



# Indian Streams Research Journal



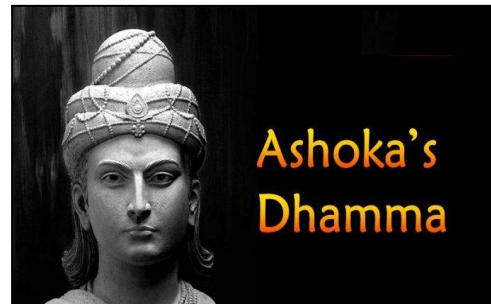
## ASHOKA'S DHAMMA: ANCIENT INDIA'S BLUEPRINT FOR A JUST SOCIETY

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### INTRODUCTION

The history of ancient India is replete with tales of mighty emperors and their enduring legacies. Among these historical figures, the name Ashoka the Great stands out prominently. Ashoka, who ruled the Mauryan Empire from approximately 268 to 232 BCE, is not only remembered for the vast expanse of his empire but also for his profound transformation as a ruler. His conversion to Buddhism marked a turning point in his life, leading him to advocate for a set of moral and ethical principles known as "Ashoka's Dhamma." This remarkable code of conduct aimed to promote non-violence, compassion, and social welfare, leaving an indelible mark on the fabric of ancient Indian society.



### THE BIRTH OF ASHOKA'S DHAMMA

The birth of Ashoka's Dhamma, the moral and ethical code he propagated during his rule over the Mauryan Empire, is a story deeply intertwined with his personal transformation and the consequences of a brutal war. To grasp the emergence of Ashoka's Dhamma, we must delve into the historical context and pivotal events that molded his convictions.

Ashoka's ascent to power began when he succeeded his father, Bindusara, to the throne of the Mauryan Empire around 268 BCE. His initial years as a ruler were marked by the typical pursuits of ancient monarchs: territorial expansion through military conquests. Under his leadership, the Mauryan Empire grew to encompass a vast expanse of territory in the Indian subcontinent.

However, the turning point in Ashoka's life and the genesis of his Dhamma was the Kalinga War of 261 BCE. This military campaign pitted Ashoka's forces against the kingdom of Kalinga, located in present-day Odisha, India. The conflict was exceptionally brutal and resulted in a substantial loss of life and widespread suffering among the people of Kalinga.

The aftermath of the Kalinga War left an indelible mark on Ashoka's psyche. The sight of immense devastation and the human toll weighed heavily on his conscience. He began to question the morality of his actions as a conqueror and the purpose of his rule.

As a result of his inner turmoil and quest for a meaningful path, Ashoka embarked on a spiritual journey. He explored various philosophical and religious traditions but found resonance with Buddhism, a spiritual philosophy emphasizing non-violence (Ahimsa), compassion, and ethical

behavior. It was under the influence of Buddhist teachings and his own introspection that Ashoka underwent a profound personal transformation.

The formulation of Ashoka's Dhamma was a direct consequence of his conversion to Buddhism. He recognized the need for a new moral and ethical foundation for his empire, one that would atone for the suffering caused by his earlier conquests and reflect his newfound commitment to non-violence, compassion, and social welfare.

With the emergence of Ashoka's Dhamma, the emperor was eager to disseminate his beliefs to his subjects. He ordered the inscriptions of his Dhamma on rocks, pillars, and other prominent locations throughout his vast empire. These inscriptions were composed in various languages and scripts to reach a broad audience. In these messages, Ashoka encouraged his people to lead virtuous lives, respect all religious traditions, and practice kindness and compassion in their interactions with others.

To ensure the practical implementation of his Dhamma, Ashoka appointed officials known as "Dhamma Mahamatras." These officers played a pivotal role in disseminating and enforcing his moral and ethical principles at the grassroots level, ensuring that his vision for a just and compassionate society was translated into action.

In conclusion, Ashoka's Dhamma was born out of a profound personal transformation, catalyzed by the Kalinga War and his subsequent embrace of Buddhism. It symbolized his genuine commitment to promoting non-violence, compassion, and social welfare within his vast empire. Ashoka's Dhamma not only reflects his own evolution as a leader but also serves as a significant historical example of a ruler who recognized the imperative of moral and ethical principles in governance and tirelessly endeavored to instill them in the society he governed.

## NON-VIOLENCE AND COMPASSION

Non-violence (Ahimsa) and compassion are two core principles at the heart of Ashoka's Dhamma, the ethical and moral code promoted by Emperor Ashoka during his rule over the Mauryan Empire. These principles played a central role in shaping his vision for a just and harmonious society.

