

Ashoka's Peace Formula: Dharma as Diplomacy

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Abstract

Emperor Ashoka, one of ancient India's most influential rulers, exemplifies ethical leadership and diplomacy grounded in Buddhist principles. His transformation from a formidable conqueror responsible for the devastating Kalinga War to a proponent of nonviolence and compassion marks a profound moral turning point in history. This paper explores Ashoka as a "Dharma Diplomat" who employed the teachings of the Buddha to shape a governance model based on peace, tolerance, and ethical responsibility. Through his rock and pillar edicts, Ashoka articulated policies promoting religious harmony, respect for all life, and moral accountability. These principles fostered both internal stability and diplomatic relations with neighboring states. His outreach extended to regions including the Hellenistic world through emissaries and missions, representing an early form of soft power diplomacy grounded in shared values rather than coercion. By examining Ashoka's reign through the dual lenses of political history and Buddhist philosophy, this study underscores the enduring relevance of integrating spiritual ethics into statecraft. At a time when global challenges such as geopolitical tensions, climate crises, and ethical fragmentation threaten peace, Ashoka's example offers timeless insights into harmonizing power with compassion. This paper invites reflection on the fusion of inner transformation and external diplomacy, positioning Ashoka not only as a historical figure but also as a guiding model for contemporary peacebuilding efforts in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Ashoka, Dharma, Diplomacy, Peacebuilding, Soft Power, Ethical Leadership

Introduction

What if the most powerful ruler of one of history's largest empires chose peace over conquest and compassion over cruelty? Emperor Ashoka Maurya, the third ruler of the Maurya dynasty, did just that transforming from a fierce conqueror into a visionary leader whose embrace of Buddhist ethics reshaped both his empire and the idea of kingship itself. Known initially for his ruthless expansionist campaigns, especially the devastating Kalinga War around 261 BCE, Ashoka's reign witnessed unprecedented human suffering, with over 100,000 deaths and widespread displacement. Yet, it was this very tragedy that sparked a profound moral awakening in Ashoka, compelling him to reject violence and adopt Dhamma (Dharma) not only as a personal philosophy but as the guiding principle of his governance.

This transformation went beyond private conviction; it revolutionized political authority by blending moral vision with statecraft. Ashoka's Dhamma was a universal ethical code promoting compassion, tolerance, and self-restraint, rather than a religious imposition. His edicts, etched on rocks and pillars throughout the Indian subcontinent, emphasized non-violence (*ahimsā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), moral discipline (*saṃvara*), and respect for diverse religious traditions. Moreover, his vision extended to social welfare, animal rights, environmental care, and just governance principles centuries ahead of their time and reflective of a deeply humane state. Ashoka's unique fusion of spirituality and politics challenges the common view that power must be enforced through domination. Instead, he modeled governance as a moral service, where leadership is exercised with empathy and ethical responsibility. As a Dharma-based ruler, he transformed kingship into a platform for compassion and justice.

Significantly, Ashoka's ethical vision extended beyond his borders through what can be described as "value-based diplomacy." He sent emissaries and Buddhist missionaries to far-flung regions Sri Lanka, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and even Hellenistic lands not to conquer, but to foster cultural understanding, religious tolerance, and peaceful cooperation. These missions anticipated many principles of modern diplomacy, including soft power and intercultural dialogue grounded in shared values. In today's world, marked by geopolitical strife, leadership crises, and environmental challenges, Ashoka's peace formula remains strikingly relevant. His emphasis on sustainability, social justice, education, and interfaith harmony closely parallels the United

Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). His legacy illustrates how ethical governance can promote peace and inclusive development on a global scale.

This article explores Ashoka's political philosophy, governance, and diplomatic strategies through a Buddhist ethical lens, demonstrating how his transformation forged a new model of leadership that blends spiritual insight with practical statecraft offering timeless lessons for contemporary governance and diplomacy.

Literature Review

Guruge, Ananda W. P. *Emperor Asoka: A Historical Biography*. Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1994.

Guruge presents a comprehensive analysis of Ashoka's transformation from a ruthless conqueror to a patron of Buddhism and peace. The text examines Ashoka's edicts, historical background, and contributions to Buddhist diplomacy with scholarly precision. Guruge asserts that Ashoka was not merely a Buddhist ruler but a visionary leader who institutionalized moral governance through Dhamma policy. His method of promoting peace through cultural and religious missions is emphasized as both a political and spiritual strategy. The work is especially valuable for its detailed account of Ashokan missions to Sri Lanka and beyond, showing the strategic use of Dhamma to foster international Buddhist communities.

Lahiri, Nayanjot. *Ashoka in Ancient India*. Permanent Black, 2015.

