

# Ashoka

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## KEYWORDS

*Ashoka, Asoka, Aesop’s tales, Arthashastra, Ashoka Pillar, Brahmi Script, Buddhism, Edicts, Buddhist literature, Chanakya, Chandragupta Maurya, civic ideals and practices; culture; dhamma, Dharma Chakra, dharma, edicts, Emperor Ashoka, fables, parables, giant empires, global connections; human rights, Jataka tales, Kautilya, Lion Capital, Lost emperor, Maurya, Mauryan Empire, Megasthenes, National emblem, National Flag, national symbols, non-violence, Panchatantra, past, present, future; Pataliputra, people, places and environments; power, authority and governance; primary sources, religion and government, religion, Sarnath Lion Capital, Satyamev Jayate, social justice, thangka painting, Thankgka, The Dalai Lama, The Tibetan Government in Exile, time, continuity and change; world history timeline, world history, world literature*

## NCSS THEMES

Culture

Time, continuity and change

People, places and environments

Power, authority and governance

Global connections

Civic ideas and practices

## 1. Essential questions

- Why do countries have National symbols?
- What do stories behind National Symbols tell us about what people of a country value?
- What would you pick to be your personal symbol? What symbol or symbols could connect your past, present and future?
- Historians, geographers, economists and other social scientists work together to discover the past by using different sources of information such as primary sources, religious texts as well as carved edicts and proclamations: can our current view of history be biased by the source of information used to decode it?
- How are religious beliefs diffused across borders and across vast distances.
- Illustrate your life as a thangka painting from the Buddhist tradition.

## 2. Introduction and Keywords

*Keywords: National Symbols, past, present, future, primary sources, social justice, world history, giant empires, non-violence, religion and government, world history timeline, Buddhism*

Emperor Ashoka (304-232 BCE) was the third king of the Maurya Dynasty. He ruled a truly massive kingdom that stretched from the Hindu Kush to the Bay of Bengal. It was India's first great empire. It included all modern-day India, as well as portions of modern-day Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan, and China. But is not just that Ashoka ably ruled this huge empire but the quality of social justice that he brought to his already strong administration.

Remorseful after his bloody campaign and conquest of Kalinga, Ashoka embraced Buddhism. Thereafter reverence for life, tolerance, compassion and peaceful co-existence were the cornerstones of his administration. Under him the earliest known bans on slavery and capital punishment as well as environmental regulations came into place.

The origins of many symbols of modern India, such as those used in the national flag and on coins and paper money can be traced to his reign.

Not much was known about Ashoka until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when a picture of his reign and times was pieced together from Buddhist texts, carved inscriptions and proclamations. He was known in ancient Buddhist texts as a supporter and patron of Buddhism under whose reign Buddhism spread east and west to other parts of the ancient world.

### Video Resources

PBS series 'Story of India' [Edicts Of Ashoka](#)

UNESCO [Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi](#)

### Timeline

PBS series 'Story of India' [World History Timeline](#)

### 3. National Symbols: our pride in our heritage

*Keywords: Sarnath Lion Capital, Lion Capital, National emblem, National Flag, Dharma Chakra, Ashoka Pillar, Satyameva Jayate*

These are four lions sitting back to back. The story of the lions that we see on currency notes and coins goes back to the third century BCE. The picture on the left is a carving of four lions sitting back to back and the pictures we see on money are based on it. It is



**The Sarnath Lion Capital of Ashoka, third century BCE**

called the 'Lion Capital' and originally it rested on top of a tall pillar. It was built in the **third century BCE** by **Emperor Ashoka** at Sarnath, near modern day Varanasi, to mark the spot where the Buddha gave his first sermon.

This picture on the right shows how the lions have been adopted as the National Emblem of India. The National emblem is symbolic of contemporary India's reaffirmation of its ancient commitment to world peace and goodwill. The four lions (one hidden from view) - symbolizing power, courage and confidence - rest on a circular abacus. The abacus is girded by

four smaller animals - guardians of the four directions: the lion of the north, the elephant of the east, the horse of the south and the bull of the west. The abacus rests on a lotus in full bloom, exemplifying the fountainhead of life and creative inspiration. The motto 'Satyameva Jayate' inscribed below the emblem in Devanagari script means 'truth alone triumphs'.



**सत्यमेव जयते**

**National Emblem of India**



The wheel from the circular base of the Lion Capital, the 'Dharma Chakra' or Wheel of Law is part of the national flag of the Republic of India.

