

# Emperor Aśoka as depicted from vamsa tradition in Sri Lanka.

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**Abstract-** In this research paper, our attempt is to examine the role of the Emperor Aśoka as depicted in vamsa tradition in Sri Lanka. Aśoka's legend is found in the fifth century chronicles of Sri Lanka, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvamsa* as well as in Buddhagohosa's commentary on the Vinaya. In addition to this, the commentary on the *Mahāvamsa*, the *Thūpavaṃsa* and the *Bōdhivaṃsa* were studied. The discrepancies in *Mahāvamsa* and *Divyāvadāna* has been discussed here. I have not discussed the third Buddhist council as discussed it in our next research article.

**Index Terms-** Vams, discrepancies, tradition, Buddhism

## I. BIRTH OF AŚOKA

The fifth chapter of *Mahāvamsa* has been dedicated to the Emperor Aśoka. The Brahman Cāṅkka anointed the king Candagutta. The *Vaṃsatthappakāsini*, which gives the name of Aśoka's mother as Dhammā, born of the Maurya clan, (Moryavamsajā Dhammā), narrated how her unusual pregnancy longings were interpreted by an Ājīvaka named Janasāna or Jarasōna. He is said to have been summoned by Bindusāra for this purpose as Brahmans of the court had been unable to interpret them. Janasāna is described as religious personage who frequented the queen's family "Bindusārassa aggamahesiyā kulūpago".<sup>1</sup> He had predicted that the son she was expecting was destined to be the emperor of Jambudīpa, exercising his suzerainty over its hundred kings.<sup>2</sup> The North Buddhist tradition speak of different Ājīvaka named Pingalavatsa in the Pāṃsupradānāvādāna of *Divyāvadāna*.

The Sri Lankan Pāli sources have preserved a tradition as regards the name of Aśoka prior to this consecration as king. According to it, Piyadassana or Piyadassi was his personal name and inferentially Aśoka was the throne name or else a second name.<sup>3</sup> The antiquity of this tradition is suggested by the fifth century commentary by Buddhaghosa on the Dīghanikāya. Here, it is said that the prince was named Piyadāsa and he became king under the name of Aśoka "Piyadāso nāma kumāro chattam ussāpetvā Asoko nāma dhammarājā hutvā". W. P. Ananda

Guruge says "Several have attempted to prove that Piyadasi or Piyadassana was a family name applied also to his grandfather Chandragupta. The very flimsy evidence for this, however, comes from the word Piyadamsana in a Prakrit passage in the Mudrārksasa, which could be better explained as an epithet that proper name."<sup>4</sup>

As stipulated in the *Dīpavaṃsa* piyadassana was anointed as the king two hundred and eighteen years after the parinibbana of the Sambuddha.<sup>5</sup> As reported when piyadassana was installed, many miraculous incidents occurred.<sup>6</sup> These splendid rewards were received as a result of the gift of honey in his previous birth.<sup>7</sup> As depicted by the *Mahāvamsa* Candagutta belonged to the clan of Moriya.<sup>8</sup> He had slain the ninth (Nanda) Dhanananda. Candagutta reigned twenty four years and his son Bindusāra reigned twenty eight years. King Bindusāra had hundred and one sons. Among whom, Aśoka was the central concern. Aśoka was the sub king of Ujjeni. He was in charge of collecting revenue of that province. Once he came to the town of Vedisa, the daughter of Setthi, known by the name of Devi, having cohabited with him, gave birth to a noble son.<sup>9</sup>

As shown by the *Mahāvamsa*, Aśoka had slain his ninety nine brothers, born of different mothers, won the undivided sovereignty all over Jambudīpa. *Divyāvadāna* mentions a brother by the name of Susīma. He is said to have been born of senior queen before Aśoka's mother was introduced to the royal court. Susīma had a prior claim to the Maurya throne. But the chief Minister Khallāta considered him unfit to be emperor as he had slapped the chief ministers in fun. Some Aśokan scholars would suggest that Susīma was the same as Sumana of the Pāli records.<sup>10</sup>

He consecrated himself as a king in the city of Pāṭaliputta four years after his kingship. Due to all these facts, it could be presumed, that Aśoka had to face with a conspiracy. Aśoka raised his youngest brother Tissa, son of his own mother, to the officer of vice regent.<sup>11</sup> Aśoka's father Bindusāra had shown hospitality to sixty thousand Brahmanas, versed in the Brahma doctrine, and in like manner, he himself nourished them for three years.