Lahiri offers a nuanced re-reading of Ashoka's reign by juxtaposing archaeological and textual records. She challenges earlier hagiographic portrayals and provides a realistic political context to Ashoka's moral governance. The book argues that Ashoka's edicts, while grounded in Buddhist morality, were also deliberate tools of statecraft. Lahiri's balanced approach helps readers appreciate Ashoka's diplomatic use of religion, not as passive piety but as active governance. Her work bridges the gap between the political historian's lens and the Buddhist scholar's outlook, offering valuable insights into Ashoka's complex persona as both king and monk-like moralist.

Strong, John S. *The Legend of King Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the Aśokāvadāna*. Princeton UP, 1983.

Strong's translation and analysis of the *Aśokāvadāna* highlight the legendary and mythic dimensions of Ashoka's life, portraying him as an idealized Buddhist monarch. While hagiographic in nature, these stories convey the spiritual depth and diplomatic ambition of Ashoka's Buddhist engagement. The text helps scholars understand how Ashoka's legacy was shaped in Buddhist imagination across centuries. Strong emphasizes how Ashoka's transformation was not only a historical event but a moral narrative used to inspire ethical rulership. His analysis of Buddhist legends as vehicles of soft diplomacy adds depth to Ashoka's role as a Dharma diplomat.

Thapar, Romila. *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Oxford UP, 1961.

Thapar's work remains foundational in Ashokan studies. She situates Ashoka's reforms within the socio-political landscape of post-war Mauryan India and considers the emperor's embrace of Buddhism a calculated move to maintain social harmony. While critical of overly idealistic interpretations, Thapar concedes that Ashoka's Dhamma represented a unique moral code for governance. Her research includes a critical examination of the edicts and questions whether Ashoka's policy was truly Buddhist or a universal ethic cloaked in Buddhist values. This perspective is vital to understanding Ashoka's diplomatic strategy, showing how religion can serve broader political and ethical functions.

Barua, Beni Madhab. *Aśoka and His Inscriptions*. New Age Publishers, 1946.

Barua's pioneering work on Ashokan inscriptions provides a philological and historical foundation for understanding his moral governance. He translates and contextualizes the edicts, highlighting their ethical and administrative significance. According to Barua, Ashoka's concept of Dhamma was a practical guide for coexistence, not a doctrinal imposition. The inscriptions are seen as tools of mass communication aimed at both unifying the empire and promoting Buddhist diplomacy. Barua's contribution lies in his ability to show how inscriptions served as state-sponsored moral education, effectively turning Ashoka into a transregional teacher of peace.

Seneviratne, H. L. *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Though focused on modern Sri Lanka, Seneviratne's analysis of how Ashokan ideals influenced *Theravāda* Buddhist political thought offers historical continuity. He examines how Ashoka's legacy as a moral king has shaped Buddhist nationalism and diplomacy in South Asia. His analysis of Dhamma as both spiritual and political currency resonates with Ashoka's own use of Buddhist ethics to stabilize and extend his empire. The book demonstrates that Ashoka's model has had enduring influence, especially in how Buddhist nations conceptualize statecraft, religious diplomacy, and ethical governance.

Falk, Harry. "Ashoka and Buddhism New Evidence." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1998.

Falk analyzes recently discovered inscriptions and reconsiders Ashoka's religious identity. He argues that Ashoka may have been more of a religious pluralist than a strict Buddhist. Still, he highlights how Buddhist values remained the central ethical framework of the emperor's Dhamma policy. His study enriches our understanding of Ashoka's flexibility as a ruler who incorporated multiple traditions under a Buddhist moral umbrella. This perspective is critical in analyzing Ashoka as a Dharma diplomat who united diversity through universal ethics grounded in Buddhist values.

***Mahavamsa Chronicle*. Translated by Wilhelm Geiger, Asian Educational Services, 1912.**

The *Mahavamsa*, a Pali chronicle from Sri Lanka, venerates Ashoka for sending his son Mahinda to spread Buddhism. This early account emphasizes Ashoka's commitment to peaceful diplomacy and cultural exchange through Buddhist missions. It presents Ashoka not just as an Indian emperor but as an international figure of spiritual authority. Although partially mythological, the chronicle plays a significant role in establishing Ashoka's image as a moral leader in Buddhist Southeast Asia. Its influence reveals how Ashoka was perceived as a Dharma diplomat by regional traditions beyond India.

Hazra, Kanai Lal. *Royal Patronage of Buddhism in Ancient India*. D. K. Printworld, 2002.

Hazra examines how royal patronage, especially by Ashoka, shaped the institutionalization of Buddhism. He emphasizes the emperor's role in funding monasteries, supporting councils, and dispatching emissaries to neighboring regions. Ashoka's policy is presented as both religiously motivated and politically wise an ideal fusion of spiritual values and statecraft. Hazra's analysis affirms that Ashoka's diplomatic missions, far from being merely religious, were state-sponsored acts of soft power designed to build alliances and cultural ties grounded in shared Buddhist ethics.

