

THE EDICTS OF ASOKA

The Mauryan king Ashoka (r. 269-232 B.C.E.) was the first ruler to forge an extensive empire in the Indian sub-continent. After a particularly brutal war fought against the neighboring kingdom of Kalinga, a campaign which wrought tremendous devastation, Asoka rejected his native Hinduism and converted to Buddhism. In governing his newly won empire, he followed the Buddhist Middle Way and actively propagated the faith as a means to achieve a peaceful and non-violent way of life for his subjects. His rule of law, ascribed on many rocks and pillars throughout his kingdom, was meant to establish a government based on truth and righteousness. The "Rock Edicts," promulgated in 257-256 B.C.E., reflect Asoka's new world view. Since the Buddha had denied the existence of supernatural beings, Asoka in effect created a theocratic state without a god.

Source: Vincent A. Smith, *Asoka, The Buddhist Emperor of India*, 2nd ed., [New Delhi: no date], pp. 159-61, 166-67, 170-75.

Edict Four

For a long time past, even for many hundred years, [there has been an] increase in the sacrificial slaughter of living creatures, the killing of animate beings, [which is] unseemly behavior to relatives, and unseemly behavior to Brahmins and ascetics.

But now, by reason of His Sacred Majesty the King's practice of piety, the reverberation of the war drums--or rather, the reverberation of the Law of Piety--is heard, bringing with it the display to the people of processional cars, elephants, illuminations, and other heavenly spectacles.

As for many hundred years before has not happened, now at this time, by reason of His Sacred Majesty the King's instruction in the Law of Piety, have increased abstention from the [sacrificial] slaughter of living creatures, abstention from the killing of animate beings, seemly behavior to relatives, seemly behavior to Brahmins and ascetics, hearkening to father and mother, and hearkening to elders.

Thus, and in many other ways, the practice of piety has increased, and His Sacred Majesty the King will cause such practice of piety to increase still more.

The sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons of His Sacred Majesty the King will promote the increase in the practice of such piety until the end of the cycle, and abiding in piety and morality, will give instruction in the Law of Piety. For this is the best of deeds--even giving instruction in the Law of Piety--and the practice of piety is not for the immoral man. In this matter to increase and not to decrease, both are excellent.

For this very purpose has this been caused to be written, in order that in this matter, men may strive for increase and not behold decrease.

This has been written by command of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King after he had been consecrated twelve years.

Edict Eleven

Thus saith His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King:

There is no such almsgiving as the almsgiving of the Law of Piety--friendship in piety, the liberality in piety, kinship in piety. Herein does it consist--in proper treatment of slaves and servants, hearkening to father and mother, giving to friends, comrades, relations, ascetics, and Brahmins, and sparing of living creatures. Therefore a father, son, brother, master, friend, comrade, nay, even a neighbor, ought to say, "This is meritorious, this ought to be done."

He who acts thus both gains this world and in the other world begets infinite merit, by means of this very almsgiving of piety.

Edict Twelve

His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King does reverence to men of all sects, whether ascetics or householders, by gifts and various forms of reverence.

His Sacred Majesty, however, cared not so much for gifts or external reverence as that there should be a growth of the essence of the matter in all sects. The growth of the essence of the matter assumes various forms, but the root of it is restraint of speech, to wit, a man must not do reverence to his own sect or disparage that of another man without reason. Depreciation should be for specific reason only, because the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another.

By thus acting, a man exalts his own sect, and at the same time does service to the sects of other people. By acting contrary, a man hurts his own sect, and does disservice to the sects of other people. For he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others wholly from attachment to his own, with intent to enhance the splendor of his own sect, in reality by such conduct inflicts the severest injury on his own sect.

Concord, therefore, is meritorious, to wit, hearkening and hearkening willingly to the Law of Piety as accepted by other people. For this is the desire of His Sacred Majesty that all sects should hear much teaching and hold sound doctrine.

Wherefore the adherents of all sects, whatever they may be, must be informed that His Sacred Majesty cares not so much for gifts or external reverence as that there should be growth in the essence of the matter and respect for all sects.

For this very purpose are employed the Censors of the Law of Piety, the Censors of the Women, the [Inspectors,] and other official bodies. And this is the fruit thereof--the growth of one's own sect, and the enhancement of the splendor of the Law of Piety.

Edict Thirteen

The Kalingas were conquered by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King when he had been consecrated eight years. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were thence carried away captive, one hundred thousand were there slain, and many times that number perished.

Directly after the annexation of the Kalingas, began his Sacred Majesty's zealous protection of the Law of Piety, his love of the Law, and his giving instruction in that Law [of dharma]. Thus arose His Sacred Majesty's remorse for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves the slaughter, death, and carrying away captive of the people. That is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty.

There is, however, another reason for His Sacred Majesty feeling still more regret, inasmuch as in such a country dwell Brahmins or ascetics, or men of various denominations, or householders, upon whom is laid this duty of hearkening to superiors, hearkening to father and mother, hearkening to teachers, and proper treatment of friends, acquaintances, comrades, relatives, slaves, and servants, with fidelity of attachment. To such people in such a country befalls violence, or slaughter, or separation from their loved ones. Or misfortune befalls the friends, acquaintances, comrades, and relatives of those who are themselves well protected, while their affection is undiminished. Thus for them also that is a mode of violence. All these several happenings to men are matter of regret to His Sacred Majesty; because it is never the case that people have not faith in some one denomination or other.

Thus of all the people who were then slain, done to death, or carried away captive in the Kalingas, if the hundredth or the thousandth part were to suffer the same fate, it would now be matter of regret to His Sacred Majesty. Moreover, should any one do him wrong, that too must be borne with. Even upon the forest folk in his dominions His Sacred Majesty looks kindly and he seeks their conversion, for [if he did not] repentance would come upon His Sacred Majesty. They are bidden to turn from evil ways that they be not chastised. For His Sacred Majesty desires that all animate beings should have security, self-control, peace of mind, and joyousness.

And this is the chiefest conquest in the opinion of His Sacred Majesty--the conquest by the Law of Piety--and this, again, has been won by His Sacred Majesty both in his own dominions and in all the neighboring realms as far as six hundred leagues--where the Greek king named Antiochos dwells, and north of that Antiochos to

where dwell the four kings severally named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas, and Alexander; and in the south the [realms of the] Cholas and Pandyas, with Ceylon likewise--and here too, in the King's dominions, among the Yonas, and Kambojas, among the Nabhapamtis of Nabhaka, among the Bhojas and Pitinikas, among the Andhras and Pulindas--everywhere men follow His Sacred Majesty's instruction in the Law of Piety. Even where the envoys of His Sacred Majesty do not penetrate, there too men hearing His Sacred Majesty's ordinance based on the Law of Piety and his instruction in that Law, practice and will practice the Law.

And, again, the conquest thereby won everywhere is everywhere a conquest full of delight. Delight is found in the conquests made by the Law. That delight, however, is only a small matter. His Sacred Majesty regards as bearing much fruit only that which concerns the other world.

And for this purpose has this pious edict been written in order that my sons and grandsons, who may be, should not regard it as their duty to conquer a new conquest. If, perchance, they become engaged in a conquest by arms, they should take pleasure in patience and gentleness, and regard as [the only true] conquest the conquest won by piety. That avails for both this world and the next. Let all joy be in effort, because that avails for both this world and the next.