## 4. Ashoka: India's lost Emperor

*Keywords: edicts, Maurya, Mauryan Empire, Brahmi Script, primary sources, dhamma, dharma, religion, non-violence, religion and government, social justice, human rights,*

KING ASOKA (Ashoka)

Source: <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>

With the rediscovery and translation of Indian literature by European scholars in the 19th century, it was not just the religion and philosophy of Buddhism that came to light, but also its many legendary histories and biographies. Amongst this class of literature, one name that came to be noticed was that of Asoka, a good king who was supposed to have ruled India in the distant past. Stories about this king, similar in outline but differing greatly in details, were found in the Divyavadana, the Asokavadana, the Mahavamsa and several other works. They told of an exceptionally cruel and ruthless prince who had many of his brothers killed in order to seize the throne, who was dramatically converted to Buddhism and who ruled wisely and justly for the rest of his life. None of these stories were taken seriously -- after all many pre-modern cultures had legends about "too good to be true" kings who had ruled righteously in the past and who, people hoped, would rule again soon. Most of these legends had their origins more in popular longing to be rid of the despotic and uncaring kings than in any historical fact. And the numerous stories about Asoka were assumed to be the same.

But in 1837, James Prinsep succeeded in deciphering an ancient inscription on a large stone pillar in Delhi. Several other pillars and rocks with similar inscriptions had been known for some time and had attracted the curiosity of scholars. Prinsep's inscription proved to be a series of edicts issued by a king calling himself "Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi." In the following decades, more and more edicts by this same king were discovered and with increasingly accurate decipherment of their language, a more complete picture of this man and his deeds began to emerge. Gradually, it dawned on scholars that the King Piyadasi of the edicts might be the King Asoka so often praised in Buddhist legends. However, it was not until 1915, when another edict actually mentioning the name Asoka was discovered, that the identification was confirmed. Having been forgotten for nearly 700 years, one of the greatest men in history became known to the world once again.

Please follow the link <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>

## **More: Emperor Ashoka, third emperor of the Mauryan dynasty ruled from 269 to 232 BCE**

Source: <http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>

King Ashoka, the third monarch of the Indian Mauryan dynasty, has come to be regarded as one of the most exemplary rulers in world history. The British historian H.G. Wells has written: "Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history ... the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star." Although Buddhist literature preserved the legend of this ruler -- the story of a cruel and ruthless king who converted to Buddhism and thereafter established a reign of virtue -- definitive historical records of his reign were lacking.

Then in the nineteenth century there came to light a large number of edicts, in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These edicts, inscribed on rocks and pillars, proclaim Asoka's reforms and policies and promulgate his advice to his subjects. The present rendering of these edicts, based on earlier translations, offers us insights into a powerful and capable ruler's attempt to establish an empire on the foundation of righteousness, a reign which makes the moral and spiritual welfare of his subjects its primary concern. Although the exact dates of Ashoka's life are a matter of dispute among scholars, he was born in about 304 BCE and became the third king of the Mauryan dynasty after the death of his father, Bindusara. His given name was Ashoka, but he assumed the title Devanampiya Piyadasi which means "Beloved-of-the-Gods, He Who Looks On With Affection." There seems to have been a two-year war of succession during which at least one of Ashoka's brothers was killed.

In 262 BCE, eight years after his coronation, Ashoka's armies attacked and conquered Kalinga, a country that roughly corresponds to the modern state of Orissa. The loss of life caused by battle, reprisals, deportations and the turmoil that always exists in the aftermath of war so horrified Ashoka that it brought about a complete change in his personality. It seems that Ashoka had been calling himself a Buddhist for at least two years prior to the Kalinga war, but his commitment to Buddhism was only lukewarm and perhaps had a political motive behind it.

But after the war Ashoka dedicated the rest of his life trying to apply Buddhist principles to the administration of his vast empire. He had a crucial part to play in helping Buddhism to spread both throughout India and abroad, and probably built the first major Buddhist monuments. Ashoka died in 232 BCE in the thirty-eighth year of his reign.

Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor 1st Edition, 2012  
by [Charles L. Allen](#) (Author) Review:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/16/ashoka-india-emperor-charles-allen-review>

## 5. Ashoka's vast empire

*Keywords: Megasthenes, Pataliputra, Mauryan Empire, Chandragupta Maurya, Chanakya, Kautilya, Arthashastra*

The Mauryan Empire (ca. 323–185 BCE): Ashoka, the third Mauryan emperor is thought to have ruled for about forty years until 232 BCE. His was a vast empire stretching from one end of the Indian sub-continent to the other from what is known today as the Arabian Sea on the west to the Bay of Bengal on the East.

