who built it. The inscription has been interpreted as meaning that Aśoka enlarged it for the second time, but it is perhaps more likely that it means “enlarged it to twice its former size”. We have no more information from the edicts about Aśoka erecting or enlarging *stūpas*, although the Chinese pilgrims record the existence of a number of *stūpas* which were attributed, in their day, to Aśoka, including one built at the place where the Mahāsāṅghikas held their assembly.²

Both the Northern and the later Southern Buddhist sources give the information that Aśoka broke into *caityas* which he thought might hold relics of the Buddha, and when he eventually found one with relics in it he re-interred them in 84,000 *caityas* in the 84,000 *vihāras* which he had had built. The words *budhasa salile* “relics of the Buddha” which occur at the end of the version of the first Minor Rock Edict found at Ahaurā in 1961, might be thought to refer to this redistribution of the

relics,¹ but since the words are found in only one of the seventeen versions of that edict so far discovered, it seems more likely that the words are an invention of the scribe at Ahaurā, based upon a misunderstanding of something which he found in the version of the edict sent to him.²

Aśoka devotes the whole of the twelfth Rock Edict to making it clear that he is equally concerned with adherents of all religions, and he honours them all with gifts and other sorts of honours. All sects must listen to each others' *dhamma*, so that there may be an increase of *sālā* (which I take to mean “communication”) between them [RE XII(I)]. Then there will be an increase in each individual sect and an illumination of *dhamma* [RE XII(N)]. Aśoka wishes them all to live in harmony together, without self-aggrandizement or disparagement of other sects.

Aśoka seems to use the compounds *brāhmaṇa-śramaṇa* and *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa* (in their various Prakrit forms) to mean all members of religious orders, orthodox and heterodox. In most cases he puts the word *śramaṇa*- first, but in two places he reverses the order of the words, and in the fourth Rock Edict he has both forms of the compound. The scribes at some sites change *brāhmaṇa-śramaṇa* to *śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa*, perhaps thinking that to have *brāhmaṇa* first was wrong, or perhaps believing that they ought to correct what appeared to be Aśoka's inconsistency. In the thirteenth Rock Edict he writes of *brāhmaṇas* and *śramaṇas* and members of other sects (*pāsaṇḍā*). He would surely not have referred to the sects in this way if he had in fact rejected the *brāhmaṇas* completely, as the Mahāvamsa story suggests. The variations of this word order are probably due to the regional scribes, who (depending on their personal feelings) put one or the other first. This applies especially to the scribe at Girnār, who always prefers to have *brāhmaṇa*- first. This may be connected with the Sanskritisations we find at Girnār, and suggests that the scribe was

¹See Bloch, 1950, p. 112, note 6 and (for the use of the word in the Mahāvastu-avadāna) Yuyama, 1969, pp. 488–92.

²Beal, 1884, Part II, p. 164.

¹See Norman, 1983B, pp. 277–92 (p. 291, note 82) (= CP II, pp. 250–68 [p. 267, note 1]).

²See Norman, 1983B, p. 288 (= CP II, p. 268).

perhaps a brahman. In Pāli texts, it seems to be conventional to have the words in the order *samaṇa-brāhmaṇa*, which is not surprising. In the seventh Pillar Edict [PE 7(HH)], where we have only one version of the edict, we find the compound in the order *bābhana-samana*.

His encouragement of all sects must mean that he did not stop feeding *brāhmaṇas*, and, as I have said, his *dhamma* in fact specifically includes giving to *śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*. His donation of caves to the Ājīvikas in his twelfth year¹ is additional evidence that he was not devoted exclusively to Buddhism.

The item which most merits our attention, however, is the set of three versions of the so-called Schism Edict, because these have been interpreted not only as showing that Aśoka was sufficiently involved in the affairs of the *saṅgha* to be able to settle the schism in the order (*saṅghabheda*), as the Mahāvamsa says, but also to intervene to the extent of removing dissenting heretics by force. The question is how far the Schism Edict reflects the actual events of the schism which the chronicles tell us occurred in the time of Aśoka and led to the holding of the third *saṅgīti*.