1. **Non-Violence (Ahimsa):** Non-violence, or Ahimsa, is a foundational concept in Ashoka's Dhamma. It is the principle of refraining from causing harm or violence to any living being, whether human or animal. Ashoka was profoundly influenced by Buddhism, a religion that places a strong emphasis on Ahimsa, and he sought to integrate this principle into his governance and the fabric of his empire.
  - **Moral Imperative:** For Ashoka, non-violence was not merely a practical or political choice; it was a moral imperative. He recognized that violence and conflict caused immense suffering and were detrimental to the well-being of his subjects and society as a whole. The Kalinga War, which resulted in widespread devastation and loss of life, served as a stark reminder of the destructive consequences of violence.
  - **Universal Application:** Ashoka's commitment to non-violence extended beyond the battlefield. He encouraged his subjects to resolve disputes peacefully and to avoid causing harm in their daily lives. This principle was intended to guide interpersonal relationships and promote harmony within society.
  - **Protection of Animals:** Non-violence also encompassed the protection of animals. Ashoka advocated for the humane treatment of animals and discouraged practices that caused harm to them. His concern for animals is evident in his edicts, which included provisions for the establishment of veterinary clinics.
  - **Environmental Conservation:** Ashoka's commitment to Ahimsa extended to the environment. He recognized the importance of preserving forests and wildlife as part of a larger ecosystem. His edicts urged the protection of forests and the planting of medicinal herbs.

2. **Compassion:** Compassion is closely linked to the principle of non-violence in Ashoka's Dhamma. It goes beyond refraining from harming others and emphasizes actively caring for and empathizing with the suffering of others, both human and animal.
- **Empathy and Altruism:** Ashoka's Dhamma encouraged individuals to cultivate empathy and altruism. This meant not only avoiding causing harm but also actively seeking to alleviate the suffering of others. Compassion was seen as a virtue that should guide one's actions and interactions with others.
  - **Promotion of Welfare:** Ashoka's compassion was not limited to words but translated into concrete actions. He established hospitals and medical facilities to provide healthcare to his subjects. These institutions were intended to serve not only humans but also animals, reflecting his commitment to compassion for all living beings.
  - **Religious Tolerance:** Compassion was also reflected in Ashoka's attitude toward religious diversity. He promoted religious tolerance and respect for different faiths, recognizing that a compassionate society should embrace and accommodate diverse belief systems without discrimination.
  - **Encouraging Virtuous Behavior:** Compassion was not only directed outward but also inward. Ashoka encouraged individuals to cultivate virtuous qualities and ethical behavior, promoting self-improvement and personal transformation.

In essence, non-violence and compassion were the cornerstones of Ashoka's Dhamma, shaping his vision for a society where empathy, kindness, and ethical conduct prevailed. These principles not only influenced his policies and edicts but also left a lasting legacy, underscoring the enduring relevance of these values in fostering peace, harmony, and social well-being in any society.

## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Religious tolerance, as exemplified by Ashoka during his reign as the Mauryan emperor, is a profound principle that embodies the acceptance, respect, and peaceful coexistence of diverse religious beliefs and practices within a society. Ashoka's promotion of religious tolerance is a defining aspect of his Dhamma and reflects his unwavering commitment to creating a more inclusive and harmonious empire. This commitment had far-reaching implications for the social, cultural, and ethical fabric of ancient India.

Central to Ashoka's approach to religious tolerance was the sincere respect he held for all religious traditions practiced within his vast empire. India, a land of remarkable religious diversity, was home to followers of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and various indigenous faiths. Rather than favoring one religion over others, Ashoka championed an atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance. This approach was a stark departure from the religious conflicts and persecution that had marred the history of many ancient empires.

A hallmark of Ashoka's commitment to religious tolerance was his unwavering stance against discrimination based on religious beliefs. He instituted policies that ensured individuals were not subjected to persecution or marginalization because of their faith. This non-discriminatory approach extended to all aspects of life, including employment, access to public services, and the right to participate fully in the social and political life of the empire.

The promotion of religious pluralism was another pivotal aspect of Ashoka's vision for his empire. He encouraged people to recognize the value of different faiths and to coexist peacefully. This pluralistic perspective fostered a sense of unity in diversity, where the multiplicity of religious beliefs was viewed as enriching rather than divisive. It set a precedent for tolerance and multiculturalism in ancient India.

One of the cornerstones of religious tolerance was the assurance of religious freedom. Ashoka's edicts explicitly guaranteed the right of individuals to choose and practice their religion without coercion. This was a groundbreaking concept, particularly at a time when rulers often

imposed their own religious beliefs on their subjects. Ashoka's commitment to religious freedom was a significant step toward a more just and equitable society.

