

IMPACT OF ASOKA'S *DHAMMA*-POLICY ON MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This research investigates the issues with the many scholarly interpretations of the term dhammakāya as it appears in early Buddhist scriptures. It notes that the conventional scholarly understanding of the Pali dhammakāya oversimplifies the canonical texts and makes use of partial information. There was no greater Mauriyan emperor than Asoka. Buddhism, art, and architecture all benefited greatly from his generosity. The renowned Mauryan emperor Asoka's early life and career are the focus of this study. Asoka was one of many great emperors in Indian history whose names were immortalised in the annals of time. Some other well-known author also offered commentary on Asoka's accomplishments. This study aims to assess Asoka's early career and regional accomplishments. This study aims to provide light on Asoka's Dhamma as well as his support for the arts and architecture of his day. This study also makes an effort to talk about how Asoka supported Buddhism.

Paper Identification



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Introduction

Society generally is not a mere aggregate of individuals or something superimposed on the individuals from above, but mutual self-interest. This self-interest is not another self-subsistent entity or essence in the individual, but one that depends upon the physical conditions, or environment, upon the historical and cultural background, upon the hopes and aspirations of the individuals. The Buddhist view of society extends beyond human beings as well. All forms of life are included in this broad ethical definition, including higher and lower forms of life. Therefore, in order to account for such a person, the Buddhist code of ethics divides them into five aspects, or pañcakkhandha, of their psychophysical personality. Having such ideas about oneself and society is necessary for cultivating the four higher states (*brāhmavihāra*) of friendliness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic delight (*muditā*), and serenity (*upekkhā*). Asoka, therefore, applied Buddhist ethics during his rule and promulgated new approach to individual. It can be said that he spread the Buddha 's teachings across India. Since then, the march of the teachings of the Buddha continues over the globe unceasingly in spite of diversity, change and cultural amalgamation. The spirit behind such continuity has been the altruistic approach for the service of mankind with love and compassion. Asoka 's empire, thus, was not limited by geographical boundaries, his *Dhamma*, or the spirit of altruism through human service could expand outside India. A new form of humanism was set up by Asoka in which no bloodshed, no exploitation, no vanquishing attitude prevailed. The moral values and humane behavior of the Buddhist missionaries succeeded in spreading the Buddha 's message throughout the region. In the global context, therefore, Buddhism preserves up till date that motto which might have patronized Asoka in his lifetime as well as his policy for the making himself to become a righteous king.

Because he based his rule on Buddhist principles, Asoka is held in high esteem by Buddhists as an example of a kind and compassionate ruler. While the Buddha may have had a preference for the semi-democratic republics of his day, he was certainly aware of the growing power of monarchies. His views of monarchy were shaped by his faith in the compassionate *Cakkavatti* rulers of the past, who ruled with great concern for *Dhamma*, in the sense of ethics and social justice. He also had an impact with his theory that the first king of human society was chosen by the people to maintain peace and order.

Ethical Aspect of Asoka's *Dhamma*-Policy

Asoka's interest in the moral uplift of his people was manifested in part through legislation, but more often through appeals to the common good. Non-violence and non-injury, essential tenets

of Buddhism and other Indian traditions, were among the most emphasised values in his edicts. Asoka stopped trying to expand his empire, however he did not disband his army as a deterrent. Pilgrimages to Buddhist holy sites took the role of royal hunting expeditions. Over time, the entire massive royal household adopted a vegetarian diet. In the nation's capital, animal sacrifice was outlawed and many species of mammals, reptiles, birds, and fish were given legal protection. It was recommended that people be generous to *Śramaṇas*, Brahmins, and the elderly. There was a lot of praise for showing these and parents respect, being kind to friends and relatives, and being kind to servants. It was suggested that one should be merciful, honest, sexually pure, mild, and content. To further the spread of Dhamma and encourage adherence to its principles, he writes in PE VII, *"I have also caused discourses on Dhamma to be heard." And in this way, the qualities that make up the Dhamma—compassion, generosity, truthfulness, purity, gentleness, and good deeds—will flourish and spread across the world. To paraphrase King Priyadarśin: "Beloved of the gods," all the wonderful things I've done have been copied over the globe, and more will be done in the future. They have matured and will continue to mature in the areas of respect for parents, respect for teachers, respect for elders, respect for the poor and the needy, respect for slaves and servants, and respect for one's ancestors.*

