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Asoka: Buddhist King and Philanthropist?¹

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Philanthropy in its longstanding sense refers to foundations, donations and supported acts of benevolence meant to reaffirm what it means to be human (McCully, 2008). Buddhist philanthropy offers a rich, complex and important case for the comparative study of philanthropy outside modern Western Europe and North America and apart from the Judeo-Christian and Moslem charitable and Greco-Roman philanthropic heritages. It also raises interesting, but perhaps unanswerable questions about the interplay between the Buddhist religious tradition of philanthropy and philanthropic traditions in ancient Greece, and subsequently western Europe and the Americas and, more recently, the entire modern world.

Some might suggest that activity before the 21st century, outside the North Atlantic tradition and under the cultural penumbra of ancient Greece cannot properly be labeled philanthropy. Agreement on the precise meaning of philanthropy remains too murky for such a definitive distinction and growing understandings of the two way cultural trafficking between Greece and much of historically Buddhist Asia make such definitive judgements suspect. In addition, questions of the origins of the Greek notion of philanthropy have seldom been addressed, much less satisfactorily answered. The possibility that Greek philanthropy before the common era (BCE) was itself a cultural import from Persia, India, or elsewhere to the east remains an open null hypothesis. Meanwhile, contemporary uses of the term philanthropy in the social sciences and social practice typically fail to reach beyond contemporary fundraising and foundations, except for the occasion vague nod to the ancientness of the term without further details.

Various recent formal definitions of philanthropy have placed emphasis on the juxtaposition of private means and public ends (c.f. Payton, 1988a; Payton, 1988b). George McCully (2008) grasps the real essence of philanthropy as used here with what he terms “nourishing and developing what it is to be human”. Philanthropy in this sense may involve local means and still not be purely local and culture-bounded in its effects. It inevitably strains toward the universal, and is not limited to any particular culture, locale or institution. McCully’s perspective offers the strongest conceptual basis currently available for comparing quite diverse practices and the acts of philanthropists under a universal rubric of philanthropy.

¹ Thanks to George McCully, Soma Hewa and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this study.

Buddhist thinkers and actors, like their Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, and other compatriots, have dealt in fundamental and thoroughgoing ways with questions of what it means to be human and arrived at complex and sophisticated answers an important part of which can be summed up in the concept of *dhamma* (or *dharma*). Like philanthropists elsewhere, the Buddhist approach has resulted in building lasting institutions for education, social service, art, social action and other contributions to human flourishing and development.

For western and non-Buddhist students of philanthropy, the full scope and basis of the distinctive Buddhist tradition of philanthropy remains veiled behind complex layers of religious soteriology extolling beliefs that are typically treated by specialist scholars in the west as far more interesting than the everyday practices and locales they inform. These are detailed in key texts written in dozens of unfamiliar (to English speaking westerners) languages and embedded in enormous cultural variety. Western scholarly specialists in Buddhist studies, with few exceptions, have done little to further the understanding of non-specialists on this topic. This study will largely forego plumbing the depths of religious doctrines and deal only with less abstract, esoteric and more worldly and practical concerns.

While this approach allows certain interesting comparisons with Anglo-American philanthropy, it also runs the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretations of Buddhist traditions. There is a long tradition of argument that it is not possible to understand the import of something like Buddhist philanthropy without first grasping fully the underlying cultures, beliefs, values and world views which produced it through extended study of the basic texts. I respect that view, but also note the observation of Wendy Doniger below. The problem may well be that such study is such an exhaustive task and absorbing challenge that successfully completing it proves entirely diversionary; once undertaken one can never again find time to return to the initial question.

Journal articles must of necessity be brief. However, there is a huge and easily available English-language literature discussing the topic. Thus, to deal with questions of Buddhist beliefs and values in a journal article risks simply rehashing issues and problems already written about many times. I have chosen instead to concentrate on describing what look from the perspective of contemporary philanthropic studies, very much like distinctive Buddhist *moeurs* (particularly, rules, practices and institutions) that will be recognizable to western students of philanthropy. Readers missing the more profound linkage to Buddhist beliefs and values are encouraged to consult any of the standard sources regarding *dhamma*, *sangha*, and the other concepts mentioned in this article.

The reader will have to judge for herself at the end of this treatment whether this approach makes a case for the importance of a distinctive

Buddhist philanthropist who should be of greater interest to English-speaking readers in Europe and North America. Most readers of this piece may be at least vaguely familiar with some of the visible manifestations of Buddhist philanthropy, including familiar, recognized statues of the Buddha that must have been commissioned, executed and paid for by someone at some time in the past. Or of world-renowned (and costly, both to build and to maintain) temples that did not design or build themselves, as well as the familiar monks in shaved heads and saffron robes going forth in procession into the community with their “begging” (rice) bowls to solicit local support. I Few readers, however, will have “connected the dots” to realize the extent to which each of these artifacts is rooted in a coherent and recognizable Buddhist approach to philanthropy in McCully’s sense of realizing what it means to be human as well as the traditions of foundations and fundraising.