It is not always realised that there are five accounts of the third *saṅgīti* and the events leading up to it given in the early Pāli chronicles and commentaries: there are two in the Dīpavaṃsa, two by Buddhaghosa in his commentaries upon the Vinaya (Sp) and the Kathāvatthu (Kv-a), and one in the Mahāvamsa. The accounts they give are not identical, but differ in various details.

Most people know the version told in the Mahāvamsa, which in fact is the latest and most developed version of the story. It states (Mhv 5.229–70) that the heretics who had lost honour, when Aśoka started feeding 60,000 bhikkhus, put on the yellow robe and joined the bhikkhus. They went on proclaiming their own doctrines and performing their old practices. The bhikkhus could not restrain them, and for seven years the bhikkhus in Jambudīpa did not hold an *uposatha*

ceremony or the ceremony of *pavāraṇā* in all the *ārāmas*. When Aśoka tried to make the bhikkhus in the Asokārāmaṭṭhāra perform the *uposatha*, his minister killed several bhikkhus. The king received a week's instruction in the Buddha's teaching, and then listened to all the bhikkhus' doctrines, and caused all the adherents of false doctrines to be expelled from the Order. They numbered 60,000 (Mhv 5.270). The Order, now in harmony (*samagga*),¹ assembled and performed the *uposatha*. They then held the third *saṅgīti* at which Moggaliputta Tissa recited the Kathāvatthu. The end of the *saṅgīti* is dated to the seventeenth year after Aśoka's consecration.

The two versions by Buddhaghosa are earlier than the Mahāvamsa. They are very similar to each other, and also to the Mahāvamsa version, with the detail, omitted in the Mahāvamsa, that Aśoka gave the heretics white robes when he expelled them from the Order. The heretics' practices are said to include the tending of the sacrificial fire, from which we can deduce that some of them were *brāhmaṇas*.

The versions in the Dīpavaṃsa are earlier than Buddhaghosa. We should note that the Dīpavaṃsa is a strangely undisciplined text. It obviously represents a conglomeration of source material bundled together uncritically, so that there are often two versions of the same event, and sometimes three. There are, in fact, two versions of the schism story:

(1) The first version² states that the schismatics and heretics, among whom the Jains and Ājīvikas are specifically mentioned, had lost gain and honour, and consequently infiltrated the Order. For seven years the *uposatha* ceremony was carried out by incomplete groups (*vagguposatha*),³ since the noble ones did not attend the ceremonies. By

¹Mhv 5.274.

²Dīp VII 35–41.

³At Dīp VII 36 *vagga* (< Skt *vyagra*) is opposed to *samagga*, according to PED (s.v. *vagga*²). Oldenberg (1879, p. 157) translated *vagguposatha* correctly, and it is not clear why Law (1957–58, p. 183) differed from him and, by dividing the compound *vaggu* (< Skt *valgu*) + *posatha* (instead of *vagga* + *uposatha*), translated “pleasant *uposatha*”, although this is highly inappropriate in the

¹Bloch, 1950, p. 156.

the time 236 years had passed since the death of the Buddha, 60,000 bhikkhus lived in the Asokārāma. The various sectarians ruined the doctrine, wearing yellow robes. Moggaliputta convened a recitation, and having destroyed the different doctrines and expelled the shameless intruders, he recited the text known as the Kathāvattu.

(2) The second version¹ says there was a dreadful schism (*bheda*) among the Theravādins 236 years after the death of the Buddha. The heretics (numbering 60,000), seeing the honour being given to the *saṅgha*, furtively attached themselves to it. The Pātimokkha ceremonies in the Asokārāmavihāra were interrupted. A minister, who ordered the Pātimokkha ceremony to be performed, killed some of the bhikkhus, which led to the king consulting the elders about the killings. Moggaliputta presided over a gathering of 60,000 Buddhists, which had assembled to destroy the sectarians. Aśoka learned the doctrine from the thera, and is said² to have destroyed the (*bhikkhu*)-emblems of the intruders (*rājā ... theyyasaṃvāsabhikkhuno*³ ... *nāseti liṅganāsanam*). The heretics, performing the *pabbajjā* rite according to their own doctrine, damaged the Buddha's utterances. To annihilate them Moggaliputta recited the Kathāvattu. After that recitation he held the Third Recitation.

