

MAHINDA: THE ROYAL AMBASSADOR OF BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The event of the introduction of Buddhism to Sinhala Dvipa took place in the eighteenth regnal year of Asoka. The Sri Lankan chronicles are full of details about the establishment of Buddhism in Sinhala Dvipa. After Gautama Buddha Buddhism left its motherland and was established easily in other countries and became a famous world-level religion. Still, many Asian countries are great followers of this religion. Sri Lanka was the first country that amazingly adopted Buddhism in its own way. Sinhalese literature Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa, Indian epic Ramayana, Mahabharata, Arthasastra, Rajtarangini and Asoka's inscription No. 2 and 13 also describes Sri Lanka by the name of "Tamraparni". According to historical descriptions during the time of three pre-Buddha Sri Lanka has been known as "Ojadipa", 'Varadipa' and 'Mandadipa'. Sinhalese believes in the coming of Lord Buddha to the Island thrice. Over and above before Mahinda, a Vijaya named Prince with his 700 followers went to Sri Lanka. Vijaya landed on Lankadipa on the same day when Buddha attained Parinibbana (about 483 B.C.). he established settlements and a proper civilization there. The introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Asoka's son Mahinda in the middle of the third century B.C. is regarded as the official introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Mahinda traveled by land route with six companions: Tissa the then king, welcomed Mahinda in his capital Anuradhapura. Mahinda delivered his first speech on Chulohaspadopoma-sutta of 'Mazzima-Nikaya'. Mahinda spent 26 days in Anuradhapura. During this period things moved speedily and great changes took place. Meanwhile, the king's junior queen Anula and her companions were much impressed by Mahinda's sermon and expressed a desire to join the order as nuns. At Mahinda's suggestion, Theri Sanghmitra along with the southern branch of the Bo Tree came to the island to ordain the females. Sanghmitra lived in Sri Lanka whole her life and died at the age of seventy-nine after one year of Mahinda. The branch of the Bodhi tree was established in

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Mahamegh Garden. One day in his old age Devanampiya Tissa asked to Thera Mahinda, "Is the tree of Buddhism has been sowed on the Island, Mahinda replied though the tree has been sowed but its roots only when spread while a man of this land will study Vinaya and ecclesiastical books. Then Arittha took the responsibility for this great work and did a thorough study of the Buddhist literature. Mahinda did a lot for the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka the uplift of the Buddha Sasana. It may rightly be considered that he was the first real teacher of Sri Lanka.

Keywords

Mahinda, Tambapanni, Mahavamsa, Dipavamsa , Arittha, Tissa.

Aim of the Work

This article is basically based on the study of Mahinda (Mahendra) son of Asoka. He was a monk and suitable for the propagation of Buddhism in a new place. The people of Sri Lanka know about the India and the great king of Asoka through the traders and some other sources. This article carries the aim to disclose the effort of Asoka and his son Mahinda because these two did a lot of effort to propagate Buddhism to far-off lands. How they get a success beyond imagination. So, this article is an effort to understand the important event of the coming of Thera Mahinda in Sri Lanka. Above all some interesting substances related to Buddhism will be disclosed. We will come to know in this article how Thera Mahinda created a good environment in Sri Lanka to propagate Buddhism through his effort. He not only propagated religion but changed and mold the mind of the people. He did a great job for the people, which nobody could do before him.

Introduction

The event of the introduction of Buddhism to Sinhala Dvipa took place in the eighteenth regnal year of Asoka. By that time Asoka had become a great follower of the Buddha and a great patron of Buddhism. The Sri Lankan chronicles are full of details about the establishment of Buddhism in Sinhala Dvipa. The accounts recorded in the chronicles about the arrival of Mahinda, the son of Asoka, would give one the notion that Mahinda's arrival was an unexpected surprise to Devanampiya Tissa, the then, ruler of Lanka.

Gautama Buddha propagated Buddhism in his whole life, yet it was an insignificant sect in East India till his death. But in a very short period, Buddhism left its motherland and was established easily in other countries and became a very famous world-level religion. Still, many Asian countries are great followers of this religion. Sri Lanka was the first country that amazingly adopted Buddhism in its own way. Because Sri Lankans took their first step When Vijaya, an Indian prince came to Sri Lanka with his 700 followers and made the Aryanization of the Island possible. According to literary evidences, Sri Lankans took the next step of civilization when Thera Mahinda brought message of Lord Buddha. Even the tree of Buddhism sowed by Mahinda is flourishing today in Sri Lanka.

