

The Ethical Value of the ‘Great Chronicle’ (*MahāvCsa*), the Prime, Heritable and Historical Record of Asians

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MahâvaCsa; the ‘Great Chronicle’

It is obvious that, no other chronicle can be found similar to this text which includes uninterrupted historical, political, cultural and literary evidences of the entire history of Ceylon. The pioneer of this vast masterpiece is none other than Ven. *Mahânâma thera* who dwelt at *Diksandaseveviyâ Pirivena* in Anuradhapura and as mentioned in *VaCsathappakâsinî*, the sub-commentary of the great chronicle, Ven. *Mahânâma* converted Sinhalese commentarial texts on the ‘Great chronicle’ into the language of *Æuddha-Mâgadhi*¹ and then compiled the great chronicle as *MahâvaCsa*.

He further elaborates in the second stanza of the 1st chapter that the *MahâvaCsa*, which was compiled by the ancient (sages) was here too long drawn out and there too closely knit; and contained many repetitions. ‘Attend ye now to this (*MahâvaCsa*) that is free from such faults, easy to understand and remember, arousing serene joy and emotion and handed down (to us) by tradition,—(attend ye to it) while that ye call up serene joy and emotion (in you) at passages that awaken serene joy and emotion’ (Geiger 2003: 01).

The author indicates in each ending of a chapter that ‘This chapter in *MahâvaCsa* is compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious.’ So, it is clear that the intention of *MahâvaCsa* is not only to reveal historical factors but to convey religious admonitions. Therefore, Ven. *Mahânâma* has used the Sinhala commentarial texts and converted it into Pâli language (as mentioned in *VaCsathappakâsinî*) adding a number of doctrinal facts with the intention of fostering the chronicle.

As mentioned above, besides a number of historical facts, religious admonitions have been added to the *MahâvaCsa*. Though every stanza does not give religious admonitions, especially doctrinal factors are included mostly in the concluding stanza of each chapter. Here, it is noteworthy that examining and paving the way to emerge these optimum doctrinal admonitions is very important for the better understanding of the Chronicle *MahâvaCsa*. Here, details have been examined under several chapters.

Superiority of the Buddha (Chapter 01)

In the very first chapter of this historical record some of the clear doctrinal factors on Enlightenment are discussed while revealing the Buddha’s life briefly and His visit to Sri Lanka.

“*DîpaEkarañhi sambuddhaC - passitvâ no jino purâ;*

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LokaC dukkhâ pamocetuC - bodhâya paGidhiC akâ” -5th stanza of the 1st chapter

The meaning of this stanza is ‘on seeing the *Sambuddha DîpaCkara*, in olden times, our Conqueror resolved to become a Buddha, that he might release the world from evil (Geiger 2003: 01).’ Here the clear and exact supreme role of a Buddha is shown before mentioning the historical incidents. It is none other than to release the world from evil or suffering. According to the *VaCsathappakâsinî*, the sub-commentary of *MahâvaCsa*, “*Dukkhâ pamocetuC*” means to release *Bhava dukkha* (the suffering of existence) and *SaCsâra dukkha* (the suffering of *SaCsâra*) (Amaravamsa Himi, Disanayake 1994: 36). In this manner, the world is suffering from these *bhava* and *saCsâra dukhâs*. Furthermore, this fact has been indicated as,

“*Puretvâ pâramî sabbâ - patvâ sambodhimuttamaC*

Uttamo gotamo buddho - satte dukkhâ pamocayi” - 11th stanza of the 1st chapter

Here, it has been clearly mentioned that the fulfillment of the Ten Perfections for the Buddha’s Enlightenment and His prime contribution to the eradication of the suffering of all beings. Thus, *MahâvaCsa* briefly gives a message to the readers, ‘who is the Buddha and what does he deal with?’ In this manner, *MahâvaCsa* author also represents the religious views of the Buddha as above. When the overall content of the 1st chapter is considered, it is obvious that while explaining the Buddha’s visit to Sri Lanka, a clear and brief picture of the Buddha’s superiority has been drawn here.

