

Poson Poya Day: The Great Day that Changed Sri Lankan Society

Posted on



The King listens to the sermon by Mahā Mahinda Thero.

Like many other countries, Sri Lanka was also an undeveloped and uncivilized country in the East, situated in the Indian Ocean, many centuries ago. Proving that, we can see indigenous people in some countries, as well as in Sri Lanka, up to this date. The advent of Buddhism, on the other hand, suddenly changed Sri Lankan society during the period of King Dēvānam Piyatissa. That is none other than the arrival of the Most Venerable Mahā Mahinda Thero.

The arrival of Arahāt Mahinda, then, marked the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of a nation of people, which we observe on Poson Pōya Day. It has become even more significant as we live in a challenging time that calls us to follow the path of the Dharma to help us cope with social and mental problems and suffering. According to the history of Sri Lanka, Venerable Mahinda was sent to the Island by King Dharmāshōka, the Greatest in India, during 277-236 B.C. Emperor Ashoka's status and reputation were that of a supreme and unconquerable leader sovereign of an empire encompassing a vast territory of India. This consisted of five great rivers (Panca Mahā Gangā) named the Yamuna, the Ganges, Sarabhu, the Achirawathi, and the Mahi, and 16 states named Anga, Magadha, Kāsi, Kōsala, Vajji, Malla, and Chethi.

If you look at his character a little back, it is very different from Dharmāshōka. Before conquering those 16 states, he was named Chandhāshoka (cruel Ashōka) though his real name was Ashōka, but after capturing the Kālinga, his character changed. Although Ashok's army succeeded in capturing and annexing the Kālinga, great devastation happened, where thousands of soldiers on both sides were killed, and multitudes of people were plunged into suffering by the war's destruction and fallout. This was a moment of shock for the monarch, who felt great remorse. After listening to the Dhamma, a novice Buddhist monk preached, the King converted to Buddhism. But his Dhamma was fair to all religions. So, after this, he was known as the Dharmāshōka, and we can see it in his Dharma inscribed on rocks and pillars as follows.

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“In the 3rd century B.C.E., several ambitious people built the expansive Mauryan empire. King Ashōka was troubled by what he saw with wartime destruction. He was a leader who had sent out his armies to kill and conquer, but he saw the result of war as destructive. He saw what happened to people when they were being conquered and afterward, so he converted himself to Buddhism, adopted a code of non-violence, renounced all warfare, and adopted Buddhist principles into his rule. He was the reason why Buddhism spread worldwide and was highly accepted. Why Kings of the caliber of Dharmashōka are rare today? Anyway, his conversion to Buddhism is essential to us; his conversion to Dharma also introduced Buddhism to our country. Arahāt Mahinda thero preached the Dhamma to King Devanampiyatissa. Having understood that Dhamma by an intelligent and wise king adopted Buddhism.



Ashoka, The Great King

His universal teachings instruct us to tune our minds toward positive thoughts. The mind and its thoughts have no religion or race; hence Arahat Mahinda's sermon from the Mihintala mountain that day remains the philosophy relevant to uplifting one's mind to a state of serenity. His teaching on Poson Day should transcend beyond observing the day's significance only and increase our knowledge of Dharma. Because, without Dharma, one cannot reach the top of the knowledge or the state of transcendent. For this reason, it will be of immense benefit to engage in a brief analysis of the Chullahatthi Padōpama Sūtra preached by the Arahat Mahinda to the King and his followers on that Poson Pōya Day, Anuradhapura, in Sri Lanka. It is stated in Pāli as:

“Seyyathāpi āvuso, yāni kānīti jangalānang pānang padajānāni, sabbāni thāni hatthi padé samōdhānang gacchti”.

“Friends, just as the footprints of all legged animals are encompassed by the footprints 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 (Kusāḷa) are gathered under the four noble truths. And what is the noble truth of suffering?

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

Our current circumstances are a clear demonstration of the fact that nothing in this world exists the way we desire them to be. This has led to a sense of hopelessness, described as 'Icchābhanga' or psychologically, frustration; and the outcome of this state of mind, irrespective of whether it is desired or not, is grief. So, what should we do about this? First, we must come to a proper understanding of the prevailing situation. It is essential to accept that what is happening around us is part of human existence, which cannot be avoided, with adversity and suffering common to all living creatures. Psychology teaches that we can overcome suffering by reflecting on it non-judgmentally; at the same time, it is vital to meditate on the profoundness of suffering in human life based on the Dharma teachings of The Lord Buddha. In all this, it is essential to discover the source of suffering.

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