An essential part of the distinctive Buddhist philanthropic tradition is a long list of known royal, aristocratic, monastic, and merchant philanthropists. Perhaps no other figure in Buddhism and few others in all of world history exemplify that realization more dramatically and completely than King Asoka; a warrior-leader who discovered and actively promoted the paths of peace, a man of great wealth, much of it garnered, no doubt, as tribute from his and his father’s conquests, who according to the legends learned the importance of giving, and from all appearances someone either fully committed to public, even ostentatious, giving who came to serve as an inspiration to devotees and followers who, for various reasons, wished the world to know of his purported actions. Asoka is venerated by millions of Buddhists as a figure of enormous respect, admiration and piety. To a greater degree, perhaps, than any other comparable figure, Asoka is credited, particularly by Mahayana Buddhists, as a key disseminator of their religious tradition.

The history and cultural tradition of Buddhism, particularly in its early royal and monastic guises, embodies a rich record of philanthropic acts, a large inventory of giving-based establishments, monuments and sites, and a substantial body of texts and manuscripts describing or encouraging philanthropic practice. For contemporary third sector scholars, however, uncovering, decoding and understanding this distinctive Buddhist tradition requires reaching across modern knowledge frontiers of history, religion, social welfare, art and architecture, mythology, sociology, politics, art history, archeology, and several other disciplines and subject areas, not to mention dealing with language gaps and substantial cultural differences. Anyone who approaches this vast repository will quickly discover that each of these diverse fields of study provides it’s own stock of tantalizing glimpses of the existence of a major tradition of philanthropic thought and practice that spans several millennia and ultimately involves hundreds of millions of people.

Yet, like the blind men surveying the proverbial elephant, none of them has yet gone beyond a limited, fragmentary perspective and sought to glimpse the whole. A good bit of the initial challenge posed by this topic is where to begin exploring this rich legacy. Only a small number of studies offering a very fragmentary picture of Buddhist philanthropic beliefs, values, practices and institutions can be found in the entire current third sector literature (e.g., DeNoon, 2010; Goodwin, 1987; Goodwin, 1994; Ilchman, Katz and Queen, 1998; Lohmann, 1995). DeNoon (2010) was the first publication in the philanthropy literature to focus explicitly on the possibility of Buddhist philanthropic practice. Previously, the historian Janet Goodwin addressed issues of giving (“alms”), and temple building in the monastic life of Japanese Buddhists, finding evidence of organized Buddhist fundraising (*kanjin*) campaigns in Japan hundreds of years ago. Ilchman, Katz and Queen (1998) explored a selection of Buddhist and Indian texts on charity and philanthropy as part of a more universal, hermeneutical analysis but devoted only limited attention to this historical possibility. Lohmann (1995) surveyed a range of available publications and cast the issue in terms of the possibility of the practice of historic Buddhist commons and the existence of common pool resources in Asia. To date, there is no general survey or overview on the subject of Buddhist philanthropy. For the English-language reader the evidence of the long record of such philanthropy still has to be teased out of myriad and sometimes difficult to locate sources. As a result, the possibilities of misunderstanding in this area are substantial, and include questions of what constitutes reliable evidence, who may be reliable sources, and even the reliability and validity of fundamental concepts.

Wendy Doniger (2009) noted that the British Victorian Indologists who coined the term “Hinduism” (and also conducted some of the first western textual studies of Buddhism) had a strong western, European ‘Protestant bias in favor of scripture’ that led them to reduce the complexity of native Indian religion into the terms of the Sanskrit texts favored by the Brahmin elite, and to largely ignore the enormous body of non-textual, syncretic religious and philosophical traditions and practices of India. In the case of Buddhism, this same textual bias may still be observed on the shelves of any college library with a collection of theological and philosophical studies of Buddhist and other Indian religions. Large portions of those published works are purely textual studies of eminent Buddhist ‘scriptures’ ‘beliefs’ and ‘doctrines’ with little attention to any of the social, political, and economic context in which they are embedded. Little fieldwork on Asian philanthropy has been published, and even the approach taken here of teasing fragmentary comments and perspectives out of a wide body of published work in history, social science and journalism is, admittedly, a poor substitute. But it is currently the best available option. And there is much of a tentative and conjectural nature to be learned this way.

For the student of philanthropy, it is precisely in the fragmentary record of those non-hermeneutical studies of Buddhist institutions and practices where the most accessible and convincing evidence of the historic role of Buddhist philanthropy is found. Not only in the stories, legends, histories and traditions, but also in the stupas, rock-cut chaityas, stelae, vast temple complexes with their extensive and elaborate statuary and carved reliefs and sophisticated architectural features that have offered living space for untold thousands of Buddhist monks. There may be few other places in the vast human record where one can find more convincing evidence of the dedication and humanity of patrons, artisans and believers than in the hundreds of Buddhist and other cave temples carved out of solid rock.