If we examine all these versions, we can probably trace the way in which additions were made to the basic version of the story. It is likely that the first account in the Dīpavaṃsa is the earliest version. It dates the occurrence, and states that sectarians whose honour and gain had been reduced because of the growing prestige of the Buddhist Order infiltrated the order and wore the yellow robe. For seven years the true Buddhists would not perform the *uposatha* in their presence.

context.

¹Dīp VII 44–54.

²Dīp VII 53.

³Dīp VII 53. It would appear that *bhikkhuno* is a genitive plural form (= *bhikkhūnam*). For genitive plural forms in *-o*, see Norman, 1976C, p. 124 (= CP I, p. 244).

Moggaliputta destroyed the various doctrines and removed the shameless ones. There is no mention of Aśoka, nor of the giving of white robes. The second version in Dīpavaṃsa adds the statement that there was a schism (*bheda*) in the Theravāda. It does not specifically mention the *uposatha*, but states that the Pātimokkha ceremony in the Asokārāmavihāra was interrupted, although it does not say for how long. A minister tried to settle the matter, but his intervention caused bloodshed. The king asked about the bloodshed, received religious instruction, and destroyed the sectarians' (*bhikkhu*)-emblems.

Buddhaghosa introduces the story of Aśoka becoming so involved in the matter that he sends a minister, rather than the minister acting on his own responsibility. That minister tries to settle the matter by forcing the bhikkhus to perform the *uposatha*, and killed a number of them in the process. After a week's training in the doctrine, Aśoka was able to discern that the intruders had heretical views, and he consequently made them wear white robes and expelled them from the Order. The Order is then said to be in harmony (*samagga*). The Mahāvamsa version adds the detail that no *uposatha* ceremony was held in Jambudīpa for seven years, nor the *pavāraṇā* ceremony in all the *ārāmas*.

We can probably reconstruct the account of the matter in the following way. Sectarians (probably those who had fallen out of favour when Aśoka began to show a preference for Buddhism) infiltrated the Asokārāma, and the true bhikkhus refused to celebrate the *uposatha* ceremony while they were there. There was therefore *bheda* in the Asokārāma *saṅgha*. It has been suggested that this *saṅghabheda* must have been a very serious event, which carried a heavier penalty than that laid down for *saṅghabheda* in the Vinaya-piṭaka,¹ namely, expulsion

¹Causing schism is dealt with in the tenth *saṅghādisesa* rule. Anyone attempting to cause schism should be told to desist. If after three admonitions he still persists, then it is a breach of the rule. The penalty for this is laid down at Vin III 185,37–38: *saṃgho va tassā āpattiyā parivāsaṃ deti mūlāya paṭikassati mānattaṃ deti abbheti*; “placing on probation, sending back to the beginning, inflicting the *mānatta* discipline, rehabilitation”. It appears that the schismatic bhikkhus at Kosambī needed to be re-ordained (*bhedānuvattakā bhikkhū puna*

from the order, which is what wearing the householder's white robes implies. I would suggest, however, that it was not a question of bhikkhus being forced to wear the householder's white robes, but of infiltrators being forced to give up the emblems to which they were not entitled, and being made to depart from the *vihāra*, where they had no right to be. The Vinaya penalties would not be appropriate for those who were not genuine bhikkhus.

I see no reason to believe that Aśoka himself carried out the expulsion. The earlier version in the *Dīpavaṃsa* states that Moggaliputta removed the heretics, and makes no mention of Aśoka. It is, however, not unlikely that, as the chronicles say that the bhikkhus were unable to restrain the sectarians by the rules of discipline, Moggaliputta was unable to enforce the order of expulsion from the *vihāra*. In this case, recourse to the civil power was perhaps inevitable, and a minister had to deal with the matter. This action would not be a case of one of the king's ministers intruding into a religious matter, since those to be evicted were not true bhikkhus.

