Sanghamitta Theri Tells Her Story

By Susan Pembroke

*(**Suggestions on using this article:** This article makes creative use of the known history as well as legends about Sanghamitta Theri, her father, and other key figures. The intent is to explore the moral lessons which still apply and continue to inspire. In a group setting, we suggest sitting in a circle and passing the pages from person to person, to be read aloud. A facilitator can use the questions at the end to initiate a discussion about Sanghamitta Theri, her times as well as ours.)*

My name is Sanghamitta Theri, meaning "friend of the Sangha." I don't think a more fitting name could have been selected for me. Every time someone addressed me, I was reminded of my life's mission. I was born to bring the Bhikkhuni Sangha, as well as a sapling from the bodhi tree and the Dhamma it symbolized, to Lanka, a teardrop-shaped island just off the coast of the subcontinent. In journeying there in the third century B.C.E., I preserved the Bhikkhuni Sangha.

I also imported the Buddhist values of my father, Emperor Asoka, who moved from wars of conquest to self-conquest, from aggression to peaceful coexistence with neighboring city-states. He envisioned an ideal and compassionate society, one that cared for the needs of its people and fostered learning, commerce, agriculture, health, and harmony. He forbade capital punishment. He urged religious tolerance and non-harming, and he even banned the hunting of animals for sport.

As my first Dhamma teacher, my Buddhist mother also played a crucial role in what I became. But my story, as you will see, is inextricably tied to my father's actions—the Emperor of Emperors—and their repercussions. He sent nine delegations to far-flung regions to spread the Dhamma. My brother, Mahinda, and I headed one such delegation as his emissaries in Lanka. I may have been the first woman ambassador in the world. My father's trust in me reveals how much respect and confidence he had in women, something revolutionary for the time. All of the foreign missions were charged with actualizing the highest principles of the Dhamma.

But you say I am ignoring the anguish of the hundreds of thousands killed or injured during his drive to expand his empire. Just think of all of those who died at the battle of Kalinga, you say. How many families were devastated by the deaths of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons in that battle? How can I praise this cruel monster? Wasn't he the most feared and detested of rulers? Wasn't he called Candasoka, Asoka the Fierce? Didn't your grandfather, King Bindusara, want your father's brother Sushim to succeed him, but your father ignored his own father's wishes and instead conspire with high-ranking officials to take over your grandfather's empire? Your father eliminated the legitimate heir to the throne by tricking him into entering a pit of live coals. Your father went on to have all of your uncles killed, their heirs, and anyone else who might stop him.

Still singing his praises, Sanghamitta, you ask me? How convenient for him to convert to the Buddha's teachings and take on the title of Dhammasoka, Asoka of the Dhamma, and pile up good deeds to undo his horrifying kamma? He was no fool. He knew what awaited him. How many monasteries and stupas did he construct? Eighty-four thousand? Who wouldn't try to buy better kamma after all he did? Still not convinced, Sanghamitta, that your father was a frightened, cowardly hypocrite who was capable of immense brutality? After all, didn't he commission the creation of one of the worst torture devices imagined? We called it hell on earth for a reason. Didn't he kill his entire harem when he learned these young women had cut off the flowers and limbs of a beautiful Asoka tree, their actions revealing how they felt about him. He flew into a rage and had these young women burned, deaf to their pleas for mercy. Admit that his pride and need for total subjugation were everything, Sanghamitta. All had to bow down to him or risk their very existence.

All I can say to you and to those who denounce my father is that I did not know that monster. My father was loving and tender with my brother and me. He wanted us close to him and took us with him to the capitol Pāṭaliputta when he fought for control of the Mauryan Empire. He grew up in a world of assassins, revolts, and invasions. His harsh reprisals in the early years of his reign may have been intended to send a message: cross me at your own peril. It was what kings did at the time, or needed to do, or so he thought when he first took power, before he understood the Dhamma. Over time, he formulated another way of leading.

Many times he spoke of the war at Kalinga, the thousands of images of death forever etched in his mind, images that haunted him throughout his life. Kalinga was also a lesson to my father about the futility of aggression. Though the entire Kalinga state was annexed to the Mauryan Empire, in truth, my father only controlled a narrow strip along the coast, with strife in the rest of the country a frequent reminder to him of what hostility breeds. Kalinga was the worst and bloodiest battle for the great Mauryan Empire. It was also my father's last war. As he stepped over corpses, as he passed the weeping widows and orphans, he asked himself, is this what victory looks like? So many dying, so many maimed, or starving. He learned and he changed. I say: from this awful tragedy, much good came.