Anicctâ, the Impermanence as a Common Fact (Chapter 02)

The details such as, the *Mahâsammata*, the supreme race of prince *Siddhârtha*, the race of his mother, the life of *Siddhârtha*, several aspects regarding the Indian dynasty and the great demise of the Buddha have been discussed in this chapter. However, impermanence (*anicctâ*), one of the three universal characteristics of the world, has been mentioned in the concluding verse. It implies that the fact of impermanence common also to the Buddha who is the omniscience of the world. This doctrinal fact is mentioned in the 33rd verse in this chapter as,

“*Tathâgato sakalalokaggataC gato - AniccatâvasaC avaso upâgato*

Iti’ dha yo bhayajananiC aniccataC - Avekkhate sa bhavati dukkhapâragûti”

Here, the meaning is implied as, ‘the *Tathâgata*, who has reached the summit of all virtues, yielded himself up, albeit free, into the power of impermanence. He who shall contemplate this (same) dread-begetting impermanence shall attain unto the end of suffering’ (Geiger 2003: 13). Impermanence, an ultimate doctrinal teaching of Buddhism is discussed here with an ultimate sense. That is indicated here as, ‘Buddha also has to face impermanence. Therefore, what is the use of talking about others?’ As mentioned in the Tika ‘*sakalalokaggataC gato*’ means, ‘he reached the summit of all virtues of a Buddha and became supremae and achieved a noble state. He is praised by mundane and supramundane virtues’ (Amaravamsa Himi, Disanayake 1994: 36).

- i. Examples for mundane virtues of the Buddha,
'*samano khalu bho gotamo sakyaputto sakyakulā pabbajito*' Gotama the Buddha is a Shākyan son and he entered the Order from the great Shākyan clan.(DN I, Ambalatta Sutta)
- ii. Examples for supra-mundane virtues of the Buddha,
gatakotiko reached the ultimate goal (Nirvana) *pālitabrahmacariyo*
engaged with perfect celibacy
uttamaditthipatto possessed of right-view
bhāvitamaggo with well-trained righteous path
pahīnakilesa purified mind without cankers
patividdhākuppo attained exact supreme level, free from cankers
sacchikatanirodho realized the cessation (of suffering)
bhāvanāpāragū catunnaC ariyamaggānaC became the master of meditation and
comprehended the four noble truths well (Khuddakanikāya, Mahāniddeśapāli)

Although the Buddha is in such a level, he is subjected to impermanence. But that is different from other beings. He is called "*Avaso*" which means 'the Buddha is not subjected to mundane world or he does not dwell with mundane subjects.' Therefore, like mundane/worldly beings (*Vasa*), he is not subjected to impermanence unwillingly or with full of lamentation and he did not get caught by the Evil-*māra* and Evil-*māra* did not get caught by the Buddha (Amaravamsa Himi 1994: 92). That is the fact that the Buddha, after He was invited to pass away by the Evil-one (*māra*), himself declared that "*na tavā'haC , pāpima, parinibbāissāmi* - Hey, Mara this is not the time for my death because I am not dying now" (Dīghanikāya II, Parinibbana sutta).

The above mentioned '*bhayajananiC aniccataC Avekkhate*' means 'reflection of fear, horripillation, sorrow, lamentation etc. which occurred to the person who abandoned meditation. Then, having reflected on that fact, the person realizes these truths as they are called, '*sa bhavati dukkhapāragūti*' (Amaravamsa Himi 1994: 94). Then, that person ultimately goes to the end of *dukkha* and attains *Nibbāna*, the emancipation. In this manner, *MahāvaCsa* author gives a clear picture on *aniccatā*, the nature of impermanence which also influences the life of the Buddha.

Death and the Cessation of Death (Chapter 03)

The 3rd chapter which describes the great demise of the Buddha, his cremation, the First Dhamma Council, Ven. Ānanda's Arahantship and records of holding the council, finally describes a doctrinal description about the death and the cessation of death, the *Nibbāna* as follows:

"*Therā'pi te matipadīpahatandhakārā - Lokandhakārahananamhi mahāpadīpā*
Nibbāpitā maraGaghoramahānilena - Tenāpi jīvitamadaC matimā jaheyāti"

The meaning of this stanza is 'also the *therās* who have overcome darkness with the light of insight, those great shining lights in the conquest of the world's darkness, have been

extinguished by the dread tempest of death. Therefore will the wise man renounce the joy of life?'