Even so, stories and legends depend on storytellers, and cave temples and other monuments do not design and hew themselves out of the rock. Together, these artifacts offer physical evidence of philanthropic practice paralleling the beliefs expressed in the texts. A growing body of historical and social science investigators have recognized this and are slowly forming a partial emerging portrait of Buddhist philanthropy out of the larger general and cultural historical record (E.g., brief discussions by Bentley, 1993; Foltz, 199; Gowing, 1983; Haynes, 1987; Olivelle, 1993; Robinson and Johnson, 1982; Wilkins, Schulz and Linduff, 1997).

The architectural, archeological and sociological evidence of thousands of ancient and contemporary sangha² (including monastic communities, assemblies or congregations), and populated and abandoned temples, stela³, pagodas,⁴ and monuments all across India, China, central and much of south Asia. The histories of countless contemporary institutions and practices all point toward longstanding and continued importance of philanthropic practice in Buddhism. It is a record that may begin with the individual monk's rice bowl but it extends to support for hundreds of temple and monastic complexes like Sanchi (India) and Angkor Wat (Cambodia),

² The term sangha is an important, but vexing, one for English-language scholars of philanthropy seeking to understand the organization of Buddhist charity and philanthropy. Originally a Sanskrit term, it occurs in various forms across several languages, in Buddhist and other Indian and Asian religious traditions. In the hands of different users discussing Buddhism alone, it may refer to virtually any Buddhist monastic community, whether a single monastery, all Buddhist monastic communities, a community of Buddhist laity, or the community of all Buddhist faithful. The term has important connotations similar to those of the English term community, but I have been unable to locate any fully satisfactory published group, organizational or community analysis of Buddhist sangha from a social science perspective.

³ A stela might be thought of, in some respects, as loosely, an ancient equivalent of a modern highway billboard or perhaps a public service announcement; a message carved into rock and posted alongside a roadway. The stelae containing the "rock edicts of Asoka", discussed below, are of fundamental important in locating and understanding the tradition of Buddhist philanthropy; more important, perhaps, than many of the basic texts which have so preoccupied practitioners of the hermeneutical tradition.

⁴ A.k.a. bagoda.

Dunhuang (China), Nara and Kyoto (Japan), Drepung (Tibet), Haeinsa (Korea), and Mahamevnawa (Sri Lanka), just to name a few of those monuments best known to English-language readers.

Together, the mere fact of the existence of such temples offers a singular architectural and organizational monument to *humanitas* broadly consistent with other traditions of philanthropy as that term is currently understood.⁵ Yet it is a tradition also characterized by much that is unfamiliar.

Buddhist Philanthropy

In an article entitled “Buddhist Philanthropy” published in the *Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, DeNoon suggested that: “There is a curious paradox in classic and contemporary Buddhism: although the religion is built on pacifist concepts and the importance of compassion, the followers of Buddhism have not, typically, been leaders in the creation of charitable organizations” (DeNoon. 2009. p. 1159). The author doesn’t explain any further why it is that pacifism and compassion, by themselves, should provide a sufficient basis to produce charitable organization. Nevertheless, her comments reveal a rather narrow conception of philanthropy in the guise of organizational fundraising and foundations. Further, her comment seems to imply that philanthropic values in all times and places will necessarily result in institutions, practices and organizations essentially identical to those that first emerged in the U.S. in the late 19th century (See Bremner, 1988). From that vantage point, Buddhist beliefs would appear not to translate into recognizable local philanthropic practice, or at least not often and not until recently when Buddhists, along with many other East and South Asians emulated U.S. and European models of philanthropic organization.

DeNoon, however, goes on to undermine her own claim and to embrace, at least implicitly, a broader concept of philanthropy like that outlined by McCully (2008). She also zeros in on our subject of this paper when she writes:

“[B]y the time of King Asoka, in the Maura state in northern India (269–232 BC), there was *an active practice of Buddhist principles....* Since that time, there has developed a vast and complex literature on Buddhist teaching ...” (italics are added for emphasis)

This suggests an apparent paradox: A practice without a coherent or recognizable philanthropic basis. Yet, it is the “active practice of Buddhist principles” that likely forms the core of the distinct Buddhist philanthropic enterprise. These principles can be discerned in such diverse forms as

⁵ As George McCully reminded me in reviewing an early draft of this paper, *humanitas* was the Latin translation of the Greek *philanthropia*.

architectural monuments, sculpture, calligraphy, lithography and associated forms of manuscript writing and reproduction of numerous forms of religious and creative writing, and in multiple associated forms of education and charitable and human service. And as we shall see below, the figure of King Asoka has been associated with and presides over the works of subsequent Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars as well as architects and builders, sculptors, and untold generations of Buddhist monks and laity.

