

# Asoka

## Beloved of the gods



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Ananda Buddha Vihara



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Beloved of the gods.  
–S. Veerananarayana Reddy

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## FOREWORD

soka Maurya is remembered in all the Buddhist countries of Asia as the first great ruler in history who attempted to bring Buddhist values into state craft. Because of ancient literature like Asoka Avadana and Mahavamsa, his name became familiar to Buddhists all over Asia even before James Prinsep deciphered his edicts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, a true picture of Asoka emerged only after his inscriptions were deciphered and much of myth and legend that surrounded his name could be removed.

Buddhists admire and respect Asoka for two reasons: first, it is because of him the Dhamma which was limited to Magadha and Kosala areas could be taken not only to the Asian countries but to the west of India as far as Greece; second, he was obviously the first Buddhist ruler who built up an administration on Buddhist values making it possible for people to understand what the Dhamma meant to them. But for him and before him, Anadhapindika, the Dhamma could not have been nourished in its early years.

This little monograph on Asoka by Shri S.Veeranarayana Reddy, Trustee of Ananda Buddha Vihara and the Editor of Suhrulekha brings you the story of Asoka both as represented in ancient Buddhist literature and as revealed in his edicts. I compliment Shri Reddy on his painstaking effort. I consider this a useful addition to literature on Buddhism.

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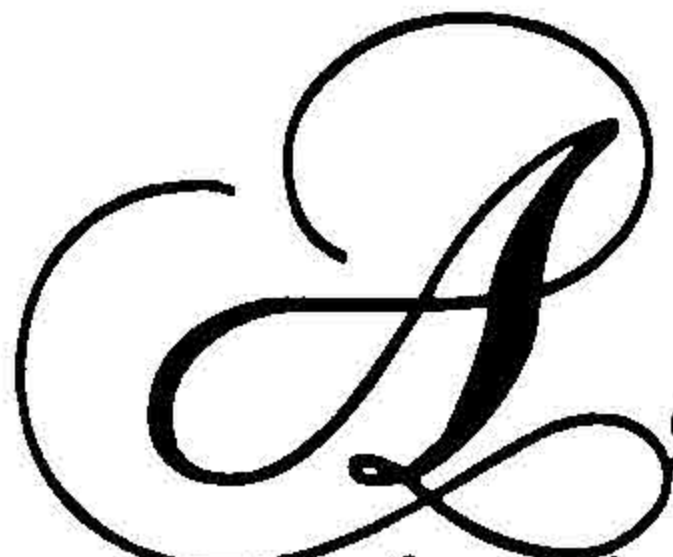




Asoka



# ASOKA

soka, the Mauryan emperor, is remembered not so much for the expanse of his empire, decidedly the largest in the ancient world, not even for promoting Buddhism, a regional faith, into a world religion. Rather, he is cherished more as the only ruler in history to have abjured violence and wars of expansion as a state policy. Stricken with remorse for the horrors of Kalinga war, this sensitive king felt moral revulsion against bloodshed and exhorted his progeny not to seek fresh conquests by arms but to regard conquest through Dharma as the real conquest. "All men are my children" he declared and guided his subjects on the path of Dharma, a way of life based on Buddhist moral precepts. Endowed with a sublime vision, he tried to establish a polity free from violence and suffering.

"Devanampiya Piyadasi", "beloved-of-the-gods, of amiable expression", that is how Asoka preferred to be known in his inscriptions. In all modesty, he disdained the use of any of the grand titles customary with imperial monarchs and mentions even his own name only in two inscriptions at Maski and Gujarra. The only two sources to reconstruct his life, literary and inscriptional, depict rather an enigmatic personality, not only in different tones, but often in contrasting images. About his story, Pali chronicles and Sanskrit legends also differ. However, both agree in picturing him initially as Candasoka (Asoka, the fierce) metamorphosing under the influence of Buddhism into Dharmasoka (Asoka, the righteous). Whereas the portrait that emerges from the inscriptions is of a monarch capable of original ideas with deep convictions, refined taste, tender sensibilities and above all a devout Buddhist leading a happy domestic life. The Avadhanas composed a few centuries later obviously in their eagerness to demonstrate the greatness of their faith, deviate from an undoubtedly more authentic version of the inscriptions. Unless these versions are filtered



and appraised on the strength of their credibility and consistency with facts from all available sources, it is not possible to reconstruct the profile of Asoka.

Sri Lankan Pali chronicles *Dipavamsa*, *Mahavamsa* and their commentaries known as *atthakathas*, *Samanthapasadika* a commentary on *Vinayapitaka* by Buddhaghosa, Sanskrit works *Divyavadana* and *Ashokavadana* and their Chinese adaptations of *A-Yu-Wang Chuan*, and *A-Yu-Wang king* and other versions extant, the narratives of Chinese travellers, Tibetan works like Taranatha's History of Buddhism are noteworthy. All these sources however shroud his personal life in mists of incredible legends. Several untenable episodes recounted in literary sources have to be discounted as not historically established. The inscriptions of Asoka scattered all over his empire definitely provide a more authentic, almost an autobiographical account of the various steps taken by him to spread Dharma, the ethical and religious content, state policy and social transformation he sought to bring about. But they hardly afford a glimpse of his personal life.

The noblest of kings in India, ironically was forgotten for more than two thousand years. The process of discovery and resurrection of Devanampiya Piyadasi from the haze of racial amnesia and restoring him to his rightful place in history is mainly due to a series of fortuitous circumstances. The inscriptions of Asoka that are in Magadhi Prakrit in Brahmi script were unknown to the Indian historical tradition until James Prinsep, an amateur philologist, with great ingenuity deciphered them in 1837. The world had come to know for the first time that the Asoka of the legends familiar to them was a great historical figure, supported by a wealth of inscriptional evidence. The pillar edicts erected at Buddhist sacred places were remembered to be that of Asoka for a few centuries, but with the disappearance of knowledge of Brahmi script in India for inexplicable reasons, had pushed his memory into oblivion. The Chinese travellers who visited Buddhist holy places described the pillars erected by Asoka but



they were not aware of the contents of the edicts. They recorded stories palmed off to them by ignorant locals. After the 12<sup>th</sup> century even the association of Asoka's name with the edicts was snapped from the people's memory. Thus the inscriptions remained undeciphered for nearly two thousand years. Puranas and Jain literature understandably passed over Asoka in silence. Asoka was sculpturally depicted in Sanchi stupa (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) and a century later at Kanaganahalli stupa in Karnataka. Girnar inscription of Rudradaman (AD 150) mentions Asoka for repairing Sudarsana lake which was excavated by his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya. He was mentioned in a fragmentary inscription at Salihundam of the same period. Thereafter his name went into obscurity, until his rediscovery by the decipherment of inscriptions by James Prinsep and correct identification of Devanampiya Piyadasi with that of Asoka mentioned in Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka by Turnour, a British civil servant. Equally ignorant were the composers of Avadanas and Pali chronicles of the contents of inscriptions which explains their silence about Kalinga war and its impact on Asoka.

## Chandasoka (Asoka the Fierce)

Sanskrit sources, particularly Buddhist Avadanas, depict Asoka in dark and lurid colours, as a wicked king deriving pleasure in watching spectacles of torture in a prison especially built for this purpose. Even physically he was described as of ugly features rough skin and a repulsive character detested by his father Bindusara and avoided by the ladies of the harem. After the death of his father, in the bitter struggle of succession that ensued, Asoka killed Sumana, his elder brother and heir apparent to the throne, and his adherents. Pali chronicles mention the massacre of ninety-nine of his brothers by Asoka in order to ascend the throne. Except his uterine brother Tissa, whose name is Vitasoka according to Sanskrit sources, all his other brothers perished in the ruthless struggle for power. An inscription at Kalsi, however, reveals many living brothers and sisters of Asoka that belies the version of literary sources.



According to Asokavadana, many of his ministers treated him with contempt after he seized power. In order to test their loyalty, Asoka ordered them to cut down all the trees bearing flower and fruit and spare the thorny ones. When they demurred and did not comply promptly, he is said to have chopped off the heads of five hundred ministers. The burning of five hundred ladies of the harem, when they did not respond to his amorous advances, is another grisly tale attributed to him. Even after becoming a devout Buddhist, Asokavadana obliquely refers to his menacing attitude. Asoka distributed the relics of the Buddha to each town having a population of hundred thousand for enshrining it in a stupa. When the people of Takhsasila, claiming a population of thirty-six hundred thousand, demanded thirty-six relics, he held a veiled threat that since he was unable to supply so many relics, he would rather reduce the population. Since the purpose of Avadanas in Buddhist tradition is primarily to narrate edifying stories of heroes and saints to draw a moral lesson for the people to emulate, they depicted Asoka in dark colours in order to highlight the transformation of his wicked character wrought by Buddhism. In all Asian countries, which were influenced by Buddhism, people were familiar with the Asoka of the legends all these years, but not Devanampiya, the spiritual guide of the inscriptions.

Bindusara, father of Asoka, according to legend had hundred sons by many wives. Asoka's mother, according to *Mahavamsa* was one by name Dhamma, while the Avadanalata mentions her as Subhadrangi. Asokavadana without naming his mother describes her as the daughter of a Brahmin of Campa. The future destiny of her becoming a queen and her son becoming an emperor was predicted by an Ajivika ascetic Janasana. Her father took her to Bindusara and offered her in marriage. But the ladies of the harem, jealous of her beauty and talent, conspired to assign her barber's duties. However, she won the heart of Bindusara by her dedicated service, revealed her antecedents and by pleasing the king succeeded in marrying



him. All sources agree that she was devoted to Ajivika faith. At the birth of Asoka as she became free from sorrow having escaped the intrigues of the harem she named him Asoka which means "sorrow less". She named her second son Vigatasoka 'purged of sorrow' as sorrow was totally purged from her mind after his birth.

