

ASHOKA THE GREAT



Asoka was one of the most powerful kings of the Indian subcontinent. A ruler of the Mauryan Empire, Ashoka ruled over the country from 273 BC to 232 BC. The reign of Emperor Asoka covered most of India, South Asia and beyond, stretching from present day Afghanistan and parts of Persia in the west, to Bengal and Assam in the east, and Mysore in the south. However, the Battle of Kalinga changed King Asoka completely. From a power hungry emperor, he turned into a Buddhist follower and started preaching the principles of Buddhism throughout the world.

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Where & when born

Ashoka Maurya commonly known as **Ashoka** and **Ashoka the Great**, was born on 304 BCE Pataliputra, (Modern day Patna) to the [Mauryan](#) emperor [Bindusara](#) and a relatively lower ranked wife of his [Dharmā](#) (or Dhammā) Subhadrangī (the daughter of a Brahmin from the city of Champa). He was the grandson of [Chandragupta Maurya](#), founder of [Mauryan dynasty](#).

Brief history of the person

Ashoka had several elder siblings, all of whom were his half-brothers from other wives of Bindusara. His fighting qualities were apparent from an early age and he was given royal military training. He was known as a fearsome hunter, and according to a legend, killed a lion with just a wooden rod.

Bindusara's death in 272 BCE led to a war over succession. According to Divyavandana, Bindusara wanted his son [Susima](#) to succeed him but Ashoka was supported by his father's ministers, who found Sushim to be arrogant and disrespectful towards them. A minister named Radhagupta seems to have played an important role in Ashoka's rise to the throne. The Ashokavadana recounts Radhagupta's offering of an old royal elephant to Ashoka for him to ride to the Garden of the Gold Pavilion where King Bindusara would determine his successor. Ashoka later got rid of the legitimate heir to the throne by tricking him into entering a pit filled with live coals. Radhagupta, according to the Ashokavadana, would later be appointed prime minister by Ashoka once he had gained the throne. The [Dipavansa](#) and [Mahavansa](#) refer to Ashoka's killing 99 of his brothers, sparing only one, named [Vitashoka](#) or [Tissa](#), although there is no clear proof about this incident.

Buddhist legends state that Ashoka was bad-tempered and of a wicked nature. He built Ashoka's Hell, an elaborate torture chamber described as a "Paradisal Hell" due to the contrast between its beautiful exterior and the acts carried out within by his appointed executioner, Girikaa. This earned him the name of Chanda Ashoka (Caṇḍa Aśoka) meaning "Ashoka the Fierce" in Sanskrit.

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As a Buddhist emperor, Ashoka believed that Buddhism is beneficial for all human beings as well as animals and plants, so he built a number of stupas, Sangharama, viharas, chaitya, and residences for Buddhist monks all over South Asia and Central Asia.

He gave donations to viharas and mathas. He sent his only daughter Sanghamitra and son Mahindra to spread Buddhism in Sri Lanka (then known as Tamraparni).

Ashoka also sent many prominent Buddhist monks (bhikshus) Sthaviras like Madhyamik Sthavira to modern Kashmir and Afghanistan; Maharaskshit Sthavira to Syria, Persia / Iran, Egypt, Greece, Italy and Turkey; Massim Sthavira to Nepal, Bhutan, China and Mongolia; Sohn Uttar Sthavira to modern Cambodia, Laos, Burma (old name Suvarnabhumi for Burma and Thailand), Thailand and Vietnam; Mahadhhamarakhkhita sthavira to Maharashtra (old name Maharatthha); Maharakhhit Sthavira and Yavandhammarakhkhita Sthavira to South India.