The enlightened teachings of the Buddha helped Asoka achieve a state of serenity and joy in his life. After that, he worked for the good of the people, whom he loved as much as his own children, and the good deeds he did have been copied all over the world and will continue to be replicated there. Asoka, the mighty conqueror, put away his sword for good after he vanquished *Kaliṅga* and developed into the most kind and generous monarch the world had ever seen after the victory. After undergoing a spiritual awakening, the king of Hindustan was elevated to the status of a merciful god. Before building a humane government, he expressed his appreciation for Buddhist ethics and encouraged the people of his nation to be obedient to their parents, nice to their children and servants, charitable, and tolerant. He also encouraged his people to be charitable. He issued directives to the employees of this government, instructing them to give free medical attention, compassionate jail administration, poverty relief, old age pensions, amenities for travellers, and animal hospitals. In addition to this, he exhorted the inhabitants of his nation to be charitable, tolerant, and obedient to their parents, as well as kind to their children and servants. The edicts encourage a Dhamma-based virtuous living that will lead to a pleasant ethical society and a heavenly rebirth; this shows that Asoka's ideals were oriented towards the laity.

Educational Aspect of Asoka's *Dhamma*-Policy

Through the application of his *Dhamma*-policy Asoka expressed his ideal of education. Through the messages carved on the RE and PE he teaches everybody how to live good moral life. The main guiding principles were non-violence, generosity (including grants to the poor in the *sūtra* on the emperors), learning what is good from *Śramaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas* and finding out how to achieve benefit and happiness. Asoka's remark about assemblies is no doubt to be understood in the light of the *sūtra* on discipline for the lay-man: addiction to assemblies is harmful, but there are some assemblies which are good, probably because they illustrate principle or other good things. The performance of *Dhamma* was already a remarkable feature of such public assemblies in India.

Asoka says that whatever good things he has done, he has done them so that the people, following his practice, would act in conformity to it and so listen to their parents, elders, following the practice of those senior in age, express sympathy for *Śramaṇas*, *Brāhmaṇas*, the poor, the unfortunate, the weak, down to slaves and servants. Finally, there are only two ways of development for men: 1) by regulations of principle or 2) by intercession or appeal. But in this connection regulations of principles are light, intercession is greater. He made many regulations of principle, such as that such and such species are not to be killed, but it is through intercession that there is perceptible change in human behavior, development of non-violence towards beings etc. He goes on to say that he has done this so that his sons and successors would be able to carry on the tradition for as long as the Sun and Moon are in existence, and he recommends that this record of ethical education be made where there are stone columns or stone tables so that it will last for a very long time.

Reminding the people of his kingdom in MRE. II about the development of ideal family and society, he says:

So, it is decreed by the God's beloved: Honour your parents, and do the same for all other forms of life. The truth needs to be heard. These are the characteristics of Dhamma that should be adopted as a way of life. The student owes respect to the teacher, and proper conduct is expected when interacting with one's own kind. This is nature at its most fundamental level, and it will last forever. That's why it calls for immediate action.

Asoka was very interested in the education of his people; he often encouraged his people to practice the *Dhamma* for the purpose of achieving the good moral life here as well as for the benefit in the next life. In his opinion, good education was the practice of *Dhamma*; only with

the practice of *Dhamma* could people develop love and good conduct. He identified the public education with the practice of *Dhamma*:

... They follow the Dhamma because they have heard the Beloved of gods speak the Dhamma, the ordinances, and the instructions in the Dhamma, and they will continue to follow the Dhamma even in locations where the envoys of the Beloved of gods do not go. And in every place where this objective is met, the victory is sweetened with love. Dhamma has helped me reach that level of affection towards others. However, love is a meaningless emotion. The Gods' Adored places a premium on eschatological knowledge. And this Dhamma edict has been engraved for this reason, so that whoever may be my sons and great-grandsons may not consider a new conquest to be worthwhile, and may instead prefer forbearance and lightness of punishment with respect to a conquest possible only through (the use of) arrow, and may instead regard that as the (real) conquest, which is a conquest through Dhamma. That's a wise decision with long-term benefits. The Dhamma's attachment to all kingdoms may flourish. That's a positive thing, both now and in the future.