Pali chronicles, as also the inscriptions of Asoka that were scripted in the eleventh year after coronation, are silent about his childhood. However, Sanskrit Avadanas, Chinese and Tibetan works based on them speak of his childhood and youth. It is mentioned that Bindusara made an Ajivika ascetic, Pingala Vatsajiva, to test all his sons in order to assess the competence of the princes and decide on a suitable successor to the Mauryan empire. The ascetic foresaw that Asoka would be the future emperor, but did not reveal it. So the eldest son Sumana or Susima was made heir apparent. Asoka's first administrative assignment was to quell a rebellion in Takshasila. He not only accomplished this task, but also annexed Khasa region to the empire. An Aramaic inscription found at Taxila-Sirkap makes mention of a Viceroy Piyadasi. Later appointed as Viceroy of Avanti he proved his administrative abilities. While on his way to Ujjain, Asoka was guest of the guild chief Devasetti of Vedisa. There he fell in love with his daughter Devi and married her. Mahinda and Sanghamitta, the two royal missionaries to Sri Lanka, were born of this marriage. Devi never went to Pataliputra when Asoka ascended the throne but remained in Vedisa for the rest of her life.

The two traditions agree that Asoka had seized the throne after a bitter fratricidal struggle in which Sumana and other brothers and adversaries were eliminated. Sumana, a heedless and arrogant youth, according to Asokavadana, appointed as heir apparent, was lured to a well-concealed pit filled with live coal into which he fell and perished as per the stratagem conceived by Radhagupta, the trusted minister of Asoka. The fact that Asoka had to wait for four years even after seizing power



to formally consecrate himself as emperor suggests a prolonged struggle of succession. As he had established well-earned reputation as a great warrior and administrator, he could muster ample support in Pataliputra and in the far-flung provinces. He was thirty-four years old at the time of his coronation (270 - 269 BC), he made his younger brother Tissa as sub-king (Yuvaraja) and appointed Radhagupta as Prime Minister.

Asoka had many wives and consorts in the capital and provinces. However, literary and inscriptional sources name only five queens who had played some significant role in his life. Asandhimitta, a trusted companion, was the chief queen for about thirty years. After her death Tissarakkhita was made the chief queen. Conceited and malevolent she tried to destroy the Bodhi tree at Buddhagaya to which Asoka was devoted. Later she got the eyes of her stepson Kunala gouged as he spurned her amorous overtures. Another wife Charuvaki was mentioned in the pillar inscription of Allahabad – Kosam along with her son Tivala. Thus there were five queens known by the names of Devi of Vedisa, Asandhimitta, Tissarakkhita, Padmavati (mother of Kunala) and Charuvaki.

## Taking Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

On assuming power, Asoka continued the traditions set up by his father like providing meals to as many as sixty thousand Sramanas and Brahmans. His restless spirit, however, was in quest of truth – the essence and non-essence (*Sara Saram*) of all existing religions. Holding discussions with several Brahmins and Sramanas he tried to grasp the philosophical and ethical content of their sects but was sorely disappointed as none of them could satisfy him. Pali and Sanskrit sources give different versions about the circumstances that impelled Asoka to embrace Buddhism.

According to Asokavadana, a young Bikkhu by name Samudra took to wandering life and inadvertently entered the torture chamber built by Asoka, which outwardly looked like a



beautiful house. The prison was under the charge of Girika the cruel. Seeing the frightening spectacle of torture the inmates were subjected to in the prison, he turned back but was barred by Girika. Earlier Asoka had assured Girika at the time of his appointment that none who entered the chamber would be allowed to go back alive. Samudra, the Bikkhu begged the jailor but could only get seven days' reprieve before his execution by torture. Agonizing over imminent death, his thoughts turned to the Buddha. On the seventh day Samudra saw a lady of the harem being reduced to pulp along with her lover by pestles on an iron mortar as they were detected in a compromising position. So shaken was Samudra, he realized suddenly the impermanence of body like a bubble and exclaimed, "In this jail I have come to the fundamental realization that this day will enable me to cross the ocean of existence". Breaking all bonds of existence he attained supreme arhatship. With a smiling face he followed Candagirika to be executed. He was thrown into an iron cauldron filled with filth and a fire was lit up. Though much fuel was consumed, the fire did not blaze into flames. Puzzled Girika looked into the cauldron and saw the young Bikkhu seated cross-legged on a lotus. On being informed of this miracle Asoka repaired to the prison and saw a series of miracles including the "twin miracle" in which the Bikkhu shed water and emitted fire simultaneously from his body. Asoka begged him to reveal the meaning of this miracle and the glories of his Dharma so that he would adhere to them as a disciple. Thinking that Asoka would accept the holy word (*Prvacana Parigrahako*) Samudra extolled Dharma, and his own detachment to all modes of existence, guided by the Buddha. He revealed the prediction of the Buddha that eighty four thousand stupas would be built by Asoka on the relics of Tathagatha. Pointing to the prison where thousands were killed, he advised the king to offer gift of security (*abhayapradana*) to all beings and carry out the wish of the Blessed One. Asoka there and then took refuge in the Buddha and Dharma and expressed his resolve to fulfil what was foretold. Samudra then



flew into the firmament and disappeared. As Asoka was leaving the prison Candagirika reminded him of the promise that none who entered the place would go alive. Asoka understood the evil intention of Girika, which was to put the emperor to death. Asoka made Girika to confess that he entered the death chamber first and as such he had to be killed. Asoka had him executed and the prison razed to the ground.

Pali version of Asoka's spiritual rebirth is different. Asoka was held in high esteem in Sri Lanka, as an introducer of Buddhism, heralding as it were a new civilization in the island. As the conversion of Asoka was a dramatic event in the history of Buddhism, Pali chronicles and the commentaries preserved the tradition very carefully. According to these sources, Asoka after coronation, when the affairs of the state had settled down, was eagerly looking for well disciplined, virtuous ones from whom he could learn the perfect Dharma. He was seeking saintly persons with 'inner essence' (*antosaram*), a word Asoka frequently uses in the inscriptions. Though he held discussions with several saints and scholars he was not satisfied until a chance encounter with a samanera – Nigrodha – opened up a new vista. One day standing on the balcony of the palace Asoka saw a recluse Nigrodha seeking alms in the street. Graceful in movement, pacified in the senses, the Samanera's countenance was restrained and serene. Impressed with the deportment of the young recluse, the king was filled with joy and exulted "like a poor man who found a treasure or like a rich man who had his mind's desire fulfilled". He sent a minister to invite the child-monk to the palace. On his arrival, in order to test him, he asked Nigrodha to sit on a seat befitting a recluse. Seeing that there was no other monk around, Nigrodha handed over the begging bowl to the king and sat on the throne. This gesture further increased the happiness of the king. He offered him food prepared for himself and begged him to give a sermon on Dharma. Nigrodha then gave a discourse on 'heedfulness' from the Appamadavarga of Dharmapada. Hearing that "heedfulness



is the path to immortality and heedlessness is the path of death”, Asoka felt that an unknown truth was disclosed to him. At that very moment, he took refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Next day the emperor went to Kukkutarama and paid homage to the arhats and monks. When he later learnt that Nigrodha was the son of Sumana, his elder brother who was killed by him, then his joy was measureless. Asoka embraced the faith in the fourth regnal year i.e., in the eighth year after his accession. The Samanera was just seven years old as he was born after his father’s death.

These legends apart, the religious atmosphere in Madhyadesa (middle country) was dominated by Sramana faiths such as Nirgranthas, Ajivikas, Acalikas, Jatilas, Lokayatas and Buddhists. Brahminism was one of the several contending sects trying to expand its influence. Generally the Sramanas believed in an universalising ethic with least metaphysical trappings compared to Brahminism which believed in bloody sacrifices, observance of costly rituals and cutting up the society into rigid hierarchical structures based on caste with separate rules for each one of them. The sacred books Vedas were not the common property of the people, not even that of all Brahmins but a private preserve of a small section of priestly adepts among Brahmins. The supplements to the Vedas were also of esoteric nature. Buddhism on the other hand did not indulge in metaphysical speculations which they called *michchaditti* and condemned animal sacrifices and other rituals. As their theories were based on empirical observation and reason, they gave precedence to morality in the life of an individual in the context of his relationship to the society. They condemned social distinctions based on birth. They laid stress on meditation enabling one to see for himself things as they really are (*yathabuta darsana jnana*). This simple faith swept away the incubus of musty ritualism and bloody sacrifices of Brahminism, opened a clear path for liberation. With morality as basis and wisdom as the goal the Good Law assured to all the realization of Nirvana, not in distant



future or in some other world but in this very life, here and now by elevating man to a higher spiritual plane. This faith appealed to masses and elite enormously.

The royal palace was an open house for all faiths and perfect freedom of thought prevailed. Chandragupta Maurya was a devout Jain and in his old age he is said to have passed away in Sravana Belagola by observing *sullekhana*, a ritual ending of life by fasting. Bindusara loved philosophical debates and was inclined to Jainism while Asoka's mother, Dhamma, was a devout Ajivaka. The palace was fully acquainted with Greek philosophical theories and in fact, Bindusara wanted a Greek philosopher to be sent to his court. It was in such an atmosphere that Asoka was brought up and he understood the essential aspects of all the prevailing faiths. Buddhism, a dominant religion, provided a solace to his critical mind and acted as an integrating force to his multi-ethnic population. As could be seen from inscriptions he banned animal sacrifices (yagnas), discouraged meaningless rituals such as mangalas and festivities such as samajas that led to deplorable excesses, judging them to be violative of the universal ethic he was propagating. These measures must have been resented by Brahmins for whom the sacrifices, rites and rituals were sources of livelihood. These acts echo the attitude of the Sramanas towards Brahminical sect, which Patanjali compared to the innate hostility of snake and mongoose. It is also significant that in none of the several inscriptions Asoka makes a mention of caste.

As his faith in Buddha Dharma deepened, Asoka made liberal donations to the Sangha, providing all the requisites. He has reputedly built eighty-four thousand stupas to adorn his empire after collecting the relics of the Tathagatha from the seven Drona Stupas sparing Ramagama of Nagas. Yet, he was considered according to Buddha Sasana only a *Paccaya dayaka* – provider of material requisites to the Sangha. Only when his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta were ordained in the sixth regnal year, he was recognized as *Sasana dayaka* – an inheritor of the faith.