Source: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/maur/hd\\_maur.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/maur/hd_maur.htm)

The Heilbrun Timeline of Art History



The expansion of two kingdoms in the northeast laid the groundwork for the emergence of India's first empire, ruled by the Mauryan dynasty (ca. 321–185 BCE). According to the writings of the Greek diplomat Megasthenes, Pataliputra, the capital—surrounded by a wooden wall pierced by 64 gates and 570 towers—rivaled the splendors of contemporaneous Persian sites such as Susa and Ecbatana.

By 303 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya (known to the Greeks as Sandracotta) had gained control of an immense area ranging from Bengal in the east to Afghanistan in the west and as far south as the Narmada River. Much of his success is attributed to his prime minister and mentor, Kautilya (also known as Chanakya), author of the *Arthashastra*, a cold-blooded treatise on the acquisition and maintenance of power. His son, Bindusara, extended the empire into central and parts of southern India.

The third Mauryan emperor, Ashoka who ruled from around 269 BCE to 332 BCE, is one of the most famous rulers in Indian history.

His conversion to and support of [Buddhism](#) is often likened to the impact of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great's acceptance of Christianity in 313 A.D. Beginning in 254 BCE, Ashoka had monumental edicts on Buddhism carved into rocks and caves throughout his empire. One records his sending of religious envoys—with no apparent results—to the Greek rulers of Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Cyrene, and Epirus. Thirteen years later, he issued seven additional edicts carved into strategically placed polished sandstone pillars. One of the best preserved, at Lauriya Nandangarh in Bihar, stands thirty-two feet high and is capped by a seated lion. Ashoka is also credited with building 84,000 stupas to enshrine the relics of the Buddha and commemorate key events in the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.

## 6. Ashoka's words from the third century BCE

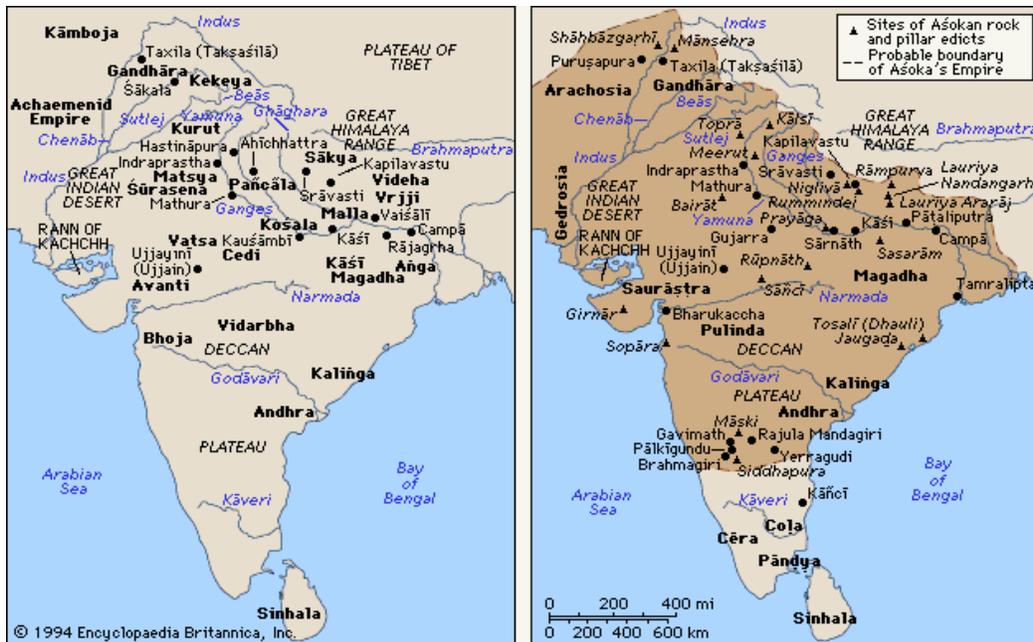
**Keywords:** Emperor Ashoka, national symbols, Buddhism, edicts, Maurya, Mauryan Empire, Brahmi Script, dhamma, dharma, Jataka tales, world history, giant empires, religion, non-violence, religion and government, social justice, human rights

World Heritage Sites connected to Buddhism

[http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id\\_site=524](http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=524) Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi – Video is especially nice! Interactive maps and immersive 360degree images.