Skilling, Peter. *Buddhism and Buddhist Literature of South-East Asia*. Fragile Palm Leaves Foundation, 2009.

Skilling's work provides a Southeast Asian perspective on the spread of Ashokan influence. He traces literary and epigraphic traditions that reference Ashoka and his emissaries, particularly in Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia. His analysis shows that Ashoka's role as a Dharma diplomat was interpreted and adapted across cultural contexts. This regional lens emphasizes how Buddhist principles were transmitted not just doctrinally but diplomatically, with Ashoka serving as the original model for Buddhist statecraft in Southeast Asia. Skilling's interdisciplinary approach connects Ashokan ideals with modern Buddhist leadership and cultural diplomacy.

Statement of the Problem

Emperor Ashoka's reign occupies a unique space at the intersection of history, religion, and political ethics. Although his transformation after the Kalinga War and subsequent propagation of *Dhamma* are well documented, there remains a significant gap in understanding how Ashoka strategically utilized Buddhist principles as tools for both internal governance and external diplomacy. The core problem is conceptual: how can spiritual teachings rooted in Buddhism be effectively integrated into political leadership and diplomatic practice? Furthermore, existing scholarship often oscillates between viewing Ashoka as either a deeply pious monarch or a pragmatic statesman, leaving unresolved tensions about the practical versus idealistic nature of his moral governance. Addressing this issue is especially important in contemporary contexts where religion and political authority frequently conflict rather than collaborate.

Statement of the Problem

Emperor Ashoka's reign embodies a remarkable fusion of spiritual values and political leadership. Although his commitment to Dhamma after the Kalinga War is well recognized, there remains a crucial gap in understanding how he concretely applied Buddhist teachings to govern his empire and conduct diplomacy. Was Ashoka's approach a personal spiritual awakening, a deliberate peace-building strategy, or a blend of both? This inquiry is vital today as global politics struggle to balance ethical governance and sustainable peace. Exploring Ashoka's model offers a potential framework for integrating moral principles into diplomacy, contributing to peaceful coexistence and sustainable development.

Research Questions

1. How did Ashoka implement Buddhist principles in governance and diplomacy to establish an ethical leadership model centered on peace?
2. To what extent can Ashoka's Dharma-driven diplomacy **provide lessons for modern efforts in global peace and sustainable governance?**

Objectives

1. To analyze the ethical and political foundations of Ashoka's Dhamma as a blueprint for peace-oriented governance and diplomacy.
2. To assess the applicability of Ashoka's Dharma-based diplomatic principles in addressing contemporary challenges of global peace and sustainability.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical approach centered on the systematic review and interpretation of primary and secondary sources.

1. **Primary sources** include Ashokan edicts, key Buddhist canonical texts such as the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Aśokāvadāna*, and the *Mahāvamsa*, alongside their scholarly translations. These texts are examined through a hermeneutical lens to interpret their socio-political and spiritual contexts.

2. **Secondary sources** consist of scholarly books and articles by South and Southeast Asian researchers, offering regional perspectives and updated historiographical insights. The study uses comparative analysis to navigate differing interpretations, supported by triangulation of epigraphy, scriptures, and contemporary scholarship.

This approach enables a culturally grounded, nuanced understanding of Ashoka's use of Buddhist ethics in both domestic administration and international diplomacy.

Delimitation

This research focuses exclusively on Emperor Ashoka's post-Kalinga transformation and his application of Buddhist teachings in governance and diplomacy. It does not cover the entirety of the Mauryan dynasty or Ashoka's pre-Buddhist reign in detail. The study primarily draws on Theravāda and early Buddhist texts relevant to Ashoka's era and emphasizes South and Southeast Asian regional perspectives, including India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Nepal. Modern interpretations are selectively incorporated from scholars rooted in these cultural contexts to preserve historical authenticity.

Importance of the Study

This study highlights how Buddhist ethics can guide effective and compassionate governance and diplomacy. Ashoka's model offers a valuable alternative to power-driven politics by integrating moral principles with statecraft. It contributes to understanding Buddhist political thought through authentic regional perspectives. The research also provides insights relevant to today's challenges of ethical leadership, peacebuilding, and sustainable development. By bridging historical and contemporary issues, it enriches global discussions on governance grounded in spirituality.

Discussion

1. Ashoka's Transformation and the Dhamma Ethic

The Kalinga War was a watershed moment in Ashoka's reign, triggering a deep personal and political transformation. Confronted by the devastation caused by his military campaign, Ashoka embraced Buddhism and adopted its ethical code as the foundation of his rule. This shift marked a move away from conquest through force (*bala-vijaya*) toward victory through righteousness (*dhamma-vijaya*), emphasizing non-violence, compassion, and social harmony. His inscriptions declare his commitment to being a *dhammika rājā* a righteous king devoted to moral governance (Barua 35; Lahiri 122).