Some scholars were now inclined to dismiss the legends as "downright and absurd mythological accounts."<sup>12</sup> Others held that one could glean from them, especially from the Sinhalese

<sup>1</sup> *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* 1935: 190-193.

<sup>2</sup> Guruge Ananda W.P, 1993: 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 1993: 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 1993: 28.

<sup>5</sup> D.v, 1992, 6:1, 146

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 1992, 5:2-15, 150,151.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1959, 6:15, 151.

<sup>8</sup> M.v, 1950, 5:17,27

<sup>9</sup> D.v, 1992, 6:15, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Guruge Ananda W.P, 1993: 30.

<sup>11</sup> M.v, 1950, 5:17,28

<sup>12</sup> Dikshitar, 277 & Strong S. John, 1989: 12.

chronicles, some valuable historical materials about Aśōka, although these must “be discredited when found lacking in corroboration from the inscriptions.”<sup>13</sup> A full consideration of all the legends of Aśōka would be an overwhelming undertaking; there are stories about him not only Pāli and Sinhalese but in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, Burmese, Thai and other Asian languages as well. We shall primarily be concerned with Pāli, Sinhalese, Sanskrit and Chinese.

## II. THE PARALLELS AND THE DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN THE AŚŌKĀVADĀNA AND THE PĀLI TEXTS

John S. Strong has shown in his book, *The legend of King Aśōka*, many parallels between the Sanskrit and the Pāli recensions of the Aśōka. As he has shown both tell the story of Aśōka’s previous life, of his birth as the son of King Bindusāra, of his somewhat violent accession to the throne, of his conversion by a young Buddhist monk, of his construction of eighty four thousand Stūpas or Vihāras, of his donations to the Buddhist community, of his worship of the Bodhi tree.<sup>14</sup> Despite these similarities, he further shows the differences between the two recensions. In the Aśōkāvadāna, Aśōka is said to have been born one hundred years after the parinirvāna of the Buddha; in the *Mahāvamsa*, however, he is said to have been consecrated king 218 years after the parinirvāna. Scholars, interested in chronological problems have spent much energy trying to deal with this discrepancy.<sup>15</sup> Some have even argued that the *Aśōkāvadāna* has here confused the figure of the great emperor Aśōka with that of his reputed forefather, King Kālāśōka, who is unknown in the Sanskrit tradition, but who according to the *Mahāvamsa*, was reigning at the time of the Second Buddhist Council at Vaiśālī a century after the death of the Buddha.<sup>16</sup> John S. Strong has come to conclusion on this discrepancy as follows.

“There is however, little reason to believe that the *Aśōkāvadāna*’s declaration that Aśōka lived one hundred years after the parinirvāna was intended as a chronological statement at all. On the one hand, it contradicts the text’s own indication that there were eleven generations of kings between the Buddha’s contemporary, King Bimbisāra and Aśōka; eleven generations can hardly fit into a single century. On the other hand, as well shall see, the designation.” “One hundred years was simply a traditional way of starting that Aśōka living at a time when there was no one still alive who had actually known the Buddha personally. What we are dealing with here, then is not a chronological issue, but something reflection a much greater difference in the whole outlook of these two texts; while the *Mahāvamsa* as a chronicle is naturally concerned with history and lineage, the *Aśōkāvadāna*, as an avadāna or a legend is not; its focus is on the religious and psychological setting of its story.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the important stories in the *Mahāvamsa* that is absent in the *Aśōkāvadāna* tells how Aśōka convenes and participates in the Third Buddhist council at Pāṭaliputra. In addition to the

differences mentioned, there are several episodes in the *Aśōkāvadāna* which do not figure at all in the *Mahāvamsa*. The story of Aśōka and his minister Yaśas, the tale of Aśōka’s pilgrimage with the elder Upagupta, the episode of his encounter with the great arhat Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, and the tragic account of Aśōka’s final gift to the sangha of half a myrobalan.

