**The Edicts of Ashoka the Great**

**Edict:**

**1.** a formal proclamation, especially one issued by a government, ruler, or other authority.

**2.** a formal or authoritative command.

**Emperor of India's Mauryan Empire**

*Ashoka, the Mauryan Emperor, looked at the bodies strewn around the smashed city, and at the Daya River that ran red with blood. He was surveying the damage that his army had inflicted on the recalcitrant Kalinga region. About 100,000 civilians were dead, as well as 10,000 of Ashoka's soldiers.*

*Far from feeling the glorious rush of victory, Ashoka felt sick and saddened. He vowed that never again would he rain down death and destruction on other people. He would devote himself to his Buddhist faith and practice ahimsa, or nonviolence.*

### *Chandashok* - Ashoka the Terrible

For the first eight years of his reign, Ashoka waged near-constant war. He had inherited a sizable empire, but he expanded it to include most of the Indian subcontinent, as well as the area from the current-day borders of Iran and Afghanistan in the west to Bangladesh and the Burmese border in the east. Only the southern tip of India and Sri Lanka remained out of his reach, plus the kingdom of Kalinga on the northeast coast of India.

In 265, Ashoka attacked Kalinga. Although it was the homeland of his second wife, Kaurwaki, and the king of Kalinga had sheltered Ashoka before his accent to the throne, the Mauryan emperor gathered the largest invasion force in Indian history to that point and launched his assault. Kalinga fought back bravely, but in the end it was defeated and all of its cities sacked.

Ashoka had led the invasion in person, and he went out into the capital city of the Kalingas the morning after his victory to survey the damage. The ruined houses and bloodied corpses sickened the emperor, and he underwent a religious epiphany. Although he had considered himself more or less Buddhist prior to that day, the carnage at Kalinga led Ashoka to devote himself to Buddhism. He vowed to practice *ahimsa* from that day forward.

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| ***From the Edicts:***Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Ashoka, conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died (from other causes). **After the Kalingas had been conquered, King Ashoka came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dhamma, a love for the Dhamma and for instruction in Dhamma. Now King Ashoka feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas. Indeed, King Ashoka is deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered**. But King Ashoka is pained even more by this — that Brahmins, ascetics, and householders of different religions who live in those countries, and who are respectful to superiors, to mother and father, to elders, and who behave properly and have strong loyalty towards friends, acquaintances, companions, relatives, servants and employees — that they are injured, killed or separated from their loved ones. **Even those who are not affected (by all this) suffer when they see friends, acquaintances, companions and relatives affected. These misfortunes befall all (as a result of war), and this pains King Ashoka.** There is no country, except among the Greeks, where these two groups, Brahmins and ascetics, are not found, and there is no country where people are not devoted to one or another religion. Therefore **the killing, death or deportation of a hundredth, or even a thousandth part of those who died during the conquest of Kalinga now pains King Ashoka. Now King Ashoka thinks that even those who do wrong should be forgiven where forgiveness is possible.** |

### Ashoka the Great

Had Ashoka simply vowed to himself that he would live according to Buddhist principles, later ages would not remember his name. However, he published his intentions across his empire. Ashoka wrote out a series of edicts, explaining his policies and aspirations for the empire, and urging others to follow his enlightened example. The Edicts of King Ashoka were carved onto pillars of stone 40 to 50 feet high, and set up all around the edges of the Mauryan Empire as well as in the heart of Ashoka's realm. Dozens of these pillars dot the landscapes of India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In his edicts, Ashoka vows to care for his people like a father. He promises neighboring people that they need not fear him; he will use only persuasion, not violence, to win people over. Ashoka notes that he has made available shade and fruit trees for the people, as well as medical care for all people and animals.

His concern for living things also appears in a ban on live sacrifices and sport hunting. Ashoka urges his people to follow a vegetarian diet, and bans the practice of burning forests or agricultural wastes that might harbor wild animals. A long list of animals appears on his protected species list, including bulls, wild ducks, squirrels, deer, porcupines and pigeons.

Ashoka also ruled with incredible accessibility. He notes that "I consider it best to meet with people personally." To that end, he went on frequent tours around his empire. He also advertised that he would stop whatever he was doing if a matter of imperial business needed attention - even if he was having dinner or sleeping, he urged his officials to interrupt him.

