

Hida bhagavam jateti Lumminigame: Lumbini where the Buddha was born

By Ven. Phra Shakyavongsvissuddhi (Anil Sakya)
Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand

Abstract

The Asokan pillar at Lumbini, Nepal is one of the unique pillars among all other Asokan pillars. The Lumbini pillar's sole purpose was to mark the holiest of the holy spot on earth. The inscription engraved on the pillar in five lines consists of ninety-three Asokan (brahmi) characters, amongst which occurs the following: 'Hida Budhe jate Sakyamuni', 'Here was born the Buddha, the sage of the Sakyas'. The phrase 'the Buddha was born' is repeated twice in the same inscription. Most importantly, the inscription clearly mentions the name of the village as Lumminigame: 'Hida bhagavam jateti Lumminigame: Lumbini village where the Buddha was born.' This clearly pin the landmark where the Buddha was born and made him a historical person. Unlike other Asokan pillars, the Lumbini inscription pillar is more than the most essential signpost of Buddhism but I equally believe that Lumbini inscription also inscribes the heart of Buddhist teaching. In addition to being the signpost of Lumbini, with this paper I am suggesting that the Emperor Asoka was requesting people of Lumbini village or people who come across the inscription to follow the core teaching of the Buddha i.e. the Noble Eightfold Path.

Introduction

One of the geo-political and scholarly debates between Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars was where exactly the historical Buddha was born? In the past, many literature and scholars tend to loosely take for granted that Buddha was born in India. This distorted the modern geo-political truth. Indeed, in the past it was doubtful to locate the exact birthplace of the Buddha in the late 19th century when people knew none of exact archeological sites of Buddhism. In 1896, the debate of actual birthplace of the Buddha was finalized by rediscovery of the great stone pillar of Emperor Asoka at Lumbini in Nepal.

The Asokan pillar at Lumbini (ancient Lummini, Pali Lumbini), in Nepal clearly inscribed that '*hidabudhejāte sakyamunīti*' means '*here the Buddha, the sage of the Sakyans, was born.*' This is one of the strongest and clearest archeological evidence ending all doubts and debates about the exact birthplace of the Buddha. This even clarifies the mischievous debates some scholars like to make that in fact Lumbini is the birthplace of the Prince Siddhartha but exact birthplace of the Buddha is Bodhi Gaya where the Buddha was actually Enlightened and where Prince Siddhartha transformed to become the Buddha. Against all odds, the Emperor Asoka doubtlessly inscribed in his pillar in Lumbini that this is where the Buddha was

born, the sage of the Sakyans. He did not inscribed that this is where the Prince Siddhartha was born.

Moreover, the fact that the Buddha was born in Lumbini was mentioned not once but twice in the same inscription of Lumbini. The second reference pinpointing even the name of the village where the the Buddha was born is the phrase '*hidabhagavamjātetī lumminigāme*' means '*the Lord was born here, the village of Lummini.*'

In comparison, on the 8th major rock edict of Emperor Asoka, it is inscribed that Emperor Asoka visited the tree of Enlightenment. Unlike in Lumbini, this rock edict only gives general information nothing in detail whereas in Lumbini it is clearly indicated that the Buddha was born '*here in Lumbini village.*' Therefore, against all arguments we could proudly say that Lumbini of Nepal is the place on earth where the historical Buddha was born.

However, with this presentation I should like to examine two very essential issues based on the Asokan inscription of Lumbini which will make Lumbini of Nepal even extra unique place on earth. In fact these two issues are recorded in the UNESCO publication made in 2013¹ as two phrases of the inscription which have been 'more difficult to translate: *silāvigadabhīcā* and *ubalikekate athabhagiyeca,*' and will try to make a proposal of my own.

Silāvigadabhīcā, the marker stone

Prior to 1994, most Buddhists believed that the exact spot of the birthplace of the Buddha was where the Asokan pillar stands in Lumbini because it is inscribed on the pillar itself that 'here the Buddha was born.' Accordingly, taking the inscription literally, Buddhists always perform their ritual and chanting at the pillar which became a Buddhist practice for people who visit Lumbini following Buddha's instruction in the Mahaparinibbana sutta.

With my surprise, in 1985 when His Holiness Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, the late Supreme Patriarch of Thailand visited Lumbini he was instructed by a Hindu priest (pujari) in the Mayadevi temple to worship at the Mayadevi image explaining as the exact spot where the Buddha was born and of course the nativity statue proved it. At his explanation, His Holiness just offered some flowers at the nativity image but led his devotees to the Asokan pillar to do a proper puja because he explained to his devotees that the inscription by Emperor Asoka had pinpointed very clearly that 'it was here (where the pillar stands) the Buddha was born.'

