

Ashoka and His Dhamma

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Introduction

Ashoka the Great (273–232 BCE) was one of the most remarkable rulers of ancient India from the Maurya Dynasty. After the Kalinga War, he embraced Buddhism and propagated the policy of Dhamma (Dharma). His Dhamma was a set of moral and ethical guidelines meant to create a just, humane, and harmonious society. It was not a religion, but a code of conduct applicable to all, irrespective of caste, class, or religion.

Meaning of Dhamma

The word 'Dhamma' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Dharma' meaning duty, righteousness, and moral law. Ashoka's Dhamma emphasized truthfulness, non-violence, compassion, and tolerance. It reflected his vision of a welfare state based on moral values rather than conquest and violence.

Principles of Ashoka's Dhamma

1. Non-Violence (Ahimsa)

Ashoka banned animal sacrifices and promoted kindness towards all living beings. He discouraged hunting and emphasized vegetarianism and compassion.

2. Respect and Tolerance

Ashoka encouraged religious tolerance and respect for all sects and beliefs. He believed that harmony among different faiths was essential for peace in society.

3. Truthfulness and Moral Conduct

He urged his people to speak the truth, be honest, and live a moral life. He emphasized ethical conduct over rituals and ceremonies.

4. Welfare of People

Ashoka focused on public welfare. He built hospitals, rest houses, roads, and wells. He appointed officials known as 'Dhamma Mahamatras' to spread the message of Dhamma and look after people's welfare.

5. Family and Social Harmony

He stressed respect for elders, proper treatment of servants, and harmonious family relations. He also encouraged care for the poor, orphans, and the aged.

6. Religious Tolerance

Ashoka believed in equal respect for all religions. He often stated in his edicts that one should not only respect their own religion but also honor others' beliefs.

Methods of Propagation of Dhamma

- Ashoka issued rock and pillar edicts inscribed with his Dhamma principles.
- Sent missionaries to foreign lands like Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and South-East Asia.
- Established a network of Dhamma Mahamatras (officers) to spread teachings.
- Promoted Buddhist councils and patronized Buddhist monks and scholars.

Impact of Ashoka's Dhamma

- Promoted peace, harmony, and moral values in the empire.
- Strengthened Buddhism as a world religion.
- Reduced violence, animal sacrifice, and social conflicts.
- Created a model of ethical governance and welfare state.
- Left a legacy of tolerance and non-violence that influenced Indian culture and beyond.

King Ashoka's Religious Policy: Dhamma

- King Ashoka declared Buddhism the state religion around 260 BC. He mandated the practice of Dhamma, which became the foundation of his

generous and tolerant administration. Ashoka's Dhamma was based on the ten principles espoused by Lord Buddha.

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- These ten principles are:
 1. To be liberal while avoiding egoism.
 2. To uphold a high moral standard.
 3. To be willing to put one's own pleasure aside for the sake of the subjects' well-being.
 4. To be truthful and uphold total integrity.
 5. To be gentle and kind.
 6. To live a humble life to inspire the subjects.
 7. To be free of all forms of hatred.
 8. To practise non-violence.
 9. To develop patience.
 10. Respect for the public's viewpoint to create peace and concord.

Ashoka's Dhamma was not a new religion. It was not a new form of political philosophy either. Dharma is the Sanskrit word for "dhamma."

Dhamma was a way of life enshrined in a code of behaviour and a set of ideals that he advised his subjects to follow to live in peace and prosperity. Dhamma policies included the following:

- Ahimsa (non-violence) and truthfulness should be practised
- The masters' treatment of slaves and servants should be humane
- All religious sects must be tolerated
- Instead of conflict, dharma conquest is preferred
- Parents must be obeyed and respected, and teachers must be revered
- Brahmanas and Buddhist monks should be respected

- Abolition of death sentences
- Animal sacrifices and the killing of birds are prohibited
- Inappropriate rituals and superstitious practices are discouraged
- Building wells and rest houses, as well as planting trees
- Human and animal health care to be provided
- Provisions to help the poor and the elderly

He propagated these Ashoka's Dhamma ideals through the issuance of 14 edicts. He disseminated all of these edicts throughout his realm during his reign. Ashoka entrusted Dhamma Mahamatras with the task of teaching the Dhamma to the masses. They were even deployed to spread it in other countries.

Conclusion

Ashoka's Dhamma was a pioneering attempt to establish a moral and ethical state based on non-violence, tolerance, and welfare of people. It went beyond religion and focused on universal human values. His teachings remain relevant today as symbols of peace, compassion, and ethical governance.