It is clear that Asoka became a Buddhist much before Kalinga war, which took place in the eighth regnal year. However, Kalinga expedition and the carnage that resulted, shook the sensitive mind of the Buddhist monarch deeply. Realizing the utter futility of war and the price paid in terms of human suffering, he eschewed war as immoral. This transformation had come surprisingly after a stunning victory over a powerful kingdom. The causes for the war were not mentioned in the inscriptions. Whether there was any provocation by the defiant Kalingans or was it only an imperial exploit (*Digvijaya*) to assert his suzerainty is not clear from the inscriptions. The agony of the monarch who experienced a moral revulsion against bloodshed was expressed in his own words in a rock edict (R.E. XIII.) "One hundred fifty thousand were deported from there. About a hundred thousand were slain there. Many times that number perished. Hereafter now that Kalinga is annexed Devanampiya's observance of Dharma, love of Dharma and propagation of Dharma became ardent. There is this remorse in Devanampiya that he conquered Kalinga". He exhorts his sons, grandsons and progeny not to think of making new conquests of aggression but only conquest by Dharma as it is both beneficial for this world and the next.

The question that is often asked is why did a Buddhist monarch like Asoka wage a war of annexation? Buddhist kings like Bimbisara of Magadha , Prasenajit of Kosala, fought wars for reasons of state. Perhaps he embarked upon this regrettable war due to political necessity or state security. Though he was a Buddhist he never ceased to be effective in the role of a ruler and drew a distinction between his personal faith and his duties and responsibilities as a sovereign. He even clearly warned recalcitrant elements in the frontiers and forest dwellers in one of his edicts that he would tolerate what can be tolerated and pardon what can be pardoned, but "even in repentance Devanampiya has the might, so turn away from evil ways so that you may not be killed." The trauma of war however



engendered an emotional metamorphosis and a moral awakening amounting to almost a 'new birth'. The observations of M. Macphail in *The Heritage of India* explain the transformation. Says he "it is not easy to understand why Asoka, the head of a great military empire that had been acquired in not very remote time by conquests should have been so deeply affected and conscience stricken by his experience of what were in those days familiar horrors of war. There must surely have been some preparation for so great a change. Possibly the teachings of the followers of Gautama had impressed him more than he had himself realized, and the experience of the actual bloodshed on a large scale merely to gratify his ambition and enrich the state served to crystallize into convictions, impressions that had been slowly forming in his mind". The uniqueness of Asoka was, in the words of Arnold Toynbee that "he stood convicted in his conscience of having sinned against his sense of brotherhood and he responded by making a complete break with his dynasty's and every dynasty's traditional policy".

He became an ardent Buddhist and gradually evolved Dharma into a code of ethics easy to understand and practice by common men all over his heterogeneous empire. What he aimed at was the universal brotherhood of all beings.

## Patron of Buddhism

Asokavadana narrates a prediction of the Buddha in the previous life of Asoka that he would become an emperor and serve Dharma in many ways. As per this legend, two children by name Jaya and Vijaya of Rajagrha were amusing themselves by building houses and preparing meals with clay. When Tathagatha passed that way, Jaya was impressed by the appearance of the Sage and decided to offer a meal and placed mud into the bowl of the Buddha with a resolution (*pranidhana*) that by his good act of merit he should become king, and bring the whole earth under a single umbrella of suzerainty and that he would adore the Buddha in many ways. Recognizing the



sincerity of the child's offer, the Buddha predicted that indeed he would become emperor in the next birth. Vijaya who wholeheartedly approved of the *dana* was born as Radhagupta, his faithful minister.

Ever since his conversion either under the guidance of Thera Moggaliputta Tissa, as per Pali tradition or Upagupta of Sanskrit tradition, Asoka's devotion manifested in various activities. Not only his brother Tissa and Aggibrahma, his son-in-law, were ordained, his own son Mahinda and Sanghamitta took to robes at a very young age. He used to feed sixty thousand monks daily as per the tradition. As foretold by the Buddha he embarked on a massive programme of building as many as eighty-four thousand Dharmarajika stupas each honouring a section of the canon traditionally held divisible into eighty-four thousand sections. It was also said that these stupas were inaugurated simultaneously on one day at a signal marked by the covering of the sun miraculously by Thera Yasas of Kukkutarama. He made pilgrimages to all the sacred sites associated with the life of Buddha such as Lumbini, Isipatana, Kusinara, and Buddhagaya and visited reliquaries of disciples like Sariputra, Moggalana, Mahakassapa and Ananda.. He enlarged the stupa of the previous Buddha Kanakamuni. Dharmalipis were engraved on rocks, caves and pillars at all important places for the people to learn the essence of Dharma. He replaced Vihara yatras, tours for pleasure and hunting with Dharma yatras which were intended to meet learned scholars, aged persons and generally people who needed help. Minor Rock Edict I mentions that the emperor spent two hundred and fifty six nights on such an extensive tour. He completed several public works such as laying roads, planting trees, cultivating medicinal herbs for the benefit of men and beasts. After the death of Thera Kontiputta for want of a handful of clarified butter to treat his illness, Asoka founded stores for free supply of medicines.



The munificence of the emperor also had undesirable negative effects. The comforts provided to the Sangha attracted large number of heretics and parasites little to do with the faith. This led to disruption of discipline and for a period of seven years Uposatha (a fortnightly confessional congregation of monks) was not held in Kukkutarama. Disgusted with the state of affairs, Thera Moggaliputta Tissa left the Arama and retreated to Mount Ahoganga. The exasperated emperor stepped in to mend the ways of the Sangha by directing a minister to see that Uposatha ceremony was held and non-believers and other troublesome elements expelled from the Order. When some Bikkhus refused to hold the Uposatha, the minister ordered capital punishment to the offending monks. The punishment was meted out with undue severity until Thera Tissa, brother of the emperor offered his own neck to the sword, thus stopping further butchery. On coming to know about the bloodshed in the Sangha, the emperor forthwith stopped further massacre. Overcome with a sense of guilt of moral responsibility for the acts of his minister, the emperor went into a retreat of penitence until Moggaliputta Tissa dispelled his doubts as his act had no evil intent by reciting Tittira Jataka. For seven days the Thera taught him the essence of the Buddhist Dharma so that Asoka could judge for himself who the true believers were. Asoka convened a general conference of monks (*samagama*), personally interrogated the monks, spotted heretics who did not believe in Vibhajjavada interpretation of Dharma and expelled them.

After the purge, satisfied that the Sangha was united and purified, Moggaliputta Tissa convened the Third Buddhist Council with thousand Arhats from all over India to settle doctrinal issues. Dissident sects surfaced ever since Vaishali council, threatening the unity of the Order. Matters came to a head, which could not be ignored any longer. The heresy of Thera Mahadeva – on whose antecedents and activities Buddhist sources differ – further acerbated and fouled the atmosphere.



He formulated five theses (*panchavastu*), challenging the privileges and dignity of the Arhats, throwing the Buddhist communities in ferment. Several sub sects sprouted among Sthaviras and Mahasanghika communities. Mahadeva was closely connected with Dhanyakataka and is said to have caused a split in the Sangha resulting in several offshoots such as Chaityakas, Purvasailas, Aparasailas, Uttarasailas, Rajagirikas and Siddhantikas. Representing the standpoint of these sects, some Arhats participated in the council. Their formulations were described as “Andhaka thesis” and were refuted along with views of other dissidents by Moggaliputta Tissa. Kathavattu (Points of controversy) that now forms part of Abhidhamma Pitaka, contain the refutations of heretical views and the true interpretation of Dharma from the point of view of Sthaviras.

Having cleansed the Sangha, Asoka took steps to prevent any type of schismatic activities. In the schism edicts at Sarnath, Sanchi, Allahabad and Kosam, he ordered that disrupters of discipline of the Order and those who were responsible for disunity should be made to wear white raiments and sent out of Sangha. The Mahamatras were enjoined to oversee compliance of the commands of the sovereign and these edicts were exhibited at places accessible to the Sangha and lay followers. Assuming the role of a spiritual guide, in Bhabru edict, he advises monks and the laity to learn and memorise some canonical texts (*Dharma Pariyayas*) which he considered to be of great benefit in leading a moral life. The aim of Asoka by all such measures was to make the Sangha united and strong. Disciplining the Sanghas, which had become beehives of dissidence was of utmost importance and he felt that it was his royal duty to ensure its purity. Besides, utilizing fully the State officials like the Dharma Mahamatras and Rajjukas for propagating Dharma, he mobilised laymen such as elephant riders, charioteers, scribes, and teachers of the Brahmin community for this stupendous evangelical effort.

With the clear support of the sovereign, Moggaliputta Tissa sent nine missions to the frontier and outlying regions, each



headed by a reputed Arhat. They were: Majjantika to Gandhara, Mahadeva to Mahisaraatta (present day Andhra and part of Karnataka), Yonadharmarakkitta to Aparantaka, Maha Dharmarakkitta to Maharatta, Maharakkitta to Yonaloka, Kasyapagotta and four others to Himavanta, Sona and Uttara to Suvarnabhumi. Mahinda and Sanghamitta were sent to Sri Lanka by the emperor himself who carried the begging bowl and the relics of the Buddha and a branch of the Bodhi tree which was planted at Anuradhapura.

Every five years he celebrated special ceremonies (*panchavarshika*) in which large number of Bikkhus and Arhants participated and held discourses on Dharma. They were fed and generous donations were given. In such quinquennial congregations, the emperor gifted away his kingdom, ladies of the harem, the ministers and later redeemed them by paying to the Sangha. By building stupas on the relics he promoted relic worship that afforded satisfaction to the lay worshippers. Not only was he concerned with the ethical conduct of the people whom he treated as his own children, he took equal interest in the welfare of animals. He banned the killing of certain animals, birds and fish with the highest aim that “the living should not be nourished with living” (*Jivena jiva na pusitaviye*). He banned killing of certain animals for sacrifice. Castration and branding of animals was prohibited on certain holy days. He provided medical treatment for both, men and beast. Perhaps his was the first proclamation to provide sanctuary to animals. On every anniversary of his coronation, amnesties were declared for prisoners.

