Ashoka: an ideal ruler

‘Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi speaks thus: There is no gift like the gift of Dhamma, no acquaintance like the acquaintance of Dhamma, no distribution like the distribution of Dhamma, and no kinship like kinship through Dhamma.’

For centuries Ashoka and his reign were forgotten in the mists of time and history, his name hardly known, his monuments broken, burnt and buried. It was only in the 19th Century, as India opened up to the West that a series of scholars, epigraphers, and archaeologists began to reassemble and understand his achievements and his message.

Sources

Our primary source for this great king is his own edicts. Engraved either on rocks or stone pillars, standing up to 50 feet high, they were topped with magnificently carved capitals. Their distribution was vast, indicating the extent of his kingdom – from Afghanistan, the borders of Punjab and Nepal to virtually the whole of the Indian sub-continent. His kingdom was Maghada, his capital Pataliputra (modern Patna).

When initially discovered, his edicts were undecipherable. Later the script was recognised as Brahmi, and the language as Maghadan Prakrit, similar to Pali. Even then the name Piyadasi, used in his edicts, was for a long time not associated with Ashoka.
Inscription Lettering

Rock Inscription at Kandahar

Pillar Inscription at Lumbini.
His edicts were usually situated at important and well frequented places: many at the sacred sites of Buddha’s life, but others also at strategic crossings and trade routes, or near population centres. They were clearly designed for prominence, for permanence, and to spread his message far and wide. The edicts vary from place to place, but many contain almost identical wording, and all have the same message. The message was one of applied Dhamma, as interpreted by a strong ruler.

**Early years**

Ashoka’s early years were hardly auspicious. He was the second son of Bindusara, the Mauryan ruler of Magadha who died in about 267 BC. He was crowned four years later, after a battle for succession. At that time the kingdom of Magadha, with its capital at Pataliputra in eastern India, near modern Patna, was already extensive. It stretched from Afghanistan in the north, and included most of the Indian subcontinent, with the exception of Kalinga, modern Orissa, on the east coast, and the southernmost tip. His early years are believed to be marked by many acts of cruelty. He was known as Chanda Ashoka, ‘Ashoka the Wrathful’.

![Map of the Empire of Ashoka with locations of surviving rock and pillar edicts](image-url)
Changes

Intent on expanding his empire, in a major battle he conquered Kalinga, at a huge cost of human life and suffering. He was in a state of shock as he walked the battlefield afterwards, strewn with corpses, amidst the groans of the wounded, and grieving of relatives.

He met a monk, whose calm bearing inspired him to practise Dhamma. This brought about a huge change in him. Now instead of Chanda Ashoka he was called Dhamma Ashoka.

His edicts say this:

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi 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, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dhamma, a love for Dhamma, and for instruction in Dhamma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas... 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 Beloved-of-the-Gods…..

Even the forest people, who live in Beloved-of-the-Gods' domain, are entreated and reasoned with to act properly. They are told that despite his remorse Beloved-of-the-Gods has the power to punish them if necessary, so that they should be ashamed of their wrong and not be killed. Truly, Beloved-of-the-Gods desires non-injury, restraint and impartiality to all beings, even where wrong has been done. (Rock Edict 13)

In the past, for many hundreds of years, killing or harming living beings and improper behaviour towards relatives, and improper behaviour towards Brahmans and ascetics has increased. But now due to Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi’s Dhamma practice, the sound of the drum has been replaced by the sound of Dhamma. (Rock Edict 4)

He regarded his subjects as his children, proclaiming:

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. (Kalinga Rock Edict 1)

The people of unconquered territories beyond the borders might think: ‘What is the king’s intention towards us?’ My only intention is that they live without fear of me, that they 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 practise Dhamma so that they may attain happiness in this world and the next. (Kalinga Rock Edict 2)
Many rulers saw their subjects as a resource to support their wars of self-aggrandisement. Ashoka never attempted to acquire the weaker states around him. Instead he gave them humanitarian aid. He remained on cordial and friendly terms with all his neighbours, weak and strong.

He devoted himself to the welfare of his subjects. He had a strong sense of service, and made himself available day and night.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi speaks thus: In the past, state business was not transacted nor were reports delivered to the king at all hours. But now I have given this order, that at any time… reporters are to be posted with instructions to report to me the affairs of the people so that I might attend to these affairs wherever I am….if disagreement or debate arises in Council, then it must be reported to me immediately….Truly I consider the welfare of all to be my duty, and the root of this is exertion and the prompt despatch of business. There is no better work than promoting the welfare of people and whatever effort I am making is to pay the debt that I owe to all beings to assure their happiness in this life, and attain heaven in the next. (Rock Edict 6)

His compassion extended to animals.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has caused this Dhamma edict to be written. Here in my domain no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice….Formerly in the kitchen of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But now with the writing of this edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer, are killed and the deer not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed. (Rock Edict 1)

He issued a long list of protected species, including, ‘all four footed animals that are neither useful nor edible’, limited hunting, and set many restrictions against cruelty to animals. It is a rare government that extends its protection to animals as well as to humans.

