

POSON, AND ITS MEANING TODAY

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It was on the Full Moon Day of Poson 247 B.C. that Mahinda Thero, son of King Dharmasoka of India, introduced Buddhism to Ceylon. Buddhism gave the people of this country a new way of life, a new attitude and a new culture. Down the ages the Sinhalese Buddhists have cherished it as the dominant conviction of the meaning of reality and as the principle, which animated all their being and all their strivings.

So it has come to pass that despite all wars, invasions and persecutions and despite all ravages of time the teaching of the Buddha has become the Great heritage of Sri Lanka, to give the people necessary strength and resilience to face the problems of a changing world firm in the belief that, *the Path of Salvation lies not in the victory but as Sri Krishna tells Arjuna, in the acceptance of battle. Not tame and gentle bliss, but disaster heroically encountered, is man's true happy ending.*

We know that King Asoka filled with remorse and pity and the horrors of war became a convert to Buddhism and embarked on a world-wide campaign to establish peace and concord on earth by spreading the Dhamma both within and without India. He set up Rock and Pillar Edicts to keep the Dhamma ever before the minds of his people. Of these, Rock Edict No.5 proclaimed that *not to injure living beings is good*. Rock Edict No.11 proclaimed, among other things that *"People perform rites or ceremonies for luck, corrupt and worthless ceremonies."*

Now, there is a lucky ceremony that may be performed, right conduct towards slaves and servants. These proclamations of King Asoka for the establishment of peace and concord have no doubt become an integral part of the living tradition of Sinhalese Buddhists and are in full accord with the best thought of the modern world. Most probably, it is to Asoka's emissaries that Ernest Renan refers in the following passage of his book *The Life of Jesus*, page 70:

Perhaps, some of those wandering Buddhist monks who overran the world, preaching by their actions and converting people who knew not their language, might have turned their steps towards Judea, as they certainly did towards Syria and Babylon.

IMPRESSION

But it cannot be said of the people of Ceylon that they knew not the language of Mahinda Thero and his companions. For this reason, Asoka's emissaries to Ceylon produced a lasting impression on the minds of its people.

King Asoka undertook his mission through loving kindness. The Middle Way,

which comprises Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, has all its members except the first animated by loving-kindness. The first member, Right View, gives insight into the reality of life. The practice of loving-kindness takes different forms.

Firstly, Edict 12 highlights tolerance. It is undeniable that from time immemorial Sinhalese Buddhists have practised tolerance. They have allowed Hindu shrines to be erected on their temple premises. They have given sanctuary to the Roman Catholics persecuted by the Dutch in places like Wahacotte and Galigamuwa and to the Moorish traders persecuted by the Portuguese in places like Batticaloa. Tolerance is closely interwoven into the very texture of their being. Unfortunately, since the advent of the foreign conquerors their tolerance has been taken unfair advantage of for purposes of exploitation.

Secondly, the British Medical Journal 22nd September 1928 writes:

It is to Gautama and His followers that we owe, apparently, the hospital idea. Buddhist hospitals in India existed before the invasion of Alexander, which moreover, touched only the northern part of that country.

The Buddha, when He found that one of the Bhikkhus had dysentery, said: *Whoever, O Bhikkhus, would tend me, he should tend the sick.* (Vinaya 1, 302)

Asoka's Rock Edit 11 records: *Medical practitioners' medicines and surgeries are provided in various parts of the Empire.*

The Revolt in the Temple page 63, says: *Buddhadasa established hospitals throughout the Kingdom, one to every ten villages, and appointed to them physicians who received as payment one-twentieth of the produce of cultivated fields.*

Thirdly, the Buddha's formula of Dependent Origination (paṭicca-samuppāda) sets out Ignorance (avijjā) as a deadly sin, which right understanding alone can cure. Accordingly, education has become the supreme concern of Sinhalese Buddhists and saint and scholar have received their deepest reverence. The present policy of free education designed to provide equality of opportunity is consistent with this heritage.

DEMOCRATIC

Fourthly the importance attached to understanding establishes the democratic way as a common method of functioning in the community. The Marquis of Zetland has referred to early Buddhist Assemblies thus:

And it may come as a surprise to many to learn that in the Assemblies of the Buddhists in India two thousand or more years ago are to be found the rudiments of our own parliamentary practice of the present day. The dignity of the Assembly was preserved by the appointment of a special

officer, the embryo of Mr. Speaker in the House of Commons. A member initiating business did so in the form of a motion, which was then open to discussion. In some cases this was done once only in others three times, thus anticipating the practice of Parliament in requiring that a Bill be read a third time before it becomes law. If discussion disclosed a difference of opinion the matter was decided by the vote of the majority, the voting being by ballot. (Nehru, The Discovery of India, Page 297).