### Conquest by Righteousness (*Dharma Vijaya*)

The Dharma of Asoka was not conceived at one point of time as the Dharmalipis clearly suggest. As he took up Dharmic life with all fervour he began to understand the essence of Dharma in its varied aspects: ethical, religious, sociological and political. As his vast empire extended from Karnataka to



Hindukush with people of varied cultures, languages, customs and faiths, he evolved a universally applicable ethic and a political philosophy which is non-sectarian and multicultural. He aimed this dharma to be a binding force of the empire, comprising myriad states and tribes at various stages of development. He reduced abstract notions into simple injunctions (*Dharmagunas*) with effective appeal as seen in Minor Rock Edict II – one should obey mother and father and elders; one should be steadfast towards living beings; one should adhere to truth; pupils should honour the teacher; proper behaviour towards relatives, friends, Brahman and Sramana ascetics; seemly behaviour to slaves and servants. He advised people in one of the edicts to observe moderation in expenditure and in possessions. To crown them all is the sanctity of life. Non-destruction of life (*prananam anarambho*) and non-injury to all creatures (*avihimsa bhutanam*) constitute the core of this ethic. In the very first Rock Edict issued in the eleventh regnal year, he prohibited animal sacrifice and samajas concourse of people indulging in excessive pleasures, in saturnalian atmosphere. However, he encouraged samajas where entertainment combined with edifying spectacles and ethical discourses. Superstitious rituals usually observed by women at the time of birth, sickness, marriage and on journeys, which were trivial and useless, were sought to be replaced by Dharmamangalas consisting of ethical practices. He recognised family as a foundation for nurturing moral behaviour. He contrasted dana with Dharmadana, i.e., transmission of Dharma to others as the supreme virtue (*sabbbadanam, dharma danam jinati*). He enumerates malevolent passions that lead to sinfulness such as impetuosity, cruelty, anger, pride and malice and commended people to practise positive virtues such as mercy, liberality and gentleness. He summed up the essence of Dharma, echoing Dharmapada, minimum evil, much good and purity of mind. Above all, he claimed that he gave the gift of eyesight (*cakkudana*) implying a gift of correct vision and wisdom.



Not interested in doctrinal matters of Buddhism, he did not mention the Four Noble Truths, Eight Fold Path, Dependent Origination, and Nirvana in the inscriptions, but echoed the moral precepts found in Dharmapada, Sigalavadasutta, Lakkanasutta and Mahamangalasutta. His concept of dhamma is a non-religious ethic.

He enumerated various steps he took in pursuance of this policy both in his dominions and neighbouring kingdoms. The names of kingdoms whose lands were thus 'conquered' by sending Dutas (missions) in this manner were: Antiyoka (Antiochus II, Theos of the Selussid dynasty, Syria and West Asia, c. 261–246 BC), Turamaya or Tulamaya (Ptolemy II, Philadelphus of Egypt 285–240 BC), Ampikini (Antigonos, Gonatas of Macedonia, 237–239 BC), Maka or Maga (Magas of Cyrena in North Africa 282–252 BC), Alikasundara (Alexander of Epirus 272–245 BC or Alexander of Corinth 252–244 BC).

Similar conquests were achieved in the southern India in the lands of Colas, Pandyas and as far as Tamraparini. In his own dominions so 'conquered' were Yonas and Kambojas, Nabhakas, Nabhapanktis and Bhoja-paitryanikas, Andhras and Pulindas. He rejoices that "everywhere they conform to Devanampiya's admonition of Dharma".

Contrasting conquest by aggression with conquest by righteousness (*Dharma Vijaya*), he finds the latter the foremost of the conquests (*ayi ca mukkhamuta vijaye devanampiya sa yo dharma vijayo*). Advising his progeny not to wage wars of conquests, he emphasizes three merits in *dharma vijaya* namely: such conquests bring happiness and satisfaction (*Pritiraso*) and it can be shared by all involved. And more important than this sense of delight were the immense benefits accruing in the life hereafter. In Rock Edict IV, he claimed that the sound of war drums became the sound of Dharma (*bheri ghoso aho dharma ghoso*). Taking an unprecedented step in rejecting the traditional Hindu theoretical concept of Raja Dharma, he abandoned once



for all the obligation of waging wars by kings as reflected in the principle of Digvijaya.

He appointed Dharmamahamatras, charged with the duties of inculcating Dharma amongst the people, beneficial to both the clergy and laity. They occupied themselves in all religious persuasions, as they were separately assigned to Buddhist Sanghas, Ajivikas, Nigranthas and Brahmins and other religious sects. Thus each religious sect had its own Dharmamahamatras and chief officers known as Mukhas. The Dharmamahamatras were to carry all these duties and inspire the people into thinking that “the king thus is like a father to us. Just as he feels for himself so does he feel for us. We are thus to the king like his progeny”. He appeals to Mahamatras, who were to discharge these duties, “You will attain heaven and also discharge your debt to me”. Realizing that legislative and prescriptive measures are not as effective as reflection and understanding by the individuals themselves, he laid great stress on meditation, learning (*Bahusruta*) and understanding.

Perhaps the spirit of intolerance was prevalent and that is why Asoka repeatedly advocated mutual tolerance among all the sects. In Rock Edict XII, he advises that the growth of the essentials of Dharma lies in restraint in regard to speech which implies that “there should be no extolment of one’s own sect and disparagement of other sects...” On the contrary, other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions. He invited in Rock Edict VII that all religious sects should live harmoniously in all parts of his dominions.

A remarkable feature of his policy was his accessibility to the people at all times which was never heard of in earlier times. In Rock Edict VI, he says, “At all times reporters (*Pativedaka*) are posted everywhere so as to report to me the affairs of the people, whether I be eating, or in the female apartments or in bedroom or on a promenade or in the farm or in a carriage or in the pleasure gardens. Everywhere I attend to



affairs of the people" (*Sarvatra ca janassa athe karomi*). He further says, "There is no higher work than the welfare of the people of the whole world. Whatever effort I make is so that I may discharge my debt to living beings. (*bhutanaam anamnam gacheyam*). I will cause them to be happy and they will also attain heaven hereafter." The concept of kingship involving a debt to be repaid to the people by the king is "a revolutionary reversal of the traditional concept of kingship". He was satisfied that his tireless propagation of Dharma had led to the increase of virtue among his people to such an extent that they were fit to associate with the gods. With firm conviction, unwavering determination, the teacher of piety embarked on a stupendous programme of swaying the whole nation in adapting the Dharmic life. It is said that it was the biggest social experiment in history.

So pervasive was his dharma consciousness that in Pillar Edict I he expresses satisfaction that his dominions were administered by Dharma, regulated by Dharma, were ensured happiness by Dharma and protected by Dharma. D. D. Kosambi remarks that, "It can even be said that the Indian national character, received the stamp of dharma from the time of Asoka".

## Asoka's Empire

Asoka ruled for thirty-seven years; a vast empire, which included the whole of Indian subcontinent except the southern tip of peninsula ruled by Colas, Pandyas, Satyaputras and Keralaputras. The only country he annexed in the eighth regnal year was Kalinga equipped with a powerful army, the boundaries of which extended from Godavari to Mahanadi with a long seaboard facilitating maritime trade and abundant forest and agricultural wealth. Andhradesa with its thirty-walled cities and a powerful military force, which was considered by Megasthenes as "second only to the kingdom of Chandragupta Maurya" was independent and unsubdued during the time of his grandfather. By Asoka's time it formed part of the Mauryan Empire. Perhaps Bindusara who was styled as *Amitraghata* (slayer of foes) must have annexed Andhradesa and a part of Karnataka. The find-



spots of Asokan inscriptions roughly provide a picture of the extent of his empire. In the south, Erragudi and Rajulamandagiri in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh, Udegolem and Nittur in Bellary district, Brahmagiri, Siddapur, Jatingarameshwaram in Chitradurga District of Karnataka indicate the frontiers in the south. Except the present Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the empire covered as far south as Kanchipuram. Suvarnagiri was the southern capital of the Imperial Mauryas where a Kumara, a member of the royal family was stationed as viceroy. Suvarnagiri was variously identified as present Jonnagiri near Erragudi in Kurnool district or Kanakagiri near Maski. It is surmised that these areas geologically found to be bearing gold and diamonds was well known in ancient times and this must have spurred the Magadhan kings to annex this region.

The administration was centrally controlled from Pataliputra, the imperial capital through four Viceroys (Kumaras or Aryaputras) selected from the royal household stationed at Takshasila, Ujjain, Suvarnagiri and Tosali. The Viceroys enjoyed considerable autonomy. Next to the Viceroys were the Governors (*pradesikas*) of provinces. The vast empire was administered with a network of efficient bureaucracy. In R.E. XIII, Asoka mentions three types of officials – Yuktas, Mahamatras and Rajjukas. Yuktas were the district officials who managed the king's property, received and maintained accounts of revenues of the lands and trade guilds. Rajjukas were higher officials overseeing judicial matters and settlement of lands. Nagaravyavaharika was the city administrator. Other officials like Mahamatras, Dharmamahamatras, Ithijhakamahamatras, were the innovations of Asoka. Ithijhakamahamatras are same as Stryadyakshamahamatras who were superintendents to deal with the problems of women such as maintenance, transgressions, elopement, divorce, and subsistence to helpless women and orphans. Vrachabhoomikas were identified with officers who were in charge of public works and duties relating to cattle herds owned by either the king or private individuals and bringing



produce to royal establishments. Antamahamatras were in charge of the frontiers who were also dispatched now and then to neighbouring countries to spread Dharma. Mahamatras were high officials and dignitaries who operated the commands of the king transmitted through parishad – council of ministers. Viyutha or Vuutha (Vusta) were touring officers like Mahamatras who had to return to district headquarters on Uposatha.