Deconstructing King Asoka

The historic figure of King Asoka is generally regarded as not merely the ruler of a Northern Indian empire, but an important philanthropic exemplar and a venerable figure of the Buddhist tradition. Asoka is by most accounts seen as the most important philanthropic figure in Theravada Buddhism. He also deserves greater recognition in the general world history of philanthropy. In particular, views attributed to him on generosity, benevolence, peaceful social relations, and the philanthropic obligations of rulers (or “the obligations of kings”) are unique, distinctive and among the earliest known surviving expressions on several of these subjects.

To begin to appreciate the importance of Asoka as well as other philanthropists, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike, we can identify seven distinct and important defining characteristics of philanthropy⁶: donation of surplus wealth (whether in the forms of money, knowledge, power, social capital, the spoils of war, or some other medium), institution building, publicity, in the sense of public efforts to advance common goods, innovative leadership, a body of published thought (or oral traditions) on the nature of philanthropy, and stories or narratives of personal generosity/benevolence in giving that refer to transcending narrow self-interest and universality.

Notable modern philanthropists would all score high on the majority of these measures. Asoka is one of a small number of historic rulers who would rate high on most, if not all, of these seven philanthropic dimensions. In the western tradition of philanthropy, rulers like Hammurabi, the Athenian ruler Pericles, the Persian King Cyrus, the Roman Constantine and Frederick the Great of Prussia come to mind. Yet, none of them can also be linked (as Maimonides, Cotton Mather and Andrew Carnegie, for example, can) with a strong and enduring record of written advocacy of philanthropic principles and practices in the way that Asoka can. Thus, the name Asoka (a.k.a. King Asoka or Asoka the Great) deserves to be included on any list of the world’s greatest philanthropists. In some parts of the world this ancient ruler of a long-passed empire is already considered the greatest of all philanthropists. For a hundred million Theravada Buddhists, Asoka is a figure of epic importance, only one step behind the Buddha himself.

⁶ This list is not meant to be exhaustive or definitive.

The historic king Asoka (circa 304-232 BCE) was the third ruler of the dynasty founded by his grandfather, ruling the Maurian Empire in Northern India and reaching far into southern India and parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Asoka reigned for 38 years from 269 BCE over his vast empire which was founded roughly a century after the conquest of nearby regions by the armies of Alexander of Macedonia⁷ in the third century BCE. The Maurian empire is believed to have survived only fifty years and two generations after Asoka and to have been divided up among two of his grandsons.

An Indian website captures another key feature of the Asoka narrative: "...[Asoka] embraced Buddhism under the Brahmin Buddhist sages Radhaswami and Manjushri. After adopting Buddhism, Asoka started propagating its principles throughout the world, even as far as ancient Rome and Egypt. In fact, he can be credited with making the first serious attempt to develop a Buddhist policy." (<http://www.culturalindia.net/indian-history/ancient-india/ashoka.html>, downloaded on July 28, 2010)

According to most accounts, King Asoka did not start out life as either a Buddhist or a philanthropist. In 261 BCE during the ninth year of his reign, Asoka is said to have annexed Kalinga (the eastern part of the state of Orissa in modern day India). However, the Kalinga campaign was apparently a costly and bloody battle that left him deeply remorseful and doubtful of the value of war. As a result, Asoka is said to have converted to Buddhism, which had been founded only a few centuries before, to have embraced pacifism, and to have spent the remainder of his reign proselytizing, creating and supporting Buddhist the sangha (monastic communities), constructing inscribed pillars (stella) with inscriptions in many different Indian dialects, as well as Persian, Greek, and Aramaic, and using his wealth for the construction of temples and the circular stone monuments known as stupas and many other philanthropic activities.

"The great emperor Ashoka is said to have build many stupas; the ones that remain intact or even in fragments from the early period are Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodh Gaya, Amaravata, Jaggay-apeta, Manikyala and Butkara (Swat).

"The most impressive as well as the best preserved of the early stupas is the great stupa at Sanchi" which was an important religious site for both Buddhists and Hindus. (Wilkins, Schulz and Linduff, 239)

⁷ Alexander is still too often presented to school children in the West in philanthropic terms as "Alexander the Great" and revered as the builder of a large empire and founder of many Greek cities in Asia and the near East (including his namesake, Alexandria in Egypt). At the same time, he is strongly reviled in much of eastern and central Asia and the Indian subcontinent as an invader and marauder, a view that is perhaps on par with the views of Attila, Tamerline or Genghis Khan in the West.