In this way the arrival of Buddhist preacher Thera Mahinda magnificent episode in Sri Lankan history. The impression of Buddhism on the brain of the mass of Sri Lanka at its first glance was really a remarkable episode.

We can see an Indian effect on every aspect of Sri Lanka. Ancient Pali, Buddhist and Sri Lankan texts prove it very well. In which Sri Lanka has been called by different names such as 'Sinhala', 'Lanka', 'Tamraparni' and 'Ratnadipa' etc. Indian epic *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Arthasastra*, and *Rajtarangini* also mention Sri Lanka. Asoka's inscription No. 2 and 13 also describes Sri Lanka by the name of "Tamraparni". Sinhala literature 'Mahavamsa', 'Dipavamsa', 'Divyavadana'. Dathavamsa and Kesadhaturvamsa etc. tell about the life history of Lord Buddha and many related stories are also mentioned.

Although the entrance of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is clearly come with Thera Mahinda with the combined effort of Asoka and his contemporary Sri Lankan king Devanampiyatissa. But according to *Mahavamsa* Buddha had a close relationship with Lanka from very early period. Even historical sources tell that more or less the people of Sri Lanka know about the Buddhism. According to historical descriptions of Sri Lanka, it has been known by different names during the time of three pre- Buddha. "Ojadipa" in Kakusandha's time, 'Varadipa' in the period of Konagamna and 'Mandadipa' in the time of Kassapa. During the period of Buddha Sri Lanka was very well known by the name of Lanka. 1 According to Mahavamsa, Dipavamsa and Samantpasadika Buddha had been visited thrice in Sri Lanka after getting enlightenment.² Sinhalese believes in the coming of Lord Buddha to the Island.³ First, he visited Mahiyangana ninth month after getting enlightenment. His second visit occurred in 5th year after getting his enlightenment when he went to Nagadipa, where two kings named Chulodera and Mahodara were preparing for a war for an adorned throne. According to Fahiyana, 'Buddha went to Nagadipa to bring back Nagas on the right path'.⁴ But after Buddha's interference both of them agreed. Later Buddha sat on the Throne and preached Nagas. His last and final visit was to Kelaniya or Kalyani. Traditions tell after his visit to Kelaniya Buddha went to Samantakuta or Adams-Peak Mountain and imprints the impression of his feet.⁶

Though we have no real evidence of Buddha's three visits. Only *Mahavamsa* and *Lankavatarasutta* are the only base of this belief. Because Pali Tripitak texts have no such evidences of Buddha's visit to South India, yet Sinhaldipa is so far.⁷ According to Aadikaram might be before Mahinda's arrival on the Island some Buddhist missionaries came to Sri Lanka. Perhaps, the writer of these books creates an image of Buddha's arrival.⁸ Virtually, whether this story is true or not, it is not

known but we can say one thing that Buddha was much popular in Sri Lanka before the arrival of Thera Mahinda. Might be these stories helped Mahinda when he came to Sri Lanka to propagate Buddhism. Over and above before Mahinda, a Vijaya named Prince with his 700 followers went to Sri Lanka. Vijaya landed on Lankadipa on the same day when Buddha attained *Parinibbana* (about 483 B.C.).⁹ According to *Mahavamsa*, in Kusinara while Buddha was on his bed, he knew about the descendent of Vijaya on the Island by his mystic power. He sent Devaraja Sakra for their protection on the Island from the Yakkhas and Rakshasas.

Here in India the great king Asoka on becoming a Buddhist convened a synod of monks, it called the Third Buddhist Council, and in Patiliputra in the year 243 B.C. On this pious occasion, Asoka dispatched his missionaries for ecclesiastical missions at least in nine countries. Sri Lanka was one of them. While Asoka was ruling on Magadha his contemporary Sri Lankan king was Tissa. It is not an overstatement that Tissa was one of the close friends of Asoka though they had never visited to each other. The introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is attributed to Asoka's son Mahinda who came to the Island in the middle of the third century B.C. Though this event may be regarded as the official introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. But Buddhism as well as the news of the great activities of the mighty Indian Emperor Asoka appears to have reached the shores of Sri Lanka before the arrival of Mahinda. As we know from the time of King Vijaya there has been a constant communication between the two countries. Asoka's social activities embraced Sri Lanka and his envoys probably visited the Island before Mahinda and it is likely that they spoke to the people of Sri Lanka about Asoka's Buddhist activities.¹⁰ But during the period of Asoka the close connection of both countries increased. Because after the descendent on the throne, Tissa sent an embassy ruthenium to the court of King Asoka. In return, Asoka sent a message of Lord Buddha. The message was—