Ashoka also invited Buddhists and non-Buddhists for religious conferences. He inspired the Buddhist monks to compose the sacred religious texts, and also gave all types of help to that end. Ashoka also helped to develop viharas (intellectual hubs) such as Nalanda and Taxila

Ashoka patronage led to the expansion of Buddhism in the Mauryan empire and other kingdoms during his rule, and worldwide from about 250 BCE. Prominent in this cause were his son Mahinda (Mahendra) and daughter Sanghamitra (whose name means "friend of the Sangha"), who established Buddhism in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)

After ruling over the Indian subcontinent for a period of approximately 40 years, the Great Emperor Asoka left for the holy abode in 232 BC. After his death, his empire lasted for just fifty more years

In the Quest of conquering the world

Because of his reputation as a frightening warrior and a heartless general, he was sent to curb the riots in the [Avanti](#) province of the Mauryan empire.

Ascending the throne, Ashoka expanded his empire over the next eight years, from the present-day boundaries [Assam](#) in the East to [Balochistan](#) in the West; from the [Pamir Knot](#) in Afghanistan in the north to the peninsula of southern India except for present day [Tamil Nadu](#) and [Kerala](#) which were ruled by the three ancient [Tamil](#) kingdoms.

While the early part of Ashoka's reign was apparently quite bloodthirsty, he became a follower of the [Buddha](#)'s teachings after his conquest of [Kalinga](#) on the east coast of India in the present-day states of [Odisha](#) and North Coastal [Andhra Pradesh](#). Kalinga was a state that prided itself on its sovereignty and democracy. With its monarchical parliamentary democracy it was quite an exception in ancient Bharata where there existed the concept of [Rajdharm](#). Rajdharm means the duty of the rulers, which was intrinsically entwined with the concept of bravery and dharma. The Kalinga War happened eight years after his coronation.

From his 13th inscription, we come to know that the battle was a massive one and caused the deaths of more than 100,000 soldiers and many civilians who rose up in defence over 150,000 were deported. When he was walking through the grounds of Kalinga after his conquest, rejoicing in his victory, he was moved by the number of bodies strewn there and the wails of the kith and kin of the dead.

Ashoka ruled for an estimated forty years. Legend states that during his cremation, his body burned for seven days and nights. After his death, the Mauryan dynasty lasted just fifty more years until his empire stretched over almost the entire Indian subcontinent. Ashoka had many wives and children, but many of their names are lost to time. His chief consort (*agramahisi*) for the majority of his reign was his wife, [Asandhimitra](#), who apparently bore him no children.

In his old age, he seems to have come under the spell of his youngest wife [Tishyaraksha](#). It is said that she had got Ashoka's son [Kunala](#), the regent in [Takshashila](#) and the heir presumptive to the throne, blinded by a wily stratagem. The official executioners spared Kunala and he became a wandering singer accompanied by his favourite wife [Kanchanmala](#). In [Pataliputra](#), Ashoka heard Kunala's song, and realised that Kunala's misfortune may have been a punishment for some past sin of the emperor himself. He condemned Tishyaraksha to death, restoring Kunala to the court. In the Ashokavadana, Kunala is portrayed as forgiving Tishyaraksha, having obtained enlightenment through Buddhist practice. While he urges Ashoka to forgive her as well, Ashoka does not respond with the same forgiveness. Kunala was succeeded by his son, [Samprati](#), who ruled for 50 years until his death.

The reign of Ashoka Maurya might have disappeared into history as the ages passed by, had he not left behind records of his reign. These records are in the form of sculpted pillars and rocks inscribed with a variety of actions and teachings he wished to be published under his name. The language used for inscription was in one of the [Prakrit](#) "common" languages etched in a Brahmi script.

King Ashoka, the third monarch of the Indian Mauryan dynasty, is also considered as one of the most exemplary rulers who ever lived

Leadership qualities

Leadership Style Of Ashoka By Amit Guha

- Cultivate Truthfulness, Peace, Restraint, Kindness, Charity, Purity of Thought, Gentleness, Goodness, Self-Control, Gratitude, and Compassion
- Control Falsehood Anger, Ferocity, Cruelty Envy Conceit Vanity Violence Jealousy Hate Laziness
- Promotion of Dhamma through i) Stone Pillar & edicts, ii) Dhamma-Mahamatras, 3) Himself a pilgrimage, Walk Your Talk, 4) Delegation and Empowerment
- Restraining Evil, Exhorting to be Good, Loving with Kindly Thoughts, Teaching what one not heard, Correcting and purifying what one had heard, Revealing the way of Heaven
- Treated all men were his children and he desired for his children their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next.