As mentioned in the *MahāvaCsa Tikā*, this verse is compiled mentioning the great demises of Great Arahantās, by the *MahāvaCsa* author in order to mitigate the desire of life through the perception of *anicca* which occurred in the minds of listeners.

Here, the viewpoint of *Theravāda* confraternity, regarding the *Arahantās* and their life after the death is clearly mentioned by *Ven. Mahanama* who represented *Theravāda* tradition. Therefore, the supremacy and nobility of *Arahantās* and contribution towards diminishing the darkness of delusion in the world is praised by the author. Here, '*Mati*' means the knowledge of path which leads to *Arahantship* (Amaravamsa Himi, Disanayake 1994: 94). So, '*matipadīpahatandhakārā*' gives the meaning as, 'the darkness of delusion which was annihilated through the light of the path of *Arahant*.' *Arahantās* are introduced as, "*Therā ... mahāpadīpā*" which means, 'they are the noblest persons who help the people who lack 'Dhamma' knowledge and by establishing and preaching 'Dhamma', and they definitely light the dark in the lustful minds of worldly people. The same fact can be seen in *Jarāvagga* of *Dhammapada* as, "*Andhakārena onaddhā - padīpaC na gavesatha?* (Dhammapada, Jarāvagga, 1st verse)" which means 'you are covered and bounded with darkness. Why don't you find a light?' As mentioned here, *Arahantās* have already found that noble light.

In this verse death is represented as, '*maraga-ghora-mahānilena*' which gives meaning as, 'a huge, fierce and fearsome wind' that cannot be stopped by anybody. The light of *Arahant* also faded away because of this fierce wind. But it is different from others and this incident recalls a statement of *Ratana Sutta* in *Sutta Nipāta* regarding the *Arahantās*' diminishing or passing away as follows,

"*nibbanti dhīrā yathāyaC padīpo - Idampi saEghe ratanaC paGītaC*",

(Khuddakapāthapāli, Ratana sutta)

'Like a lamp or light fades away, those noble wise Arahantas fade away or demise.' This is a noble and sacred characteristic of *SaCgha* or Arahants.

Therefore, here the most important doctrinal fact that the author has attempted to tell the audience is '*Tenāpi jīvitamadaC matimā jaheyya*', through this understanding (death is permanent), wise man can give up the desire regarding his own-life. In this manner, connecting to the 2nd chapter's statement, '*bhayajananiC aniccataC Avekkhate*', the author of *MahāvaCsa Tikā* gives a comprehensive idea as follows,

"Dear disciples, look, the above mentioned fact, the nature of impermanence (Buddha's great demise – concluding verse in 2nd chapter) and *Great Arahantās* who are like a light of annihilating world's darkness, subjected to the nature of impermanence which is like a huge, fierce and fearsome wind. They passed away from the element of *Nirupadisesa Nibbāna*. What is the use of telling about you? (There is nothing to tell about you). Therefore, make sure and try to make a concerted effort to overcome all the wrong desire on life and cease the suffering (Amaravamsa Himi, Disanayake 1994: 104).

Maranânussati; the mindfulness on death (Chapter 04)

This is also a significant verse which can be found in *MāhavaCsa*, with regard to the meditation of *Maranânussati* (the mindfulness on death). This is a profound doctrine which is directly connected with the cessation of *saCsâra* or desire of life. Thus, *MāhavaCsa* tries to establish this doctrinal fact in the listener's mind with a noble intention of engaging him in this noble path.

“*Iti paramamatînaC pattipattabbakânaC*

TibhavahitakarânaC lokanâtherasânaC

SumariyamaraGaC taC saEkhatâ sârakattaC

ParigaGiyamasesaC appamatto bhaveyyâti” - 66th Verse of 04th Chapter

Pali grammarian Gaiger gives its meaning as ‘when we bethink us of the sons of the Universal teacher, who were gifted with perfect insights, who had attained all that is to attain, who had conferred blessings on (the beings of) the three forms of existence, then may we lay to heart the entire vanity of all that comes into being and vigilantly strive [after deliverance] (Geiger 2003: 25).