There seems to be no reason to doubt that this part of the story is historically true. The *Mahāvāṃsa* version, however, has Aśoka himself becoming involved, doubtless because it was "his" *ārāma*. According to this version, he personally sent his minister, and became further involved after the bloodshed which was caused. Aśoka's commitment to the Theravādin cause is emphasised by the story that he personally decided who held the heretical views, and expelled them from the Order. The story is, however, given a slightly unreal element by the insertion of a detail whereby Aśoka, after recognising the heresies of the dissidents, and the correct views of the orthodox bhikkhus, then asked the thera Moggaliputta Tissa what the Buddha actually taught (Mhv 5.271). When the sectarians had been removed, the *saṅgha* in the Aśokārāma¹ *vihāra* became *samagga* "united, in harmony". The final expansion of the story adds the detail that no *uposatha* ceremony was

¹*upasampajjeyyūṃ*, Vin II 201,1-2).

held in Jambudīpa for seven years, nor any *pavāraṇā* ceremony in all the *ārāmas*. These additional details presumably represent an attempt to make the matter appear far more widespread than it really was.

The shortest version of the three versions of Aśoka's Schism Edict, which we may assume gives the gist of the edict, states that the *saṅgha* had been made united (*samagga*), and that any monks and nuns, who caused schism in the future, should be made to live outside the dwelling (*āvāsa*), i.e. the *vihāra*, and to wear white robes. There is no information about where the *saṅgha* had been made *samagga* or by whom, and the order to remove schismatics refers to the future and does not say that any had already been removed. Consequently, it is by no means obvious that Aśoka's edict and the story in the chronicles refer to the same event. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the removal of the (*bhikkhu*)-emblems or the wearing of white robes, the expulsion and the *saṅgha* being made united (*samagga*) are mentioned in some of the Pāli accounts. I believe that it is too much of a coincidence for there to be no connection whatsoever between the edict and the Pāli accounts. I conclude, then, that the references in the Pāli texts must go back to a very early tradition, brought from India and preserved in the *Mahāvihāra*, that Aśoka did, or at least wrote of doing, these things. It is interesting to note that the references to white robes and the *saṅgha* being *samagga* do not occur before Buddhaghosa's account of the matter, which implies either that these details were not available to the author of the *Dīpavaṃsa*, perhaps because they did not yet exist, or else that he chose to omit them for some reason.

It is obvious that some of the statements made about Aśoka by modern writers can be verified by reference to his inscriptions.¹ Aśoka was a Buddhist and he was emperor of India, or at least the sole ruler of a large proportion of it. We know of no Buddhist ruler of this, or any other comparable, territory before Aśoka, so it is not incorrect to call him the first Buddhist Emperor. On the other hand, some of the

¹See Lamotte, 1988, p. 253.

statements made about him seem to be rather extravagant, and not capable of being verified. A case can perhaps be made for saying that "Aśoka was the greatest political figure of ancient India", but, in the absence of any first-hand information about his spirituality, it seems unjustified to say that he was also the greatest spiritual figure. Aśoka's own words about the function of *dhamma* journeys (*dhammayātrās*) seem to make his alleged enthusiastic promotion of religious activities such as pilgrimage and the veneration of relics less than certain.

There are three questions to answer. The first question is: why did the Buddhists claim that Aśoka was exclusively pro-Buddhist? The second question is: why did the Theravādins claim that he favoured them at the time of the schism? The third question is: why do modern writers make claims about him which are not supported by his own words? The last is easily answered. Modern writers say what they do because they have either read only the Buddhist sources or been misled by other modern writers. In either case they have not actually read the Aśokan inscriptions themselves. Those who have heard that Aśoka recommended certain *suttas*, i.e. portions of the Buddhist *dhamma*, and know that Aśoka set up *dhamma*-writings and sent out messengers, have put the two pieces of information together, and have assumed that Aśoka set up, i.e. popularised, Buddhist teachings and sent out Buddhist missionaries. This incorrect view may owe something to the editor of the *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*,¹ who had perhaps confused Aśoka's messengers with Moggaliputta's missionaries, and actually states that Aśoka sent out the missionaries after the third *saṅgīti*, although the texts clearly state that they were sent out by Moggaliputta.

