CELEBRATING BUDDHISM’S ADVENT THIS POSON AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO MENTAL HEALTH

Posted on

Mihintale, known as the cradle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is where a legendary meeting created history. On the Full Moon Poson Poya day over two millennia ago, Arahat Mahinda and his disciplines arrived in Mihintale, bringing the word of the Buddha to the nation of Sri Lanka thus, changing the course of the history of the country.

The sacred day of Vesak that marks the birth of the Buddha is a universal festival of reflection. This celebration in May is followed by another significant commemoration in June on Poson Poya, which happens to be an extremely important day of remembrance unique to Sri Lankans, a day in history that transformed the future course of this country when Arahat Mahinda, an emissary of Emperor Ashoka of India, descended upon this land to introduce Buddhism – a

rational and systematic philosophy that propounded a way of life marked by non-violence and peace; a new way of life and a teaching that trained the mind to a new level of existence. The arrival of Arahat Mahinda, then, marked the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of a nation of people, which, as we mark Poson, becomes even more significant as we live in a challenging time that calls us to follow the path of the Dhamma to help us cope with sickness and suffering and in effect strengthen our religiosity. This important episode in the history of our country has its origins in India, then well-known as Dambadiva, which was the Buddha’s country of birth. The most plausible reason for Emperor Ashoka to embark on this historical mission was supposedly the friendship that he had with Devanam Piyatissa, who was the reigning monarch of the island (307-267 BC). And it was this acquaintance that led to Ashoka sending his son Mahinda, on this important missionary journey to the country, followed by his daughter, Sangamitta Theri, who also arrived in Sri Lanka to carry out missionary work.

Emperor Ashoka’s (277-236 BC) status and reputation at that point in time was indeed that of a supreme and unconquerable leader, who was Sovereign of an empire that encompassed a vast territory of land that was made up of great rivers like the Yamuna, the Ganges, Sarabhu, Achirawathi and Mahee, and 16 states – Anga, Magadha, Kashi, Kosala, Vajji, Malla, Chethi, Vatchcha, Kuru, Panchala, Matchcha, Soorasena, Assaka, Avanthi, Gandhara and Kamboja. Ashoka’s conquest of Kalinga proved to be the turning point in his life. Although Ashoka’s army succeeded in capturing and annexing Kalinga, the great devastation that his actions brought about, where thousands of soldiers on both sides were killed, while multitudes of people were plunged into suffering by the destruction and the fallout of the war, was a moment of reckoning for the monarch who felt great remorse. Thus, Ashoka’s Dhamma was inscribed on rocks and pillars, which instructed officials to read his message to the people. One such edict is a testament to his transformation; “One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died. After the Kalingas had been conquered, the king felt deep remorse and determined to be a righteous ruler.”

His Dhamma edicts propounded his principles of Buddhism in practice: “All religious people should live with peace and harmony.”

“There is no better work than promoting the welfare of all the people And that my sons, grandsons and great-grandsons might act in conformity with it for the welfare of the world.”

“Along roads I have had banyan trees planted so that they can give shade to animals and men, and I have had mango groves planted. I have had wells dug, rest-houses built, and in various places, I have had watering-places made for the use of animals and men.”

“As human being live, enjoying peace of mind and collective protection, self-control and purity of heart, I desire for the animals of the jungle in my kingdom also to enjoy equal survival” (Bauddhalokaya, Siri Seevali Thero, Page 185/186).

The advent of Buddhism to the island on a Poson Poya day is a good time to reflect on Ashoka’s conversion, an all-powerful ruler, who was almost invincible at the zenith of his conquests, but went on to become an exemplary leader to all, but more so a restored ruler to be imitated by leaders to come, a model to the corrupt and foul leaders of today presiding over the nations of the world. The point is that Ashoka’s Dhamma based on the Buddha’s teachings were presented in such a way that it resonated among all religions.

Ashoka’s brutality was such that in time he came to be known as Chandashoka, but since his conversion, which happened as he concurred with the reality of his actions as death and suffering engulfed a multitude, his good deeds earned him the name Dharmashoka, as he renounced violence and chose to serve by example.

Following his education under his spiritual teacher – Moggaliputta Thera, Ashoka embarked on a mission to propagate the Dhamma that he was instructed into. For this purpose, he sought the assistance of the Buddhist clergy. And accordingly he successfully initiated missionary journeys into South India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Central and West Asia, Egypt, Macedonia, East Africa and Greece. His outreach was territorially vast; Central Asia spanned from the Caspian Sea in the West to China and Mongolia in the East and from Afghanistan and Iran in the South to comprise countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. West Asia was equally enormous with Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cyrus, Gaza, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, SaudiArabia, Syria, Turkey, the UAE, the West Bank, and Yemen belonging to this region.