Readers are principally familiar with the image of Aśōka, presented in the *Mahāvamsa* may be surprised to find that his portrayal in the *Aśōkāvadāna* is not always as bright and glorious as it is in the Sinhalese chronicle.<sup>18</sup> In fact he is, in the text, presented as being physically ugly. His father cannot stand the sight of him; his skin is rough and harsh; and the young women in his harem refuse to sleep with him because of his repugnant appearance.<sup>19</sup> Hendrik Kern, has given the worst idea of Aśōka. He says “If we knew him only by these Buddhist sources, we should have to conclude that he was a sovereign of exceptional insignificance, remarkable only in that he was half monster, half idiot.”<sup>20</sup>

## III. MEETING THE NIGRODHA SĀMAṆERA

Whilst Aśōka once standing at the window, saw an ascetic, the sāmaṇera Nigrodha, passing along the street, he felt kindly towards him. He was the son of prince Sumana, the eldest brother of all the sons of Bindusāra.<sup>21</sup> When Bindusāra had fallen sick Aśōka left the government of Ujjeni conferred on him by his father, and came to Pataliputra. *Mahāvamsa* further says that when he had made himself master of the city, after his father’s death, he caused his eldest brother to be slain and took on himself to sovereignty in the splendid city.

Consequently the consort of prince Sumana, who bore the same name (Sumanā), being with child, fled straightway by the east gate and went to a caṇḍāla village, and there the guardian god of Nigrōdha tree, called her by her name, built a hut and gave it to her. As reported in the *Mahāvamsa* on the same day she bore a beautiful boy and gave her son the name Nigrodha, enjoying the protection of the guardian god. When the headman of the Caṇḍālas saw the mother, he looked on her as his own wife and kept her seven years with honour. Then as the thēra Mahāvaruṇa saw that the boy bore the signs of his destiny, the arahant questioned his mother and ordained him and at the same room where they shaved him, he attained to the state of arahant. When Nigrodha sāmaṇera going to visit his mother, he entered the splendid city by the south gate, and he passed the king’s court on his way. Having seen the sāmaṇera, a kindly thought arose on king. The sāmaṇera was invited by the king to the palace. According to the description in *Mahāvamsa*, since the sāmaṇera saw no other bhikkhu there he approached the royal throne.<sup>22</sup> Leaning on the king’s hand the monk mounted the throne and took his seat on the royal throne under the white canopy. It further remarks, that seeing him seated there, King Aśōka rejoiced greatly that he had honoured him according to his rank.

<sup>13</sup> Barua, B. M, 1968:6 & Strong S. John, 1989: 12.

<sup>14</sup> Strong S. John, 1989: 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1989: 21.

<sup>16</sup> Barua, Vol. I:41 & Strong S. John, 1989: 21.

<sup>17</sup> Strong S. John, 1989: 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 1989: 40.

<sup>19</sup> *The Aśōkāvadāna*, 1963: 37,43 & Strong S. John, 1989: 40.

<sup>20</sup> Hendrik Kern, 1901-1903, vol. 2, 2: 335 & Strong S. John, 1989: 40.

<sup>21</sup> *M.v.*, 1950, 5:37,29.

<sup>22</sup> *M.v.*, 1950, 5:64,31.

The question that would naturally arise is why King Aśoka allowed this young sāmaṇera to sit on the royal throne under the white canopy at the initial stage of his kingship? Here it is clearly understood that there is claim for kingship for the sāmaṇera, as his father was the eldest son of King Bindusāra. King Aśoka was the one who plundered the throne and slain the father of sāmaṇera. Then the sāmaṇera preached to him, the “Appamādavagga.”<sup>23</sup> Finally King Aśoka bestowed eight perpetual supplies of food to the sāmaṇera, to the master of him, to his teacher and to the community of bhikkus.

It is interesting to compare this episode of Nigrodha with Samudra’s episode in the Sanskrit tradition of Aśokāvadāna. There lived in Śrāvastī a merchant who, along with his wife, embarked on a journey across the great ocean. While at sea, his wife gave birth to a son and he was given the name Samudra (Ocean). When, after twelve years, the merchant returned from his travels, he was robbed and killed by five hundred brigands. His son, Samudra, then entered the Buddhist order, and wandering throughout the land he arrived once at Pāṭaliputra. Unknowingly he approached the prison belonged to the Caṇḍragirika, the executioner of Aśoka. The king has given him the right to execute all those who enter here. Samudra was overcome by sorrow and started to cry. Samudra begged for a month’s stay of execution. He was granted seven days, and shuddering with the fear of death, he wrestled with the thought that in a week’s time he would be no more. Early on the seventh day, King Aśoka happened to see one of his concubines conversing with the gazing lovingly at a youth with whom she was enamored. As soon as he saw them together, he became furious and sent them both to the executioner. There they were ground with pestles in an iron mortar until only their bones remained. Samudra was thoroughly shaken by the sight of this event. He applied himself the whole night through to the teaching of the Buddha, he broke the bonds of existence and attained supreme arhatship.