It is apparent and interesting that, by scrutinizing this verse, a clear and concise picture about the nature of *khînâsava maharahat* (the noble person who uprooted all defilements) can be drawn. Here ‘*paramamatî*’ means the person who attained ultimate noble knowledge and he is called *pattipattabbaka* because he is the person who realized what should be realized in this dispensation (*Buddha Sâsana*). Because of his great effort for the goodness and welfare of three *Bhava Kâma, Rûpa and Arûpa*, he is called ‘*Tibhavahitakara*’ (Amaravamsa Himi 1994: 118). Furthermore, *MāhavaCsa Tika* gives a definition to the word ‘*lokanâtherasa*’ for *Arahantâs*. According to the word meaning (*lokanâthassa + orasa*) *Arahantâs* are born from the *Dhamma* shoulder of the Buddha. They are the sons of the *Buddha* (*Buddhaputta*).

The death of *Arahantâs* is different from the others. It is a clear and pure death which does not take a next birth (*pratisandhi*). ‘*SumariyamaraGaC* is a specific word which is included in this stanza. It is better to take this word as a compound word and the meaning as, correct, pure, proper, faultless and accurate death. Its word formation is *sumariya + maraGaC*, “*sumariyaC ca taC maranaC câti SumariyamaraGaC*” and it belongs to *kammadhara* compound; Descriptive Determinate Compounds. The word ‘*sumarati*’ means ‘to remember’. For an instance, ‘*IcevaC so sumariya alaEkattukâmo’si maggaC*’ (JinavaCsadîpa, Pathama sagga), having well realized, Sumedha, the *Bodhisatta* was willing to prepare for the path. Here also ‘*sumariya*’ means ‘having a well concentrated mind or consciousness.’ So, the death with such a mind state is called ‘*SumariyamaraGaC*.’

On the other hand, the author of *MāhavaCsa* points out the significance of death with a well concentrated mind and commemorating of death as the Buddha said, “*maragassati, bhikkhave, bhâvitâ bahulikatâ mahapphalâ hoti mahânisaCsâ amatogadhâ amatapariyosânâ*.

O Bhikkhu, always contemplate on death. It brings benefits for you” (AN Pathamamaranassati sutta). Finally, he gives a great piece of advice that having known and recognized that ‘every conditional things are impermanent (*saEkhatâsârakattaC*), it is not too late to engage with commemorating the death (*appamatto bhaveyya*).

Psychological Process of Mind (Chapter 05)

In the 5th chapter of *MāhavaCsa* which describes the 3rd *Dhamma* Council, the three verses mentioned below are very important to understand the psychological process of mind connected to death. Likewise, it gives a doctrinal structure that ‘how the development of mindfulness of death (*maranasaññâ*) causes the highest achievement (*Nibbâna*) of Bhikkhûs.

While recording the 3rd council, a story has been mentioned to bring out this doctrinal fact. An heir apparent (*EkâhaC Uparâjâ*) goes to the forest and sees a king of deer which eats grass and plays. Then, he thinks ‘why monks who have good foods do not play while deer in jungle play with having grass?’ He asks the king and the king gives him the kingship for seven days to rule the kingdom with a condition that after seven days ‘you will be killed.’

“*Anubhoi ime rajjaC - sattâha tvaC kumâraka*

Tato taC ghâtayissâmi - icca’voca mahîpati.” (verse 157)

After seven days the heir apparent (Uparajâ) has nothing but only skin and born. Then the King asks thus,

“*Âhâtîtamhi sattâhe - TvaC kenâ’si kiso iti*

MaraGassa bhayenâti - Vutte râjâha taC puna. (verse 158)

When the week was gone by, the king asked, ‘why are you wasted away (slender) like this?’ And then (*Tissa*) answered: because of the fear of death. And then the king spoke again and said thus,

“*SattâhâhaC marissaC ti - tvaCna kili ime kathaC*

Kîlissanti yati tâta - sadâ maraGasaññino.” (verse:159)

Thinking that thou must die when the week was gone by, thou was no longer joyous and gay; how then can ascetics be joyous and gay, my dear, who think ever upon death? (Geiger 2003: 25).