Today, Buddhism remains in just a few of these countries that received the great missionary input of Ashoka. War and violence have gripped some of these countries that had the good fortune of receiving the Dhamma; for instance, more than 300 people have lost their lives as fighting erupted in the Gaza region, accompanied by the massive destruction to buildings and property. All this is unfolding before our eyes as the world battles a war of its own making – that of COVID-19, gripping the people with immense fear and uncertainty.

Ashoka's missionary undertakings are important to us because he chose none other than his son Mahinda, mentored by the great Moggaliputta Thera to introduce Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Accompanied by four Arahats, namely, Ittiya, Uthiya, Sambala, Baddhasala and Sumana Samanera, and a laymen Bhanduka, the entourage arrived at a place called Ambasthala, today, known as Mihintale, where they met with King Devanam Piyatissa. The exchange that followed between Arahat Mahinda and the king, famously described as the 'mango question' was in fact the former's strategy to assess the king's intelligence and capacity to understand. Satisfied with the king's intelligence, Arahat Mahinda went onto preach the Dhamma to the monarch. At a time when we are all gripped by a global pandemic, his sermon that day can be described (from a psychological perspective) as being therapeutic to all human beings, irrespective of their beliefs and religions. His teachings are universal as they instruct us on tuning our minds towards positive thoughts. The mind and its thoughts have no religion or race, hence Arahat Mahinda and his companions' sermon from the mountain that day remains relevant to uplift one's mind to a state of serenity. His teaching on that first day of Poson should transcend beyond observing the significance of the day only, to increase our knowledge of the Dharmaya, while producing spiritual development that would lead to a state of increased resistance to face up to diseases. For this reason it will be of immense benefit to engage in a brief analysis of the Chullahaththi Padopama Suthraya preached by the Arahats to the king and his followers on that Poson Poya day.

"Seyyathãpi ãvuso yãni kãneethi jangalãnang pãnang padajãnãni, sabbãni thãni hatthi padé samõdãnang gacchati"

"Friends, just as the footprints of all legged animals are encompassed by the footprint of the elephant, and the elephant's footprint is reckoned the foremost among them in terms of size; in the same way, all skillful qualities (kusala) are gathered under the four
noble truths. And what is the noble truth of suffering? Birth is suffering, aging is

suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair are suffering; not getting what is wanted is suffering.”

Today, as the world deals with the dreadful effects of COVID-19, the four noble truths related to suffering become relevant as we witness images of burning bodies and the lamentations of the people; hunger, loss of employment and education; people forced to live amidst travel restrictions; cease pleasurable activities as before; and witnessing our loved ones becoming diseased. It is unprecedented and in contrast to what we have been used to, as we are ordered to maintain distance, thereby limiting the freedom to conduct ourselves without restraint, while having to protect ourselves with a mask and washing of hands, which are all accompanied by a constant fear of disease and death.

Our current circumstances is a clear demonstration of the fact that nothing in this world exists the way we desire them to be. This in turn has led to a sense of hopelessness, described as ‘Ichchabangathwaya’ or frustration; and the outcome of this state of mind, irrespective of whether it is desired or not, is grief, constant fear and mental stress leading to psychosomatic disorders such as anxiety, and depression.

So, what should we do about this? First, it is crucial that we come to a true understanding of the prevailing situation. It is important to accept the fact that what is happening around us is part of human existence, which cannot be avoided, with adversity and suffering being common to all living creatures. Psychology teaches that we can overcome suffering by reflecting on it, non judgementally; at the same time, it is important to meditate on the profoundness of suffering in human life based on the Dhamma teachings of the Lord Buddha. In all this, it is imperative to discover the source of suffering. Further, the elements of the human makeup – earth, water, fire and air (Patavi, Apo, Thejo and Vayo), are what the natural world is also made up of, and hence if one element is disturbed it affects the others in the system; they are constantly evolving in the universe with a causal effect on the world and on nature. Therefore, it is important to realize that if our body is made of these constantly changing elements, then it is also prone to change, disease and decay and will never remain the way we desire it to be. Then, the attitude that we should espouse is to accept the fact that nothing in this world is in our control, and everything is prone to change and that everything is temporary. If so, why should a

human being be sad in life? The path to a peaceful and happy life rests with our attitude to life. It is a choice that we make to embrace a way of life lived either according to the Dhamma (or a religion) or according to psychological principles or by simply attuning our minds to adapt to our current circumstances, which will help us to live a peaceful life without worry as this would keep us safe from the risk of being diseased mentally and physically.

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