According to the narrative, Asoka intends to use the education policy till the very end of the *kalpa* to spread the *Dhamma*. In the 26th and 27th years of his reign, he issued the Pillar Edicts, which appear to reflect an even firmer belief than before that the *Dhamma* has altered the morals and behaviour of the world. In PE. VII, he smugly reflects on his time spent working for social change. His officers are diligently executing the new *Dhamma* policy, and the populace is conforming. As long as the moon and sun shine, it will remain. This signifies that Asoka cares deeply about the happiness and well-being of everyone in his realm. And he hopes to teach them the *Dhamma* through his inscriptions.

The educational policy that Asoka wants to make public in his inscriptions is not only the education of family, but also the education of society. Asoka is interested in the education to all people of his kingdom as well as the world. It is clear that this policy of education imbued with the idea of *Dhamma-vijaya* initiated by Emperor Asoka, continued unabated throughout his glorious epoch. As a result of his efforts, Indian culture spread throughout Asia. Verily, Asoka had carried the torch of Indian culture and civilization far and wide in the world.

Environmental Aspect of Asoka's *Dhamma*-Policy

The development of science is something to be proud of as a species. However, the ecobiotic system was also impacted. It is a truth that there were once approximately four billion forms of life on Earth, but that number has declined to only four and a half million, demonstrating that life is being extinguished at an alarming rate. Nothing says the rest won't vanish at some point,

either. Because our own survival is dependent on that of other living things, we have an obligation to ensure theirs. So, it's safe to state that environmental protection is crucial in the modern world.

Asoka prioritised *Ahiṃsā* that is non-violence, non-injury to humans and animals, and non-combativeness in his Dhamma-policy. In the past, many rulers regularly slaughtered hundreds of cows and other animals in ritual sacrifices. Asoka banned his court from participating in hunting excursions and outlawed the consumption of flesh. He stressed the importance of showing compassion to all sentient beings. To avoid needlessly suffering people and animals, he prioritised ecological and public services. So, Asoka built his kingdom on the idea that violence never solves anything. According to what he writes in RE. I, "many hundreds of thousands of animals were every day slaughtered for curry" back when King *Priyadarśī* was the Beloved of Gods' kitchen ruler. At the time this Dhamma-lipi was written, however, only three animals—two peacocks and one deer—had ever been slain for curry. These three creatures cannot be slaughtered in the future.

A characteristic of Asoka is that he did not preach what he was not practicing himself. The policy of Asoka was to see to the welfare and happiness not only of his subjects but also of the people of other lands beyond the borders of his kingdom. There is a distinct change in the outlook towards animals in the comprehensive *Dhamma*-policy of Asoka. For the first time we hear about national parks where animals could move about unmolested. Asoka shows a universal and broad mind as the orders in one of his edicts to provide medical treatment and grant the right to shade and water to men and animals belonging to the neighbouring states or kingdoms, is recorded in his RE. II as follows:

King Priyadarśī, the Beloved of Gods, has established two types of medical treatment, medical treatment for men and medical treatment for animals, in all of his domains and those of his frontier sovereigns, as far as the Tāmraparṇī, the Yona (Greek) king called Aṃṭiyaka (Antiochus), and also those who are the neighbours of Aṃṭiyaka (Antiochus) have ruled.

Humans have intentionally introduced and cultivated human and animal-friendly medicinal plants in regions where they do not exist naturally. Plants with non-native root systems or fruit trees have been transplanted elsewhere. For the convenience of travellers and their animals, wells have been dug and trees have been planted along the paths.

