



A study of Emperor Ashoka, Kalinga war and spread of Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

Ashoka converted his foreign policy from expansionism to that of coexistence and peace with his neighbours — the avoidance of additional conquests making his empire easier to administer. In keeping with his Buddhism he announced that he was determined to ensure the safety, peace of mind and happiness of all “animate beings” in his realm. He announced that he would now strive for conquest only in matters of the human spirit and the spread of “right conduct” among people. And he warned other powers that he was not only compassionate but also powerful. Ashoka’s wish for peace was undisturbed by famines or natural disasters. His rule did not suffer from the onslaught of any great migration. And during his reign, no neighboring kings tried to take some of his territory — perhaps because these kings were accustomed to fearing the Maurya monarchs and thinking them strong. The resulting peace helped extend economic prosperity. Ashoka relaxed the harsher laws of his grandfather, Chandragupta. He gave up the kingly pastime of hunting game, and in its place he went on religious pilgrimages. He began supporting philanthropies. He proselytized for Buddhism, advocating non-violence, vegetarianism, charity and tenderness to all living things.

INTRODUCTION

The second Mauryan emperor, Bindusara, ruled for twenty-five years. He warred occasionally, reinforcing his nominal authority within India, and he acquired the title “Slayer of Enemies.” Then in the year 273 BCE, he was succeeded by his son Ashoka, who in his first eight years of rule did what was expected of him: he looked after the affairs of state and extended his rule where he could. Around the year 260 Ashoka fought great battles and imposed his rule on people southward along the eastern coast of India — an area called Kalinga. The sufferings created by the war disturbed Ashoka. He found relief in Buddhism and became an emperor with values that differed from those of his father, grandfather and others. He was a Buddhist lay member and went on a 256-day pilgrimage to Buddhist holy places in northern India. Buddhism benefited from the association with state power that Hinduism had enjoyed and that Christianity would enjoy under Constantine the Great.

Like Jeroboam and other devout kings, Ashoka was no

revolutionary. Rather than India changing politically, Buddhism was changing. In the years to come, Ashoka mixed his Buddhism with material concerns that served the Buddha’s original desire to see suffering among people mitigated: Ashoka had wells dug, irrigation canals and roads constructed. He had rest houses built along roads, hospitals built, public gardens planted and medicinal herbs grown. But Ashoka maintained his army, and he maintained the secret police and network of spies that he had inherited as a part of his extensive and powerful bureaucracy. He kept his hold over Kalinga, and he did not allow the thousands of people abducted from Kalinga to return there. He announced his intention to “look kindly” upon all his subjects, as was common among kings, and he offered the people of Kalinga a victor’s conciliation, erecting a monument in Kalinga which read:

All men are my children, and I, the king, forgive what can be forgiven.

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