To promote interfaith harmony, Ashoka actively engaged in dialogue with religious leaders and encouraged his officials to do the same. He believed that open discussions and exchanges of ideas among followers of different religions could lead to greater understanding and mutual respect. This approach sought to transcend religious divides and promote a culture of dialogue rather than conflict.

Ashoka's support for religious institutions was another manifestation of his commitment to religious tolerance. While he provided patronage and support to Buddhist monasteries and stupas, he also extended his beneficence to institutions representing other religions. This financial support aimed to facilitate the peaceful dissemination of religious teachings and the maintenance of religious infrastructure.

Furthermore, Ashoka's Dhamma placed a strong emphasis on moral conduct and ethical behavior as the core of religious practice. He believed that adhering to ethical principles, such as non-violence, compassion, and honesty, was more essential than rigid adherence to rituals or dogma. This perspective encouraged a more inclusive and less dogmatic approach to religion, highlighting the common thread of moral values that ran through all faiths.

Ashoka's commitment to religious tolerance found explicit expression in his edicts, which were inscribed on pillars and rocks throughout his empire. These edicts served as a testament to his dedication to religious harmony, respect for all religious traditions, and the idea that virtue and righteousness were the shared foundations of all faiths. They were not mere declarations but tangible reminders of his vision for a more inclusive and tolerant society.

In conclusion, Ashoka's promotion of religious tolerance was a transformative force in ancient India. His commitment to respecting and accommodating diverse religious beliefs played a pivotal role in creating an environment of coexistence and harmony within his vast and culturally diverse empire. Ashoka's legacy as a proponent of religious tolerance continues to inspire discussions about pluralism, interfaith dialogue, and the importance of respecting religious diversity in contemporary societies. His vision for a harmonious and tolerant society remains a timeless example of leadership based on principles of compassion, empathy, and respect for all.

## **SOCIAL WELFARE AND EMPATHY**

Ashoka's Dhamma was not confined to lofty ideals but also extended to practical measures for social welfare. He built hospitals, established veterinary clinics, and constructed rest houses along major roads to aid travelers. His concern for the welfare of his subjects went beyond humans; he encouraged the planting of medicinal herbs and the protection of forests and wildlife. His edicts reveal a ruler who cared deeply about the well-being of his people and the environment.

Social welfare and empathy were two fundamental components of Ashoka's Dhamma, the ethical and moral code he propagated during his rule over the Mauryan Empire. These principles were deeply intertwined and reflected his vision for a just and compassionate society.

### **SOCIAL WELFARE:**

1. **Healthcare for All:** Ashoka's commitment to social welfare included providing healthcare services for his subjects. He ordered the construction of hospitals and dispensaries, ensuring that medical care was accessible to people across his vast empire. These medical facilities not only catered to humans but also extended to animals, underlining his broad compassion.
2. **Veterinary Care:** In addition to human healthcare, Ashoka established veterinary clinics to provide medical treatment to animals. This demonstrated his recognition of the importance of animal welfare and his belief that compassion should extend to all living beings.
3. **Rest Houses:** Ashoka also built rest houses along major roads and highways to assist travelers. These rest houses offered a place for weary travelers to rest and recuperate during their

journeys. This gesture aimed to improve the well-being of travelers and underscored his commitment to the welfare of his subjects.

4. **Protection of the Vulnerable:** Ashoka's Dhamma advocated for the protection and welfare of vulnerable populations. This included widows, orphans, and the elderly. He recognized that society's progress should not come at the expense of those who were marginalized or disadvantaged.
5. **Environmental Conservation:** Ashoka's commitment to social welfare extended to the environment. He emphasized the importance of preserving forests, preventing deforestation, and protecting wildlife. These efforts were not only for ecological balance but also for the well-being of future generations.

#### EMPATHY:

1. **Compassion for All:** Empathy was a driving force behind Ashoka's policies and actions. He encouraged his subjects to cultivate compassion and kindness towards all living beings. This virtue was seen as essential for fostering a harmonious and caring society.
2. **Religious Tolerance:** Ashoka's empathy was not limited to his own beliefs. He promoted religious tolerance, respecting and supporting various religious traditions within his empire. This empathetic stance allowed people of different faiths to coexist peacefully, transcending religious divides.
3. **Reduction of Suffering:** Ashoka's empathy was particularly evident in his response to the suffering caused by war and conflict. The Kalinga War, in which countless lives were lost and widespread suffering occurred, deeply affected him. This empathy for the victims of violence led to his profound transformation and the formulation of his Dhamma.
4. **Interpersonal Relationships:** Ashoka encouraged individuals to practice empathy in their daily interactions with others. This included being considerate, understanding, and respectful in dealings with fellow citizens. By fostering empathy, he aimed to create a more compassionate and harmonious society.
5. **Personal Transformation:** Ashoka's own personal transformation was driven by empathy for the suffering he had caused. He recognized the pain inflicted on others and sought to make amends by promoting values of compassion, non-violence, and ethical conduct.