- The caste system ceased to exist in his eyes and he treated all his subjects as equals. At the same time, each and every person was given the rights to freedom, tolerance, and equality.

Governance in large

The edicts describe in detail the first wide expansion of Buddhism through the sponsorship of one of the most powerful kings of Indian history, offering more information about Ashoka's proselytism, moral precepts, religious precepts, and his notions of social and animal welfare.

He emphasized on the virtues of *Ahimsa (Non-Violence)*, respect to all religious teachers, equal respect for and study of each other's scriptures, and on rational faith.

Ashoka's military power was strong, but after his conversion to Buddhism, he maintained friendly relations with three major Tamil kingdoms in the South namely Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas, the post Alexandrian empire, Tamraparni, and Suvarnabhumi.

His edicts state that he made provisions for medical treatment of humans and animals in his own kingdom as well as in these neighbouring states. He also had wells dug and trees planted along the roads for the benefit of the common people.

Ashoka banned the slaughter and eating of the common cattle, and also imposed restrictions on fishing and fish-eating. He also abolished the royal hunting of animals and restricted the slaying of animals for food in the royal residence. Because he banned hunting, created many veterinary clinics and eliminated meat eating on many holidays, the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka has been described as "one of the very few instances in world history of a government treating its animals as citizens who are as deserving of its protection as the human residents.

Critical moments and life changing event

Asoka quickly grew into an excellent warrior general and an astute statesman. His command on the Mauryan army started growing day by day and because of this, his elder brothers became suspicious of him being favored by Bindusara as the next emperor. The eldest son of Bindusara, Prince Susima, convinced him to send Asoka to Takshashila province (in Sindh) to control an uprising caused by the formation of different militias. However, the moment Ashoka reached the province, the militias welcomed him with open arms and the uprising came to an end without any fight. This particular success of Asoka made his elder brothers, especially Susima, more insecure.

Susima started inciting Bindusara against Ashoka, who was then sent into exile by the emperor to Kalinga. Soon, the province of Ujjain started witnessing a violent uprising. Emperor Bindusara called back Ashoka from the exile and sent him to Ujjain. The prince was injured in the ensuing battle and was treated by Buddhist monks and nuns. It was in Ujjain that Asoka first came to know about the life and teachings of Buddha.



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Legend says that the day after the Kalinga war was over, Ashoka ventured out to roam the city and all he could see there burnt houses and scattered corpses. This sight made him sick and he cried the famous monologue.

“What have I done? If this is a victory, what's a defeat then? Is this a victory or a defeat? Is this justice or injustice? Is it gallantry or a rout? Is it valor to kill innocent children and women? Did I do it to widen the empire and for prosperity or to destroy the other's kingdom and splendor? One has lost her husband, someone else a father, someone a child, someone an unborn infant.... What's this debris of the corpses? Are these marks of victory or defeat? Are these vultures, crows, eagles the messengers of death or evil?

The lethal war with Kalinga transformed the vengeful Emperor Ashoka to a stable and peaceful emperor and he became a patron of Buddhism. Whether or not he converted to Buddhism is unclear although Buddhist tradition mentions so. According to the prominent [Indologist, A. L. Basham](#), Ashoka's personal religion became Buddhism, if not before, then certainly after the Kalinga war. However, according to Basham, the Dharma officially propagated by Ashoka was not Buddhism at all. [Romila Thapar](#) argues that modern day historians argue his conversion into Buddhism, in the aftermath of the Kalinga war. She argues that Ashoka curiously refrained from engraving his confession anywhere.

Historiographies

H.G. Wells wrote of Ashoka in his book The Outline of History:

His legend is related in the 2nd-century Ashokavadana ("Narrative of Ashoka"), a part of Divyavadana and in the Sri Lankan text Mahavamsa ("Great Chronicle").

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