

## King Aśoka's Dedication to Buddhism

“[a]midst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines, almost alone, a star.” (*The Outline of History*, H. G. Wells)

Aśoka the Great (304-232 BCE) was the third ruler of the Indian Mauryan Empire which was the largest ever in the Indian subcontinent and one of the world's largest empires at its time. He ruled the empire for 26 years (268 BCE - 232 BCE) and became a model of kingship in the Buddhist tradition. King Aśoka's legacy almost went extinct in India's later Islamic history until European orientalist began to rediscover it in the late eighteenth century, and, along with it, much we know about Buddhism today. Ever since Indian's lost child received the highest recognition and adulation by his descendants and internationally. The Republic of India has chosen the Aśoka-Chakra (wheel) as its symbol in the national flag as well as the Four-Lion-Capital (Ashok stambh) as the emblem of the republic, and Bollywood portrayed him in a US\$1.9m movie production in 2001.

Beyond the Edicts of Ashoka, biographical information about him relies on legends written centuries later, such as the 2nd-century CE *Ashokavadana* ("Narrative of Ashoka", a part of the *Divyavadana*), and in the Sri Lankan text *Mahavamsa* ("Great Chronicle"). His Sanskrit name "Aśoka" means "painless, without sorrow". In his edicts, he is referred to as *Devānāmpriya* (Pali *Devānaṃpiya* or "the Beloved of the Gods"), and *Priyadarśin* (Pali *Piyadasī* or "He who regards everyone with affection"). His fondness for his name's connection to the *Saraca asoca* tree, or "Ashoka tree", is also referenced in the *Ashokavadana*.

**Aśoka** was the grandson of King Chandragupta, the founder of the Maurya Dynasty. After king Chandraguptha, his son, King Bindusara expanded Maurya empire. Asoka's parents were King Bindusara and Subhadraṅgī (or Dharmā). History says king Bindusara had 16 wives and 101 sons. Susima was the eldest son and Asoka was the third. The youngest was Tissa. Ashoka was stationed at Ujain, the capital of Malwa, as governor by his father. After king Bindusara's death in 272 BCE, Ashoka was led to a war over succession for the throne. According to the *Divyavadana*, Bindusara wanted his elder son Susima to succeed him but Ashoka was supported

by his father's ministers, In *The Dipavansa* and *Mahavansa* refer to Ashoka's killing 99 of his brothers, sparing only one, named Vitashoka or Tissa.

Buddhist legends state that Ashoka was bad-tempered and of a wicked nature. A Chinese traveller named Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang) who visited India for several years during the 7th century CE, reports that even during his time, about 900 years after the time of Ashoka, Hindu tradition still remembered the prison Ashoka had established in the north of the capital as "Ashoka's hell", an elaborate torture chamber described as a "Paradisal Hell" due to the contrast between its beautiful exterior and the acts carried out within by his appointed executioner, Girikaa. Ashoka ordered that prisoners should be subject to all imagined and unimagined tortures and nobody should ever leave the prison alive.

Ascending the throne, Ashoka expanded his empire over the next eight years, from the present-day Assam in the East to Balochistan in the West; from the Pamir Knot in Afghanistan in the north to the peninsula of southern India except for present day Tamil Nadu and Kerala which were ruled by the three ancient Tamil kingdoms. The empire's capital was Pataliputra (in Magadha, present-day Patna), with provincial capitals at Taxila and Ujjain.

During the expansion of the Mauryan Empire, Ashoka led a destructive wars against a state named Kalinga (present day Orissa) which he conquered in about 260 BCE. This earned him the name of *Chañḍāśoka* meaning "Ashoka the Fierce" in Sanskrit. In about 263 BCE, he converted to Buddhism after witnessing the mass deaths of the Kalinga War, which he had waged out of a desire for conquest and which reportedly directly resulted in more than 100,000 deaths and 150,000 deportations. After he embraced Buddhism, he became the zealous and ardent *Dharmāśoka*. Professor Charles Drekmeier cautions that the Buddhist legends tend to dramatise the change that Buddhism brought in him, and therefore, exaggerate Ashoka's past wickedness and his piousness after the conversion.

## **SUPPORT FOR BUDDHISM**

Asoka contributed to the development of Buddhism in three important ways.

1. First he applied basic principles of Buddhism to his rule through government and foreign policies.

2. Second and the most significant contribution, Asoka played the central role of **organizing the Third Buddhist Council**, followed by the **support of Buddhist missions all over the empire and even beyond as far as Greece, Egypt and Syria.**
3. Third, Asoka was able to maintain Buddhism as a major religious tradition in the kingdom. Asoka was able to contribute interfaith dialogue; he maintained positive dialogue with people of other religions because he believed all religions are good.
  - Asoka believed the first precepts (Ashismsa) and generosity were very important in witnessing the faith.
  - Asoka taught people about Buddhism in different ways to help them best understand all the Buddhist teachings. For example Asoka taught the educated through writing on edicts and pillars, whereas he taught the uneducated through ministry, stories and paintings.
  - Asoka strengthens Buddhism through building 84,000 commemorative Buddhists buildings in order for Sangha to use as a place of meditation.
  - Asoka established social welfare support because Asoka believed it was important to support all his people. An example of a social welfare that Asoka did was he grew **medicinal herb gardens and shade areas for all the people.**
  - Most importantly Asoka believed that everyone should be treated with friendliness.
  - distributed his wealth to poor;
  - sponsored festivals, and looking after peace and prosperity in the country
  - served as an inspiring model of a righteous and tolerant ruler that influenced monarchs from Sri Lanka to China and Japan.
  - Asoka used to **worship the bodhi tree.**