In essence, social welfare and empathy were integral to Ashoka's Dhamma, reflecting his commitment to creating a just and compassionate society. His policies and actions were rooted in the belief that the welfare of his subjects, both human and animal, should be at the forefront of governance. Empathy, as a guiding principle, played a pivotal role in his personal transformation and his vision for a more caring and harmonious empire. Ashoka's legacy continues to inspire discussions about the importance of social welfare and empathy in contemporary societies, highlighting their enduring relevance for fostering a more equitable and compassionate world.

#### JUST AND ETHICAL GOVERNANCE

The principles of Ashoka's Dhamma also underscored the importance of just and ethical governance. He urged his officials to treat people fairly and kindly, emphasizing that the welfare of his subjects was a primary concern. To ensure the implementation of these principles, Ashoka appointed "Dhamma Mahamatras" or officers responsible for enforcing his Dhamma policies.

Just and ethical governance was a foundational element of Ashoka's Dhamma, the moral and ethical code promoted during his rule over the Mauryan Empire. This principle emphasized the importance of fair, humane, and morally upright governance, setting a standard for ethical leadership that continues to resonate today.

#### Key Components of Just and Ethical Governance in Ashoka's Dhamma:

1. **Fair Treatment of Subjects:** Ashoka's Dhamma placed a strong emphasis on treating all subjects with fairness and impartiality. He urged his officials to administer justice equitably, ensuring that the rights and dignity of individuals were upheld. This commitment to justice was a stark departure from the arbitrary and oppressive rule often associated with ancient empires.
2. **Avoidance of Cruelty:** Just governance, as envisioned by Ashoka, required the avoidance of cruelty and inhumane practices. He denounced practices such as torture and unnecessary violence, reinforcing the idea that the state's power should not be used to oppress or harm its citizens.
3. **Protection of Vulnerable Populations:** Ashoka's Dhamma extended protection to vulnerable segments of society, including widows, orphans, and the elderly. He recognized the importance of safeguarding those who were marginalized or disadvantaged and implemented policies to provide for their welfare.
4. **Accessibility to Rulers:** Ethical governance also meant that rulers should be accessible to their subjects. Ashoka encouraged open communication between rulers and citizens, allowing people to voice their concerns and grievances without fear of reprisal. This accessibility fostered a sense of trust and transparency in governance.
5. **Promotion of Moral Conduct:** Ashoka believed that ethical governance should go beyond mere adherence to laws and regulations. He encouraged moral conduct and virtuous behavior among his subjects. This emphasis on personal ethics aimed to create a society where individuals upheld high moral standards in their interactions with others.
6. **Monitoring Officials:** To ensure that just and ethical governance was practiced throughout the empire, Ashoka implemented a system to monitor the conduct of his officials. He held his administrators accountable for their actions, discouraging corruption and abuse of power.
7. **Respect for Individual Freedom:** Ashoka's Dhamma recognized the importance of individual freedom and autonomy. He upheld the right of his subjects to choose and practice their religion freely, emphasizing that coercion or religious discrimination had no place in his vision of a just society.
8. **Conflict Resolution:** Ethical governance also encompassed peaceful conflict resolution. Ashoka advocated for the peaceful settlement of disputes and discouraged violent means of conflict resolution. This approach aimed to minimize suffering and promote harmony within society.
9. **Welfare of Animals:** Ashoka's vision of ethical governance extended to the welfare of animals. He encouraged the humane treatment of animals and discouraged practices that caused harm to them. His concern for the well-being of animals reflected his broader commitment to compassion.

In conclusion, just and ethical governance, as envisioned by Ashoka, represented a significant departure from the autocratic and oppressive rule commonly associated with ancient empires. His Dhamma emphasized principles of fairness, compassion, moral conduct, and the protection of individual rights. Ashoka's commitment to ethical leadership and his recognition of the importance of governance that prioritized the well-being of citizens and the moral growth of society continue to serve as a timeless example of leadership that upholds the principles of justice and ethics. His legacy underscores the enduring relevance of these principles in contemporary governance and the quest for a more equitable and humane world.

