

14

Xuan Zang and Fa Hsien on the History and Religion of Sri Lanka

Senior Prof. Asanga Tilakaratne

Head, Department of Buddhist Philosophy, Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Of the many pilgrims who ventured to travel to what was known among the Chinese as "western Buddhist countries" Xuan Zang undoubtedly was most prominent. His records serve as one of the most reliable sources for unraveling some mysteries of Indian Buddhist history. It is clear that Xuan Zang did not visit Sri Lanka. He was satisfied by the accounts he got from the monks visiting from Sri Lanka and seems to have thought that there was no point in visiting the Country. The monks who provided information on Sri Lanka refer to the death of the king and a famine the country was facing. Nearly two centuries earlier however, Fa Hsien, another illustrious Chinese traveler visited Sri Lanka and recorded his impressions on the Country, its culture, religion and people.

In this paper I will be examining the accounts given by Xuan Zang and Fa Hsien on Sri Lanka with a view to assess the light their accounts shed on understanding history of Buddhism in the Island in particular and in the region in general. Also it is of interest to put the information given by these travelers against the information on the state of Sri Lanka during this period as revealed through the chronicles of Sri Lanka and other historical sources.

Fa Hsien's Records of Sri Lanka

Fa Hsien started his journey at the beginning of the 5th century and spent altogether 15 years (399-414 A.D.) in India and Sri Lanka. The last lap of his journey was Sri Lanka where it is believed that he spent two years, and from where he started for his own country. The purpose of his visit was to find Vinaya texts of early Buddhist schools.

Fa Hsien's account begins with reference to early human settlement in the Island a long time ago. The Country according to this account was