He took many practical steps for the benefit of his subjects. We see concern for public health, for good transport, and the environment.

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. (Rock Edict 2)

Along roads I have had banyan trees planted so that they can give shade to animals and men, and I have had mango groves planted. At intervals of eight *krosas* I have had wells dug, rest houses built, and in various places I have had watering places made for the use of animals and men. (Pillar Edict 7)

He was actively supportive of all religions, and his edicts make it clear that he wished all religions to flourish under his rule:
Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi desires that 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 practise 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. (Rock Edict 7)

In the state of Bihar, we find caves with rock inscriptions saying that they were donated by Ashoka to the Ajivakas sect.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this - that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth 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 honour other religions for this reason. By doing so, 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 out of excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought ‘Let me glorify my own religion’ only harms his own religion. (Rock Edict 12)

Had these sentiments been followed throughout history, the amount of war and bloodshed that could have been avoided is incalculable.

Today we can hardly imagine a country in which violence is abjured – even towards animals. A country that is respected yet not feared, enjoys cordial and friendly relations with all its powerful neighbours, in which its ruler regards his subjects as his own children and takes practical steps for their benefit and welfare. A country where all religions are tolerated and supported while promulgating Dhamma as a universal practice. Yet this is what happened.

The result was a period of almost 30 years of uninterrupted peace, without war, insurrection or civil disturbance - a rare achievement in history.

**Spread of Dhamma**

Ashoka’s own practice of and devotion to Dhamma was unparalleled in a ruler.

His edicts describe his own lack of progress to start with – it is a very personal statement from a powerful ruler to his subjects. Then he started practising more seriously with the monks and clearly made progress.

It is now more than two and a half years since I became a lay-disciple, but until now I have not made much progress. But now that I have visited the Sangha for more than a year, I have made good progress (Minor Rock Edict 1).
Because his own practice was strong, his understanding of Dhamma grew, and what he promulgated was pure, universal Dhamma, unconnected with any sect or religion.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi speaks thus: There is no gift like the gift of Dhamma, no acquaintance like the acquaintance of Dhamma, no distribution like the distribution of Dhamma, and no kinship like kinship through Dhamma. And it consists of proper behaviour towards servants and employees, respect for mother and father, generosity to friends, companions, relations, Brahmans and ascetics, and not killing living beings. *(Rock Edict 11)*

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi speaks thus: 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 among them neglects this, they will do evil. Truly, it is easy to do evil. *(Rock Edict 5)*

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, 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. *(Rock Edict 10)*

He appointed Dhamma Mahamattas, religious officials, who worked with different religions. They were also administrative officials charged with the spread of Dhamma by persuasion, and the redress of administrative wrongs. They had the power of judicial review, and to release prisoners on compassionate grounds. Even where the death sentence had been pronounced, prisoners were to be given three days to appeal, or make merits.

In the past there were no Dhamma Mahamattas but such officials were appointed by me …they work among all religions for the establishment of Dhamma, for the promotion of Dhamma, and for the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to Dhamma…so they may be free from harassment. They work for the proper treatment of prisoners, towards their unfettering, and if the Mahamattas think ‘This one has a family to support’, ‘That one has been bewitched’, ‘This one is old’, then they work for the release of such prisoners. …They are occupied everywhere. *(Rock Edict 5)*

…the Mahamattas are to be told this….While being completely law-abiding, some people are imprisoned, treated harshly and even killed without cause so that many people suffer. Therefore your aim should be to act with impartiality.

…the judicial officers…may strive to do their duty and so people under them may not suffer unjust imprisonment or harsh treatment. To achieve this I will send out every five years Mahamattas who are not harsh or cruel, but who are merciful and can ascertain if the judicial officers have understood my purpose and are acting according to my instructions. *(Kalinga Rock Edict 1)*

In the twenty-six years since my coronation prisoners have been given amnesty on twenty-five occasions. *(Pillar Edict 5)*
This is a far cry from the so-called ‘religious police’ or spies of many ancient and modern states, which became nothing more than an instrument of religious persecution or state terror.

My Rajjukas [officers] are working among the people…Just as a person feels confident having entrusted his child to an expert nurse thinking, ‘The nurse will keep my child well’, even so the Rajjukas have been appointed by me for the welfare and happiness of the people in the country. (Pillar Edict 4)

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. (Rock Edict 3)

**Future generations**

His pillar edicts, many at sacred places frequented by the Buddha, show satisfaction with his own Dhamma work, and exhort future generations to do the same and follow his example.