In some accounts, Asoka is said also to have been the patron of the Third Buddhist Convocation held around 250 BCE or during the 17th year of his reign, in his capital city of Pataliputra, although evidence of this event is sketchy at best. It is because of his conversion and subsequent philanthropic activity that Asoka is revered by Theravada Buddhists throughout the world as second in importance only to the Buddha. It is the claims of Asoka's renunciation of war, embrace of pacifism and *ahimsah* (belief in the sacredness of all living things and the avoidance of violence in all forms) and the assorted good works in sponsoring construction of the inscribed monuments (typically referred to as the Rock Edicts of Asoka), and the construction of statuary, monuments, temples, stupas and some authorities argue, orphanages, old age homes that contribute to Asoka's reputation as a great philanthropist.

King Asoka, that is a host of artisans and factotums acting in his name and under his patronage, appears to have left a remarkable legacy of material artifacts as tributes to philanthropy including the Great Stupa of Sanchi, possibly other great and lesser stupas (some more exuberant sources claim up to 80,000), and the remarkable set of widely disbursed "rock edicts", stone monuments and markers containing noble sentiments: advocating compassion for the poor, kind treatment of animals, pacifism, and other pieties.

There is also a small reminder of King Asoka found on Indian currency in the form of the lion.⁸ It is believed in the Theravada tradition to be due in part to the philanthropic deeds of King Asoka that Buddhism rose to become a world-class religion, spreading outside India and into Southeast Asia through his sponsorship of missionary activity.⁹

The Rock Edicts of Asoka

The rock edicts that are attributed to Asoka include fourteen major rock edicts, the Kalinga rock edicts, an unspecified number of minor rock edicts, seven pillar rock edicts and other minor pillar edicts. These edicts cohere as a recognizable body of philanthropic ideals based in the dhamma, sometimes also referred to as the Buddhist law of piety. Through these public

⁸ The Paisa India coin, includes an image of the Asoka Pillar at Sarnath which is the National Emblem of India. At the base of the Pillar is the Asoka Chakra which represents the wheel of the law of dharma. (<http://coincollecting.a-z-series.com/new-paisa-coin-with-the-legend-of-king-asoka/comment-page-1/>, downloaded on 9/2/10.)

⁹ There is a notable parallel in the association of Asoka with rock and the role of Peter, as "the rock" upon which Roman Catholic Christianity is built. There are also a number of parallels between Asoka conversion narratives and the claimed role of the Roman Emperor Constantine as a patron of Christianity. There are a number of dangers in doing too much with such parallels, including inferring implications of the western narratives back onto Asoka. Nevertheless, the parallels are intriguing.

monuments, the dhamma advocates doing little evil, much good, and engaging in kindness, generosity, truthfulness, and personal purity. Practicing the dhamma, the Asokan rock edicts testify, will merit one in this world and the next. They also proclaim that he promoted and advanced the practice of dhamma among his subjects and, through missionary activity, also among his neighbors including perhaps the Persians, and Egyptians as well as Mediterranean cities such as Athens, Alexandria and Rome.

The surviving rock edicts and legends also make reference to a long list of Asoka's good deeds in the practice of the dhamma, including importing and planting medicinal herbs, roots and fruits wherever they were lacking in his kingdom and among his neighbors such as Sri Lanka, the South Indian states, and far afield, digging wells and planting banyan along the roads, planting mango groves, building rest houses and watering places for the enjoyment of man and animals. Asoka is also said to have personally gone on missionary tours characterized by generous donation and preaching of the dhamma.

As a royal philanthropist, Asoka is said to have considered advancing the welfare of his people (and perhaps the welfare of all mankind) his duty. He is said to have seen his people as his children and given orders to be approached at any time with the people's concerns. He is said to have appointed officers of the dhamma ("welfare officials"?) to care for the welfare of those people following the dhamma.

Moreover, the stellae and the surviving legends involve not only Asoka but also members of his family, and their didactic value is clear. The accounts make reference to various philanthropic activities by his Queen in different parts of the Maurian Empire and his sons were said to engage in distributing gifts to the different regions. The edicts also still urge all people who read them to be generous to their friends, acquaintances, and relatives and to give alms to ascetics and Brahmans but urge caution to reserve some personal funds to spend and to save.

Historiography and Skepticism

Not everyone finds the conventional Asoka narratives either convincing or plausible. In a 2009 essay, for example, David Shulman introduced a general note of caution and skepticism:

"But what can a modern historian do with the Asoka¹⁰ story? Almost everyone seems to agree that Asoka more or less converted to Buddhism (at that time, still a very young religion), though not because of

¹⁰ Shulman used the "Ashoka" spelling throughout. We have adjusted this to Asoka here for readability. In the essay, he was referring specifically to the famous story that Asoka was converted to Buddhism after listening to the enchanting poetry of the beautiful maiden 'Kunala' – but his point seems to apply more generally to other aspects of the Asoka myth as well.

listening to Kunala's haunting verses. It's quite possible that Asoka gave early Buddhism a powerful push by patronizing the Buddhist monastic establishment, the Sangha, and perhaps by sending out missionaries to propagate the Buddhist message in distant lands. In any case, that's the standard story that crops up in the standard histories.