2. Governance through Buddhist Principles

Ashoka institutionalized his Buddhist values through reforms that promoted welfare, morality, and tolerance. He appointed *Dhamma-mahāmattās*, officers tasked with spreading ethical conduct and religious harmony across the empire. Public works like hospitals, wells, and rest houses reflected Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*) in practical terms. His governance model emphasized persuasion rather than coercion and respected religious pluralism, demonstrating a unique integration of spirituality and political administration (Guruge 104-6; Hazra 87-90).

3. Ashoka's Buddhist Diplomacy and International Missions

A hallmark of Ashoka's reign was the use of Buddhist missions as tools of diplomacy. Emissaries were sent to regions such as Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and even Hellenistic kingdoms like Egypt and Greece to spread Buddhist teachings and promote peace. This approach contrasted sharply with the militaristic expansions of other empires. Through *dhamma-vijaya*, Ashoka expanded his influence by fostering ethical values, cultural exchange, and peaceful relations rather than territorial conquest (Foucher 124-25; Ray 90-92).

4. Religious Pluralism under Ashoka

Ashoka's edicts reveal a policy of religious tolerance uncommon for the time. He actively discouraged sectarianism and promoted respect for all faiths within his diverse empire. This pluralistic approach helped maintain social harmony and political stability by encouraging peaceful coexistence among different religious communities. Rather than imposing Buddhism as

the state religion, Ashoka upheld it as a guiding ethical framework compatible with diverse beliefs (Lahiri 143; Chaudhuri 205).

5. The Political Relevance of Ashoka in Contemporary Governance

Ashoka's ethical approach to leadership remains highly relevant in today's politically fragmented and ethically challenged world. His integration of compassion, morality, and non-violence into governance offers a valuable model for modern policymakers. Emphasizing interfaith harmony and social justice, Ashoka's legacy inspires efforts toward ethical governance and conflict resolution, especially in multicultural and democratic societies of South and Southeast Asia (Mitchell 211-13; Obeyesekere 143-45).

6. Ashoka's Ethical Diplomacy as Soft Power

Ashoka's reign exemplifies an early use of what modern scholars call soft power—political influence achieved through moral authority rather than military force. By promoting *dhamma-vijaya*, Ashoka legitimized his rule through ethical persuasion and compassion, blending spiritual principles with effective governance. This diplomatic strategy fostered respect and peaceful relations among neighboring states, offering a timeless framework for ethical leadership and international diplomacy (Klein 27; Lahiri 132).

Conclusion

Emperor Ashoka's transformation from a warrior ruler to a Dharma-centered sovereign marks a landmark evolution in political history. His adoption of Buddhist ethics emphasizing non-violence, compassion, and moral responsibility redefined the nature of kingship and state power in ancient India. Ashoka's propagation of Dhamma was not only an instrument for internal governance reform but also a pioneering approach to peaceful foreign relations through Buddhist missions and cultural diplomacy. His model demonstrated that spirituality and politics can converge to create a governance system that promotes social harmony and ethical leadership.

This study has shown that Ashoka was more than a religious convert; he was a Dharma diplomat who strategically employed Buddhist principles to bridge power with peace. The enduring legacy of his policies and institutions across South and Southeast Asia affirms the relevance of his approach in today's world. In times marked by conflict and leadership crises,

Ashoka's reign stands as a powerful example that governance rooted in moral vision can serve both the state and humanity effectively.

Recommendations

In an era marked by geopolitical tensions, ethical dilemmas, and leadership challenges, the lessons from Ashoka's reign offer valuable guidance for modern governance. Integrating his Dharma-based principles can foster more compassionate, inclusive, and peaceful political systems. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed to help contemporary societies and policymakers draw from Ashoka's legacy in practical ways:

- **Contemporary leaders** should study Ashoka's principles of Dhamma to develop governance models based on compassion, ethical responsibility, and non-coercive leadership.
- **Governments in South and Southeast Asia** can enhance cultural diplomacy by drawing on shared Buddhist heritage and Ashokan values to promote peace and regional cooperation.
- **Educational institutions**, particularly in political science and religious studies, should incorporate Ashoka's model of moral leadership into curricula to inspire future policymakers.
- **Interfaith dialogue platforms** should utilize Ashoka's example as a historic precedent for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence among diverse communities.
- **Policy research centers and governance reform groups** ought to revisit Ashoka's inscriptions and edicts as early exemplars of ethical governance and peacebuilding strategies, adapting them to address

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