In addition, Ashoka was very concerned with judicial matters. His attitude toward convicted criminals was quite merciful. He banned punishments such as torture, the putting out of people's eyes, and the death penalty. He urged pardons for the elderly, those with families to support, etc.

Another principle that Ashoka stressed in his edicts was respect for others. He recommends treating not just parents, teachers and priests with respect, but also friends and even servants.

Finally, although Ashoka urged his people to practice Buddhist values, he fostered an atmosphere of respect for all religions. Within his empire people followed not only the relatively new Buddhist faith, but also Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Greek polytheism and many other belief systems. Ashoka served as an example of tolerance for his subjects, and his religious affairs officers encouraged the practice of any religion.

Selections from the Edicts of Ashoka:

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|  | **Here (in my domain) no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice.** |
|  | **Wherever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Wherever medical roots or fruits are not available I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals.** |
|  | **Respect for mother and father is good, generosity to friends, acquaintances, relatives, Brahmans and ascetics is good, not killing living beings is good, moderation in spending and moderation in saving is good.** |
|  | **To do good is difficult. One who does good first does something hard to do. I have done many good deeds, and, if my sons, grandsons and their descendants up to the end of the world act in like manner, they too will do much good. But whoever amongst them neglects this, they will do evil. Truly, it is easy to do evil.** |
|  | **all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart.** But people have various desires and various passions, and they may practice all of what they should or only a part of it. But one who receives great gifts yet is lacking in self-control, purity of heart, gratitude and firm devotion, such a person is mean. |
|  | **King Ashoka does not consider glory and fame to be of great account unless they are achieved through having my subjects respect Dhamma and practice Dhamma, both now and in the future.** For this alone does Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desire glory and fame. And whatever efforts Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, is making, all of that is only for the welfare of the people in the next world, and that they will have little evil. And being without merit is evil. This is difficult for either a humble person or a great person to do except with great effort, and by giving up other interests. In fact, it may be even more difficult for a great person to do. |
|  | **Father and mother should be respected and so should elders, kindness to living beings should be made strong and the truth should be spoken.** In these ways, the Dhamma should be promoted. Likewise, a teacher should be honored by his pupil and proper manners should be shown towards relations. This is an ancient rule that conduces to long life. Thus should one act. |
|  | **There is no gift like the gift of the Dhamma, (no acquaintance like) acquaintance with Dhamma, (no distribution like) distribution of Dhamma, and (no kinship like) kinship through Dhamma. And it consists of this: proper behavior towards servants and employees, respect for mother and father, generosity to friends, companions, relations, Brahmans and ascetics, and not killing living beings.** Therefore a father, a son, a brother, a master, a friend, a companion or a neighbor should say: "This is good, this should be done." One benefits in this world and gains great merit in the next by giving the gift of the Dhamma. |
|  | **King Ashoka does not value gifts and honors as much as he values this — that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions.** Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honor other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. **Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others.** Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions. |
|  | **All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men. You do not understand to what extent I desire this, and if some of you do understand, you do not understand the full extent of my desire.** |
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|  | The people of the unconquered territories beyond the borders might think: "What is the king's intentions towards us?" **My only intention is that they live without fear of me, that they may trust me and that I may give them happiness, not sorrow. Furthermore, they should understand that the king will forgive those who can be forgiven, and that he wishes to encourage them to practice Dhamma so that they may attain happiness in this world and the next.** I am telling you this so that I may discharge the debts I owe, and that in instructing you, that you may know that my vow and my promise will not be broken. Therefore acting in this way, you should perform your duties and assure them (the people beyond the borders) that: "The king is like a father. He feels towards us as he feels towards himself. We are to him like his own children." |
|  | **This progress among the people through Dhamma has been done by two means, by Dhamma regulations and by persuasion. Of these, Dhamma regulation is of little effect, while persuasion has much more effect.** The Dhamma regulations I have given are that various animals must be protected. And I have given many other Dhamma regulations also. But it is by persuasion that progress among the people through Dhamma has had a greater effect in respect of harmlessness to living beings and non-killing of living beings. |