According to the PE. V, "twenty-six years after the coronation of King Asoka the following species of animals were declared to be protected from slaughter: parrots, mynas, ruddy geese, will geese, waterborne birds, bats, queen ants, terra pins, boneless fish, skate fish, tortoise and

porcupines, leaf-hares, twelve-antler stags, free roaming bulls, cats and rats etc., rhinoceroses, white pigeons, village pigeons and all the quadrupeds which are neither useful nor edible. Pregnant or lactating female goats, sheep, and cows were off-limits for slaughter. Also, infants younger than a few months.” This demonstrates Asoka's commitment to protecting all forms of life. Caponing cocks is also forbidden, according to the plaque. Never set fire to a husk if it contains anything alive. It is unacceptable to set fire to forests for no good reason or to kill off wildlife. Feeding a live thing another living thing is strictly forbidden. On the full moon day of *Tishya*, the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight, the fifteenth day of the brilliant fortnight, and the first day of the dark fortnight of every three-month period, as well as on every fast day, it is forbidden to kill or sell fish. It is inappropriate to kill these creatures and others in the forests and waters frequented by fishermen. It is important to remember that Asoka's birth star was *Tishya*, also known as *Pushya*. On the eighth, fourteenth, and fifteenth days of the fortnight, as well as on the days of *Tishya* and *Pun̄arvasu*, on the three days of the three-month period, and on every auspicious day, castration of bulls and other animals is prohibited. Branding should be avoided on those days among horses and bullocks.

Here, Asoka admits openly that he did not invent the practice of providing entertainment for humans and animals; rather, he merely continued the practice of previous monarchs. So, Asoka has completed his altruistic mission, in the hopes that others will follow his lead. Therefore, there is no plausible alternative explanation for Asoka's true motivation. For he states the same thing a little later on in the same edict: Whatever good actions I have performed, says he, these have been conformed to throughout the world; and these (they) will perform. The fact that Asoka placed such a premium on helping others stands out. And it's natural to wonder if Buddhists place any value on public good deeds like those mentioned of Asoka.

Human Rights Aspect of Asoka's *Dhamma*-Policy

The concept of Human Rights appears to be a modern one. But individual rights and privileges had been respected and protected in the east as well as in the West even during the ancient times. But to be precise, an attempt has been made here to highlight the cause of the protection of human rights through the *Dhamma*-policy of King Asoka. It is strange to note that a great emperor like Asoka who was himself shocked at the utter violation of human rights caused by him in the *Kalinga* War consequently introduced some provisions for the protection of those rights through his RE and PE as remedial measures. As, for example, in the RE. V, Emperor Asoka proclaimed:

For a very long time prior to this, no Dharma-Mahāmātrās existed. I made the first Dharma Mahatmas after thirteen years of ordination. They are used by people of all religious persuasions to further the spread of the Dhamma and ensure the well-being and contentment of Dhamma adherents. For the sake of the welfare and happiness of the Yavanas, Kaṃbojas, and Gādhāras, as well as the hereditary Rāṣṭrikas and others on the Western coast (Aparānta), as well as the Brāhmaṇas and Gr̥hapatis who have become hirelings, and, among the helpless and the aged, they are actively engaged. They worry about freeing captives financially, liberating the oppressed, and caring for the elderly, depending on the circumstances of the captive. They work in Pāṭaliputra and the surrounding towns, both in private female apartments and with my brothers, sisters, and other relatives. As long as there is someone engaged in Dhamma study, an abode of Dhamma, or devoted to almsgiving, my domains will be full of devotees. So that my descendants may continue the practise of Dhamma after my passing, I have carved this document.

In the year XIII of the Common Era, Emperor Asoka gave a graphic account of his human rights abuses.

Kaliṅga was captured after eight years of King Priyadarśin (Beloved of the Gods) reign. There were at least 150,000 people killed or captured, and many more than that lost their lives. With the conquest of Kaliṅga behind him, the Beloved of the Gods devotes himself wholeheartedly to the Dhamma, to the love of the Dhamma, and to the teaching of the Dhamma. That much remorse is felt by the Beloved of the Gods for having destroyed Kaliṅga. The Beloved of the Gods mourns the slaughter of innocents and the enslavement of a people during the conquest of a nation that has not yet been subjugated. However, this should be viewed as more regrettable than that because it is established that among the Brāhmaṇic Śramaṇic, and other sects and householders, namely, heeding to the elders, heeding to the parents, heeding to the preceptors, seemly behaviour, and steadfast devotion to friends, acquaintances, companions, relatives, slaves, and servants. War causes bodily pain, death, and separation of family for such (religious) people. Or, there are some who are lucky and have undying love for one another, but who can do nothing to prevent the tragedies that befall their friends, family, and acquaintances. This is the fate of men, the Beloved of the Gods mourns. Also, the Brāhmaṇic and the ramaa ascetics may be found in every nation apart from Yavana, and there isn't a single place on the planet where men don't practise some form of religion. The Beloved of the Gods now mourns even a hundred or a thousandth of those who were killed, perished, or were captured in Kaliṅga. The Beloved of Gods must tolerate all that is bearable if someone wrongs him. And he comforts and exhorts the