The unmerciful monster Chandragirika, feeling no pity in his heart, threw Samudra into an iron cauldron full of water, human blood, marrow, urine and excrement. He lit a great fire underneath, but even after much firewood had been consumed, the cauldron did not get hot. Once more, he tried to light the fire, but again it would not blaze. He became puzzled, and looking into the pot, he saw the monk seated there, cross-legged on lotus. Straight away, he sent word to King Aśoka. Aśoka came to witness this marvel and thousands of people gathered, and Samudra, seated in the cauldron, and realized that the time for Aśoka’s conversion was at hand.<sup>24</sup> Samudra began to generate his supernatural powers. In the presence of the crowd of onlookers, he flew up to the firmament, and wet from the water like a swan, he started to display various magical feats. King astonished and made an Anjali. Samudra said “Great King, with reference to you, the Blessed One predicted that one hundred years after his parinirvāṇa there would be in the city of Pāṭaliputra a king named Aśoka, a chakravartin ruling over one of the four continents, a righteous dharmarāja who would distribute his bodily relics far and wide, and build the eighty four thousand dharmarājikās. But instead your majesty has built this

place that resembles a hell and where thousands of living beings have been killed. Your highness, you should give to all beings a promise of security and completely fulfill the wish of the Blessed One.” Then Samudra departed from the place by means of his supernatural powers. We are lucky to encounter a somewhat similar story in *Rājāvalī*. The king Kāvantissa has punished a thēra by putting him in the cauldron of oil in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C.E.<sup>25</sup> As stipulated in the *Mahāvamsa* and its commentary thēra was slain and thrown into the sea.<sup>26</sup>

John. S Strong says “There is thus, in the *Mahāvamsa*’s account of Aśoka’s conversion, no reference either to the infernal prison or to a display of supernatural powers, but only to the more common situation of a monk preaching a sermon. Nonetheless it is clear that both Samudra and Nigrodha share the element of personal charisma, and that this is fundamental in effecting Aśoka’s change of heart. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, this charisma manifests itself in the form of miraculous displays, while in the *Mahāvamsa* it is reflected in Nigrodha’s noble and peaceful bearing”.<sup>27</sup>

#### IV. PVIOUS LIFE OF AŚOKA

There is another piece of information in *Mahāvamsa*, which contributes some facts about the former life of Emperor Aśoka. Once in the time past there were three brothers, traders of honey. The one was used to sell honey, the two others used to collect the honey. A certain paccekabuddha, who was sick of a wound, and another paccekabuddha, who for his sake wished for honey, came to the city on his usual way of seeking alms. A maiden, who was going for water to the river bank, saw him. She pointed with hand outstretched and said “Yonder is a honey store, sir, go thither”. The trader, with believing heart, gave to the Buddha who came here a bowlful of honey, so that it ran over the edge. As he was the honey filling the bowl and flowing over the edge, and streaming down to the ground, he, full of faith, wished “May I for this gift, come by the undivided sovereignty of Jambudīpa and may my command reach for a yojana (upward) into the air and (downward) under the earth”.<sup>28</sup> When the brothers arrived seller of the honey said “A man of such and such a kind I have given honey”. The eldest brother said grudgingly “It was surely a caṇḍāla, for the caṇḍāla, ever clothe themselves in yellow garments”. The second said; “A way with thy paccekabuddha over the sea”. Then the maid who had pointed out the store wished that she might become the royal spouse and a lovely form with limbs of perfect outline. Aśoka was he who gave honey, the queen Asamdhimittā was the maid, Nigrōdha he who uttered the word caṇḍāla, King Devānampiyatissa he who had wished him away over the sea. He who uttered the word “caṇḍala” lived in expiation thereof in caṇḍāla village, but because he had desired deliverance, he also, even in the seventh year, attained unto deliverance.

It is interesting to compare the episode of the gift of dirt in the *Aśokāvadāna* with the above story. In the *Aśokāvadāna*, Aśoka in his previous life is no longer portrayed as a trader of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:68,31.