The king did not want to kill the *Uparâja* but wanted him to realize of the nature of ‘death perception.’ It is obvious that even somebody who has a kingship or a luxurious life, he or she is overcome by death. That psychological fear of death affects the physical degradation of a being. Furthermore it is noteworthy that the nature of mind of a monk regarding the death is called ‘*Maranânussati*’. Buddhism instructs that nine factors should be developed for the better realization of the ultimate truth. Those are,

I. Perceptions of the foul - *asubhasaññâ*

- II. Perceptions of death - *marāEasaññā*
- III. Perceptions of the loathsomeness of food - *āhārepatikūlasaññā*
- IV. Perceptions of distaste for the whole world - *sabbalokeanabhiratisaññā*
- V. Perceptions of impermanence - *aniccasaññā*
- VI. Perceptions of the suffering in impermanence - *anicce dukkhasaññā*
- VII. Perceptions of impersonality in suffering - *dukkhe anattasaññā*
- VIII. Perceptions of relinquishment - *pahānasaññā*
- IX. Perceptions of dispassion - *virāgasaññā* (DN Dasuttara sutta)

Among these nine factors *Maranasaññā* (or maranānussati = commemorating death as it is) is one of facts that should be developed by the truth seeker. However, it can be assumed that the above mentioned incident in *Mahāvamsa* is a practical and interesting applying to convey that doctrinal message to the listeners.

Everybody Has to Face the Natural Phenomenon, the Impermanence (chapter 20)

The final verses of this chapter reveal the demise of the *Mahā Therās* and *Therīs*. Those verses mention ‘who they are? , what are their qualities? and ultimately what happened to them? The five great *theras* (Those who came to Ceylon with Ven. Mahinda), also the twelve *therīs* including *Sanghamitta* and many thousands of *bhikkhūs* and *bhikkhunīs* who were freed from *asavās*, are included here.

Having ruled the kingdom for years, king Uttiya also faced this natural phenomenon. Here the nature of impermanence has been personified as, “*aniccatā esā, sabbalokavināsinī.*” It is feminine and she (*aniccatā*) destroys all objects of the world. Concluding the chapter of ‘Thera parinibbāna’ the final verse mentions the mitigation of desire of life of the beings (Amaravamsa Himi 1994: 329).

The final stanza gives the meaning as ‘a man who, although he knows this overmastering, overwhelming, irresistible morality, yet he is not discontented with the world of existence and does not feel, in this discontent, resentment at wrong nor joy in virtue—that is the strength of the fetters of his evil delusion! — Such a person is knowingly fooled (Geiger 2003: 141).

Here, the terms ‘*atisāhasaC, atibalaC* and *nāvāriyaC*’ show the seriousness of the nature of impermanence. Likewise, through this verse the writer points out and describes ‘how a person automatically becomes foolish?’ He says, because of evil delusion (*atimohajālabalatā*), someone

makes blunders, although he has knowledge about impermanence. Then the *Mahāvamsa* author introduces satirically, that the man as a foolish one becomes a fool purposely or consciously (*tassa yaC taC jānampi muyhati*).

The Value of Diminishing Hatred (Chapter 24)

While describing the war of the two brothers, the arrival of Prince Gemunu to Māgama and making peace between two brothers and sending prince Tissa to Digāveva, the value of diminishing hatred is admired by the author, in this chapter. ‘Concluding the chapter of the war of the two brothers, having shown those two brothers, this final stanza is said with the intention of admiring the listeners’ (Amaravamsa Himi 1994: 373) as follows:

“*Iti veramanekavikappacitaC - Samayanti bahuC api sappurisaC*
Iti cintiya kōhi naro matimā - Na bhavyeaya paresu susanta manoti.”