I know firsthand that he was transformed by what he witnessed at Kalinga and became determined to leave a legacy of peace and prosperity as well as model a different way of ruling. If my father had not felt tremendous guilt, if Kalinga had never happened, it is very possible I would not have been sent to establish a Bhikkhuni Sangha in the isle of Lanka. If I and my eleven bhikkhuni sisters had not gone to the island nation, the Bhikkhuni Sangha would have died out following the repeated wars and invasions from the north much later.

We brought the Bhikkhuni Sangha to the Sinhalese, we brought a cutting of the sacred bodhi tree, we brought the Dhamma to the women. Because of us, in 429 C.E. it was possible for Bhikkhuni Devasara, a Sri Lankan nun to take a cutting from the Sri Lankan tree and travel to China with a group of bhikkhunis to establish a Bhikkhuni Sangha there. These Sri Lankan bhikkhunis gave higher ordination to more than 300 Chinese nuns at a monastery in Nanjing. A second group followed in 433 C.E. Thousands of years after my death, bhikkhunis will trace their lineage from me, to Lanka, and then to China, and then south from there again. In history's interesting twists, the revival of the Sinhalese Bhikkhuni Sangha thousands of years after I stepped onto its shores is a result of brave Lankan bhikkhunis making the dangerous trip north to China.

What people may not know is that long ago, the people of Kalinga and Lanka shared a very similar language and script. Many were kin, their ties stretching far back in time. About eighty years before my father invaded Kalinga, these seafaring, proud, and industrious people had won back their freedom from the Magadha Empire, only to suffer a much worst fate under my father. Many Kalingans fled to the island nation. If my father had not felt so much guilt about what he put the Kalingans through, he may not have felt the need to bring the Dhamma to the Lankan people, many of whom suffered under his hand at Kalinga or had family and friends who had lost their lives or all they had owned, so sacked and devastated was Kalinga.

One of the best ways to guarantee the Lankans remained a peace-loving people was to plant the Dhamma in their country. Going to Lanka was a large-scale, well-thought-out diplomatic effort. Being visionary as well as highly practical, my father had insisted that a wide range of craftsmen and artisans accompanied us in our journey. My father was sensible enough to know that people of Lanka needed more than spiritual ideals. They needed prosperity. Unless the people of Lanka flourished economically—the reason for the many tradesmen we brought—amity between our people would not last. Ensuring that Lanka became a peaceful extension of the Mauryan Empire accomplished multiple goals for my father: stability, harmony, trade to benefit all, as well as a way for my father to atone for his violence.

My brother and I were well aware of all of this. Raised in an imperial world, we were trained in diplomacy. We were also well trained in the Dhamma. Having memorized the suttas, my learned brother, Mahinda, was chosen to go to Lanka, as well as my son, Sumana. The people of Lanka so loved the Dhamma that Mahinda taught that hundreds converted. Many men went forth into the homeless life and the Bhikkhu Order established there.

But King Tissa's sister-in-law, the Princess Anula, and her retinue of 500 women also loved the Dhamma and wished to establish a bhikkhuni order. The Vinaya requires bhikkhunis to ordain bhikkhunis, so I was asked to come months later. My father, the Emperor of Emperors, King Asoka, wept, knowing he would never see any of us again. Yet he allowed me to travel with 200 people to Lanka. Does this sound like some last-minute capitulation by a father who could not say no to a daughter he loved?

Future historians would also note that of the hundreds who accompanied me, most of the high-ranking members of the delegation were my mother's relatives. Some scholars would later speculate that another reason my father sent an envoy to the island nation was to create a haven for my mother's clan from the confrontations between them and my father's clan. Before my brother left, he spent the better part of a year visiting my mother at Vedisa as well as meditating at a monastery she had constructed nearby at Sanchi. Do people think I was not a part of the many plans and conversations that took place, that my going to Lanka was not anticipated from the very beginning?

I am overdue in telling you about my Buddhist mother, who was the daughter of a Vedisa merchant. My father had stopped at my maternal grandfather's house on his way to Ujjayinī, where he was going to assume the position as the Prince Viceroy. My parents met and fell in love. They had my brother, and then two years later I was born. My mother was my first Dhamma teacher and had enormous influence on me as well as on my brother and father. From the same clan as the Buddha, my mother's Sākyan family had escaped the destruction of Kapilavatthu by Viḍūḍabha, who had invaded and massacred the Sākyas and annexed their territory to Kosala. The son of King Pasenadi, Viḍūḍabha overthrew his father and took revenge on the Sākyans for tricking his father into marrying the daughter of a slave.