<sup>24</sup> Strong S. John, 1989: 216.

<sup>25</sup> *Rājāvalī*, 1997, 176.

<sup>26</sup> Peris. M, 2011: 44.

<sup>27</sup> Strong S. John, 1989: 76.

<sup>28</sup> *M.v*, 1950, 5:55,30.

honey but as a little boy who offered dirt to the Buddha. As mentioned in the *Aśokāvadāna*, when the blessed one was dwelling at Kalandakanivāpa in the Veṇuvana near Rājagṛaha, he put on his robes, took his bowl, and surrounded by a group of monks and honored by the monastic community, entered Rājagṛaha for alms. The blessed one came to the main road where two little boys were playing at building houses in the dirt. One of them was the son of a very prominent family and was named Jaya, while the other was the son of somewhat less prominent family and was named Vijaya. Both of them saw the Buddha whose appearance is very pleasing, his body adorned with the thirty-two marks of the Great Man. And young Jaya, thinking to himself “I will give him some ground meal,” threw a handful of dirt into the Buddha’s begging bowl. Vijaya approved of this, by making an anjali. After presenting this offering to the Blessed One, Jaya then proceeded to make the following resolute wish “By this root of good merit, I would become king and, after placing the earth under a single umbrella of sovereignty, I would pay homage to the Blessed Buddha.” The Blessed One then displayed his smile. Ānanda thēra asked what made Buddha to smile. The Blessed One said “the boy who threw a handful of dirt into the Tathāgata’s bowl, one hundred years after the Tathāgata’s parinirvāna, will become a king named Aśōka in the city of Pāṭaliputra. He will be righteous dharmarāja, a chakravartin who rules over one of the four continents, and he will distribute my bodily relics far and wide and build the eighty four thousand dharmarājikās. This he will undertake for the well-being of many people.” Then the Blessed One gave all the dirt to the Venerable Ānanda and said; Mix this with some cowdung and spread it on the walkway (caṅkrama) where the Tathāgata walks.” And the Venerable Ānanda did as he was told.

Paul Mus is one of the few scholars who has sought to compare the *Mahāvamsa*’s “gift of honey” with the *Aśokāvadāna*’s “gift of dirt”.<sup>29</sup> A John S. Strong has discussed about the gift of dirt and the gift of honey.<sup>30</sup> He purports “The story of the gift of dirt was focal point for the feelings of ambiguity about Aśōka. On the one hand it expressed the rudeness of his character, the physicality and roughness of his person and kingship. On the other hand it pointed to this future greatness and to his dedication, as the king of the whole earth, to the Buddha, Dharma, and the sangha.”

## V. OTHER MERITORIOUS DEEDS OF AŚŌKA

The *Mahāvamsa* states that the King Aśōka gave alms to sixty thousand bhikkhus.<sup>31</sup> Having heard the greatness or the content of the dhamma by the Moggaliputta-Tissa thēra, he constructed eighty four thousand vihāras to honour the each of the dhamma. The king himself constructed the Aśokārāma.<sup>32</sup> *Mahāvamsa* further says that by the miraculous power of the thēra Indagutta, who watched over the work, the ārāma named after

Aśōka was quickly brought to completion.<sup>33</sup> It further exemplifies on the spots where the Buddha trod, Aśōka himself visited and built beautiful cētiyas.<sup>34</sup> He bestowed the hundred thousand pieces of money for the three gem, for Nigrōdha and for the sick each day.<sup>35</sup> The King gave the tooth sticks called nāgalatā to the sixty thousand bhikkhus and to sixteen thousand women of the palace.

The legend of Aśōka’s failure to retrieve the relics from the nāgas was to spin a later Sinhalese tradition that those relics had been reserved for enshrinement in the Great Stūpa on the island of Sri Lanka. According to the tale in the *Mahāvamsa*, when Aśōka went to the nāga palace to get the Rāmagrāma relics, he was informed that he could not have them because the Buddha himself had set them aside for King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi of Sri Lanka.<sup>36</sup> The story then goes on to relate how the elder Soṇuttara, on Duṭṭhagāmaṇi’s behalf, descends to the nāga palace where he accuses the snake lords of not honouring the Buddha properly, more or less steals the relics from them, and returns with them to Sri Lanka where they are enshrined with great ceremony.<sup>37</sup>