inhabitants of the woodlands located within the sphere of influence of the Most Beloved of Gods. They are told of the power of the Beloved of Gods, despite the fact that he has repented, so that they may feel humiliation and avoid death. The God of Love wants all creatures to be kind, compassionate, self-controlled, and even-tempered....

The Spirit of Non-Violence of Asoka and Modern Terrorism

On the field of battle at *Kaliṅga* (260 BCE), the Emperor Asoka had a profound epiphany. He had just won the battle, but instead of celebrating, the sight of so much suffering forced upon him the question, "What is the meaning of conquest, victory, and annexation?" He realised that thousands of people had died, and countless more had been captured and deported, all for the benefit of his ego. Many people were torn away from their loved ones and made to suffer because of his pride.

After realising that he was completely on his own, Asoka made a life-altering decision: I will conquer myself. As a result, he made it his life's work to disseminate the Dhamma. After *Kaliṅga* was defeated, he wrote in RE. XIII, he felt a great pull towards the Dhamma, love for the Dhamma, and a desire to share the Dhamma with others. He was extremely sorry that he had to defeat the *Kaliṅga*. He was very saddened by the slaughter and exile that inevitably followed the conquest of a hitherto unconquered nation. Anyone who has friends, acquaintances, companions, or family members who are affected by death feels the pain of those around them. That's how he felt, anyway. The mighty ruler Asoka finally acknowledged the Dhamma as his ultimate authority. Following his epiphanic realisation, he devoted the rest of his life to making the principle of ahimsa the guiding light of his kingdom's administration. Asoka was the first emperor to implement *ahimsā* as a guiding principle of government policy at both the national and international levels.

In this setting of nonviolence, one important question arises. How can we promote nonviolence in this time of war and terrorism? It's true that many nations are struggling with internal and external challenges at the moment, with terrorism being among the most alarming. Many individuals are now keenly aware of these problems as a result of dramatic shifts in the social, political, economic, and cultural realms. Sometimes a subset of the population causes an issue so severe that authorities can do nothing to stop it. For instance, the 9/11 (2001) assaults on the United States were met with threats from all around the world. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives as a direct result of the attacks. The attacks were widely condemned. Why were these good individuals executed? There is no justification for such a terrible deed.

As a result, world leaders have been asking how to counter and avoid modern terrorism. How can we accomplish this goal? How well do you think military reprisal would work? Won't it just stir up more hostility? What if, for the purpose of argument, the immediate opponent were to be subdued? These situations defy a simple solution. So, may the correct application of the idea of ahimsa help stop terror attacks? The urgency of the question is rising.

The Spirit of Non-Violence: From Asoka To Mahatma Gandhi

Asoka the Great, a king of ancient India, stands out as a virtuous leader who brought the philosophy of nonviolence to the realm of politics and helped advance his society's culture as a result. After his invasion of the nearby state of Kalinga, Asoka had a rude awakening to the reality of war and was so overcome with guilt that he vowed never to use force again. After coming to sincerely embrace Buddhism, he realised that the triumph of armed might is the ultimate loss for humanity. Thus, he built a peaceful reign based on the teachings of the Buddha by deciding that his rule would be in conformity with the Dhamma. According to the Edicts of Asoka, Kalinga was conquered after eight years of the reign of King *Priyadarśin*, Beloved of the Gods. There were at least 150,000 people killed or captured, and many more than that lost their lives. The Beloved of the Gods is passionate in his observance of Dhamma, his love of Dhamma, and his instruction of Dhamma now that the land of *Kalinga* has been conquered.