Sites of Ashoka rock and pillar edicts

Source: [http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden/H088\\_05\\_Frameset.htm](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden/H088_05_Frameset.htm)



### The Inscriptions

This is what Ashoka declared in one of his inscriptions:

*“Eight years after becoming king I conquered Kalinga.*

*About a lakh and a half people were captured. And more than a lakh of people were killed.*

*This filled me with sorrow. Why?*

*Whenever an independent land is conquered, lakhs of people die, and many are taken prisoner. Brahmins and monks also die.*

*People who are kind to their relatives and friends, to their slaves and servants die, or lose their loved ones.*

*That is why I am sad, and have decided to observe dhamma, and to teach others about it as well.*

*I believe that winning people over through dhamma is much better than conquering them through force.*

*I am inscribing this message for the future, so that my son and grandson after me should not think about war.*

*Instead, they should try to think about how to spread dhamma.”*

(‘Dhamma’ is the Prakrit word for the Sanskrit term ‘Dharma’).

**Complete texts of the 14 rock edicts that have been found:**

<http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html#FOURTEEN>

## 7. Emperor Ashoka and Buddhism

*Keywords: Emperor Ashoka, national symbols, Buddhism, edicts, Maurya, Mauryan Empire, Brahmi Script, dhamma, dharma, Jataka tales, world history, giant empires, religion, non-violence, religion and government, social justice, human rights*

Buddhism and non-violence: Religion and government.

*Extract from the NCERT Text Book “Our Pasts – I”, Chapter 8: Ashoka, The Emperor Who Gave Up War*

The most famous Mauryan ruler was Ashoka. He was the first ruler who tried to take his message to the people through inscriptions. Most of Ashoka’s inscriptions were in Prakrit and were written in the Brahmi script. They were carved on massive stone pillars and tablets.

The Brahmi script.

Most modern Indian scripts have developed from the Brahmi script over hundreds of years. Here you can see the letter ‘a’ written in different scripts.



Kalinga is the ancient name of coastal Orissa (see Map 5, page 76). Ashoka fought a war to conquer Kalinga. However, he was so horrified when he saw the violence and bloodshed that he decided not to fight any more wars. He is the only king in the history of the world who gave up conquest after winning a war.

### **Ashoka’s inscription describing the Kalinga war**

This is what Ashoka declared in one of his inscriptions:

*“Eight years after becoming king I conquered Kalinga.*

*About a lakh and a half people were captured. And more than a lakh of people were killed.*

*This filled me with sorrow. Why?*

*Whenever an independent land is conquered, lakhs of people die, and many are taken prisoner. Brahmins and monks also die.*

*People who are kind to their relatives and friends, to their slaves and servants die, or lose their loved ones.*

*That is why I am sad, and have decided to observe dhamma, and to teach others about it as well.*

*I believe that winning people over through dhamma is much better than conquering them through force.*

*I am inscribing this message for the future, so that my son and grandson after me should not think about war.*

*Instead, they should try to think about how to spread dhamma.”*

(‘Dhamma’ is the Prakrit word for the Sanskrit term ‘Dharma’).

### **What was Ashoka’s dhamma?**

Ashoka’s dhamma did not involve worship of a god, or performance of a sacrifice. He felt that just as a father tries to teach his children, he had a duty to instruct his subjects.

### **He was inspired by the teachings of the Buddha**

There were a number of problems that troubled him. People in the empire followed different religions, and this sometimes led to conflict. Animals were sacrificed. Slaves and servants were ill treated. Besides, there were quarrels in families and amongst neighbors. Ashoka felt it was his duty to solve these problems. So, he appointed officials, known as the dhamma mahamatta who went from place to place teaching people about dhamma. Besides, Ashoka got his messages inscribed on rocks and pillars, instructing his officials to read his message to those who could not read it themselves. Ashoka also sent messengers to spread ideas about dhamma to other lands, such as Syria, Egypt, Greece and Sri Lanka. He built roads, dug wells, and built rest houses. Besides, he arranged for medical treatment for both human beings and animals.

### **Complete texts of the 14 rock edicts that have been found:**

<http://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html#FOURTEEN>

### **World Heritage Sites connected to Buddhism**

[http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id\\_site=524](http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=524) Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi – Video is especially nice! Interactive maps and immersive 360degree images.

