

CHAPTER 18

DHARMA, ARTHA, KAMA, AND MOKSHA

WAR AND PEACE IN THE TIME OF ASHOKA

“ VISHAKADATTA
AND ASHOKA

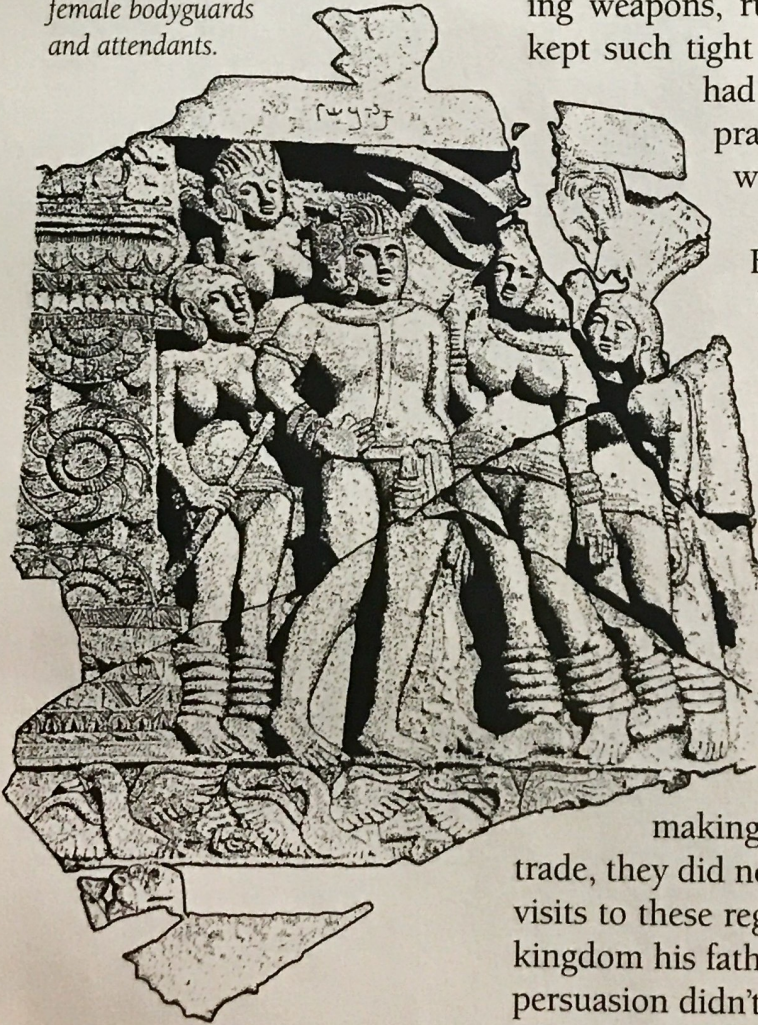
Prince Ashoka Maurya had two kinds of heroes. The first were the gods and goddesses of the Vedic scriptures and the prince and princesses who served them in stories such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. These religious heroes taught him the satisfaction of living with honor and justice (*dharma*), the excitement of money and success (*artha*), and the contentment of enjoying the world's beauties and pleasures (*kama*). They taught him that if he filled his life with these qualities of honor, excellence, and beauty, he would reach *moksha*, when the cycle of life, death, and rebirth would end.

That all sounded good to Prince Ashoka. But so did the adventures of his second kind of hero—the warrior heroes like his father, King Bindusara, and his grandfather, Chandragupta. Ashoka loved fighting, and he was good at it. He may well have gone to a military academy like the one in Taxila. Brahmins and Kshatriya came there from all over the subcontinent to learn military science, including the use of the eight major weapons. Brahmins shot bows, the Kshatriya were swordsmen, the Vaisya used the lance, and the Shudra wielded the mace—a heavy,



Emperor Ashoka erected these carved lions on top of a 45-foot (15-meter) stone pillar in 272 BCE. It celebrates the Buddha's first sermon, when he set the "wheel of law" in motion. This pillar is India's national symbol; one of the wheels under the lions' feet appears on India's flag.