Asoka was a practising Buddhist, but he also respected the rights of others to practise their faith without persecution. In addition, he thought that serving the people's interests with a heart filled with thanks and respect was the very core of politics. He dispatched envoys and emissaries to the western lands of Asia Minor, Syria, Persia, Egypt, and Macedonia to propagate the Dhamma beyond his domain. Mahinda, his son, was also sent to Ceylon by him. By doing so, he pursued a form of diplomacy for world peace that was not limited by barriers of language or culture.

Thus, Asoka, as a good Samaritan, has promulgated the teachings of *ahimsā* (nonviolence) for the benefit of all sentient creatures. His Dhamma-policy, which incorporates these ideas, has spread over the country from coast to coast, excluding people based on their religion or ethnicity. His son and daughter were killed in the name of spreading the Buddha's message of nonviolence and loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity from village to village, city to city, province to province, country to country; as a result, today, more than three-fifths of the world's population identifies as Buddhist. Asoka was a lay leader who succeeded ahead of his time, and his pronouncements were too grand and revolutionary in idea to be carried out by his officers or to be well appreciated by the mass of his followers in such a short period. His call for peace, nonviolence, truth, tolerance, etc., has been hailed by politicians at the highest level, proving

once and for all that the long period of silence and apathy has been broken. Finally, the world has come around to accepting, at least in principle, the Asokan principles that India has long proclaimed to the rest of the globe.

Conclusion

Emperor Aśoka is often cited as a case study in how a Buddhist approach to leadership might be successfully implemented. His life story is shrouded in mystery, but his ministry has been held up over the course of two millennia as an example of ethical leadership that prioritised social welfare without stifling economic development. He leads in a way that is consistent with Buddhist principles. Although his devotional intentions are undeniable, it is unclear whether he accepted them solely out of faith or out of rather strategic concerns. We cannot be certain that Aśoka leadership is a precise implementation of the Buddhist views available to him at the time, or that his example did not influence the development of the Buddhist scriptures to make them appear matching now, because the ink of the canon was not dry at the time. The likelihood of mutual benefit appears high. Asoka's leadership style may be considered Buddhistic, but the fact that his example may be followed by people of all faiths is more important than the label. The Buddhist world nevertheless owes Buddha a significant debt of gratitude for his efforts, without which the Buddhist faith as we know it today could not have survived. Asoka's legacy would serve modern society well if it encouraged other leaders to pursue ambitious goals and develop their full potential for the sake of a more interconnected world.

The edicts of Aśoka prove without a reasonable doubt that the stories told about his enlightened and compassionate administration deserve the praise they have received through the ages. In his decrees, he distinguished between official morality and personal morality. The first was the foundation upon which his administration was built, and the second was the advice and encouragement he gave to individuals in the hopes of creating a more just and spiritually minded society. The Buddhist virtues of compassion, moderation, tolerance, and respect for all life can be found in both of these ethical frameworks.

Aśoka advocated for a code of conduct that echoed the Lord Buddha's counsel to Sigala, which included showing reverence for one's parents, instructors, friends, servants, ascetics, and Brhmaas. He advocated for giving to the less fortunate, religious people like ascetics and brahmins, as well as close friends and family. It comes as no surprise that Asoka advocated for nonviolence (*avihisa bhūtānām*) towards all forms of life. Moderation in both spending and saving (*apa vyayatā apa bhadatā*) was something he thought was beneficial, echoing the

Buddha's teachings from the Aguttara-Nikya. He said that rites meant to bring good fortune were not as important as treating people with respect (*samya pratipati*). Asoka wanted his subjects to be well-versed in the enlightening teachings of other faiths (*bahu sruta*) so that they might better accept and tolerate one another's beliefs. Asoka's spirituality is attested to by the edicts' emphasis on moral excellence. Kindness (*dayā*), honesty (*palikhaya*), gratitude (*katamnatā*), purity of heart (*bhava sudhi*), zeal (*usahena*), steadfast allegiance (*dadha bhatita*), restraint (*sayame*), and a devotion to the Dhamma (*Dhammakamatā*) are all part of this list.

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