The meaning of this verse is ‘thus, are pious men want to appease an enmity, though heaped up from many causes, even if it be great; what wise man, pondering this, shall not be of peace-loving mind toward others?’ Here, it has explained how hatred rises in the mind of an individual. It is indicated by the term, ‘*anekavikappacitaC.*’ The Tika explains ‘*anekavikappacitaC*’ as, “*anekadhā upacitaC punappunānusaranavasena rāsikataC ti attho*’ which means ‘rose from various manner, the bonded hatred by reacting again and again. This is how the hatred is raised in the common world. Thus, *Mahāvamsa* advises that it should be uprooted by spreading loving kindness and tolerance (*Samayanti*). Then, it explains furthermore that the person who is calm and has a composed mind is called *matimā*, the wise man. This same doctrinal instruction comes in *Petakopadesa* (quoted from *Dīgha Nikāya*) as,

“*Dadato puññaC pavaddhati - ‘SaCyamato’ ‘veraC na cīyati’*
Kusalo ca jahāti pāpakaC, - Rāgadosamohakkhayā sanibbuto
 (Petakopadesapāli / DN, Mahāvaggapāli)

In this verse *cīyati* means ‘to be heaped up.’ So, ‘*SaCyamato*’, the person who has restrained from hatred does not heap up hatred.

Merits are the only one Strength for Living Being (Chapter 31)

According to the *VaCsathappakāsinī* the concluding verse of this chapter is mentioned with the intention of advising the audience that ‘merits are the only one strength for the living and non-living beings in the world.’ That idea can be found in the canon as thus,

“*Tasmā vineyya maccheraC - dajjā dānaC malābhibhū*
Puññāni paralokasmīC - patitthā honti pāGina’nti”
 (SN, Macchari sutta)

The doctrinal message of the above mentioned stanza is none other than the significance of performing merits. The concluding verse of this chapter gives a valuable message about the significance of engaging in a meritorious life. It means ‘thus do the pious themselves perform

pure deeds of merit, in order to obtain the most glorious of all blessings; and they, with pure heart, make also others perform them in order to a following of eminent people of many kinds.

without any force of other. *Kîtâgiri sutta* of *Majjhima Nikaya* also indicates that the person enters to study *Dhamma* having established *Saddha*, the devotion (*saddhâjato upasaCkamati*). Likewise, it is a task that should be performed by him not by another.

The wise man does not only engage in doing merits individually but engages others in meritorious deeds and prevents others from doing evil deeds. It is mentioned in the *VaCsathappakâsinî* as follows,

“*Khattiyabrâhmanâdivividhavisesanaparivâra-hetubhutâni Puññâni pi pare ca kârenti attho*” (Amaravamsa Himi 1994:466).

In *Sumangalavilâsinî*, the commentary of *Dîgha Nikâya*, mentions the value of the person who engages with good behavior and engages others to behave in that manner. “*Catuttho yo attanâ ca silâdisampanno parañca silâdisu samâdapeti âyasmâ mahâkassapo viya*” (Sumangalavilâsinî, the commentary of DN) Indicating Ven. Mahâkassapa, Ven. Buddhaghosa comments on *Sangîti sutta*. In this manner, great qualities of the real meritorious persons are mentioned in a nutshell in the 31st chapter of *Mahâvansa*.

Conclusion

By examining the above verses in several chapters of *MahâvaCsa*, especially the concluding verses, a conclusion can be drawn that the intention of compiling *MahâvaCsa* is not only to reveal historically significant factors of Ceylon but also to help the listeners observe Buddhist Doctrinal factors. In some verses, it is seen that the *MahâvaCsa* author has used his own way of engaging listeners in religious admonitions.

Showing examples through historical incidents he conveys these messages to the listeners and engages them in practicing mental and physical good deeds and turn their lives towards a righteous way. It is noteworthy here that the methods used by the *MahâvaCsa* author is absolutely a practical way and admirable. On the other hand, in each ending of a chapter he indicates that ‘This chapter in *MahâvaCsa* is compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious’

Therefore, when attention is paid furthermore to the inclusions of the whole *MahâvaCsa*, a number of religious admonitions can be found and they can be scrutinized comparing them with canonical doctrinal factors.

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¹ ‘*Āuddha-Māgadhi bhāṣā*’: the pure form of the provincial dialect of Magadha (language used in Magadha, the most powerful province in India during the Buddha’s time), was used by the Buddha as his medium of instruction to expound his Doctrine of Deliverance.

² In *Abhidhamma* the word ‘*AsaCkārîka*’ is used to indicate the consciousness which is born without any external force (others).