Asoka reformed the judicial system and his concern is reflected in the instructions given to them. He advises the judicial officers to studiously guard themselves against “envy, lack of perseverance, harshness, impatience, neglect of repeated effort, idleness and sense of weariness”. He even holds a threat to judicial officers that he would send Dharmamahamatras with injunctions to rectify any misadministration of justice. In his 26<sup>th</sup> regnal year, he made Rajjukas, the sole charge of judicial investigations and judgments of punishments with the aim of bringing uniformity in the judicial process. Asoka could say with satisfaction “just as someone having entrusted his progeny to a skilled nurse is confident that ‘the skilled nurse is alert to take care of my child well, so are my Rajjukas appointed for the welfare and happiness of the people of the regions in order that they may perform their duties without fear, with confidence and without perplexity” (Pillar Edict IV). He reformed the penal code with a touch of clemency by granting reprieve of three days to men condemned to death affording opportunity to ponder and make themselves fit for the next world before the sentence was enforced. The compassion of the king is reflected in the amnesties he declared to all prisoners on every anniversary of coronation.

Dharmamahamatras were important officials created by Asoka to look after the development of not only the earthly but also the spiritual good of the people. They were to inspect those who were in prison, to make various grants to those prisoners who were encumbered with large families, to free innocents and the aged from shackles and in general temper justice with clemency. Looking after prisoners’ families is indeed a modern



concept in penology. They had other humanitarian duties such as overseeing the welfare of Brahmans, Sramanas and the helpless and aged in general. The idea of the state providing help to the needy is an innovative measure found nowhere in the ancient world. What animated the administrative machinery always was a sense of identification with the people affectionately expressed by Asoka in the Kalinga edict: "All men are my children just as I desire for my children that they may obtain every kind of welfare and happiness both in this world and the next world, so I desire for all men". The vision of the saintly monarch included not only man, but all living creatures. The sweep of his reforms extended beyond his dominions, practically the whole world known to him.

### Master of Upaya Kausalya (Skill in Means)

Asokavadana mentions a few instances of skilful ploys adopted by Asoka to convince and win over people to his way of thinking. When he found Vitasoka, his younger brother had nothing but contempt for the spiritual attainments of the Bhikkus who in his view led comfortable lives compared to the austere lives of other Sramanas, the master of *upayakausalya* (skill in means) wanted to convert his brother. He asked his ministers to persuade Vitasoka to don royal robes and wear diadem while Asoka was taking bath. Later he accused him of usurping his royalty and called the guards to mete out punishment. But the ministers on cue intervened and pleaded for mercy for the Yuvaraja. Asoka pretended to relent and pardoned him for seven days, granting him the kingship during that period. Every pleasure that gratifies the senses was provided for him. However, the executioners dressed in blue with drawn swords always kept an eye and on the expiry of each day they reminded him that a day had passed. On the last day when he was brought before the king, the latter asked him how he enjoyed his kingship and the pleasures of singing, dancing and other delights. Vitasoka replied that he could neither see them nor hear them. He did not feel the touch of women for his mind was filled with fear of death



and the sinister presence of the executioners. Asoka then retorted as to how he thought that Buddhist monks enjoyed worldly pleasures as they meditated on the subject of death in hundreds of lifetimes and watched the realms of rebirth and suffering which goes with them. How could they be attached to worldly passions, he said, when “their mind part from all pleasures as water slips from a lotus leaf”?

The lesson opened the eyes of Vitasoka who then became favourably disposed to the Sangha and took refuge in the Three Jewels. He sought the permission of Asoka to be ordained as a monk. Asoka dissuaded him thinking that he may not withstand the rigorous life of a monk. But when his brother persisted testing his resolve, permitted him to don the robes.

Vitasoka left Pataliputra, and lived in Videha, ardently following a religious life and attained the Arhathood. He returned to the capital once to meet his brother. As he entered the palace, the sovereign got down from the throne and prostrated at his feet. Gazing at Vitasoka with tears flowing from his eyes he praised his brother for attaining the state of aloofness and equanimity by the exquisite taste of wisdom. Asoka served him food with his own hands and listened to his discourse sitting at his feet. Later Vitasoka left the capital to become a forest dweller.

The second instance mentioned in Asokavadana was convincing his minister Yasas about the vanity of men based on birth and wealth. Yasas, who had great faith in the teaching of the Blessed One, did not however, approve of the emperor prostrating and touching his head to the feet of the monks, some of whom belonged to the lower castes. Asoka heard the repeated remonstrations of his minister and wanted to open his eyes. He called all his ministers one day and ordered them to bring the heads of a variety of animals and instructed Yasas to bring the head of a human being. When the ministers assembled, each bringing the head of an animal, the king asked them to sell them in the market place. Soon all the heads were sold out



except the human head. Even when it was offered gratis, no one would touch it. Disappointed Yasas reported to the king that the heads of every animal like cow, goat, ass and others were sold but none would take this worthless human head. Asoka asked him whether it was just this head that was disgusting or the heads of all human beings, including his own head. When the king insisted to speak up, the minister admitted that the head of the emperor also would be disgusting after death. Asoka then admonished his minister that he was obsessed with matters of mere form and superiority of caste, and because of this attachment he tried to dissuade the king from bowing down his head to the monks. Further “if I acquire some merit, by bowing down a head so disgusting, that no one on earth would take it, even free of charge, what harm is there in that? You sir, look at the caste, and not the inherent qualities of the monks. Haughty, deluded and obsessed with caste, you harm yourself and others... for Dharma is a question of qualities, and qualities do not reflect caste.... A wise man who considers the body, in the light of the Buddha’s teachings, does not perceive any bodily differences, between a prince and a slave. Skin, flesh, bones, head and liver, as well as other organs, are common to all men, only removable ornaments make one body better than the other”. That is how the king convinced and converted his minister to his way of thinking.

## Blinding of Kunala

On the day of the inauguration of eighty-four thousand stupas, queen Padmavati gave birth to a son. Handsome, pleasing in appearance, with sparkling eyes, he was named Dharmavivardhana. Looking at the infant, with beautiful eyes resembling that of kunala bird, Asoka called him Kunala. Thera Yasas, the arhant of Kukkutarama endowed with six supernatural powers, foresaw that the eyes of the prince would soon be gouged. To prepare him for the ordeal, he prescribed as a religious practice to Kunala to meditate that “the eye is impermanent, the eye is fickle by nature and yokes man to



thousand sufferings". Delighting in solitude, seated in a secluded spot, the prince diligently practiced his meditation subject, realizing that the eye and other senses as impermanent, empty and marked by suffering.

One day, queen Tissarakkhita happened to seek Kunala in the garden and overcome with passion she embraced him. Shocked, the prince said that she was his mother and would not commit such an immoral act. Spurned thus, she threatened him with death.

Meanwhile as a rebellion broke out in Takshasila, Asoka sent the prince to quell it and restore the administration to normalcy. The rebels who had nothing against the emperor but were aggrieved by the ill treatment of local ministers, welcomed the prince with pomp and gaiety into the city. Just then, Asoka suffered grave illness; and impure substance oozed out of all the pores of his body. Fearing his end was near, he wanted Kunala to immediately return and be consecrated as king. When Tissarakkhita learnt this, she was afraid that Kunala would punish her after he came to power. Assuring the king that she would cure the disease she made enquiries and learnt that an Abhira was suffering from similar symptoms. She had him brought to the palace, secretly killed him, opened his belly and found a large worm in the stomach which was the cause of the illness. Eventually she found that onion was the antidote. She treated the king and soon restored his health. So pleased was the king that he granted Kingship to Tissarakkhita, on her request, for seven days.

Her first thought was to take revenge on Kunala. She composed a letter in the name of the king to the people of Takshasila commanding them to destroy Kunala's eyes. The king was in the habit of sealing confidential messages with his teeth. She succeeded in securing the imprint of king's teeth on the seal of the letter when he was asleep. The king had three dreadful nightmares in which two vultures were trying to pluck the eyes of Kunala and the prince was entering the city with beard and



unkempt hair. And lastly, he dreamt as though his teeth were falling out.

On seeing the message sent by Tissarakkhita, the people of Takshasila who were impressed with the virtuous Kunala but at the same time fearful of the wrath of the emperor, were in a dilemma. Eventually they revealed the contents of the letter to the prince. He calmly told them to carry out the royal command. Even Candalas refused to execute the order though tempted by Kunala with the offering of a diadem. Finally a wretch afflicted with eighteen uglinesses came forward to do the dark deed. Kunala then remembered the words of Thera Yasas that the essence of an eye is impermanence, suffering and empty. The prince told the executioner to pluck one eye and place it in his palm. When that was done the prince grasped it and said: "Why do you not see forms as before? O lump of fashioned flesh?" As the other eye was being plucked out, his wisdom was purified. Later he came to know that Tissarakkhita and not his father who was responsible for the crime. As banishment was imposed on him, Kunala took to wandering life with his wife Kanchanamala. Playing veena and singing, they begged for their food and ultimately reached Pataliputra. One day Asoka who was kept in the dark of the entire episode, heard the song of Kunala and sent a servant to fetch the singer. When Kunala and his wife were taken to the king, Asoka could not recognize him. At length recognizing his saintly son, he collapsed as the tragedy was beyond his bearing. Probing, the king learnt that Tissarakkhita had hatched the sordid crime. The compassionate Kunala implored his father saying "If Tissarakkhita's deeds were not honourable, let your own be not like hers". However, Asoka could not forgive her, and ordered her to be thrown into a lacquer house where she was burnt to death. Yuvan Chang, the Chinese traveller of the seventh century AD, saw a hundred feet high stupa near Takhasila built by Asoka at the spot where Kunala's eyes were gouged out. And it was recorded that the blind used to go to the stupa and pray and many were believed to have recovered their sight.