“I have taken shelter of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, during the reign of Shakya Putra, I am the only devotee, oh! The great in all men! You also fill up your heart with attitude and must take shelter of these three Tri-ratna.¹¹

On their return to Lanka, ambassadors gave the message of Asoka and Tissagot the honor of “Devanampiya Tissa”, which was basically the honorable name of Asoka.¹² While Asoka was the viceroy of Ujjain during the reign of King Bindusara he fell in love with a lady named Devi, a daughter of a merchant and had her a son, Mahinda and a daughter Sanghmitra. Mahinda was of 26 when he became a monk and attain the spiritual condition of an ‘Arhat, which is the final fruit of Buddhism. After taking permission from his father, he went to Sri Lanka as a

propagandist of Buddhism. But a careful study of source material on this event has revealed that the event was a result of negotiations by royal missions from both countries during the previous seven months. The successive missions are given below in the Buddhist era as furnished in Sri Lankan chronicles. The period of seven months falls within two hundred thirty-five and two hundred thirty-six of the Buddhist Era corresponding to the eighteenth year after the coronation of Asoka. 235 B.E. waxing moon of the month of Kartika (oct.) Conclusion of the third Buddhism Council held nine months of Asokaramaya in Patiliputra, presided over by great Thera Moggaliputta Tissa.

First Waning moon of Kattika (Oct.) By this date, the eight missions to other countries had left Patiliputra, but Thera Mahinda who was assigned to Lanka was still awaiting the news of the consecration of the new king Tissa in Sri Lanka, relying possibly on information furnished by Asoka's royal messenger.

On the First Waxing Moon of Maggasira (Nov.) Consecration of Devanampiya Tissa held in Lanka. First Waning moon, Maggasira (Nov.) The mission headed by Ariththa, the prime minister and Bhagineya, the sister's son of Tissa, started from Anuradhapura. Carrying valuable items such as those presented to his unseen friend Asoka.

On the Fifteenth Waning moon (nov.) The Lankan mission arrived in Patiliputra where they met Mahinda who was still awaiting their arrival.

From 235 B.E. first waxing moon of nov. to the fifteenth waning moon of April: for five months, the Sri Lankans Royal missions were staying in Patiliputra as Royal guests of Emperor Asoka. Thera Mahinda was also residing close to Asokaramaya, Patiliputra, Probably, meeting each other daily for five months. 235 B.E. 12th Waxing moon of May : Lankan royal mission came back to Anuradhapura, and handed over the message and the requisites sent by Asoka for the Mauryan consecration of the Sri Lankan king.

236 B.C. 15th waxing moon of May –Tissa performed his second consecration, using requisites and instructions sent by Asoka. The epithet Devanampiya Tissa used by Asoka seems to have been received by the Lankan king probably on the instruction sent by Emperor. By this date, Mahinda missions would have reached Vedisagiri after two weeks' travel from Patiliputra. 236 B.E. 15th waxing moon of June; Mahinda mission from Vedisagiri appeared on Cetiya Tabata, seven miles east of the capital Anuradhapura where they met with Lankan king Tissa and his retinue with fourfold army who probably would have gone to meet the mission on the way.

Mahinda traveled by land route with six companions: Sinhalese tradition says that the missionary wished to visit his mother at Vidisagiri, and hence he preferred the overland route.¹³ Of six companions one was a close relation of his. Suman Samanera was the son of his sister Sanghmittra. According to Mahavamsa, Mahinda and his companion flew in the air with their meditational power and landed on Missaka-pasta. They introduced themselves to Devanampiyatissa,

“Oh! King, we are the missionaries of Dahmmaraja (Buddha) and come over here from Jambudipa to sanctify you,¹⁴