"I'm a little skeptical. Asoka looks to me like any other precariously perched Indian king trying to shore up his political base by patronizing whoever there was to be patronized - Buddhists, Brahmins, and probably other peripatetic dreamers and religious virtuosi. For much of Indian history, it was the only sensible thing for a king to do."
(Shulman, 2009, 51)

Shulman notes also:

"...we might conclude, first, that even the greatest of Indian kings was strikingly lacking in effective power, unable to prevent catastrophe in his own family or to control his own officers in distant Takshasila, and secondly that Buddhist monks claimed from very early on a critical part in the very core of political life as kingmakers and carriers of primary values. Buddhism is not, and never was, an 'apolitical' religion."
(Shulman, 2009. 51-52.)

Earlier, Robinson and Johnson (1982) expressed a similar view, although not quite as starkly. While there are many interesting issues posed by such skeptics, one expressed in purely novel form, is the familiar issue of philanthropic motivation: What is it that inspires philanthropic action? Even if Asoka did all the things he is alleged to have done (and, as Shulman notes, this is far from a certainty), did he do them for "good" or "base" reasons, for the good of his people or merely to shore up his dynastic power base?

Shulman goes on:

"Generally, modern historians tend to stick to the terra firma of inscriptions, coins, the accounts of foreign travelers, and other precisely datable sources. There are obvious advantages to such a method, and we can certainly learn critically important things from such evidence; but one unfortunate byproduct of such choices is that modern histories of India, heavily empiricist in the narrowest sense and loaded down with unwieldy records of temple donors and royal land grants, tend to be boring." (Shulman, 2009. 52.)¹¹

¹¹ One reviewer reacted to this comment in apparent disagreement: "Speak for yourself, Shulman!"

Although he doesn't say it directly, Shulman intimates that the methods of modern historiography do not presently even confirm what Strong (1983) called forthrightly "the legend of Asoka." He also doesn't do anything more than mention it, but one could also infer from his comment that there is a substantial but largely archival record yet to be explored in those "unwieldy records of temple donors and royal land grants." In that case, what appears boring to a Shuman may be grist for other philanthropic scholars' mills.

In an interesting digression full of scholarly portent, Shulman also contrasts the "boring" historiographic approach of sifting through documentary evidence with what he calls "the indigenous South Asian, 'puranic' model of writing history" blending myth and history.¹² For better or worse, it is that tradition in which the stories of Buddhist conversion and the philanthropic deeds of Asoka like the ones told above are embedded. The student of philanthropy is thus faced with a seeming dilemma over the "real" life of Asoka. However, regardless of whether Asoka is considered in any way credible as an actual historical philanthropist or merely a suitable mythic symbol, the Indian cultural record contains a large complex of stories, myths, legends and beliefs in which Asoka is the exemplar, and a rich cultural mix testifies to the importance of philanthropy.

A Problem of Asokan Philanthropy

North Atlantic perspectives on giving and philanthropy as a product of ancient Greek culture evidenced in a unique, Anglo-American manner, is still widely heard at fundraising banquets and patriotic political rallies. In one respect, it began to give way to a more universal and multi-cultural approach to gift-giving of the early 20th century work of Mauss (1906), Malinowski (1922), Boaz and the critical view of history as articulated by Shulman. One of the questions the legend of Asoka raises is whether the 'premodern' Buddhist and Hindu traditions are to be treated as similarly 'primitive' like the Trobriand Islanders or the Tlingit. Such a view would certainly be consistent with the British colonial worldview that produced the first studies of 'Eastern religions'. (Sharma, 2001)

Without question, organized philanthropy is largely absent from classic anthropological studies of giving, and also not a central focus of historical research, thus complicating the challenge of weighing Asoka (and a number of other, lesser known Asian, Buddhist and Indian philanthropic figures) in world-comparative terms: assessing the evidence of large, historically significant, projects of widespread and enduring impact and cultural importance; in a word, philanthropy.

¹² The label "puranic" seems to be Shulman's own. At any rate, I can find no evidence of a school of history writing by that name. His larger point of Indian historical writing blending myth and history appears valid, and indeed provided the starting point for this article.

Yet, a vast architectural, archeological and documentary record of physical artifacts in India and across Asia between Asoka and the present testifies to major historic projects that are only dimly understood but easily recognizable as philanthropy.¹³ Yet, it is precisely in that direction that the narrative of Asoka the philanthropist points.