Although no images of Ashoka were created during his lifetime, this drawing, made from a carving on a Buddhist stupa in South India, dates from about 100–300 CE. It shows the emperor surrounded by his female bodyguards and attendants.



66 Vishakadatta, *Mudrarakshasa*, ninth century CE

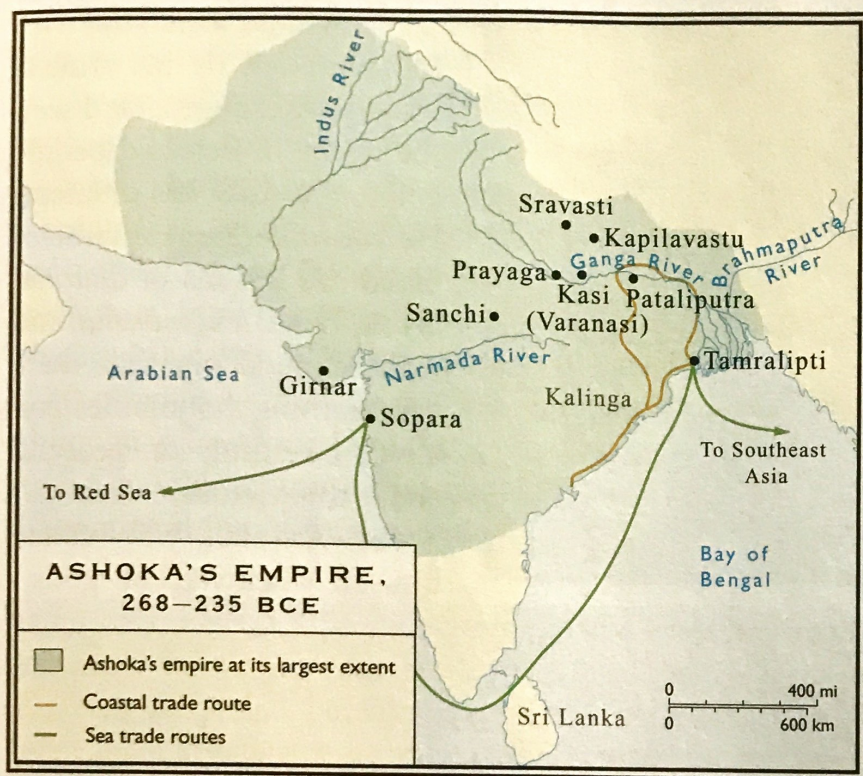
spiked, hammerlike weapon. The teacher was skilled in all those weapons plus the disk (*chakra*), the spear, and fighting with his bare hands. Brahmin and Kshatriya students was also trained to command a war elephant.

Military academies like the one in Taxila show how important war was to the people of Ashoka's time. Each town had its own central armory, a strong building for storing weapons, run by a superintendent. The government kept such tight control over its weapons that all soldiers had to return their arms to the armory after they practiced each morning. No one could carry a weapon unless he had a special permit.

In about 269 BCE, Ashoka's father, King Bindusara, died. Ashoka was barely 30, but he had already proven himself a brilliant warrior. Ashoka's mother had not been his father's chief wife, so he had to compete with his half brothers for the throne. But by 265 BCE Ashoka had defeated all his rivals and was the unquestioned king of the entire northern subcontinent.

He may have been king, but many of his people did not wish to be his subjects. They had lived in independent city-states for centuries and, and although a centralized state had its good points, like making the roads better and safer and increasing trade, they did not want to obey a king. Ashoka made royal visits to these regions to persuade his people to stay in the kingdom his father and grandfather had established. When persuasion didn't work, he sent his army.

Ashoka's grandfather, Chandragupta, had united most of the northern subcontinent. His empire stretched "from the lord of the mountains [Himalayas], cooled by showers of the spray of the divine steam [Ganga] playing about among its rocks, to the shores of the southern ocean marked by the brilliance of gems flashing with various colors." Ashoka's father, Bindusara, had continued his father's tradition, earning himself the nickname "Slayer of Enemies." But neither



Chandragupta nor Bindusara had dared attack the territory of Kalinga in eastern India.