Similarly, late Ven. Bhikshu Sudarshan, a famous Nepalese Buddhist historian and author, always get mad when he sees archeologists dig around the Asokan pillar in Lumbini. He was always againts any exacavations around the pillar fearing that the excavation might destroy the foundation of the pillar which may lead to a possible argument that the pillar was relocated to Lumbini from somewhere else in the late

¹ Weise, Kai. 2013. The Sacred Garden of Lumbini: Perceptions of Buddha's birthplace. Paris: UNESCO <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002239/223986e.pdf> p.47

period. Therefore, popular believe prior to 1994 was that the Asokan pillar in Lumbini was the very spot where the Buddha was born.

However, in 1990 the excavation of the main archeological site of Lumbini was carried out aiming to uproot a tree which was gradually destroying the important archeological remains of Lumbini. Unexpectedly, the archeologists found a stone conglomerate sizing 70x40x10 located deeply buied in the sanctum sanatorium of the main archeological site. The way it was found signified the significance of the stone as it is located in the centre of the site and the stone was intentionally fixed by Mauryan bricks around so that the stone may not easily moved. This finding opened a new challenge to archeologists, historians and Buddhist scholars in order to understand about the stone they just had found. No body had a clue what was this stone all about.

However, with a great research from every part of the world pushed all scholars to search for an answer from the ancient Asokan inscription of Lumbini itself. Scholars paid more scrutiny on interpretation of the Brahmi inscription. Most importantly, the controversial term *silāvigadabhīcā* was widely studied. Remarkably, in 1994, without any connection of new archeological finidings in Lumbini, School of Oriental and African Studies of Univerity of London published an article written by Professor Kenneth R. Norman, the then president of the Pali Text Society entitled ‘a note on *silāvigadabhīcā* in Asoka’s Rummindei Inscription.’²

The article examined some of the proposals which had been made so far in the academic circle about the very term *silāvigadabhīcā*. Over dozen of scholars had their own version of interpretations different from each other. The interpretations are varied from installation of the pillar to types of the pillar, decorations of the pillar and surroundings of the pillar. However, after in depth examination, Professor Norman proposed his own interpretation that the original form of the phrase was *silāvigadabhītīca* with the meaning ‘and a wall made from, or decorated with, stone.’

Based on a linguistical study made by Professor Norman together with some other ancient unknown Chinese travellers’ records, hinted that the newly found unknown stone conglomerate was indeed the Marker Stone of the exact birthplace of the Buddha. It is understood that upon the arrival of the Emperor Asoka at Lumbini the exact spot of the birthplace of the Buddha was pointed out to him. Emperor Asoka then giave royal command to his staff to mark the place with a stone which was easily found around the area and fixed it with Mauryan bricks so that it won’t easily displaced or moved.

Similarly, Keisho Tsukamoto, a professor emeritus at Tohoku University and specialist in Indology and the history of Buddhism proposes that the term refers to the Marker Stone: ‘He caused to be made [the structure] with the enclosure (or wall)

² Norman, Kenneth R. ‘A Note on *silāvigadabhīcā* in Asoka’s Rummendei Inscription’ in **The Buddhist Forum Vol. III** edited by Tadeusz Skorupski and Ulrich Pagel. London: School of Oriental and African Studies 1994: 227-237.

[to protect] the stone being in its natural condition, i.e. a piece of natural rock...'
(Japanese Buddhist Federation, 2005, p. 20)

This activity of placing the marking stone by Emperor Asoka was then recorded by the term *silāvigadabhīcā* in his inscription which was installed much later. This is how the government of Nepal came to pinpoint the Marker Stone in Lumbini and illuminated all misunderstanding of whereabouts the Buddha took his birth in Lumbini itself. This finding indeed ended the long lasted debates of whereabouts is the birthplace of the Buddha.

Japan Buddhist Federation in their publication made in 2001 entitled 'Archaeological Research at Mayadevi Temple,' adopted new English translation of the Lumbini as follows:

'By King Piyadasi, the beloved of the gods (who) having been consecrated twenty years (having) come himself personally (here) to offer homage, or celebrate, because Shakyamuni Buddha was born here, was caused both a Silavigadabhica to be built and a stone pillar to be set up. (And), because the Lord was born here, the Lumbini village was made free from taxes and liable to pay (only) one-eighth part (of the produce)'³.

Unfortunately, the concerned department of the government of Nepal has not updated the translation of the inscription in Lumbini itself.