It is clear that the Buddhists appropriated Aśoka for their own use. It is possible that the earlier version of the story in the *Dīpavaṃsa* goes back to a very early form of the tradition, when there was no need to "invent" Aśoka's involvement, whereas the second *Dīpavaṃsa* story was formulated later, when the political situation had changed. There

was undoubtedly rivalry with the brahmanical caste, when the power of the brāhmaṇas grew again after Aśoka's death, as Puṣyamitra supported a brahmanical reaction. Samprati, Aśoka's grandson, is said in Jain sources to have been a great supporter of Jainism and, in face of the royal support for both those religions, it was perhaps inevitable that the Buddhists, building upon the undoubtedly correct fact that he was a Buddhist layman, would maintain that the great king Aśoka favoured only the Buddhists, to the exclusion of other sects, and in fact had 18,000 Jains put to death in a single day, according to the Aśokāvadāna.¹ In later times the story was embroidered even more, and I-tsing reports that an image of the Buddha was dressed in a monk's robes of a particular pattern,² implying that Aśoka was more than just a layman.

It is probable that it was only after the schism in the Buddhist *saṅgha*, and indeed because of the schism, when the inclusion of the word *mahā-* in the name Mahāsāṅghika seemed to imply that the Theravādins were only a minority sect of Buddhism, that it became necessary to prove that the Theravādin view of the Buddha's teaching was the correct one. The Theravādin school consequently began to make statements about Aśoka himself favouring their view of the Buddha's teachings, in order to legitimise their claims to be the true exponents of the Buddhist tradition.

It has been said that Aśoka's patronage was responsible for establishing Buddhism over a far wider area than could have been imagined before the founding of the Mauryan empire.³ We must note that we can find no evidence in the edicts that there was any greater patronage of Buddhism than of any other sect. It is probably pure chance that we have little or no information about the patronage which Aśoka bestowed upon other sects, although I have mentioned the caves which he gave to the Ājīvikas. It is also probable that some of the things which the

¹Divy 427.

²See Takakusu, 1896, p. 73.

³Cutler, 1994, p. 33.

¹See *DPPN*, s.v. Asoka.

Buddhist texts claim Aśoka did were not done by him personally, but by the *mahāmātras* appointed to look after the affairs of the *saṅgha*. There is no reference to Asoka quelling schism in the order (*saṅghabheda*) in the seventh Pillar Edict, which is dated to Aśoka's twenty-seventh year, and seems to be a summary of Aśoka's activities as a ruler, nor is there any mention there of the third *saṅgīti*. The fact that Aśoka says nothing about the *saṅgīti* being held under his patronage suggests that he did not include among his achievements any detailed information about the *mahāmātras'* activities. It would have been the *mahāmātras* who made whatever arrangements were needed to ensure that the *saṅgīti* could be held. Since the Buddhists recognised that they did so on behalf of the king, they were able to claim that he was their patron.

Similarly, the instructions in the covering letter, which is attached to the version of the so-called Schism Edict at Sarṇath, about *mahāmātras* coming on every *uposatha* day to read and understand the edict, probably refer to the *mahāmātras* whose duty it was to look after the *saṅgha*. We may not be too wide of the mark if we also assume that it was not Aśoka himself who officiated at the voting, recorded in Chinese sources,¹ after the dispute which resulted in the arising of the Mahāsāṅghikas, but the *mahāmātras*, acting on Aśoka's behalf.

If it is true that Buddhism expanded during the reign of Aśoka, then it seems to me that, rather than this being the result of his patronage, or to his deliberate attempts to propagate it (for which, as we have seen, there is little or no direct evidence), it is more likely that it was a result of the peace which he established, leading to greater prosperity and the expansion of trade. As I said in the second lecture, Buddhism followed the trade routes. It was undoubtedly those same trade routes which were followed by Aśoka's emissary *dhamma-mahāmātras*, who, as we read in the fifth Rock Edict, were instituted in Aśoka's thirteenth year to look after members of all sects, and to spread Aśoka's *dhamma* through all parts of his territories, and we may be sure that the religious

missionaries sent out by Moggaliputta followed in the footsteps of the *mahāmātras*.¹

I mentioned the doubt about the identity of some of the seven texts which Aśoka recommended to the *saṅgha*. Beside that doubt, there is also a dispute about the significance of the list, some believing that Aśoka's ability to mention texts by name implies that a canon was already in existence in his day. I will deal with this problem in the eighth lecture.

¹Lamotte, 1988, pp. 172-73.

¹Lamotte, 1988, p. 301.