Kalinga was a particularly rich and powerful state. Its riches came from its trade with Southeast Asia. Merchants from Kalinga could be found as far away as Borneo, Bali, and Java. Although it had no king, Kalinga protected its riches with a huge and well-organized army, including an army of especially mighty war elephants.

Ashoka wanted Kalinga not only for its riches, but also because the highways that connected north and south India ran right through the middle of the state. And war elephants or no war elephants, what Ashoka wanted, he usually got. His attack was brutal and effective. By the time the war was over, one out of every four Kalingans was dead or wounded. Many more had been taken prisoner and were separated from what was left of their families. Those who survived faced lives as broken and barren as their wrecked houses and ruined fields. Ashoka reported that “150,000 were deported, 100,000 were killed, and many more died (from other causes).”

WAR ELEPHANTS, THE SEQUEL

Catching, training, and controlling war elephants was one of the most important skills that the military academies taught. According to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, summer was the best time to catch a wild elephant. The best kind was about 20 years old, with “red patches, evenly fleshed, of even sides and rounded girth, with a curved backbone and well covered with flesh.”

The trainer, called a *mahout*, first got the elephant used to being led around. Then he'd teach it to raise its leg to help riders climb on. Then the elephant would learn how to run, jump over obstacles, roll over, and move in formation with other elephants (moving forward, backward, zigzag, or in a circle). It would also learn how to trample and destroy horses, chariots, and men, how to fight other elephants, and how to attack forts.

66 Ashoka, third century BCE

This column is more than 32 feet (almost 10 meters) tall and carved from a single block of sandstone. Ashoka had his stonemasons carve a message around the bottom of the column to teach his people about the Buddha.



As Ashoka stared out over the ruins left by his armies, something changed. He'd seen the agony of defeated people before, but this was different. He was different. He remembered the lessons of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*, and realized suddenly that there was nothing honorable, creative, beautiful, or peaceful about this victory.

So Ashoka, who called himself "Beloved of gods,"

sent out a royal edict, a message, which he had proclaimed in every village and carved into rock pillars for all to see: "After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved of the Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards *dharma*, a love for *dharma*, and for instruction of *dharma*. Now Beloved of the Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas."

Ashoka adopted a new philosophy, one he called "conquest by *dharma*," instead of by arms. As he explained in one of his proclamations:

I have had this edict written so that sons and great-grandsons may not consider making new conquests, or that if military conquests are made, that they be done with forbearance and light punishment, or better still that they consider making conquest by *dharma* only, for that bears fruit in this world and the next. May all their intense devotion be given to this which has result in this world and the next.

He told his people that he wanted them to live in a way that would lead to an "increase of their inner worthiness." Ashoka also promoted the teachings of the Buddha and sent missionaries, including his son and his daughter, to lands as far away as Sri Lanka so that his people would not make the same mistakes he had. As he said, "All men are my children. As for my own children, I desire that they may be provided

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with all the welfare and happiness of this world and of the next, so do I desire for all men as well.”

As part of his reforms, Ashoka banned the sacrifice of animals. This confused and angered many of his people, especially the Brahmins who made their living by performing animal sacrifices. The Brahmins were powerful enemies, and convinced the leaders of one region after another to break away from the Mauryan Empire after Ashoka's death. The last Mauryan ruler was assassinated in 185 BCE by one of his generals—who was, not so coincidentally, a Brahmin. Although other kings would follow, no ruler would be strong enough to unite the many different people of the subcontinent into a single political state for 1,600 years.



AND YOU THOUGHT YOUR HANDWRITING WAS BAD

The people living under Ashoka's rule spoke many different languages, so scribes needed to write his edicts, or messages, in all kinds of languages. One particularly popular way of communicating was a carved stone pillar, which would last a long time. Scholars think that first a Brahmin scribe probably copied the inscriptions with a piece of charcoal and then a craftsman carved them. The craftsmen, some of whom could not read, were sometimes sloppy, and this makes it difficult for scholars to figure out some of the letters.

This spectacular temple at Bodhi Gaya, India, marks the place where the Buddha sat under a bodhi, or banyan, tree and gained enlightenment. The original temple was built by Ashoka, but it has been rebuilt and expanded many times during the past 2,000 years.