Lumbini : Fountain of Buddhism and Peace

From the inscription of the Asokan Pillar in Lumbini, it can be concluded that Emperor Asoka showed his great respect for the Buddha. He personally visited Lumbini, worshipped at the birth spot and constructed a platform to place the Marker Stone upon and erected a stone pillar with a suitable inscription stating the significance of the place as one worthy of commemoration. The inscription also states that pilgrims visiting the location were exempt from all religious taxes and that the levy on the produce of the village of Lumbini was reduced.

Most scholars have accepted the interpretation of the last part of Emperor Asoka's Lumbini inscription: '**pilgrims visiting the location were exempt from all religious taxes and that the levy on the produce of the village of Lumbini was reduced to one part out of eight.**' Unlike *silāvigadabhīcā*, there are hardly any examinations on the accuracy of this interpretation of the last two phrases of Asokan inscription: *ubalikekate athabhagiyeca*. I find that this interpretation is unfit and irrelevant considering the importance of Lumbini shown by the Emperor Asoka himself. Therefore, I would like to offer an alternative view on this last part of the inscription.

Since the 17th century, 150 Emperor Asokan edicts have been found carved into the face of rocks and cave walls as well as the pillars, all of which served to mark his kingdom, which stretched across northern India and south to below the central Deccan plateau and in areas now known as Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and

³ Japanese Buddhist Federation, Archaeological Research at Mayadevi Temple, 2001, p. 75

Afghanistan. The rocks and pillars were placed along trade routes and in border cities where the edicts would be read by the largest number of people possible. They were also erected at pilgrimage sites such as at Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, Bodh Gaya, the place of Buddha's Enlightenment, and Sarnath, the site of his First Sermon and Sanchi, where the Mahastupa, the Great Stupa of Sanchi, is located.

Some pillars were also inscribed with dedicatory inscriptions, which firmly date them and name Emperor Asoka as the patron. The script was Brahmi, the language from which all Indic language developed. A few of the edicts found in the western part of India are written in a script that is closely related to Sanskrit and a pillar in Afghanistan is inscribed in both Aramaic and Greek—demonstrating Emperor Asoka's desire to reach the many cultures of his kingdom. Some of the inscriptions are secular in nature. Emperor Asoka apologizes for the massacre in Kalinga and assures the people that he now only has their welfare in mind. Some boast of the good works that Emperor Asoka has done, underscoring his desire to provide for his people.

The pillars and edicts represent the first physical evidence of Buddhism. The inscriptions assert Emperor Asoka's Buddhism and support his desire to spread the dharma throughout his kingdom. However, surprisingly, the edicts say nothing about the philosophical aspects of Buddhism and some scholars have simply suggested that this demonstrates that Emperor Asoka had a very simple and naïve understanding of the dharma. Arguing against those scholars, Ven S. Dhammika suggests, Emperor Asoka's goal was not to expound on the truths of Buddhism, but to inform the people of his reforms and encourage them to live a moral life. The edicts, through their strategic placement and couched in the Buddhist dharma, serve to underscore Emperor Asoka's administrative role and as a tolerant leader.

A good example of the edict that explains the true intention of Emperor Asoka is edict no 6: Beloved of the Gods speaks thus: Twelve years after my coronation I started to have Dhamma edicts written for the welfare and happiness of the people, and so that not transgressing them they might grow in the Dhamma. Thinking: "How can the welfare and happiness of the people be secured?" I give my attention to my relatives, to those dwelling far, so I can lead them to happiness and then I act accordingly. I do the same for all groups. I have honored all religions with various honors. But I consider it best to meet with people personally.

I propose here with an alternative view that in fact Emperor Asoka did have good philosophical knowledge of Buddhism and that was how he was fully converted to be a pious Buddhist. Based on the examination of available Emperor Asoka's inscriptions we could not find any inscription where Emperor Asoka mentions about his economic taxation system. On the contrary, it was not relevant at all to his emphasis on social, ethical and moral proclamations.

For the translation of *ubalikekate athabhagiyeca*, V.A. Smith⁴ in his examination supported the idea that there was a system for taxing one-eighth of land revenue with the pilgrims who visited Lumbini. Smith refers that *bali* as shown by the *Arthasastra*, meant specially, but not exclusively, religious cesses. *Bhāga* meant 'land-revenue.' Thus in *Arthasastra*, *shadbhāga* means 'one-sixth of the produce paid as land-revenue.' Consequently, *ashta (atha) bhāga* means 'one-eighth of the produce paid as land-revenue.' However, the uses of 'one-eighth of the land-revenue' was never existed in any of the Brahmin or Buddhist ancient texts. The boon conferred on Lummini clearly was that the village had to pay only one-eighth of its produce as land-revenue. Supporting his theory, Smith further states that the proportion taken by the government varied at different times and places. One-sixth was the normal approved rate, but one-fourth was common. Probably Asoka ordinarily took one-fourth and in Lummini remitted half of that.

