

By CHOONG Mun-keat

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INTRODUCTION

Chronologically accurate records for early Indian history are evidently lacking. Consequently, the date of the historical Buddha remains difficult to conclude exactly, though it has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. (note 1) Contemporary scholars in Asia and the West have suggested various dates that differ from the traditional Sinhalese/Theravaadin dates of 624-544 BCE; for example:

466 - 386 BCE (UI Hakuju)

463 - 383 BCE (NAKAMURA Hajime)

448 - 368 BCE (Heinz BECHERT)

500/460 - 420/380 BCE (Andre BAREAU)

502/479 - 422/399 BCE (Richard GOMBRICH)

The reasoning and evidence used in calculating these dates are diverse and are not always conclusive or convincing. One viable method entails reckoning from the year of the coronation or accession of the emperor A"soka, and this is the approach I adopt here. I consider that A"soka's coronation date has now been established fairly accurately. This facilitates the determination of the date of the Buddha because in Buddhist traditions the coronation of A"soka is stated to have taken place so many years after the Buddha's death (Parinirvaa.na). Further, it is known that the lifetime of the Buddha lasted eighty years. Based on these shared records in Buddhist traditions and the information provided by modern Indological research on the coronation date of A"soka, one is able to infer the date of the Buddha, though still with some questions remaining. The following analysis will discuss three possible dates of the Buddha based on this method.

THREE POSSIBLE DATES

In research on the coronation date of A"soka there remain minor differences of opinion amounting to two or three years. Without entering into the debate, I adopt here the generally accepted coronation date of circa 268 BCE: A"soka reigned c. 268-232 BCE.(note 2) As to how many years after the death of the Buddha A"soka's coronation took place, Buddhist records representing the most ancient traditions indicate three different figures: 218 years, 116 years, and 160 years. (note 3) These figures are found in sources representing the Sinhalese, Sarvaastivaadin, and Tibetan traditions, as follows.

1. Based on 218 years

According to the Sinhalese tradition, A"soka was crowned in the year 218 after the death of the Buddha. For instance, BUDDHAGHOSA in his Samantapaasaadikaa commentary on the Pali Vinaya (fifth century CE) states:

"Two hundred and eighteen years after the death of the Tathaagata the self-inaugurated king (i.e. A"soka) ruled over the whole of Jambudiipa (India) (Tathaagatassa parinibbaanato dvinna.m vassasataana.m upari a.t.thaarasame vasse sakala-Jambudiipe ekarajjaabhiseka.m paapu.ni)." (note 4)

Taking the coronation date of A"soka as 268 BCE, this makes the date of the Buddha's death $268 + 218 = 486$ BCE. (note 5)

2. Based on 116 years

The Sarvaastivaada tradition on this issue is represented in two texts, both written by Vasumitra (c. 100-200 CE) and translated by Paramaārtha (499-569 CE): Shibabu-lun [Treatise on the Eighteen Sects] and Buzhiyi-lun [Treatise on the Sects]. According to these two texts, as recorded in the Taisho edition of the Chinese Tripi.taka, A"soka was crowned 116 years after the death of the Buddha.(note 6) For example, Buzhiyi-lun states:

"One hundred and sixteen years after the death of Bhagavant Buddha ... there was a great country called Paataliputra whose king named A"soka ruled over Jambudviipa."(note 7)

Applying the figure of 116, as above, places the Buddha's death in 384 BCE.

3. Based on 160 years

As presented in the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasty editions of the Chinese Tripi.taka, the Buzhiyi-lun gives the coronation of A"soka as 160 years after the death of the Buddha.(note 8) However, the Shibabu-lun in those same editions has 116 years, thus agreeing with the Taisho edition. The same ambiguity is found in Sde-pa tha-dad-par byed-pa da"n nmam-par b"sad-pa, the Tibetan translation of BHAVYA's Nikaayabheda-vibha"nga-vyaakhyaa [Treatise on the Schisms].(note 9) It gives the figure of 160 years in some editions of the Tibetan canon and 116 years in other editions. For example, according to BAREAU's translation, the Narthang (1741-42 CE) and Peking (1724 CE) editions have the following statement:

"One hundred and sixty years (lo-brgya-drug-cu) (note 10) having passed since the parinirvaa.na of the Blessed Buddha, at the time when the king named Dharmaa"soka ruled in the town called Kusumapura, there developed a great dissension in the Sangha as a consequence of the appearance of various points of controversy." (note 11)

However, according to WATANABE's translation, the Derge edition (1744 CE) has 116 years. (note 12) The figure of 160 years places the Buddha's death in 428 BCE.

CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed dates based on the following points:

- The coronation date of the emperor A"soka was c. 268 BCE (on this scholars still have minor differences of opinion).
- The number of years between the death of the Buddha and the coronation of A"soka, as recorded in Buddhist traditions, is:
218 years (Sinhalese tradition),
116 years (Sarvaastivaada tradition, some editions), or
160 years (Sarvaastivaada tradition, other editions)
- The lifetime of the Buddha was eighty years.
- Hence, the possible dates for the Buddha's lifetime are: (1) c. 566-486, (2) c. 464-384, and (3) c. 508-428.
- There is no sure basis for choosing among these three.