A Speculation

It is altogether too easy for contemporary Americans and westerners to lump Asokan philanthropy in a high civilization like the Maurian Empire in a uniform clump with anthropological studies of “primitive” gift giving in small, isolated tribal societies. Yet, the deeds of Asoka and the continuing Buddhist philanthropy evident in the wake of Asoka on the Indian subcontinent and eventually throughout China, central and southern Asia is of another order of magnitude entirely from the Kuna gift cycle and inter-tribal diffusion practices of the potlatch.

It involves settled, urban, literate, urban people not to mention considerable wealth, and a substantial record of civilization spanning long periods of time and a massive architectural record of monuments. A simple catalog of impressive architectural structures alone should give rise to a host of philanthropically motivated questions: E.g., Who paid for the construction and maintenance of all of this and how was the funding for such efforts initiated, collected and disbursed?¹⁴ In India and throughout Asia, there are hundreds of major and thousands of minor monuments, temples, and untold numbers of ruins and sites, as well as thousands of known groups and organizations, numerous collections of ancient manuscripts (along with the libraries and other places they were kept and copied) and vast bodies of other evidence that testify to the existence of something very much like what westerners currently regard as the philanthropic sector composed of fundraising campaigns and financial foundations.

Granted, the philanthropic foundations and charitable organizations in the Asokan tradition do not, as deNoon initially notes, look precisely like the annual giving program of the 23rd street family service agency in Middle America City. This should not deflect our gaze from the sheer enormity and variety of the Buddhist philanthropic tradition in Asia and elsewhere and the human, social and material capital that would have been necessary to found and continue such efforts. And whether a matter of critical history or story, that record begins with Asoka, at least in its Buddhist manifestations.

Four elements in particular, pacifism, ahimsa, or nonviolence toward people and animals, the special philanthropic obligations of the ruler, and a

¹³ There are a few notable exceptions among historians and anthropologists, in particular the remarkable work of Janet Goodwin.

¹⁴ Janet Goodman’s work on Buddhist temples in Japan is a pioneering work in this regard.

distinct perspective of large-scale association and assembly, are particularly evident as the core of the Buddhist philanthropic tradition arising from Asoka. Together, these elements can be said to constitute a distinct core of the Asokan-Buddhist philanthropic tradition. Despite her initial misgivings, DeNoon goes on to delineate several hallmarks of that tradition. The result looks quite understandable as philanthropy in modern terms:

“As a result (of the major doctrinal split within Buddhism between the Mahayana and Theravada traditions, which occurred at a Buddhist conclave held around 2100 years ago and said to have been sponsored by King Asoka), [Buddhist] charitable traditions began to diverge. In China, Japan, and Korea, where there were strong states, government took the lead in organizing the response to famines and natural disasters. Buddhist monasteries were asked to help in providing shelter, food, and minimal health care to suffering populations. For example, by the time of the Tang Dynasty, Empress Wu (eighth century AD) went even farther and had government officials overseeing how monasteries provided care for orphans, the indigent and infirm (Gernet, 1995: 221–222). Another case of a Buddhist/government link was during the Kamakura Period (AD 1185–1333) in Japan where monks solicited funds from the public and then provided care to the needy along with infrastructure projects like roads, bridges, and irrigation systems (Goodwin, 1994: 1–2, 127–131).” (DeNoon. 2009. p. 1160)

As Shulman noted (and ongoing involvement of Buddhist monks in the political conflicts in Tibet, Burma and elsewhere confirm), the Buddhist philanthropic tradition in general draws quite different political boundaries from those of the progressive, civic American nonprofit tradition and Sections 501-c-3 and 501-c-4 of the U.S. Tax Code. However, these are more accurately seen as different approaches to philanthropy in the sense of “embracing the challenge of being human” than as categorical differences, i.e., “not philanthropy.”

DeNoon’s reference to the Korean, Japanese and Chinese political states points up the impressive range of the philanthropic obligations of the Buddhist king first outlined by Asoka in the rock edicts. Bentley (1993, 42-53; 72-81) elaborates the complex dynamics involved in the diffusion of Buddhism out of India along the Silk Roads into the oasis communities of central Asia, and eventually into China and from there into Korea and Japan, carried abroad by companies of devout Buddhist merchants. According to Bentley, all of the major oasis communities along the silk road had Buddhist temples, monasteries, and translators for rendering Buddhist texts into regional languages. One of the most important philanthropic developments of this Buddhist diaspora was the abundance of cave temples near Dunhuang. Scholars have identified 492 cave temples, many lavishly decorated with

murals, carved into the rocks in the vicinity of Dunhuang, where the northern and southern branches of the silk roads converged and entered China. (Bentley, 1993, 73) The constructions at Dunhuang, like the medieval cathedrals of Europe, were a philanthropic, architectural and artistic enterprise encompassing many centuries. Their construction and illumination was the project of a millennium from the 4th to the 14th centuries with the vast majority built in the period 600-1000 CE They reflect some of the major achievements of the Mahayana tradition.