Children, of course, are not privy to adult conversations or what transpires between their parents. I do know my father was determined to seize power and become the next Mauryan Emperor. I cannot imagine my mother would have encouraged my father to engage in wars of succession, especially considering how her family had been deeply scarred by violence and destruction perpetrated by Viḍūḍabha, really traumatized by the massive loss of life and annihilation of their city-state. If anything, she would have begged my father to do no harm. She may well have known what a murderous rampage my father was about to embark on and wanted nothing to do with it, which is why she did not accompany him to the capitol.

It was a time of upheaval and danger. Four years later, at my father's coronation, after he had eliminated all who stood in his way of becoming the next Mauryan ruler, the queen at his side was not my mother, but Asandhimitta. Knowing my mother as I do, I cannot conceive of her taking any joy in ascending to a throne won through so much sorrow and loss of life.

After my father became emperor, I married Aggribrahma in my early teens and we had our son, Sumana, who later became a monk and envoy for my father as well. My husband felt called to ordain after a couple of years into our marriage. I, too, had stirrings to commit myself to the Dhamma. I have Sakyan blood in my veins and felt a strong tie throughout my life to the Triple Gem and to the Buddha, who lived only 200 years before my father ascended to power. Soon, I too, ordained. My preceptor was the well-known nun Dhammapālā and my teacher Āyupālā.

The eighth year after my father's coronation, he waged war on the country of Kalinga, his last war. I was a young woman by then. The war, as I said earlier, marked a turning point for every person in our family and for every person in the empire.

Centuries later, scholars would wonder how and when my father became a Buddhist. The Pali scriptures name a couple of monks who featured prominently in my father's life. I, though, believe my mother, Devi-Vedisa, planted the seeds of the Dhamma and taught all of us the value of compassion and non-harming. I think it helps explain why the slaughter at Kalinga impacted my father so tremendously. He had absorbed more of the Dhamma than he realized. Afterwards, my father was very open about his commitment to the Dhamma in his many edicts but never mentioned my mother's impact on him.

It may be my father chose not to disclose my mother's influence as a way to protect her and her relatives. He was, after all, very sensitive about the impact on the local populace of what he wrote and thus wrote slightly different variations of his edicts to best suit an area. He also had a new chief queen who may not have appreciated his lavish praise of my mother, who remained one of his queens and someone he continued to hold in high regard. Some assumed that my mother was forgotten and abandoned by my father. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her family figured prominently in the Dhamma missions to Lanka. My father also built a magnificent stupa just outside of Vedisa, later known as the Great Stupa of Sanchi, where he helped my mother construct a lovely monastery. These and other actions reveal the depth of his devotion and respect for her.

Centuries after my death, my chroniclers will write the most fantastic things about me. They will claim I had miraculous power, such as having the ability to assume the form of a garuda, part human, part bird, to drive away nagas. For me, the real miracle is the profound impact the Dhamma had on my father, me, my family, the Mauryan Empire, as well as the isle of Lanka. When the Dhamma infuses a culture, when non-harming is the foundation of a nation, it does become heaven on earth. The fact that the Dhamma can produce the most sweeping and profound changes in anyone strikes me as utterly amazing. Let's all become miracle workers, for our good and the good of all.

Material for this article was drawn from the following sources:

Guruge, Ananda W. P. "Emperor Asoka and Buddhism: Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist" in *King Asoka and Buddhism: Historical and Literary Studies,* ed. Anuradha Seneviratna (Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 37–91.

Rohanadeera, M. "Mauryan Society Introduced Bodhi Worship to Sri Lanka." *Sunday Observer,* June 15, 2003.

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Strong, John S. "Asoka's Wives and the Ambiguities of Buddhist Kingship." Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie, 13 (2002), 35–54.

Facilitator Comments and Questions

*(**Facilitator:** Please feel free to use some, all, or none of the following topics when leading a group discussion. Tailor questions and themes that are most fitting for your group. An option is to close with a guided meditation on metta, forgiveness, or peace.)*

1. What things were most striking about Sanghamitta's story? What most surprised you? What, if anything, moved you?
2. Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta Theri was a pioneer, bringing the Dhamma to a new culture. We also are pioneers, tasked with figuring out how to integrate the Dhamma into our culture. In real time, in our busy lives, how do we do that? How do we infuse the Dhamma into our family life, communities, workplace, and civic obligations? As envoys ourselves, how do we go about bringing the Dhamma to a community new to Buddhism?
3. Emperor Asoka, in his edicts, prescribes an ethical life based on broad, inclusive principles and grounded in integrity, respect, compassion, and religious tolerance. Non-Buddhist religious sects at the time could identify with what he outlined, find these ideas compatible with their own religious ideals, and wish to uphold them. Is there more we can do to find common ground with other religions and work toward a common good? How do we create greater harmony, safety, economic well-being, and justice?
4. In considering the enormous transformation Emperor Asoka underwent, can we imagine that we as well as others are capable of far greater change than we imagined possible? What would that look like? How can we encourage others to transform themselves? To feel hopeful about that possibility?
5. In purifying kamma, often it is not only our kamma but the kamma of generations and whole cultures which needs to be purified, with atonement and reconciliation called for. What aspects of our personal, family, or societal legacy demand action from us?
6. Consider reading some or a part of Emperor Asoka's Rock Edict XIII, which is his open confession about what he did to the people of the country of Kalinga (see next page). What is the value of making an open confession, of accepting responsibility for our actions and consciously atoning? How is that helpful to us, to others?
7. Is there more we can do to foster peace in our time?

