

Instruction to Administrators

The high officers of this region,
in charge of administration of the city,
are to be addressed as follows
at the command of King Ashoka:

Whatever vision I have,
I want to see carried out in practice
and fulfilled by proper means.
And I regard giving instruction to you
as the principle means to this end.
For you are placed over thousands of beings
for the purpose of earning the people's affection.

All people are as my children.
Just as I desire that my own children
may be provided with complete welfare
and happiness both in this world and the next,
so do I desire the same for all people.
Most of you do not understand how far this matter goes.
Some do understand this, but only partially.

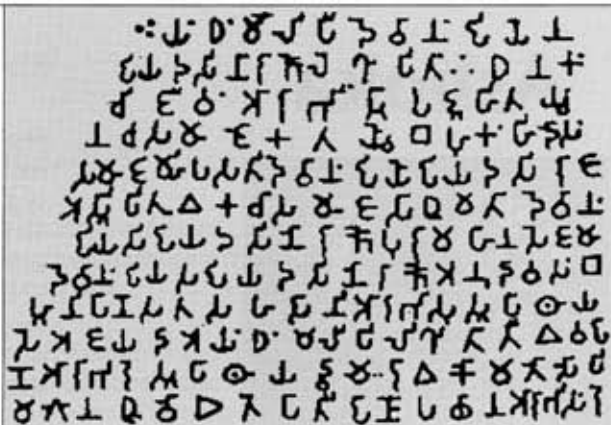
See to it then, since you are well provided for.
If in the course of administration it happens that
a person dies because of imprisonment or torture,
many other people are also deeply injured by this.
You must insist that a middle path
be followed in matters of justice.

But you surely won't achieve success
with any of the following attitudes:
envy, impetuosity, cruelty, impatience,
want of application, laziness or lethargy.
You should wish of yourselves:
"May I not have these attitudes."

The root of the matter, indeed,
is patience and steadfastness.
One who is lethargic in administration will not rise up;
but you should rouse yourselves,
get going, and move forward.

The Slaying of Creatures

Formerly in the kitchen of the king thousands of living creatures
were slaughtered daily for use in curries.
But now, as this edict is being inscribed,
only three living creatures are slaughtered:
two peacocks and one deer, and the deer, moreover, not regularly.
Soon, even these three living creatures will not be slaughtered...



The Rock Inscriptions of King Ashoka

King Ashoka was a remarkable leader,
by any standard.

He inherited from his father and grand-
father an immense kingdom,
encompassing most of present-day India
and Pakistan, which he ruled for more
than forty years from 274 to 232 B.C.E.

Converting to Buddhism early in his
reign, he worked tirelessly to uplift and
civilize his world through the influence
of Dhamma—the teaching of the
Buddha.

He had numerous inscriptions carved on
stones and pillars set up in all reaches of
his empire, but within a few generations
the script he used went out of usage
and people no longer understood the
markings.

All these sayings, and many others, thus
lay unread for centuries, until British
archeologists in the 19th century put the
puzzle together and managed to
decipher both script and language
(which is close to Sanskrit and Pali).

Today Ashoka's wisdom and compassion
ring out clearly, bequeathing to the
modern world an inspired vision of how
the leader of a superpower might use his
influence to steer the world toward a
brighter and more noble future.

*Edited and translated by Andrew Olendzki, following Radha
Kumud Mookerji, Asoka, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi 1962.*

Ashoka



Harmony Among Traditions

King Ashoka honors all traditions,
and honors both ascetics and house-holders
by giving gifts of various kinds.
But the King himself does not value gifts or homage
as much as growth in the essential teachings of all the traditions.

Many factors contribute to this growth in the essential teachings,
but the process is rooted in the restraint of speech,
insofar as one should not praise only one's own tradition
and condemn the traditions of others without any ground.
Such criticisms should be on specific grounds only.

Rather, the traditions of others should be honored
on this ground and that.
By doing so, one helps one's own tradition to grow,
and benefits the traditions of others as well.
Otherwise, one hurts one's own tradition
and injures the traditions of others.

Harmony alone is commendable.
Toward this end, all should be willing to listen
to the doctrines professed by others.
It is the wish of King Ashoka that in all traditions
there be great learning and benevolent teachings.

