

# EMPEROR KANIṢKA'S CONTRIBUTION TO BUDDHISM

VEN. BU B. SIRI SIVALI THERO

---

The Empire of the Kushans was extremely powerful among the empires that gained prominence in India at different periods. A number of historians, such as Professor Jayacandra of Vidyālaṅkāra, presume that the founders of this empire were the Kushans, who were called the Ta Yuch Chi by the Chinese. Professor Jayacandra says that these Kushans, who originated in the western borderlands of China in Central Asia, began to build up a huge empire from about the first century B.C. until the first century A.D.

Their empire lasted for about three hundred years and extended as far as Benares and the Vindhya Mountain Range in South, Kāshgār, Yārkand and Khotān in the North, and the Persian and Parthia boundaries in the West.

In the early years Kabul was the capital of this empire. Puruṣapura or Peshāwar became its capital later. At the height of its power, the Kushan Empire extended from the Caspian Sea as far as Pāṭaliputra.

Most learned historians depict the Kushan Empire as a Buddhist Empire and some Buddhist scholars consider it second only to that of Aśoka's Empire. This is mostly due to the numerous Buddhist activities to the credit of the great Emperor Kaniṣka. This earned him the honorary names of "Devaputra" and "Shāhanushāha" and other titles. ("Devaputra" is similar to "Devānampriya", the first being an honorary name also given to Chinese Emperors. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Emperor Kaniṣka who had Chinese connections, being honoured with this title.)

The first part of the second honorary title awarded, "Shāhanushāha", had its origin in "Shāhi" and was given to powerful "Shakas", from which the word "Shāha" is derived. Thus "Shāhanushāha"

means "shāh" of the "Shāhas" or "King of Kings". Similarly "Rājādhirāja" has the same meaning "King of Kings".

It is clear that Kaniṣka became "King of Kings" due to his position as chief of an Empire which was governed by provincial rulers or local kings. In a number of large provinces Buddhism was the dominant religion, such as Punjab, United Provinces and Kashmir and all came within this empire.

There is evidence to show that the Kushan kings were more influenced by Buddhism than any other doctrine. It should be explained that as the empire was being established, the principles of Mahāyāna Buddhism were spreading in various parts of India.

## Arising of the Mahāyāna

Viewed historically, certain fundamental principles of Mahāyāna Buddhism seem to have originated during the time of the Buddha.

This has to be understood first in relation to the "Lokottaravāda" or the exalted position of the Buddha.

According to this doctrine there arose and spread various spiritual ideas and feelings. Simultaneously there were differences of opinion among those who expressed such views in respect of the Vinaya (Discipline) as laid down by the Buddha.

In the course of time the tension became so great that a century after the parinirvāṇa of the Buddha, there arose a big dissension or dispute within the Saṅgha, - the monks, based on some "ten points". As a result of this, the Saṅgha, which had serious internal disagreements over the previ-

ous decades, finally separated into two major divisions called 'Theravādins' and 'Mahāsāṅghikas'. They even held two separate Councils, such was their desire. Since then the adherents of these two sections divided further but never united again. Hence by the third century B.C. or by the time of Emperor Aśoka (277-236 B.C.) there sprang eleven subsects of Theravāda and seven sub-sects of the Mahāsāṅghikas. Aśoka during his time managed to unite as far as possible the various Theravāda sects and held a council which came to be known as "the Third Council".

### Under One Banner

Although the Theravādins could organise themselves as a single body during the period of Aśoka, the Mahāsāṅghikas on the other hand could not reach a similar arrangement. Therefore they existed as separate sects until the first century A.D. When Kaniṣka became aware of this state of affairs he brought them all under the banner of the Mahāyāna. There is a belief that he received valuable advice on these matters from the Elder Aśvaghōṣa who is described as "Kavilulaguru" or "Poet Laureate" and "Dārśanika Śiromaṇi" or "Distinguished Philosopher". This seems highly probable.

Emperor Kaniṣka at one time invaded Sāketa or present day Ayodhyā, where the Elder Aśvaghōṣa was born and lived. Undoubtedly Kaniṣka had met him there when the Venerable Aśvaghōṣa already had entered the Noble Order of Monks. There is no doubt that Kaniṣka esteemed him highly because of his wide reputation as one who composed valuable works on the Dharma such as the "Mahāyāna Śraddhotpāda Sūtra" and as one who composed poems and dramas such as "Buddha Carīta", "Saudarā Nanda" and "Śāriputra Prakaraṇa". The Ven. Elder was also highly proficient in music.

A review of Kaniṣka's numerous services for the renaissance of Buddhism and Buddhist culture would also lead the reader to conclude he had indeed taken the opportunity of associating closely with such a great teacher.

The greatest contribution Kaniṣka made to Buddhism was the unification of the various sects that had ceded from the Mahāsāṅghikas. As a result of this important act, some believe the Mahāyāna originated in the reign of Kaniṣka. But in fact, the formation of Mahāyāna appears to have begun much earlier, from the fifth or fourth century B.C.