### **Going to see the monuments?**

Visit the [Archaeological Museum, Sarnath](#) (District Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh)

<http://www.sarnathmuseumasi.org>

## 8. Jataka Tales

Keywords: world literature, fables, parables, Thangka, Aesop's tales, Panchatantra, The Dalai Lama, The Tibetan Government in Exile, primary sources, thangka painting, Buddhist literature, religion and government

The Jatakas are a collection of stories of the many lives of the Buddha before he was born as Prince Siddhartha. The stories reflect the Buddhist Middle Way and easily convey grand themes as everyday life lessons. They are thought to have been composed between 400 and 200 BCE.

From the Encyclopedia Britannica:

Jataka: Buddhist Literature

**Jataka**, (Pali and Sanskrit: "Birth") any of the extremely popular stories of former lives of the [Buddha](#), which are preserved in all branches of [Buddhism](#). Some *Jataka* tales are scattered in various sections of the [Pali canon](#) of Buddhist writings, including a group of 35 that were collected for didactic purposes. These 35 constitute the last book, the [Cariya Pitaka](#) ("Basket of Conduct"), of the [Khuddaka Nikaya](#) ("Short Collection").

Beyond this, a Sinhalese commentary of the 5th century that is questionably attributed to a Buddhist scholar named Buddhagosa and called the *Jatakavannana*, or *Jatakakatha*, gathers together about 550 *Jataka* stories, some of which are quite brief while others are as long as novelettes.

Each tale begins by noting the occasion that prompted its telling and ends with the Buddha identifying the lives of the people in the introductory story with those of people from the past. There is humour in these stories and considerable variety. The future Buddha may appear in them as a king, an outcast, a god, an elephant—but, in whatever form, he exhibits some virtue that the tale thereby inculcates.

Many *Jatakas* have parallels in the [Mahabharata](#) ("Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty"), the *Panca-tantra* (animal fables), the [Puranas](#) (collections of legends), and elsewhere in non-Buddhist Indian [literature](#). Some turn up again in such places as Aesop's fables. The *Jataka* stories have also been illustrated frequently in sculpture and painting throughout the Buddhist world.

### The Stories

Some of the Jataka Tales <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/jataka.html>

Buddhist Tales for Young and Old [http://www.buddhanet.net/bt1\\_conts.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/bt1_conts.htm)

### From Around the web:

[The Buddha](#) From the British Museum

The Dalai Lama: The Tibetan government in exile

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/people/dalailama\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/people/dalailama_1.shtml)

Bhutanese painted thangka of the Jātakas, 18th-19th Century, Phajoding Gonpa, Thimphu, Bhutan (Public Domain)



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhutanese\\_painted\\_thangka\\_of\\_the\\_Jataka\\_Tales,\\_18th-19th\\_Century,\\_Phajoding\\_Gonpa,\\_Thimphu,\\_Bhutan.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhutanese_painted_thangka_of_the_Jataka_Tales,_18th-19th_Century,_Phajoding_Gonpa,_Thimphu,_Bhutan.jpg)

## 9. Teacher Guide for Extension Activities and NCSS Curriculum Connections

### NCSS Themes connected to this lesson

Culture  
 Time, Continuity and Change  
 People, Places and Environments  
 Power, Authority and Governance  
 Global Connections  
 Civic Ideals and Practices

NCSS – National Council for Social Studies

### Extension Activities

Early	Middle	High
<p>Create your own edicts. Where would you place them and what would they say?</p>	<p>What was happening in other parts of the world (such as Greece and China) when the Mauryan Empire was at its peak under Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century B.C.E.?</p>	<p>What was happening in other parts of the world (such as Greece and China) when the Mauryan Empire was at its peak under Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century B.C.E.?</p>
<p>Construct a timeline to understand the sequence of events during the Mauryan dynasty.</p>	<p>Compare Pataliputra with Susa and Ecbatana.</p>	<p>Determine the impact of Ashoka's support of Buddhism and Holy Roman Emperor Constantine's acceptance of Christianity.</p>
<p>Prepare a "Compare and Contrast" chart demonstrating the similarities or differences between two or more cultural groups in categories such as food, shelter,</p>	<p>Develop a classroom edict for just governance.</p>	<p>Create a podcast highlighting the role of religious beliefs in a past or present example of conflict or cooperation.</p>

language, religion,  
and clothing.

