

Ashoka and the Early Development of Buddhism

A Brief Outline

His Bloody Beginnings

Emperor Ashoka ("without sorrow") Maurya (c. 268-239 BC), Ashoka the Great, inherited the Magadhan Empire. This included most of modern India except the far south.

Ashoka was the grandson of Chanragupta Maurya who had forcibly created the Mauryan empire in India. Ashoka himself came to the throne in 268 BC, following a bloody power struggle.

Ashoka met a Buddhist monk named Nigrodha, who urged him to apply his power towards peace and virtue. He became a nominal Buddhist by about 260 BC.

However, in the eighth year of his reign he sent his armies to deal with some rebellious subjects, the Kalingas, who were living in the area now known as Orissa. His troops caused such immense carnage (over 100,000 slaughtered), devastation and suffering that Ashoka was deeply distressed. Ashoka issued an edict, expressing his remorse and declaring his intent to govern, please and protect his subjects according to *Dhamma* (Buddhist teaching).

His Promotion of Buddhism

Ashoka is famous for his so-called *Rock Edicts*, for he ordered edicts like this to be carved on rocks and pillars all over his empire:

Do not perform sacrifices or do anything else that might hurt animals... Be generous to your friends... Do not get involved in quarrels and arguments... Try to be pure of heart, humble and faithful... Do not think only of your good points; remember also your faults as well and try to put them right...

Ashoka is remembered for his good works and devotion to Buddhism:

- Emphasised, as the edict illustrates, non-injury (*ahimsa*).
- Established hospitals for people and animals.
- Made the royal household completely vegetarian.
- Banned animal sacrifice in the capital.
- Legislated against the killing of animals on observance days, the castrating and branding of cattle and the indiscriminate burning of forests.
- Ensured the protection of a wide range of non-food animals, birds and fish.
- Urged the good treatment of servants.
- Had wells dug.
- Had rest-houses provided for travelers.
- Renovated major roads.
- Appointed *Dhamma*-officials to care for the old and orphans and ensure judicial standards throughout the empire.
- In the justice system he retained some beatings, but abolished torture (and, possibly, the death penalty).
- Released prisoners were given some short-term financial help.
- Condemned the slaughter and capture of prisoners of war.

- Showed interest in all religions, conferring them with endowments, e.g. supported Brahmins, Jain wanderers and Ajivaka ascetics.
- Replaced hunting trips with pilgrimages to religious sites, especially those associated with the Buddha.
- Opposed the praising of one's own religious tradition and the criticism of other religious traditions (12th rock edict).
- Discussed religious matters with religious leaders.
- Replaced military conquest with spiritual conquest, sending missionaries to broadcast the Dhamma to many places, reaching even the West and places like Egypt, Syria, Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene in north Africa.

Ashoka's mission to Sri Lanka was particularly successful (his own son, Mahinda, headed this mission). It was during his reign that Buddhism spread widely, reaching most of the Indian sub-continent and beyond, becoming a "world religion."

He erected many shrines housing relics (*stupas*) and memorial pillars on his pilgrimages to Buddhist sites. He founded many monasteries (some say 84,000 to correspond with the 84,000 sections in the Dhamma), which attracted a lot of bogus devotees and led to the degeneration of Buddhism. This distressed him deeply. So it was that Ashoka convened the *Third Buddhist Council*, held at Pataliputra (modern Patna), his capital, around 200 years after the Buddha's death (c. 253 BC).¹ This involved 1000 genuine *bhikkhus* (monks) who over a nine month period sought to ensure the accuracy of the oral traditions being passed down. The council ended with the excommunication of 60,000 monks, because they would not adhere to the Theravada orthodoxy insisted on by Buddhist leader, Moggaliputtatissa.

Sources

John R. Davis, *The Path to Enlightenment: Introducing Buddhism* (Communities of Faith; ed. Walter Riggans; Hodder & Stoughton, 1997)

Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, history and practices* (Cambridge University Press: 1998)

John Snelling, *The Buddhist Handbook: A Complete Guide to Buddhist Teaching and Practice* (Rider: 1998)

See too:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashoka>

¹ There are scholars, however, who question that this Council ever occurred.