### **Sending Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka**

Asoka's had two children from his first wife Maharani Devi, Mahinda and Sanghamitta; both became great monastics proselytising Sri Lanka later. Mahinda was twenty when he was ordained by his preceptor Ven. Moggaliputta Tissa, one of Asoka's advisers.

According to Sri lankan history, king Asoka had a unseen relationship with Devanampiyatissa who was the king of Sri Lanka at that time. They wrote letters and shared gifts with each other. As a result of this friendship, Asoka sent his own son and daughter to Sri Lanka for spreading

Buddhism when he sent messengers to 9 countries. The Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa, Sri Lanka's two great history books, contain accounts of Asoka sending his own son Mahinda to Sri Lanka for Buddhist missionary as a result of the third Buddhist council. Mahinda traveled to Sri Lanka and converted King Devanampiyatissa. The Mahavamsa also says that Ashoka's daughter became a nun and brought the Bodhi Tree to Sri Lanka.

Asoka has been a big part in the development of Buddhism and has contributed many important and significant contributions that are still being used and continued to be followed today.

Eventually, Buddhism died out in India sometime after Ashoka's death, but it remained popular outside its native land, especially in eastern and south-eastern Asia. The world owes to Ashoka the growth of one of the world's largest spiritual traditions.

### **THE EDICTS OF ASHOKA AND HIS TEACHINGS**

After the war of Kalinga, Ashoka stopped his expansion policy and India turned into a prosperous and peaceful place for the years to come. Ashoka began to issue one of the most famous edicts in the history of government and instructed his officials to carve them on rocks and pillars. In the rock edicts, Ashoka talks about **religious freedom and religious tolerance**, he instructs his officials to **help the poor and the elderly, establishes medical facilities for humans and animals, commands obedience to parents, respect for elders, generosity for all priests and ascetic orders no matter their creed, orders fruit and shade trees to be planted and also wells to be dug along the roads so travellers can benefit from them.**

What makes the Dharmāsoka so outstanding is that he extended this responsibility for the common good of the Arthasāstra to all people. Aśoka broadcasted his vision by rock epigraph which he extended to anyone in and beyond his domain,

**“All men are my children. Now (therefore) I desire, what? All should live here happily and be benefited. (...) I also desire for all men that they should obtain it (happiness).”<sup>78</sup> In a later inscription he added that his orders “may last long as (my) sons and great-grandsons (shall reign and) as long as the moon and the sun (shall shine).”**

**“[T]o protect with Dhamma, to make happiness through Dhamma and to guard with Dhamma”** was Aśoka's clear mission statement. However, his Law-of-Pity exceeded the rājadhammā, the traditional duties of a king. What Ashoka meant by *dharma* is not entirely clear:

some believe that he was referring to the teachings of the **Buddha** and, therefore, he was expressing his conversion to **Buddhism**. But the word *dharma*, in the context of Ashoka, had also other meanings not necessarily linked to Buddhism. It is true, however, that in subsequent inscriptions Ashoka specifically mentions Buddhist sites and Buddhist texts, but what he meant by the word *dharma* seems to be more related to **morals, social concerns and religious tolerance** rather than Buddhism. With regards to “Ashoka’s dhamma”, **Bhatta** writes, “may be described as moral law independent of any caste or creed based on the essence of all religions. His dhamma included the least amount of sin and the greatest amount of good done to others.” Its core values, collected from the epigraphs, are given in the following table.

<b>Core Values</b>	<b>10-fold Rājadhama</b>
Generosity (PE II)	dāna (munificence, generosity)
“Minimum sins, maximum virtues” (PE II)	sīla (excellent character, law-abiding)
Sense-of-Duty (Kaliṅga RE I), “For the welfare and happiness” (several edicts) pariccāga (sacrifice, altruism) Truthfulness (PE II)	Ajjava (honesty, integrity)
Kindness (PE II)	maddava (gentleness)
Self-Control (RE VII)	tapa (self-control, restraint)
Gratitude (RE VII)	akkodha (non-hatred)
Conquest by Dhamma (RE XIII)	ahimsā (non-violence)
Forgiveness (RE XIII)	khanti (forbearance, patience)
Purity of Heart (RE VII)	avirodhana (uprightness, conformity)

Comparison Of Aśoka’s Core Values With The 10-Fold Rājadhama of the Jātaka