During this early period, Theravāda Buddhism had spread over much of India and hence the Mahāsāṅghikas and their associated schisms (the Mahāyāna groups) were confined to only a few regions in this pre-Kaniṣka period. After the third century B.C. or after Aśoka, the Theravādins were losing strength in India. But on the other hand, the Mahāsāṅghikas became not only prominent but also began to carry on a wide range of Buddhist activities.

The practice was to compete with the Hindus. At the same time they also respected many Vedic customs and used the Sanskrit language. Unlike the Theravādins they did not expound three types of the Bodhi (awakening) namely, the Buddha, the Pratyeka Buddha and the Arhat. They declared the attainment of Buddhahood was the only way to Nirvāṇa. In emphasizing this ideal, they said that it was a mean act to attempt to reach Nirvāṇa simply through Pratyeka Buddhahood and Arahathood. Accordingly they named the Theravādins as "Hinayānist" (an uncomplimentary term not in use now) and proclaimed their own path to Nirvāṇa - the Mahāyāna.

Kaniṣka presumably preferred the Mahāyāna because it emphasized Buddhahood. Doubtless he surmised that the correct way to follow the Buddha was to become one like him. Therefore it was necessary to tread the Bodhisattva way of life.

### Mahāyāna Canons Compiled

This great emperor who supported the Mahāyāna, made arrangements to hold a Mahāyāna Council at Kuṇḍalavana Monastery in Kashmir under the guidance of many elders such as Pārśva, Pūrṇayaśas, Vaśumitra, Aśvaghōṣa and others. At this council

the three canons were compiled in Sanskrit together with a great commentary or the Mahāvibhāṣā comprising three parts, Vinaya Vibhāṣā, Sūtra Vibhāṣā, and Abhidhamma Vibhāṣā. It was said that all these were inscribed on copper plates, laid in stone boxes and were enshrined in a stūpa at Kuṇḍalavana Monastery. Some of these books and their translations are found even today in countries such as China, Mongolia, Nepal, Tibet, Turkistan, Afganistan and Bactria.

Kaṇiṣka uplifted Buddhist culture after the council had finished by means of using arts and crafts. We have to assume that he received the approval and help of the Mahāyāna elders. The truth was that they were always interested in poetry, drama, music, sculpture, artwork and painting and so on, and were trying to spread Buddhist ideas and culture through them. Therefore it was with their approval and encouragement that Emperor Kaṇiṣka built Buddha images. Those who recognize this special aptitude in him, think that he deserves to be accorded the honour of being the first person in the world to make images of the Buddha. [Up to that point in time ritual worship had simply been to the Bodhi tree and Cetiya.]

However it is not quite correct to presume that he was the first in this field of art as there is proof of the construction of both large and small Buddha images in Ceylon and India before him. Nevertheless the impetus given by the Emperor to the interest in constructing Buddha images must have been considerable. He also initiated engravings of Bodhisattva images on caskets and coins. Although they incorporate Greek or Roman influences, they nevertheless all contributed to the growth of Buddhist art and culture. (It must have been in this era, too, when the idea of a “halo” for the Buddhist saint was first adopted -the Kuṇḍalinī Cakra of the top of the head. This artistic device would then soon be used elsewhere in the world)

Kaṇiṣka initiated the construction of many religious edifices, such as temples and stūpas within his empire. Hiuen Tsiang says that one huge stūpa or tower pagoda attributed to Kaṇiṣka was 700 to 750 feet high. This giant stūpa which had thirteen

stories, was decorated with images of the Buddha on each side and all this was capped by a tall canopy of copper. Some historians think that this was the pagoda which became the model for countries such as Mongolia and China.

### The Spread of Buddhism

Kaṇiṣka helped the spread of Buddhism not only by building temples and stūpas but also by sending out messengers to Middle Asian countries, Mongolia and China. This task was made easy for him because of the abundance of Buddhist messengers who were a product of that excellent ideal of the Mahāyāna, to go among the public and do social welfare work and teach.

These good missionaries for the Buddha traversed the most rugged mountain passes and deserts where there were no roads, no water and not enough food to eat. But they yoked themselves to the noble task of spreading the Dhamma. Kaṇiṣka became most enthusiastic and encouraged them to a great extent! Thus during the first century A.D. Buddhist ideas spread to the East and China and Westwards too!

Although Kaṇiṣka did everything possible as a Buddhist for the renaissance of Buddhism and Buddhist culture, there is evidence that he treated non-buddhists in a worthy manner too. His coins have images and imprints of gods and goddesses of various faiths such as Hindu, Greek and Zoroastrian gods. This indicates that Emperor Kaṇiṣka, like Emperor Aśoka before him, recognized all faiths alike and gave them due respect. This has always been the Buddhist attitude of tolerance towards other faiths. Although he was a Mahāyānist, he never showed any disrespect towards the Theravādins, and no harm was ever done to them. His main concern was to explain peacefully to the world the value of the Mahāyāna and in doing so never condemned any other view, faith or doctrine or religious community. Therefore we can safely say that Kaṇiṣka occupies a unique place among the Buddhist kings of Asia.