## Last Years of Asoka

A series of tragic events haunted the aged king according to Avadanas. The death of Asandhimitta, the chief queen for thirty years, in the 29<sup>th</sup> regnal year was a great blow to Asoka. Three years after her death he made Tissarakkhita, an impetuous and immoral woman, as the chief queen. Jealous of Bodhi tree, the cynosure of Asoka's devotion she got the tree poisoned by a Candala woman with Mandu thorn. As the tree was slowly dying, alarmed at the intense grief of the king, Tissarakkhita herself restored the tree by having it watered with a thousand pitchers of milk. The king celebrated the revival of the Bodhi tree by holding a Pancavarsika assembly.

The tragic death of Vitasoka was yet another blow to Asoka. The king on coming to know that Ajivikas of Pundaravardhana had dishonoured the image of the Buddha ordered the beheading of Ajivikas and even announced reward of a gold coin for every head that was brought to him. At that time, Vitasoka fell ill and happened to spend a night in the house of a cowherd. Mistaking him to be an Ajivika by the long growth of his hair and beard, the wife of the cowherd persuaded her husband to kill him and claim the reward. The cowherd killed Vitasoka and presented his head to the king. On recognising his brother. Asoka bemoaned the cruel fate of his brother. And after this incident, it was said that no one was ever condemned to death.

According to Asokavadana, the king became seriously ill in his old age. He had an unfulfilled wish of donating one hundred crores of gold pieces to the Sangha and thus equal if not excel the donation of the celebrated Anathapindika. Until then he donated ninety-six crores and wished to donate the remaining four crores. But, Sampradin, Kunala's son, the heir apparent, on the advice of ministers forbade any disbursement of funds from the treasury. The emperor began sending gold plates used for his meals to the Sangha. When that was restricted,



he sent silver plates and copper plates also to the Sangha. Finally he was served food in clay vessels. The emperor was reduced to such a hapless straits that he was left with half a myrobalan. Holding the fruit in his palm, he summoned the citizens and ministers and asked them “who is presently the lord of the earth?” They bowed down and declared that he was the lord of the earth. Eyes clouded with tears he asked them whether they were saying that in order to please him as he had indeed lost his sovereignty and the only thing that remained under his rule was half a myrobalan. He wailed that his orders were countermanded “just like a river that is turned back when it dashes a mountain cliff”. Handing the myrobalan to a servant he requested him as a last task for an emperor to go to Kukkutarama and offer it to the Sangha. He wished this humble gift be distributed in such a way that the whole Order of the monks enjoys the gift. When the offering was presented, moved by grief and showing signs of emotion, the elder of the Sangha told the Bikkhus: “The great donor, the lord of men, the eminent Maurya Asoka, has gone from being the lord of Jambudvipa, to be a lord of half a myrobalan”. Mashing the fruit, the Thera put it in a soup and distributed to the community. Kumaralata in his *Kalpanamanditika*, and Yuvan Chang mention Amalaka stupa in Kukkutarama built to commemorate this episode.

Towards the end, when his trusted minister Radhagupta reassured him that Asoka continues to be the lord of the earth, the aged emperor struggled to his feet, gazed in all directions making an *anjali* in the direction of the Sangha, and declared: “Except the state treasury I now present the whole earth surrounded by the ocean to the community of the Blessed Ones’ disciples”. He added, “With this gift I do not seek the reward of rebirth in Indra’s abode or Brahma’s world. Even less do I want the glory of kingship that is as unsteady as a choppy sea. But because I gave it with faith, I would obtain as the fruit of this gift something that cannot be stolen, that is honoured by the Aryas, and safe from all agitation – sovereignty over the mind”.



Asoka got this document written and sealed it with his teeth. He gave the great earth to the Sangha and passed away at the age of seventy-one (231 BC). According to Asokavadana the ministers removed the body on a bier covered in blue and yellow cloth and cremated him after performing funeral ceremonies. *Mahavamsa* briefly says that Asoka came under the sway of impermanence. On the advice of Radhagupta, four kotis of gold pieces were given in dana to the Sangha by Sampradin, the new monarch, and thus redeemed his kingdom. We have no information whether any stupa was built on the sacred relics of this unforgettable monarch of India.

## Asoka's Place in History

There was no ruler whose breadth of vision encompassed not only men but the entire creature world. Their welfare and happiness was the goal of Asoka's state policy. Incessantly he advocated peace, nonviolence, compassion, understanding and tolerance as the basis of individual morals and social behaviour. Scholars have compared great rulers and men such as Alexander, Charlesmagne, Constantine, St. Paul, Napoleon, with Asoka and found them woefully wanting to measure up to his vision of lofty life and the passionate zeal to create a world where there is no violence or suffering. He formulated a universal morality to be the basis for the prosperity and security of his empire believing in the perfectibility of human nature.

Finding that Asoka is unique and incomparable, Dr. Copleston compares three of the great rulers in history together with Asoka and observed "he was not merely the Constantine of Buddhism, he was Alexander with Buddhism for Hellas, and an unselfish Napoleon with 'mettam' in the place of 'glorie' ". It is wearisome to recount the opinions of scholars on this subject. However, we may conclude with the opinions of two of them. Bhandakar evaluates in the following words: "In the history of Buddhism, Asoka's importance is second only



to that of the founder of that religion. Asoka was thus not a patron but a veritable apostle of Buddhism". And finally we may conclude with perhaps the most comprehensive appraisal of Asoka by H.G. Wells "Amidst the tens and thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines and shines almost alone, a star. From Volga to Japan his name is still honoured. China, Tibet and even India though it has left its doctrine preserve the tradition of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory today than have ever heard the names of Constantine or Charlesmagne." Thus he is an ideal *chakravartin*, the wheel turning monarch in the true tradition of Buddhism. Divyavadana actually styles him "*Chaturbhaga- chakravarti, dharmiko, dharmarajo* (universal emperor of righteousness).







# Inscriptions



## Inscriptions

As the inscriptions of Asoka convey in a better manner the profile of the man, than all the tomes written about him, the edicts of Asoka are presented here containing proclamations, sermons, exhortations, addressed to officers and his subjects at large. According to D.D.Kosambi, these inscriptions are “the oldest Indian inscriptions hitherto deciphered.” After a gap of two millennia, since the Indus script, we find Brahmi as the first script employed by Asoka. The inscriptions, apart from being good source material, are literary nuggets of rare beauty. Gentle in tone, simple in expression, direct in appeal, they radiate an aura of serenity worthy of the noble monarch’s lofty idealism. One feels as though the emperor is directly relating to us about his innermost thoughts, insights, and aspirations for establishing a world of brotherhood. They also reflect the abiding faith of Asoka in Buddha Dharma. It is said that while the literary sources detail what Buddhism did to Asoka, the epigraphs tell what he did to Buddhism.

These inscriptions first begin in the third person with the usual formula “*devanampiya piyadasa raja eyam aha*” and immediately switch over to the first person. Every inscription counts the years from the year of coronation. Not once does he refer to himself as Chakravartin or in other extravagant titles but invariably styles himself Devanampiya – the beloved of gods. Rhys Davids feels that the inscriptions could have been his own drafts. “There is a personal touch in the edicts which cannot be ignored. The language must have been his own. No minister would have dared to put such confessions and such professions into the mouth of so masterful a master.” Asoka unbosoms himself particularly in Rock Edict XIII, the agony felt by him at the enormity of the horror that ensued in the Kalinga war. “The language is instinctive with personal feelings and the rocks still echo across the ages the wail of a penitent soul” (D. R. Bhandarkar).



There are altogether thirty-three inscriptions in Prakrit with regional variations, in Brahmi script. Karosthi, Aramaic and Greek scripts were used in the north-west. Fourteen major rock edicts were found in different recensions at ten sites (Kalsi, Girnar, Sopara, Dhauri, Jaugada, Erragudi, Sannati, Shahbazgarhi, Mansehra and Kandahar). In two places – Dhauri and Jaugada – Rock Edicts XI, XII and XIII were replaced by two separate rock edicts relating to Kalinga.

Two minor rock edicts of Asoka were discovered at seventeen places and seven pillar edicts were found at all important spots associated with the life of the Buddha. No pillar inscription was found in south except a fragment unearthed at Amaravathi. The minor rock edicts were the earliest documents issued in the twelfth year after his coronation followed by major rock edicts at various times. Pillar edicts were the latest issued from time to time up to twenty-eighth year after his coronation.

Erragudi in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh has the unique distinction of having all the Major Rock Edicts I to XIV and the two Minor Rock Edicts. The find spot is a desolate place with no vestiges of bygone glory traceable now. The edicts were engraved on the rocks of a mound known locally as Yenigakonda (elephant hill) or Nallayenagakonda (black elephant hill) near Jonnagiri village which according to some scholars was the ancient Swarnagiri, the southern capital of Asoka. It is not known whether the name Yenigakonda refers metaphorically to the Buddha symbolically represented in the form of an elephant as in Girnar, Kalsi and Dhauri. In fact, the sculpture of an elephant emerging from the rock at Dhauri is one of the finest pieces of Mauryan Art. At Kalsi, *gajatame* in Brahmi script equivalent to Sanskrit *gajattamah* or *gajottama* is inscribed. Another peculiarity of rock edicts of Erragudi edicts is that some lines are written from left to right and some from right to left. At some places, half a line runs from left to right and the other half from right to left. Perhaps as in Brahmagiri where the engraver had put his signature as Capada in Kharosthi, these inscriptions must have



been scripted by a person who was accustomed to chised in Kharosti which runs from right to left.

Two minor inscriptions were discovered on a rock face near Rajulamandagiri village, 25 km from Erragudi.

S. Dhammika, an Australian Buddhist monk, made English rendering of the inscriptions given below. Only Errangudi version of Minor Edict II was taken from a translation of D. C. Sircar, as this version contains more information.

## The Fourteen Rock Edicts

### Edict 1

Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadasi, has caused this Dharma edict to be written. Here (in my domain) no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice. Nor should festivals be held, for Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, sees much to object to in such festivals, although there are some festivals that Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does approve of.

Formerly in the kitchen of the Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But now with the writings of this Dharma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer are killed, and the deer not always. And in times not even these three creatures will be killed (Girnar Version).