The same merchant caravans that carried Buddhism into central Asia brought it East again into China, where it moved beyond the “foreign compounds” and began to impact directly upon Chinese society in various amalgams with Confucian, Taoist and shamanist beliefs.¹⁵ This also had important implications for philanthropy and the Buddhist tradition of royal patronage in China. In the Northern Wei dynasty (385-534) in China, Toba emperors added Buddhist alternative to their shamanistic cults and established themselves as Buddhist dieties while lavishly patronizing the construction of monasteries and temples, making land grants, and leading popular rituals and festivals in return for religious legitimation of their rule. Theirs was the first institution of Buddhism as a state religion in China, and their exchange of patronage for legitimacy was subsequently followed also by Sui and early Tang emperors in China. (Bentley, 1993, 78) The Chinese Emperess Wu (deNoon, 2008) and Prince Shotaku of Japan (Lohmann, 1995) were also among those Chinese rulers who came within the Buddhist tradition of royal philanthropy first laid down by Asoka.

The lines of Buddhist communication, commerce and culture that opened between India and China were not a one way street: “Between the third and the ninth century, thousands of Indian missionaries traveled to central Asia and China, where they received patronage and support at courts friendly to Buddhism” while thousands of Chinese pilgrims, including the monks Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing, traveled to India to study, collect and copy manuscripts and visit holy sites. (Bentley, 1993, 81)

In SE Asia, the expansion of Buddhism, carried out of India by other groups of merchants, was associated with the decline of the kingdom of Funan and the growing importance of a number of island empires, notably Srivijaya, with its capital of Palembang in southeastern Sumatra, which continued to dominate the region until the 13th century. (Bentley, 1993, 72) In a manner reminiscent of the Toba, Sui and Tang emperors in China, and Asoka, the kings of Srivijaya also saw political advantage in patronizing Buddhism, and their patronage “helped Buddhism to develop into much more than a courtly adornment in southeast Asia” and included the founding of

¹⁵ The philanthropic beliefs and practices of ancient and historic China may be, if anything, even less apparent to the contemporary field of philanthropology than those of India.

Buddhist establishments in Java, Malaya and other conquered territories (Bentley, 1993, 72). This was also an era in which Buddhism became much stronger as a popular religion in the region, with a strongly syncretic tone (Bentley, 1993, 73). The cultural effects of this have been very long lasting. In Southeast Asia today, contemporary Theravada Buddhists continue to sponsor 'feasts of merit' resembling potlatches, with many sponsors, donors or patrons (Kammerer and Tannenbaum, 1996).

For those who choose to look, there are many important Asian philanthropists in addition to Asoka: the builders of Ankor Wat, the Chinese Emperess Wu (deNoon, 2008), and Japanese Prince Shōtoku (Lohmann, 1995) just to name three.

Conclusion

The term philanthropy is etymologically derived from ancient, classical Greek and as McCully has shown, many of the important connotations of the term can be linked with ancient Greek culture and mythology, in particular, the myth of Prometheus. Although analogies of this type can be dangerous in cross-cultural context, it would appear that for Buddhism, and particularly for Theravada Buddhism, the legend of the real historic figure of King Asoka, may serve a similar role as the *locus classicus* of what we are calling Buddhist philanthropy. In Buddhism after Asoka, we find an ongoing story of substantial indigenous giving for the good of humanity over a very long period of time right down to the present.

The legend of King Asoka, together with the durable legacy of monuments, buildings, records of organizations and texts in many languages found throughout Asia serve as a reminder that something very similar to western notions of philanthropy has been an integral part of Buddhism for many centuries. If this is not to be termed "philanthropy" per se, it is something a great deal like philanthropy.

For the time being, it appears reasonable to call this impressive record of human accomplishment Buddhist philanthropy, in order to accentuate the similarities and continuities with practices in the Greco-western tradition. It is clear that the absence of suitable terminology has led many observers to the (demonstrably false) conclusion that no such activity is to be found in the Indian and Asian Buddhist past and only appeared in recent decades when these ideas were imported from the west.

Over the longer run, however, the global human community might benefit from the discovery or invention of additional, more traditional and indigenous terminology and theory in this area. In effect, this would seem to involve a two-step process: First further, ore detailed, identification of terminologies and theories for Buddhist giving practices and the larger meanings associated with them. Secondly, this would also necessitate identifying and

naming the larger set or class of phenomena of which both greco-western and Buddhist practices are members.

Whether knowledge of Buddhist, and ultimately, other Asian practices of this type are best regarded as a species of the genus philanthropy, or as a separate genus of some larger family of related gift-giving phenomena remains to be determined. Regardless of the outcome, however, for philanthropologists throughout the world, King Asoka remains an important figure, worthy of note.

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