In his review article of volumes 1 and 2 of BECHERT's three-volume report (1991, 1992, 1997), COUSINS states:

"It is clear that if the objective of these volumes was to find absolute proof as to the exact date of the Buddha, then they would have failed. No method or evidence we have at the present is sufficient to establish that to the strictest standards of evidence. What certainly has been done is to firmly dethrone the old consensus - it is not impossible that the long chronology (note 13) may yet be rehabilitated, but someone will have to undertake the task. From the point of view of reasonable probability the evidence seems to favour some kind of median chronology and we should no doubt speak of a date for the Buddha's Mahaparinibbana (note 14) of c. 400 B.C. - I choose the round number deliberately to indicate that the margins are rather loose." (note 15)

I consider, however, that the three dates proposed above are all possible, because they conform closely to ancient Buddhist traditions regarding the number of years between the death of the Buddha and the coronation of A"soka.

NOTES:

1 Cf. Etienne LAMOTTE, "The Date of the Buddha", *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Saka Era* (tr. Sara WEBB-BOIN) (1958; Institut Orientaliste de l'Universite Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1988), pp. 13-14; Heinz BECHERT, "The Problem of the Determination of the Date of the Historical Buddha", *Wiener Zeitschrift fur die Kunde Sudasiens*, vol. 33 (1989), pp. 93-120; (ed.), *The Dating of the Historical Buddha. Die Datierung des Historischen Buddha*, 3 vols. (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Gottingen, 1991-2, 1997); and *When Did the Buddha Live? The Controversy on the Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Selected Papers Based on a Symposium Held under the Auspices of the Academy of Sciences in Gottingen; Bibliotheca Indo-Buddhica

Series, No. 165) (Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1995); Hajime NAKAMURA, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes* (Japan, 1980; reprinted Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1989), pp. 13-14; YIN SHUN, *Yindu Fojiao Sixiang Shi [A History of the Thought of Indian Buddhism]* (1988; Zhengwen Chubanshe, Taipei, 1993), pp. 8-9; Lance S. COUSINS, "The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A review article" (of BECHERT, 1991-2). See Indology website (www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgadkw/indology.html): www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgadkw/position/buddha/buddha.html (1997); originally published in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 6.1 (1996), pp. 57-63.

2 For example, NAKAMURA, pp. 91, 93-94. Other coronation dates of A"soka proposed by various scholars range from 280 to 267 BCE.

3 Records of the coronation of A"soka as taking place 100 years after the death of the Buddha are here considered as relatively late legendary documents (for the sources, see LAMOTTE, pp. 13-14). Also, "100" in Indian texts is often not used to indicate an exact number; thus "100 years" may signify an indefinite lengthy period of time.

4 *Samantapaasaadikaa*, I, pp. 41-42 (cf. Taisho edition of Chinese Tripi.taka (abbreviated T) vol. 24, No. 1462, p. 679c); *Diipava.msa*, VI, pp. 1, 19-20; *Mahaava.msa*, V, p. 21.

5 It has been pointed out that the Sinhalese (Theravaada) tradition was the basis for the chronology of the Dotted Record. BECHERT (1989), pp. 101-2.

6 T 49, No. 2032, p. 18a; T 49, No. 2033, p. 20a.

7 T 49 No. 2033, p. 20a.

8 E.g. T 49, No. 2033, p. 20, note 7; Qian-long (Qing dynasty) vol. 102, No. 14, p. 468.

9 Compiled by BHAVYA in 6th century CE.

10 Peking (Beijing) edition of Tibetan Tripi.taka, vol. 127, No. 5640, p. 253, leaf 1, line 3.

11 Andre BAREAU, "Trois traites sur les sectes bouddhiques attribues a Vasumitra, Bhavya et Vinitadeva: Deuxieme partie", *Journal asiatique* 244 (1956), pp. 167-8. This is a French translation of BHAVYA's work. Cf. BECHERT (1989), pp. 107-8.

12 WATANABE Zuigan's Japanese translation, *Osaki Gakuho*, No. 94 (July 1939), p. 71, note 1.

13 Referring to the chronology based on the Sinhalese tradition.

14 Referring to the death of the Buddha.

15 See note 1, above.

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P.S.:

My personal thought is that - Asoka was crowned "160 years" after the death of the Buddha - is perhaps closer to the historical fact. 160 years and 116 years are likely based on the same tradition of Sthavira (not the Tamrasatiya). It is possible that the numbers, 160 in the Chinese characters, were miswritten as 116 in some Chinese editions, and thus influencing also the Derge edition (1744 CE) of the Tibetan canon, which is the edition later than the Narthang (1741-42 CE) and Peking (1724 CE) editions. Also, more textual editions give the coronation of Asoka as 160 years after the death of the Buddha (for example, see "3. Based on 160 years" in my article, above).

Nevertheless, the above consideration cannot be absolute proof as to the exact date of the Buddha.

CHOONG Mun-keat
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