### Edict 2

Everywhere within Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi's domain, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satiyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far Tamrapani and where the Greek King Antiochos rules, and among the kings who are neighbours of Antiochos, everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment; medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. 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 (Girnar Version).

### Edict 3

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: Twelve years after my coronation this has been ordered – everywhere in my domain the Yuktas, the Rajjukas and the Pradesikas shall go on inspection tours every five years for the purpose of Dharma instruction and also to conduct other business.

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 savings is good. The council shall notify the Yuktas about the observance of these instructions in these very words (Girnar Version).

### Edict 4

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 Dharma practice, the sound of the drum has been replaced by the sound of the Dharma. The sighting of heavenly ears, auspicious elephants, bodies of fire and other divine sightings has not happened for many hundreds of years. But now because of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, promotes restraint in the killing and harming of living beings, proper behaviour towards relatives, Brahmans and ascetics and respect for mother, father and elders, such sightings have increased.

These and many other kinds of Dharma practice have been encouraged by Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi and he will continue to promote Dharma practice. And the sons, grandsons and great grandsons of the Beloved-of-the-Gods, King



Piyadasi's too will continue to promote Dharma practice until the end of time; living by Dharma and virtue, they will instruct in Dharma. Truly this is the highest work, to instruct in Dharma. But practising the Dharma cannot be done by one who is devoid of virtue and therefore its promotion and growth is commendable.

This edict has been written so that it may please my successors who devote themselves to promoting these things and not allow them to decline. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has had this written twelve years after his coronation (Girnar Version).

## Edict 5

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 amongst them neglects this, they will do evil. Truly it is easy to do evil.

In the past there were no Dharma Mahamatras but such officers were appointed by me thirteen years after my coronation. Now they work among all religions for the establishment of Dharma, for promotion of Dharma, and for the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to Dharma. They work among the Greeks, the Khambojas, the Gandharas, the Rashtrikas, the Pitinikas and other people on the western borders. They work among soldiers, chiefs, Brahmans, householders, the poor, the aged and those devoted to Dharma – for their welfare and happiness – so that they may be free from harassment. They (Dharma Mahamatras) work for the proper treatment of prisoners, towards their unfettering, and if the Mahamatras think, "This one has a family to support" "The one has been bewitched," "This one is old," then they work for the release of such prisoners. They work here, in outlying towns, in the women's quarters belonging to my brothers and sisters, and among my other



relatives. They are occupied everywhere. These Dharma Mahamatras are occupied in my domain among people devoted to Dharma to determine who is devoted to Dharma, who is established in Dharma and who is generous.

This Dharma edict has been written on stone so that it might endure long and that my descendants might act in conformity with it (Kalsi Version).

## Edict 6

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, whether I am eating, in the woman's quarters, the bedchamber, the chariot, the palanquin, in the park or wherever, reports 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. And whatever I orally order in connection with donations or proclamations, or when urgent business presses itself on the Mahamatras, if disagreement or debate arises in Council, then it must be reported to me immediately. This is what I have ordered. I am never content with exerting myself or with despatching business. 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 all the people and whatever efforts I am making is to repay the debt I owe to all these to assure their happiness in this life and attain heaven in the next.

Therefore this Dharma edict has been written to last long and that my sons, grandsons and great-grandsons might act in conformity with it for the welfare of the world. However, this is difficult to do without great exertion (Girnar Version).

## Edict 7

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 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 (Girnar Version).

## Edict 8

In the past kings used to go out on pleasure tours during which there was hunting and other entertainment. But ten years after Beloved-of-the-Gods had been coronated, he went on a tour to Sambodhi and thus instituted Dharma tours. During these tours, the following things took place: visits and gifts to Brahmins and ascetics visits and gifts of gold to the aged, visit to people in the countryside, instructing them in Dharma, and discussing Dharma with them as is suitable. It is this that delights Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, and is, as it were, another type of revenue (Girnar Version).

## Edict 9

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: In times of sickness, for the marriage of sons and daughters, at the birth of the children, before embarking on a journey, on these and other occasions, people perform various ceremonies. Women in particular perform many vulgar and worthless ceremonies. These types of ceremonies can be performed by all means, but they bear little fruit. What does bear great fruit, however, is the ceremony of the Dharma. This involves proper behaviour towards servants and employees, respect for teachers, restraint towards living beings, and generosity towards ascetics and Brahmins. These and other things constitute the ceremony of the Dharma. Therefore, a father, a son, a brother, a master, a friend, a companion, and even a neighbour should say: "This is good, this is the ceremony that should be performed until its purpose is fulfilled, this I shall do." Other ceremonies are doubtful fruit, or they may achieve their purpose, or they may not, and even if they do, it is only in this world. But the ceremony



of the Dharma is timeless. Even if it does not achieve its purpose in this world, it produces great merit in the next, whereas if it does achieve its purpose in this world, one gets great merit both here and there through the ceremony of Dharma (Kalsi Version).

## Edict 10

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 Dharma and practice Dharma, 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 (Girnar Version).

## Edict 11

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: There is no gift like the gift of the Dharma, (on acquaintance like) acquaintance with Dharma, (no distributions like) distribution of Dharma, and (no kinship like) kinship through Dharma. And it consists of this: proper behaviour 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 neighbour 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 Dharma (Girnar Version).

## Edict 12

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honours them with gifts and honours of various kinds. But 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 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 honour 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.

Those who are content with their own religion should be told this: Beloved-of-the Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honours as much as he values that there should be growth in the essentials of the religions. And to this end many are working – Dharma Mahamatras, Mahamatras in charge of women's quarters, officers in charge of outlying areas, and other such officers. And the fruit of this is that one's own religion grows and the Dharma is illuminated also (Girnar Version).

### Edict 13

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 Dharma, a love for the Dharma and for instruction in Dharma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas.



Indeed, Beloved-of-the-Gods is deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that takes place when an unconquered country is conquered. But Beloved-of-the-Gods is pained even more by this – that Brahmans, ascetics, and householders of the 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 Beloved-of-the-Gods.

There is no country except among the Greeks, where these two groups, Brahmanas and ascetics, are not found, and there is no country where people are not devoted to one or the other 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 Beloved-of-the-Gods. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods thinks that even those who do wrong should be forgiven where forgiveness is possible.

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.

Now it is conquest by Dharma that Beloved-of-the-Gods considers to be the best conquest. And it (conquest by Dharma) has been won here, on the borders, even six hundred yojanas away, where the Greek King Antiochos rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas and Alexander rule, likewise in the south among the Cholas, the Pandyas, as



far as Tamrapani. Here in the king's domain among the Greeks, the Khambojas, the Nabhakas, the Nabhapamktis, the Bhojas, the Pitinakas, the Andhras and the Putindas everywhere people are following Beloved-of-the-Gods' envoys have not been, these people too, having heard of the practice of Dharma and the ordinances and instructions in Dharma 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 conquest by Dharma 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.

I have had this Dharma edict written so that sons and great grandsons may not consider making new conquests, or that if military conquests are made, that they be done with forbearance and light punishment, or better still that they consider making conquest by Dharma only, for that bears fruit in this world and next. May all their intense devotion be given to this which has a result in this world and next (Kalsi Version).

## Edict 14

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has had these Dharma edicts written in brief in medium length, and in extended form. Not all of them occur everywhere, for my domain is vast. And also there are some subjects here that have been spoken of again and again because of their sweetness, and so that the people may act in accordance with them. If some things written are incomplete, this is because of the locality, or in consideration of the object, or due to the fault of the scribe (Girnar Version).

## Kalinga Rock Edicts

1

Beloved-of-the-Gods says that the Mahamatras of Tosali who are judicial officers in the city are to be told this: I wish to see that everything I consider to be proper is carried out in the right way. And I consider instructing you to be the best way of



accomplishing this. I have placed you over many thousands of people that you may win the people's affection.

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.

You must attend to this matter. 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. It is because of these things – envy, anger, cruelty, hate, indifference, laziness or tiredness – that such a thing does not happen. Therefore your aim should be: “May these things not be in me.” And the root of this is non-anger and patience. Those who are bored with the administration of justice will not be promoted; (those who are not) will move upwards and be promoted. Whoever among you understands this should say to his colleagues: “See that you do your duty properly. Such and such are Beloved-of-the-Gods' instructions.” Great fruit will result from doing your duty, while failing in it will result in gaining neither heaven nor the king's pleasure. Failure in duty on your part will not please me. But done properly, it will win you heaven and you will be discharging your debts to me.

This edict is to be listened to on Tisa day, between Tisa days, and on other suitable occasions, it would be listened to even by a single person. Acting thus, you will be doing your duty.

This edict has been written for the following purpose: that the judicial officers of the city may strive to do their duty and that the people under them might not suffer unjust imprisonment or harsh treatment. To achieve this, I will send out Mahamatras every five years who are not harsh or cruel, but



who are merciful and who can ascertain if the judicial officers have understood my purpose and are acting according to my instructions. Similarly from Ujjayini, the prince will send similar persons with the same purpose without allowing three years to elapse. Likewise from Takhasila also. When these Mahamatras go on tours of inspection each year, then without neglecting their normal duties, they will ascertain if judicial officers are acting according to the king's instructions (Dhauili Version).

## 2

Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus: This royal order is to be addressed to the Mahamatras at Samapa. I wish to see that everything I consider to be proper is carried out in the right way. And I consider instructing you to be the best way of accomplishing this. All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire for the welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men.

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 must 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 Dharma so that they may attain happiness in this world and 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."

By instructing you and informing you of my vow and my promise I shall be applying myself in complete fullness to achieving this object. You are able indeed to inspire them with confidence and to secure their welfare and happiness in this



world and the next, and by acting thus, you will attain heaven as well discharge the debts you owe to me. And so that the Mahamatras can devote themselves at all times to inspiring the border areas with confidence and encouraging them to practice Dharma, this edict has been written here.

This edict is to listen to every four months on Tisa day, between Tisa days and on other suitable occasions, it should be listened even by a single person. Acting thus, you will be doing your duty (Dhauili Version).

