

IMPACTS OF BUDDHISM ON THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF ASHOKA THE GREAT

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The second Mauryan emperor, Bindusara, ruled for twenty-five years. He warred occasionally, reinforcing his nominal authority within India, and he acquired the title "Slayer of Enemies." Then in the year 273 BCE, he was succeeded by his son Ashoka, who in his first eight years of rule did what was expected of him: he looked after the affairs of state and extended his rule where he could. Around the year 260 Ashoka fought great battles and imposed his rule on people southward along the eastern coast of India – an area called [Kalinga](#). The sufferings created by the war disturbed Ashoka. He found relief in Buddhism and became an emperor with values that differed from those of his father, grandfather and others. He was a Buddhist lay member and went on a 256-day pilgrimage to Buddhist holy places in northern India. Buddhism benefited from the association with state power that Hinduism had enjoyed – and that Christianity would enjoy under Constantine the Great.

Like Jeroboam and other devout kings, Ashoka was no revolutionary. Rather than India changing politically, Buddhism was changing. In the years to come, Ashoka mixed his Buddhism with material concerns that served the Buddha's original desire to see suffering among people mitigated: Ashoka had wells dug, irrigation canals and roads constructed. He had rest houses built along roads, hospitals built, public gardens planted and medicinal herbs grown. But Ashoka maintained his army, and he maintained the secret police and network of spies that he had inherited as a part of his extensive and powerful bureaucracy. He kept his hold over Kalinga, and he

did not allow the thousands of people abducted from Kalinga to return there. He announced his intention to "look kindly" upon all his subjects, as was common among kings, and he offered the people of Kalinga a victor's conciliation, erecting a monument in Kalinga which read:

All men are my children, and I, the king, forgive what can be forgiven.

Ashoka converted his foreign policy from expansionism to that of coexistence and peace with his neighbors – the avoidance of additional conquests making his empire easier to administer. In keeping with his Buddhism he announced that he was determined to ensure the safety, peace of mind and happiness of all "animate beings" in his realm. He announced that he would now strive for conquest only in matters of the human spirit and the spread of "right conduct" among people. And he warned other powers that he was not only compassionate but also powerful.

King Ashoka, who many believe was an early convert to Buddhism, decided to solve these problems by erecting pillars that rose some 50' into the sky. The pillars were raised throughout the Magadha region in the North of India that had emerged as the center of the first Indian empire, the Mauryan Dynasty (322-185 B.C.E). Written on these pillars, intertwined in the message of Buddhist compassion, were the merits of King Ashoka.

Ashoka the great is widely believed to be the first leader to accept Buddhism and thus the first major patron of Buddhist art. Ashoka made a dramatic conversion to Buddhism after witnessing the carnage that resulted from his conquest of the village of Kalinga. He adopted the teachings of the Buddha known as the Four Noble Truths, referred to as the dharma (the law):

Life is suffering (suffering=rebirth)
 the cause of suffering is desire
 the cause of desire must be overcome
 when desire is overcome, there is no more suffering (suffering=rebirth)

Individuals who come to fully understand the Four Noble Truths are able to achieve Enlightenment, ending samsara, the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. Ashoka also pledged to follow the Six Cardinal Perfections (the Paramitas), which were codes of conduct created after the Buddha's death providing instructions for the Buddhist practitioners to follow a compassionate Buddhist practice. Ashoka did not require that everyone in his kingdom become Buddhist, and Buddhism did not become the state religion, but through Ashoka's support, it spread widely and rapidly.

One of Ashoka's first artistic programs was to erect the pillars that are now scattered throughout what was the Mauryan empire. The pillars vary from 40 to 50 feet in height. They are cut from two different types of stone—one for the shaft and another for the capital. The shaft was almost always cut from a single piece of stone. Laborers cut and dragged the stone from quarries in Mathura and Chunar, located in the northern part of India within Ashoka's empire. The pillars weigh about 50 tons each. Only 19 of the original pillars survive and many are in fragments. The first pillar was discovered in the 16th century.

The physical appearance of the pillars underscores the Buddhist doctrine. Most of the pillars were topped by sculptures of animals. Each pillar is also topped by an inverted lotus flower, which is the most pervasive symbol of Buddhism (a lotus flower rises from the muddy water to bloom unblemished on the surface—thus the lotus became an analogy

for the Buddhist practitioner as he or she, living with the challenges of everyday life and the endless cycle of birth and rebirth, was able to achieve Enlightenment, or the knowledge of how to be released from samsara, through following the Four Noble Truths). This flower, and the animal that surmount it, form the capital, the topmost part of a column. Most pillars are topped with a single lion or a bull in either seated or standing positions. The Buddha was born into the Shakya or lion clan. The lion, in many cultures, also indicates royalty or leadership. The animals are always in the round and carved from a single piece of stone.

Some pillars had edicts (proclamations) inscribed upon them. The edicts were translated in the 1830s. Since the 17th century, 150 Ashokan 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 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 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 (a stupa is a burial mound for an esteemed person. When the Buddha died, he was cremated and his ashes were divided and buried in several stupas. These stupas became pilgrimage sites for Buddhist practitioners.

Some pillars were also inscribed with dedicatory inscriptions, which firmly date them and name Ashoka 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 Ashoka's desire to reach the many cultures of his kingdom. Some of the inscriptions are secular in nature. Ashoka 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 Ashoka has done, underscoring his desire to provide for his people.

Ashoka's wish for peace was undisturbed by famines or natural disasters. His rule did not suffer from the onslaught of any great migration. And during his reign, no neighboring kings tried to take some of his territory – perhaps because these kings were accustomed to fearing the Mauryan monarchs and thinking them strong.

The resulting peace helped extend economic prosperity. Ashoka relaxed the harsher laws of his grandfather, Chandragupta. He gave up the kingly pastime of hunting game, and in its place he went on religious pilgrimages. He began supporting philanthropies. He proselytized for Buddhism, advocating non-violence, vegetarianism, charity and tenderness to all living things.

Ashoka had edicts cut into rocks and pillars at strategic locations throughout his empire, edicts to communicate to passers-by the way of compassion, edicts such as "listen to your father and mother," and "be generous with your friends and relatives." In his edicts he spread hope in the survival of the soul after death and in good behavior leading to heavenly salvation. And in keeping with the change that was

taking place in Buddhism, in at least one of his edicts Ashoka described Siddhartha Gautama not merely as the teacher that Siddhartha had thought of himself but as "the Lord Buddha."

Ashoka called upon his subjects to desist from eating meat and attending illicit and immoral meetings. He ordered his local agents of various ranks, including governors, to tour their jurisdictions regularly to witness that rules of right conduct were being followed. He commanded the public to recite his edicts on certain days of the year.

Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism gave it more respect, and in his empire Buddhism spread. More people became vegetarian, and perhaps there was some increase in compassion toward others. He was not championing the cause of a jealous god and was able to plead for tolerance toward everyone.

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