Emperor Asoka's Repentance: Rock Edict XIII

[Please note that Asoka is referring to himself as King Priyadarsi, or Beloved of the Gods. In this edict, he reveals the profound and transformational impact the battle of Kalinga had on him.]

The country of the Kalingas was conquered by King Priyadarsī, Beloved of the Gods, eight years after his coronation. In this war in Kalinga, men and animals numbering 150,000 were carried away captive from that country; as many as 100,000 were killed there in action and many times that number perished.

After that, now that the country of the Kalingas has been conquered, the Beloved of the Gods is devoted to an intense practice of the duties relating to Dharma, to a longing for Dharma and to the inculcation of Dharma among the people. This is due to the repentance of the Beloved of the Gods on having conquered the country of the Kalingas. Verily the slaughter, death and deportation of men which take place in the course of the conquest of an unconquered country are now considered extremely painful and deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods.

But what is considered even more deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods is the fact that injury to or slaughter or deportation of the beloved ones falls to the lot of the Brāhmanas, the śramaṇas, the adherents of other sects and the householders who live in that country and among whom are established such virtues as obedience to superior personages, obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders and proper courtesy and are full of affection towards the former; even though they are themselves well provided for, the said misfortune as well becomes an injury to their own selves. In war, this fate is shared by all classes of men and is considered deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods.

Now really there is no person who is not sincerely devoted to a particular religious sect. Therefore, the slaughter, death or deportation of even a hundredth or thousandth part of all those people who were slain or who died or were carried away captive at that time in Kalinga is now considered very deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods.

Now the Beloved of the Gods thinks that, even if a person should wrong him, the offense would be forgiven if it was possible to forgive it. And the forest-folk who live in the dominions of the Beloved of the Gods, even them he entreats and exhorts in regard to their duty. It is hereby explained to them that, in spite of his repentance, the Beloved of the Gods possesses power enough to punish them for their crimes, so that they should turn away from evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes.

Verily, the Beloved of the Gods desires the following in respect of all creatures: non-injury to them, restraint in dealing with them, and impartiality in the case of crimes committed by them. So, what is conquest through Dharma is now considered to be the best conquest by the Beloved of the Gods.

And such a conquest has been achieved by the Beloved of the Gods not only here in his own dominions, but also in the territories bordering on his dominions, as far away as at a distance of 600 yojanas, where the Yavana king named Antiyoka is ruling and where, beyond the kingdom of the said Antiyoka, four other kings named Turamaya, Antikini, Maka, and Alikasundara are also ruling, and towards the south where the Choḷas and Pāṇḍyas are living as far as Tāmraparṇi.

Likewise here in the dominions of His Majesty, the Beloved of the Gods—in the countries of Yavanas and Kāmbojas, of the Nābhakas and Nābhapanktis, of the Bhoja-paitryānikas, and of the Andhras and Paulindas—everywhere people are conforming to the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods.

Even where the envoys of the Beloved of the Gods have not penetrated, there too men have heard of the practices of Dharma and the ordinances issued and the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods, and are conforming to Dharma and will continue to conform to it.

So, whatever conquest is achieved in this way, verily that conquest creates an atmosphere of satisfaction everywhere both among the victors and the vanquished. In the conquest through Dharma, the satisfaction is derived by both the parties.

But that satisfaction is indeed of little consequence. Only happiness of the people in the next world is what is regarded by the Beloved of the Gods as a great thing resulting from such a conquest.

And this record relating to Dharma has been written on stone for the following purpose, that my sons and great-grandsons should not think of a fresh conquest by arms as worth achieving, that they should adopt the policy of forbearance and light punishment towards the vanquished even if they conquer a people by arms, and that they should regard the conquest through Dharma as the true conquest. Such a conquest brings happiness to all concerned both in this world and in the next. And let all their intense joys be what is pleasure associated with Dharma. For this brings happiness in this world as in the next.

Guruge, Ananda W. P. "Emperor Asoka and Buddhism: Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist" in *King Asoka and Buddhism: Historical and Literary Studies,* ed. Anuradha Seneviratna (Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 37-40.