Tissa welcomed Mahinda in his capital Anuradhapura. Mahinda delivered his first speech on *Chulohaspadopoma-sutta* of ‘Mazzima-Nikaya’. The selection of the Sutta for the first sermon was very appropriate as the Sutta gives a clear idea of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha and describes how one is converted to Buddhism and becomes a monk.¹⁵ People were much impressed by the straightforward and uncomplicated rules of the life. And surprisingly at least thirty thousand people adopted Buddhism after the first sermon. Buddhism had such a profound impression on the people’s brains that Tissa constructed Mhamegh Garden and gave it to the monks. He constructed caves in Mihintale for his first retreat.¹⁶ Mahinda spent 26 days in Anuradhapura. During this period things moved speedily and great changes took place. He delivered a number of sermons to convince the people of the value of the new faith. Most of these sermons deal with the Transitoriness of life, and the dreadful nature of samsara, and he taught the noble life is necessary to escape from samsara and to attain Nibbana. His sermons also included the Dhamacakkappavatana- Sutta, which deals with the fundamental teachings of the Buddha.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the king’s junior queen Anula and her companions were much impressed by Mahinda’s sermon and expressed a desire to join the order as nuns. At Mahinda’s suggestion, the king dispatched an emissary under the leadership of Prince Arittha to the court of Asoka to bring the Thri Sanghmittra along with the southern branch of the Bo Tree. A bhikkhuni could teach Buddha’s teaching the other women not a bhikshu. Asoka got ready to send Sanghmittra. Nor did she come to Sri Lanka empty-handed, for she brought with her a cutting of the famed Bo tree of Gaya under which Buddha had attained Buddhahood and sent it with Sanghmittra. She was perhaps the first woman missionary in world history to leave her native land in order to propagate her faith in foreign countries.¹⁸

Besides it, Mahinda suggested to Devanampiya Tissa the idea of building Cetiya to enshrine the relics of the Buddha. Suman Samanera obtained the

responsibility to bring the right collarbone of Buddha from his grandfather Asoka. Besides it, a large number of other bone relics together with the alms bowl (patra-dhatu) of the Buddha come into the Island. The collarbone of the Buddha was enshrined in the Thuparama Dagaba, which thus became the first Cetiya to be built in Sri Lanka.¹⁹ When Sanghmitra arrived with the branch of Bo-tree, Anula and her companions entered the order of nuns. Sanghmitra and her companions' nuns were received with great honor in Sri Lanka.

Sanghmitra lived in Sri Lanka whole her life and died at the age of seventy-nine after one year of Mahinda. The branch of the Bodhi tree was established in Mahamegh Garden. The planting of the Bo tree was performed with a great ceremony in which people from all parts of the Island participated. It has been said Asoka himself had sent a large number of families from India to attend and thus; India was also represented in a big way. The branch miraculously served itself from the parent tree now it is still existed as the oldest authenticated tree in the world.²⁰

One day in his old age Devanampiyatissa asked to Thera Mahinda, "Is the tree of Buddhism has been sowed on the Island, Mahinda replied though the tree has been sowed but its roots only when spread while a men of this land will study Vinaya and ecclesiastical books. Then Ariththa took the responsibility for this great work and did a thorough study of the Buddhist literature. Virtually, in place of any foreigner, learning by a man of their own land left a great effect on the mind of the mob and the people showed their great interest in the adaptation of Buddhism.²¹

In this way, many relics of Buddha, which amazingly came from India through the effort of Mahinda, played a great role between the two countries. The bringing of the branch of the Bo tree, the relics of the Buddha along with the alms bowl further strengthened the great cultural links between India and Sri Lanka. The planting of the Bo tree was symbol of the establishment of Buddhism and Buddhist culture in the Island. This also served as an inspiration to the people who had recently embraced Buddhism. The relics of the Buddha were regarded as representing the Buddha himself and present in it and their enshrinement was as good as the Buddha's residence in Sri Lanka.

Hence, the arrival of Thera Mahinda in Sri Lanka 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 to the Island along with monasteries and Cetiya. He can be regarded

as the father of Sinhalese literature. Buddhaghosa says, that ‘Mahinda brought to the Island the commentaries of the Tripitaka and put them in the Sinhalese for the benefit of the people’. He thus made Sinhalese a literary language. It is probable that he introduced the Asokan alphabet as well. Probably, for this reason, Missionaries felt less problem with propaganda of the Buddhism on the Island.

Thus, Mahendra founded the order of monks and Sanghmitra that nuns in Sri Lanka and both are revered on the Island as the founder of the Buddhist Church of Sri Lanka. Both brother and sister labored ceaselessly for the propagation of the faith on the Island and adopted it as their own land. Mahendra after establishing the Church on a firm basis, passed away during the sixteenth annual retreat after his ordination, which would mean that he was about 80 years of age at the time of his death.²² When Mahinda returned from Anuradhapura there were 62 monks in the capital. Which was a great success maybe there was some exaggeration but one thing is clear that the wonderful success of Buddhism on the Island had been possible by the royal coming of the Thera Mahinda ²³

In a nutshell, we can say that he was a royal ambassador. During the 48 years of work of Mahinda in Sri Lanka, Buddhism was firmly established on the Island and spread into most parts of the country. He brought Buddhism to the Island in its real form especially when Buddhism was declining in India.

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