And those who are content in their respective traditions
should all be told that the King does not value gifts or homage
as much as that all traditions flourish,
and that there be growth in their essential teachings.

Foreign Policy

It might occur to those outside my kingdom:
"What are the king's intentions towards us?"

This alone is my desire for those outside the kingdom:
that they may understand my kind wishes towards them,
that they may be free from fear of me and trust me,
that they may receive from me only happiness and not sorrow.

And I would further wish that they understand this:
that the king will tolerate in them whatever can be tolerated;
that they may be inspired by me to practice Dhamma;
and that they may thus gain happiness in both this world and the next.

Dhamma Blessings

People perform various ceremonies:
In troubles, marriages of sons and daughters,
birth of children, departures from home...
Ceremonies should certainly be performed, but these bear little fruit.

However, what is concerned with Dhamma produces great fruit:
The proper treatment of servants and employees, reverence to teachers,
restraint of violence towards living creatures
and liberality to teachers and ascetics.
These and other such [virtues] are called Dhamma-blessings...

Ceremonies other than these are all of doubtful effect.
They may achieve their purpose or they may not.
And they only pertain to this world.
But these ceremonies of Dhamma [described above] are timeless.
Even if one does not achieve one's object in this world,
endless merit is produced for the world beyond.

The Practice of Dhamma

For the past several hundred years
the sacrificial slaughter of animals, cruelty towards living beings,
and the improper treatment of relatives and teachers
have all increased.

But today, because of King Ashoka's practice of Dhamma,
the sound of the war drum has become
the call (not to arms but) to Dhamma.

And to a degree unseen for several hundred years past,
through the edicts of King Ashoka,
the slaughter of animals has ceased,
non-violence towards living beings is practiced,
and relatives, teachers, parents and elders
are all treated with proper respect.

These and many other kinds of Dhamma practice have increased.
And King Ashoka will further increase this practice of Dhamma,
as will his sons, grandsons and great-grandsons, in every era.
And not only will they practice Dhamma through virtuous conduct,
but they will all also teach Dhamma,
for teaching Dhamma is the most important work that can be done.



Right Livelihood

There is no satisfaction for me in exertion and the dispatch of business.
But my highest duty is the promotion of the good of all,
and the root of this is exertion and dispatch of business.
There is no higher work than the promotion of the common welfare.

Whatever exertion I am making,
it is in order that I may discharge a debt to all living beings,
and make them happy in this world,
while they may attain heaven in the world beyond.

For this purpose this edict has been inscribed that it may last for ever,
and that my sons, and grandsons, and great-grandsons
may follow it for the good of all.
But this can only be achieved by great and sustained effort.

The Gift of Dhamma

Thus proclaims King Ashoka:
There is no gift like the gift of Dhamma...
which consists of:

the proper treatment of servants and workers,
heeding one's mother and father,
generosity towards friends and acquaintances,
relatives and spiritual teachers,
and abstention from the slaughter of living creatures.

Father, son, brother, master, friend, acquaintance, or neighbor
—all should declare that it is good to do these things.
By means of this gift of Dhamma one succeeds in this world,
while immeasurable merit flows into the world beyond.

Public Works

Everywhere within the dominion of King Ashoka,
and also among the neighbors of his realm
—in South India, Kerala and Sri Lanka,
in the Greek kingdom of Antiochus,
and even among his neighbors—
the King has instituted two kinds of medical treatment:
medical treatment for humans
and medical treatment for animals.

Also roots and fruits and medicinal herbs,
wholesome for humans and for animals,
have been imported and planted wherever they did not exist.
And along the roads wells have been dug
and trees have been planted
for the benefit of both humans and animals.

Glory and Fame

King Ashoka does not regard glory or fame as bringing much gain.
Whatever glory or fame he desires, it would be only for this:
That the people in the present time and in the future might practice
in accordance with Dhamma, and conform to the observances of Dhamma.

For this purpose alone does the King wish for glory or fame.
And what little he exerts himself, it is all for future generations,
and in order that all beings may be free from the bondage of wrong-doing.

Indeed, this is difficult to achieve by those of low rank or high rank,
—except by strenuous effort and renunciation.
But of these [two], it is more difficult for the person of high rank to achieve.