However, Smith was also in doubt whether it was the true wish of the Emperor Asoka himself. He writes, 'it will be observed that the record does not claim to have been incised by royal command. Presumably it was both drafted and engraved by a local authority to commemorate Asoka's visit and the favours conferred by him on that occasion.'⁵ This proposal weakens the authority of Asokan pillar itself as we generally believe that most of available inscriptions were direct wish of Emperor Asoka.

Hultzsch⁶ translated the last two phrases of the Lumbini inscription as 'He made the village of Lummini free of taxes, and paying only an eighth share (of the produce).' However, Parānavitana⁷ views that the normal land-tax being one-sixth, its reduction to one-eighth does not appear to be a great boon conferred on the people of Lumbini village, when we consider that august personage at whose hands they are supposed to have received it, and the great event meant to be glorified by it. Such considerations appear to have also troubled Hultzsch when he adopted the above rendering. For he says: 'In the case of the village of Lumbini, bureaucracy prevailed against charity.' If so, one may pertinently ask whether the Emperor Asoka would have had this fact advertised by having it engraved on stone.

Indeed, it sounds funny for Emperor Asoka who deeply venerates Buddha to tax revenue in the name of the Buddha's birthplace. On the contrary, it was more likely to sacrifice or giving away one's wealth for benefit of many as it was clearly inscribed on his 8th edict at Bodh Gaya.

I, therefore, believe that the term *bali* not necessarily means taxing. Based on religious texts, *bali* in Brahmanism generally means sacrifice (e.g. animal sacrifices).

⁴ Smith, Vincent A. 'Asoka: The Buddhist Emperor of India.' Oxford: the Clarendon Press. 1920 (1970): 222-223

⁵ *ibid* p. 223

⁶ E. Hultzsch, *The Inscription of Asoka*, Oxford, 1925: 164-65

⁷ S. Parānavitana, 'Rummindei Pillar Inscription of Asoka.' *JAOS*, 82, 1962: 163-67

However, in Buddhist texts, *bali* means worship, offering, practicing as in *pancabali*⁸ the fivefold offering to kinsfold, guests, the departed, the King and the gods.

Similarly, *athabhagiyecca* not necessarily means an eighth of land-revenue. According to the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary, *bhāga* means part, portion, fraction, or share. In another meaning it can also mean luck or fortune. *Bhāga* can also refer to the fortunate one or the Nobles Ones as in Bhagava or Bhagavant. In Buddhism, the Nobles Ones means those who have realized one of the eight stages of holiness (magga and phala, paths and fruitions) through practice of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path is not Eight Paths but it is the eightfold i.e. one Noble Path with eight parts of it.

Comparing with other Asokan inscriptions where Emperor Asoka prefers to give instructions for his subjects on all kinds of social and ethical issues, I believe that Lumbini inscription is in the same type i.e. giving practical Buddhist instructions for people of Lumbini village and people who visit Lumbini. It is nothing to do with remittance of the revenues. Therefore, the phrase *ubalikekate athabhagiyecca* more probably means requesting people of Lumbini and people who visit Lumbini to honour or worship (*bali*) Buddha by practicing the Noble Eightfold Paths (*athabhagiyecca*) because this is the place where the Buddha was born. This is more likely of encouraging people to honour Buddha by *pattipatipuja* or worship by practice.

Provided my theory is accurate, we can say that the Lumbini inscription is the most unique of all with proclamation of the core philosophy of Buddhism, the Noble Eightfold Path. Accordingly, Lumbini is the first place in the Buddhist history with archeological evidence in propagation of the core Buddhist philosophy of Buddhism and Peace i.e. the Noble Eightfold Path. This is accordance with the Buddha's first sermon after the Enlightenment. The first ever doctrine the Buddha taught to his first five ascetics were the very Noble Eightfold Path. Rest of the three Noble Truths out of the Four Noble Truths were only briefly mentioned towards the end of the discourse.

Therefore, Lumbini of Nepal is certainly not only the very birthplace of the Buddha but its inscription is the fountain of Buddhism where Emperor Asoka pledged all inhabitants of Lumbini and people who visit Lumbini to follow the core practice of Buddha to achieve ultimate peace, the ultimate goal of Buddhism, Nibbana.

Accordingly, Lumbini is indeed fountain of Buddhism and Peace.

⁸ Pali Text Society, London. *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English dictionary*. Chipstead, 1921-1925.p. 483