The divergence between this version of the story and the *Aśokāvadāna*’s reflects, of course, the different orientation of the two texts touched upon in chapter one.<sup>38</sup> In the *Aśokāvadāna*, the stress is at least nominally on the value of devotion to the relics, whether it be the devotion of Aśōka or of the nāgas. In the *Mahāvamsa*, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the glory of Sri Lanka and on its possession of some genuine Buddha relics.<sup>39</sup> Duṭṭhagāmaṇi is shown to have succeeded where Aśōka had failed. Nevertheless the failure of Aśōka to collect all the relics of the Buddha in the *Aśokāvadāna* highlights once again the less than perfect aspect of Aśōka’s rule. Even in this great deed of gathering the relics, Aśōka encounters certain obstacles that, ideally, he should have been able to overcome, but, in reality, was not.<sup>40</sup>

The same notion is reinforced in Buddhism by stories recounting how the relics miraculously come alive and take on the bodily form (rūpakāya) of the Buddha himself, with all of his physical traits. In the *Mahāvamsa*, for example, when Duṭṭhagāmaṇi is about to enshrine the relics in the Great Stūpa, the casket rises up into the air. It then opens of itself and the relics come up out of it and “taking the form of the Buddha, gleaming with the greater and lesser signs, they performed, even as the Buddha himself.....that miracle of the double appearances that was brought to pass by the Blessed One during the lifetime.”<sup>41</sup> In the *Aśokāvadāna*, we do not find such a spectacular coming alive of the relics, but it is quite clear that in Aśōka’s organized distribution of the relics, an attempt is being made to recapture, to make present, the Buddha’s rūpakāya.<sup>42</sup>

Aśōka’s son Kunāla is born on the very same day on which King Aśōka built the eighty four thousand dharmarājikās and the Vītaśoka episode occurs shortly after the completion of the eighty four thousand dharmarājikās. The *Mahāvamsa* records that when Aśōka learns that there are eighty four thousand sections of the Dharma he decides to undertake his construction project and

<sup>29</sup> Strong S. John, 1989: 67.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 1989: 66.

<sup>31</sup> *M.v.*, 1950, 5:75,32.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:80,33.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:174,41.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:175,41.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:83,33.

<sup>36</sup> *Thūpavamsa*, 2010: 223.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 2010: 223.

<sup>38</sup> Strong S. John, 1989: 113.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 1989: 113.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 1989: 113.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 1989: 116.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 1989: 117.

honour each one of those sections by building a vihāra. By building the eighty four thousand stūpas or vihāras, Aśōka is also symbolically reconstructing the body of the Buddha's teaching on his dharmakāya.<sup>43</sup>

## VI. CAṆḌĀŚŌKA

According to the description given in the *Mahāvamsa* Aśōka was called as Caṇḍāśōka (the wicked Aśōka) in early times, by reason of his evil deeds, afterwards he was known as Dhammāśōka (the pious Aśōka) because of his pious deeds.<sup>44</sup>

## VII. CREATION OF THE FIGURE OF BUDDHA

Once the king Aśōka invited the Nāga king Mahākāla to create the figure of Buddha, the Nāga king created beautiful figure of the Buddha endowed with the thirty two greater signs and brilliant with eighty lesser signs.<sup>45</sup> The king was more uplifted with joy and hence, he kept the great festival called the "feast of the eyes" for seven days.<sup>46</sup> *Dīpavamsa* remarks only on the presence of the Mahākāla and he has offered flowers to king piyadassi.<sup>47</sup> There we encounter a resemble story of *Aśokāvadāna* with the above story. Māra takes the form of the Buddha at the request of Upagupta, in both cases, there is a vision of the physical form, the rūpakāya, of the Buddha, although he has achieved the bliss of parinirvāna.<sup>48</sup>