## Minor Rock Edicts

### 1

Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus: It is now more than two and half years since I became a lay disciple, but until now I have not been very zealous. But now that I have visited the Sangha for more than a year, I have become very zealous. Now the people in India who have not associated with gods do so. This is the result of zeal and it is not just the great who can do this. Even the humble, if they are zealous, can attain heaven. And this proclamation has been made with this aim. Let both humble and great be zealous, let even those on the borders know and let zeal last long. Then this zeal will increase, it will greatly increase, it will increase up to one-and-half times. This message has been proclaimed two hundred and fifty-six times by the king while on tour (Gavimath Version).

### 2

Thus saith the Beloved-of-the-gods: You should act as instructed by the Beloved-of-the-gods. You should order the Rajjukas, and the Rajukas in their turn should order the people of the countryside as well as the local officers should order the people of the countryside as well as the local officers called Rashtrikas in the following words: "Mother and father are to be obeyed. And similarly elders are to be obeyed. Living beings should be treated with kindness. Truth must be spoken. These



attributes of Dharma are to be propounded.” Thus you should order in the words of the Beloved-of-the-gods.

You should order in the same way the elephant-riders, scribes, charioteers and teachers of the Brahmana community in the following words: “You should instruct your pupils in accordance with what is the ancient usage. This instruction should be obeyed. Whatever honour enjoyed by the teacher lies really in this. Then again, the principles underlying these instructions should be established in the proper manner among the teacher’s female relations by the male relatives he may have. They should also establish this principle among the pupils according to the old usage. You should thus guide and instruct your pupils in the proper way, so that the said principle grows among them abundantly.”

This is the order of the Beloved-of-the-gods (Erragudi Version).

### 3

Piyadasi, king of Magadha, saluting the Sangha and wishing them good health and happiness, speaks thus: you know, reverend sirs, how great my faith in the Buddha, the Dharma and Sangha is. Whatever, reverend sirs, has been spoken by Lord Buddha, all that is well-spoken. I consider it proper, reverend sirs, to advise on how the good Dharma should last long.

These Dharma texts – Extracts from the Discipline, the Noble way of Life, the Fears to Come, the Poems on the Silent Sage, the Discourse on the Pure Life, Upatissa’s Questions, and the Advise to Rahula which was spoken by Buddha concerning false speech – these Dharma texts, reverend sirs, I desire that all the monks and nuns may constantly listen to and remember. Likewise, the laymen and laywomen. I have had this written that you may know my intentions (Bairat Version).



# The Seven Pillar Edicts

## 1

Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus: This Dharma edict was written twenty-six years after my coronation. Happiness in this world and the next is difficult to obtain without much love for the Dharma, much self-examination, much respect, much fear (of evil), and much enthusiasm. But through my instruction this regard for Dharma and love of Dharma has grown day by day, and will continue to grow. And my officers of high, low and middle rank are practising and conforming to Dharma, and are capable of inspiring others to do the same. Mahamatras in border areas are doing the same. And these are my instructions: to protect with Dharma and to make happiness through Dharma and to guard with Dharma.

## 2

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: Dharma is good but what constitutes Dharma? (it includes) 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 I have done many other good deeds.

The Dharma edict has been written that people might follow it and it might endure for a long time. And the one who follows it properly will do something good.

## 3

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi speaks thus: People see only their good deeds saying, "I have done this good deed." But they do not see their evil deeds saying, "I have done this evil deed" or "This is called evil." But this (tendency) is difficult to see. One should think like this: "It is these things that lead to evil, to violence, to cruelty, anger, pride and jealousy. Let me not ruin myself with these things." And further, one should think: "This leads to happiness in this world and the next."



Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus: This Dharma edict was written twenty-six years after my coronation. My Rajjukas are working among the people, among many hundreds of thousands of people. The hearing of petitions and the administration of justice has been left to them so that they can do their duties confidently and fearlessly and so that they can work for the welfare, happiness and benefit of the people in the country. But they should remember what causes happiness and sorrow, and being themselves devoted to Dharma, they should encourage the people in the country (to do the same), that they attain happiness in this world and the next. These Rajjukas are eager to serve me. They also obey other officers who know my desires, who instruct Rajjukas so that they can please me. 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.

The hearing of petitions and the administration of justice have been left to the Rajjukas so that they can do their duties unperturbed, fearlessly and confidently. It is my desire that there should be uniformity in law and uniformity in sentencing. I even go this far, to grant a three-day stay for those in prison who have been tried and sentenced to death. During this time their relatives can make appeals to have the prisoners' lives spared. If there is none to appeal on their behalf, the prisoners can give gifts in order to make merit for the next world, or observe fasts. Indeed, it is my wish that in this way, even if a prisoner's time is limited, he can prepare for the next world, and that people's Dharma practice, self-control and generosity may grow.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: Twenty-six years after my coronation various animals were declared to be protected – parrots, mainas, *aruna*, ruddy geese, wild ducks,



*nandimukhas, gelatas*, bats, queen ants, terrapins, boneless fish, *vedareyaka, gangaputaka, sankiya* fish, tortoises, porcupines, squirrels, deer, bulls, *okapinda*, wild asses, wild pigeons, domestic pigeons, and all four-footed creatures that are neither useful nor edible. Those nanny goats, ewes and sows, which are with young or giving milk to their young, are protected, and so are young ones less than six months old. Cocks are not to be caponized, husks hiding living beings are not to be burnt and forests are not to be burnt either without reason or to kill creatures. One animal is not to be fed to another. On the three Caturmasis, the three days of Tisa and during fourteenth and fifteenth of Uposatha, fish are protected and not to be sold. During these days animals are not to be killed in the elephant reserves or the fish reserves either. On the eighth of every fortnight, on the fourteenth and fifteenth, on Tisa, Punarvasu, the three Caturmasis and other auspicious days, bulls are not to be castrated; billy goats, rams, boars and other animals that are usually castrated are not to be. On Tisa, Punarvasu, Caturmasis, and the fortnight of Caturmasis, horses and bullocks are not to be branded.

In the twenty-six years since my coronation prisoners have been given amnesty on twenty-five occasions.

## 6

Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus: Twelve years after my coronation I started to have Dharma edicts written for the welfare and happiness of the people, and so that not transgressing them they might grow in the Dharma. Thinking: "How can the welfare and happiness of the people be secured?" I give attention to my relatives, to those dwelling near those dwelling far, so I can lead them to happiness and then I act accordingly. I do the same for all groups. I have honoured all religions with various honours. But I consider it best to meet with people personally. This Dharma edict was written twenty six years after my coronation.



Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus: In the past kings desired that the people might grow through the promotion of the Dharma. But despite this, people did not grow through the promotion of the Dharma. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi said concerning this: "It occurs to me that in the past kings desired that the people might grow through the promotion of the Dharma. But despite this, people did not grow through the promotion of the Dharma. Now how can the people be encouraged to follow it? How can the people be encouraged to grow through the promotion of the Dharma? How can I elevate them by promoting the Dharma? "Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, further said concerning this: "it occurs to me that I shall have proclamations on Dharma and instructions on Dharma given. When people hear these, they will follow them, elevate themselves and grow considerably through the promotion of the Dharma." It is for this purpose that proclamations of Dharma have been announced and various instructions of Dharma have been given and that officers who work among many promote and explain them in detail. The Rajjukas who work among hundreds of thousands of people have likewise been ordered: "In this way and that encourage those who are devoted to Dharma." Beloved-of-the-gods, speaks thus: "Having this object in view, I have set up Dharma pillars, appointed Dharma Mahamatras, and announced Dharma proclamations."

Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadasi, says, "along roads I have had banyan trees planted so that they can give shade to animals and men, and I 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. But these are but minor achievements. Former kings have done such things to make the people happy. I have done these things for this purpose, that the people might practice the Dharma.



Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: My Dharma Mahamatras too are occupied with various good works among the ascetics and householders of all religions. I have ordered that they should be occupied with the affairs of the Sangha. I have also ordered that they should be occupied with the affairs of Brahmanas and the Ajivikas. I have ordered that they be occupied with the Niganthas. In fact, I have ordered that different Mahamatras be occupied with the particular affairs of all different religions. And my Dharma Mahamatras likewise are occupied with these and other religions.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: These and other principal officers are occupied with the distribution of gifts, mine as well as those of the queens. In my women's quarters, they organise various charitable activities here and in the provinces. I have also ordered my sons and the sons of other queens to distribute gifts so that noble deeds of Dharma and the practice of Dharma may be promoted. And noble deeds of Dharma in the practice of Dharma consist of having kindness, generosity, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness increase among the people.

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: Whatever good deeds have been done by me, those the people accept and those they follow. Therefore, they progressed and will continue to progress by being respectful to mother and father, respectful to elders, by courtesy to the aged and proper behaviour towards Brahmins and ascetics, towards the poor and distressed, and even towards servants and employees.

Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: This progress among the people through Dharma has been done by two means, by Dharma regulations and by persuasion. Of these Dharma regulation is of little effect, while persuasion has much more effect. The Dharma regulations I have given are that various animals must be protected. And I have given many other Dharma regulations also. But it is by persuasion that progress among the



people through Dharma has had a greater effect in respect of harmlessness to living beings and non-killing of living beings.

Concerning this, Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, says: Wherever there are stone pillars or stone slabs, there this Dharma 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 the moon shine, and so that people may practice it as instructed. For by practising it happiness will be attained in this world and the next.

I have written this Dharma edict twenty seven years after my coronation (Delhi Topra Version).

## The Minor Pillar Edicts

### 1

Twenty years after his coronation, Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadasi, visited this place and worshipped because here the Buddha, the sage of the Sakyans, was born. He had a stone figure and a pillar set up because the lord was born here, the village of Lumbini was exempted from tax and required to pay only one eighth of the produce (Lumbini).

### 2

Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadasi, commands: The Mahamatras at Kosambi (are to be told: whoever splits the Sangha), which is, now united, is not to be admitted in 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 the monastery (Allahabad).





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Asoka with his queen  
Kanaganahalli Stupa - Karnataka



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