To the foregoing paragraph may be added the Buddha's exhortation to Kalamas:

Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon rumour, nor upon what is in scripture, nor upon surmise, nor upon an axiom, nor upon specious reasoning, nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over, nor upon another's seeming ability, nor upon the consideration The Monk is our teacher. Kalamas, when you yourselves know, these things are good, these things are not blameable, these things are praised by the wise, undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness, enter on and abide in them.

The Buddhist tradition of compassion outlined here has invariably had a profound effect on the daily life of the Sinhalese.

TESTIMONY

This is borne out by foreign visitors over the centuries. John de Marigolli, who visited the island in 1349 on his way back from the Court of the Grand Khan of Cathay (China), where he had been sent as an emissary by Pope Benedict XII, wrote: *They have houses of palm leaves scattered up and down in the woods, and full of property and yet they live without the slightest fear of thieves unless perchance there come vagabonds from foreign parts.*

Father Queyroz (1634) wrote: *We must admire some of their moral customs, which may well be an example to us, for they have such a horror of theft (probably because of some great punishment which had preceded) that in the doors of their houses they use no locks.*

Robert Knox (1681), who lived in the Kandyan Kingdom for over 20 years, said: *Drunkenness they do greatly abhor, neither are there many that do give themselves to it.*

The natural born Sinhalese so much abhors thievery that I never know any practice it. There is no difference between the ability and speech of a countryman and a courtier. In their speech the people are bold without sheepish shame-facedness, and yet no more confidence than is becoming.

Similar observations are made by Heydt, a German who lived in Ceylon from 1734 to 1737. He says: *The Sinhalese are a very courteous folk, experienced in all things, and very skilled in all sorts of work. The most excellent thing*

about them is that they have a great loathing of drunkenness, and that one sees among the very few who give themselves to it, except the most degraded of them. And in general they are very temperate, and it is not hard to consort with them, and one has been taught a little of their customs, one can get on well with them.

CATASTROPHE

At last, there came a national catastrophe to shatter the moral qualities and the exceptional honesty of the Sinhalese.

The Ceylon Medical Students' Journal, 1963-64 contains an article by Prof. K. Rajasuriya on the menace of Alcohol. He cites Paul Pieris, the historian, to prove that the drink habit was introduced by the Portuguese. *The liquor of the palm trees was seized by them and taken over at their own valuation to be converted into arrack.* Dr Rajasuriya states that later on the Portuguese who were settled in the country distilled arrack and kept taverns.

Then he quotes D'oyley to prove that under later Kandyan Kings the manufacture of arrack was punishable as an offence. Next he quotes Knox to prove that the Dutch who followed the Portuguese in the maritime provinces also *love drink and practice their proper vice in this country.*

Thereupon the article proceeds to quote Thomas Skinner in order to show how alcohol was introduced among the teetotal population. This is what he says: *Renters purchase from Government the monopoly of the taverns of a district, they are established in every district, almost in every village of any size throughout the interior, often to the great annoyance of the inhabitants, and in opposition to the Headmen. To give the people a taste for the use of spirits it is often at first necessary to distribute it gratuitously, the tavern-keepers well knowing that with the use, the abuse of the indulgence follows as a certainty.*

DECAY

I have known districts of the population of which, some years ago, not one in a hundred could be induced to taste spirits, where drunkenness now prevails to such an extent that villagers have been known to pawn their crops upon the ground to tavern keepers for arrack. We know the train of evils which are the inevitable consequences of intemperance in the most highly civilized societies: but deprive the poor uncivilized, uneducated native of his great redeeming virtue of sobriety, and you cast him adrift at once, an unresisting victim to all the vices of humanity.

The article concludes: *With the maritime provinces as its main fount the vice of alcoholism has penetrated into the interior of the country and illicit distillation of liquor has become almost a cottage industry in the villages, the police force and Excise Department notwithstanding.*

Against this background of moral decay, we see:

1. Burning with the fire of lust
2. Burning with the fire of hate
3. Burning with the fire of delusion

The significance of Poson is that we must regain what we have lost. The prevalent moral decay should first be arrested so as to prepare the ground for the settlement of other issues. It must be clearly understood that the present crisis is more a moral and spiritual crisis than an economic one.