## VIII. GENEROSITY TOWARDS THE DOCTRINE OF THE BLESSED ONE

Once King Aśōka asked thēra Moggaliputta, "Whose generosity towards the doctrine of the Blessed one was ever so great?" He replied "Even in the lifetime of the Blessed one there was no generous giver like to thee". When the king heard this he rejoiced yet more and asked; "Is there a kinsman of Buddha's religion like unto me?" Thēra Moggaliputta replied "he who lets son or daughter enter the religious order is a kinsman of the religion and withal a giver of gifts". When king asked Mahinda and Saṅghamittā, they expressed their willingness to get themselves ordained. The king permitted his dear son Mahinda and his daughter Saṅgamittā, to be ordained with all solemnity. The *Vinayaṭṭhakathā* (*Samantapāsādikā*) which is written in Sri Lanka, gives information on the income and the expenditure of the emperor Aśōka. He got the income of four hundred thousand, from the four gates of the *pālalu nuwara*, one hundred thousand from the court which is situated in the middle of the city, five hundred thousand as the other income.<sup>49</sup> Further, it is explained as to how he spent the five hundred thousand;

1. One hundred thousand for the Nigrōda monk.
2. One hundred thousand to offer the fragrances to the Buddhist stūpa.

3. One hundred thousand for the scholarly Bhikkhus for the four requisites.
4. One hundred thousand for the monks.
5. One hundred thousand for the medicine.

It is further mentioned in the *Vinayaṭṭhakathā* (*Samantapāsādikā*), that emperor Aśōka built 84,000 temples, having spent ninety six million pieces of coins.<sup>50</sup> These practices of Emperor Aśōka must have set an example for the kings in Sri Lanka to work on the development of the Buddhism.

## IX. THE STORY OF KUNTĪ

*Mahāvamsa* sheds light on the story of Kuntī (wood-nymph). Here it says having heard of the demise of the Tissa thēra, the son of Kuntī, king had made tanks at the city gates and filled them with remedies for the sick.<sup>51</sup>

## X. PRINCE TISSA (AŚŌKA'S BROTHER) ENTERING THE BROTHERHOOD

The vamsa tradition sheds light on the own brother of King Aśōka. There are two short stories related to him in *Mahāvamsa*. One day the prince Tissa, the own brother of King Aśōka when hunting saw gazelles sporting joyously in the wild. Having seen this he thought; "Even the gazelles sport thus joyously, who feed on grass in the wild. Why not the bhikkhus joys and gay, who have their food and dwelling in comfort? After coming home prince Tissa told King Aśōka, his thought. The king handed over him the government of the kingdom for one week, saying "Enjoy, prince, for one week, my royal state; then will I put thee to death", thus said the ruler. When the week was gone, having seen the pale body of Tissa King asked the reason. Tissa replied, "by the reason of the fear of death". The king spoke again to him and said; "Thinking that thou must die when the week was gone by, thou waste no longer joyous and gay; how then can ascetics be joyous and gay, who think ever upon death? When his brother spoke thus, Tissa was turned toward faith in the doctrine of the Buddha.<sup>52</sup>

There is another piece of information which contributes some knowledge about Aśōka's brother Tissa. Once prince Tissa was hunting he saw thēra Mahādhammarakkhita, self-controlled, sitting at the foot of a tree, and fanned by an elephant with a branch of a Sāla-tree. Having seen the thēra prince thought "when shall I, like this thēra, be ordained in the religion and live in the forest wilderness?" As well as prince Tissa saw the same thēra flying through the air, standing on the water of the pond in the Aśōkārāma, he leaving his goodly garments behind him in the air, plunged into the water and bathed his limbs. And when the prince saw this marvel he was filled with joyful faith. The prince received the pabbajjā from the thēra Mahādhammarakkhita and with him four hundred thousand persons ordained.<sup>53</sup> The nephew of śoka, Aggibrahmma ordained together with the prince.<sup>54</sup> As stipulated

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 1989: 117.

<sup>44</sup> M.V, 1950, 5:189,42.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:91,33.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:94,34.

<sup>47</sup> D.v, 1959, 6:15, 151.

<sup>48</sup> Strong S. John, 1989: 122.

<sup>49</sup> *Vina. Att*, 2009:45.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 2009:97.

<sup>51</sup> M.v, 1950, 5:225,45.

<sup>52</sup> M.v, 1950, 5:154-159, 40.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:164-168, 40.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 1950, 5:170, 41.

in the *Mahāvamsa*, the prince Tissa's ordination was taken place at the fourth regnal year of Aśōka.

## XI. CONCLUSION

In this research I made an attempt to gather historical facts which compiled in vamsa in Sri Lanka. I have identified some similarities in the stories of thēras Nigroda and Samudra. The practices of Emperor Aśōka must have set an example for the kings in Sri Lanka to work on the development of the Buddhism.

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