Happiness in this world and the next is difficult to obtain without much love for the Dhamma, much self-examination, much respect, much fear (of evil) and much enthusiasm. But through my instruction this regard for Dhamma and love of Dhamma has grown day by day, and will continue to grow. And my officers of high, low and middle rank are practising and conforming to Dhamma, and are capable of inspiring others to do the same. Mahamattas in border areas are doing the same. And these are my instructions; to protect with Dhamma, to make happiness through Dhamma, and to guard with Dhamma. (Pillar Edict 1)

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi speaks thus: Dhamma is good, but what is Dhamma? Little evil, much good kindness, generosity, truthfulness and purity. I have given the gift of sight in various ways. To two-footed and four-footed beings, to birds and aquatic animals, I have given various things including the gift of life. And many other good deeds have been done by me. (Pillar Edict 2)

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi speaks thus: This progress among the people through Dhamma has been done by two means, by Dhamma regulation and by persuasion. Of these Dhamma regulation is of little effect, while persuasion has much more effect….. Wherever there are stone pillars or stone slabs, there this Dhamma edict is to be engraved so that it may long endure. It has been engraved so that it may endure as long as my sons and great-grandsons live and as long as the sun and moon may shine, so that people may practise it as instructed. For by practising it happiness will be attained in this world and the next. (Pillar Edict 7)
The Sangha

His support for the Sangha was huge. He built thousands of stupas and viharas for the Sangha. In Pataliputra, the capital, a large monastery and many others were built. At the time, there seems to have been some dissent among the Sangha. We find edicts urging the Sangha not to fall into schism:

No-one shall cause division in the order of monks.

It is my wish that the Sangha community always be united.

[Whoever splits the Sangha] which is now united, is not to be admitted into the Sangha. Whoever, whether monk or nun, splits the Sangha is to be made to wear white clothes and to reside somewhere other than in a monastery.  
(Minor Pillar Edict 2)

Ultimately this led to his supporting the Third Sasana Council, in which the Sangha reviewed all the teachings of the Buddha, to correct any mistakes. It is reported that 60,000 people attended this major event. There is archaeological evidence of a huge wooden hall near the river at Pataliputra. The first of these Sasana Councils was held immediately after the Buddha’s death, in which Ananda, the Buddha’s secretary, participated. The Sixth and most recent was held in Burma in 1954-5 in which Sayagyi U Ba Khin was closely involved.

The spread of Dhamma

Later King Ashoka decided to spread Dhamma far and wide, further than the reach of his edicts. He sent Dhamma-dūtā (ambassadors of Dhamma) to teach Dhamma. He sent his own son Mahinda and his daughter Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka, where he enjoyed very friendly relations with the king who seems to have taken Dhamma as result. The ambassadors went to Nepal, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. Relations with King Antiochus to the West were cordial and friendly, enabling the Dhamma-dūtā to reach through Iran and Turkey, to Egypt and southern Europe.

Now it is conquest by Dhamma that Beloved-of-the-Gods considers to be the best conquest….everywhere people are following Beloved-of-the-Gods’ instructions in Dhamma. Even where Beloved-of-the-Gods’ ambassadors have not been, these people too, having heard of the practice of Dhamma and the rules and instructions in Dhamma given by Beloved-of-the-Gods, are following it and will continue to do so. This conquest has been won everywhere, and it gives great joy – the joy which only the conquest of Dhamma can give. But even this joy is of little consequence. Beloved-of-the-Gods considers the great fruit to be experienced in the next world to be more important.  
(Rock Edict 13)

It is important that he sent two arahants, Sona and Uttara, to the kingdom of Burma. From them, a long line of teachers preserved both the words and the practice of Dhamma, right through to today. When they went, Ashoka’s teacher, Mogalliputta Tissa, predicted that Burma would maintain this tradition and practice, even though other countries might lose it. This is what has happened.
His Legacy

His kingdom did not last long after his death. There was a fight for the kingdom, and his successors were unable to practise Dhamma or rule as he had done. Disintegration started quickly and within a decade it seems that his kingdom had been fragmented.

But his example as a ruler has endured. ‘In the history of the world there have been thousands of kings and emperors who called themselves “their highnesses”, “their majesties”, and “their exalted majesties” and so on. They shone for a brief moment, and as quickly disappeared. But Ashoka shines and shines brightly like a bright star, even unto this day.’ HG Wells, The Outline of History.

He was a great inspiration to both Gandhi and Nehru, especially for his practice of ahimsa, non-violence. ‘At the very pinnacle of his glory as a conqueror Emperor Ashoka embraced the philosophy of ahimsa, non-violence.’ Gita Mehta. His Dhamma wheel and his emblem of the four lions have become symbols of India.

But his real legacy was the way in which he spread Dhamma. Until his time, it had been largely confined to north India and the Ganges basin. By the time of his death, it had spread south to south India and Sri Lanka; north to Nepal and China; east to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and, of course, Burma. In the West it had spread as far as southern Europe.

Later the technique became corrupted, both in India and abroad as it spread further and wider. But as we know Burma maintained it in its purity, right up to the present day.

We are extraordinarily grateful to this great king, not only for his unique example as a Dhamma ruler, but for his foresight in spreading pure Dhamma so far and wide, preserving it and enabling us to practise it today.

Patrick Given-Wilson

The author was inspired by historian Charles Allen's Ashoka: The Search for India’s Lost Emperor and recommends the book to anyone wanting to learn more. Historical background and references, unless otherwise indicated, are drawn from Allen's work.