### Personal Transformation

Ashoka's personal transformation is a remarkable journey of self-discovery and growth that profoundly shaped his reign as the Mauryan emperor and the development of his Dhamma, the moral and ethical code that governed his rule. This transformation unfolded in several key stages, each marked by significant shifts in his beliefs, values, and actions.

The catalyst for Ashoka's personal transformation was undoubtedly the Kalinga War, which took place in 261 BCE. Prior to this conflict, Ashoka was known for his ruthless expansion of the



Mauryan Empire through military conquests. However, the war had a profound and deeply unsettling impact on him. The sheer scale of suffering, death, and destruction that he witnessed on the battlefield left an indelible mark on his conscience.

This critical juncture marked the beginning of Ashoka's inward journey. He experienced a profound sense of remorse and guilt for the immense suffering caused by his military campaigns. This introspection led him to question the morality of his actions and the purpose of his rule. It was during this period of soul-searching that Ashoka encountered Buddhism, a faith that emphasized non-violence (Ahimsa), compassion, and ethical conduct.

Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism was a pivotal moment in his personal transformation. Buddhism provided him with a moral framework and a path toward inner peace and enlightenment. The teachings of Buddhism resonated deeply with Ashoka, particularly the principle of Ahimsa, which emphasized refraining from harming any living being. This newfound commitment to non-violence became a cornerstone of his personal transformation and his governance.

Empathy and compassion were integral to Ashoka's personal transformation. As he grappled with the consequences of his past actions, he began to develop a profound sense of empathy for the suffering of others. His own remorse and empathy became powerful drivers of change, influencing his approach to leadership and governance.

One of the most notable outcomes of Ashoka's personal transformation was his rejection of further military conquests. He recognized the futility and destructiveness of warfare and chose to build his empire on principles of peace and ethical governance. This marked a significant departure from his earlier ambitions of expansion through violence.

The formulation of Ashoka's Dhamma, a moral and ethical code, was the culmination of his personal transformation. This code aimed to promote non-violence, compassion, social welfare, and religious tolerance within his empire. It reflected his newfound beliefs and served as a blueprint for just and humane governance.

Ashoka's personal transformation was not limited to his own beliefs and actions; it extended to his advocacy for moral conduct among his subjects. He actively encouraged individuals to cultivate virtues, practice self-control, and lead virtuous lives. This emphasis on personal growth and ethical behavior was a central theme of his Dhamma.

Another crucial aspect of Ashoka's transformation was his support for religious tolerance. While he embraced Buddhism as his own faith, he respected and supported various religious traditions within his empire. This inclusive approach created an environment where people of different faiths could coexist peacefully, transcending religious divides.

Ashoka's personal transformation was also evident in his commitment to social welfare initiatives. He initiated policies to provide healthcare, veterinary care, and other social services for his subjects. These initiatives reflected his newfound concern for the well-being of his citizens, both human and animal.

Furthermore, Ashoka's transformation extended to his environmental consciousness. He emphasized the importance of preserving forests, protecting wildlife, and planting medicinal herbs. This reflected his recognition of the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of ecological balance.

In summary, Ashoka's personal transformation is a powerful narrative of an individual who evolved from a ruthless conqueror to a compassionate and ethical leader. His journey was marked by a conversion to Buddhism, the embrace of non-violence and compassion, and the formulation of his Dhamma. This transformation had far-reaching consequences, influencing his policies, governance, and vision for a more just and harmonious society. Ashoka's story serves as a timeless testament to the capacity for personal growth and change, as well as the potential for leadership rooted in empathy, ethics, and a commitment to the well-being of all.

## Legacy and Influence

Ashoka's legacy and influence on the Indian subcontinent and beyond are profound and multifaceted, encompassing a wide range of areas including governance, ethics, religion, and social values. His impact has left an indelible mark on history and has continued to influence subsequent generations in various significant ways.

One of the most enduring aspects of Ashoka's legacy is his promotion of moral and ethical governance. His reign was characterized by a commitment to just and humane leadership. His Dhamma, a moral and ethical code, emphasized principles such as non-violence (Ahimsa), compassion, and social welfare. This model of governance has served as an enduring example for leaders throughout history, inspiring them to prioritize the well-being and moral growth of their subjects.

Ashoka's influence on the spread of Buddhism is another cornerstone of his legacy. His personal conversion to Buddhism and his subsequent patronage of the faith played a pivotal role in its dissemination. Under his rule, Buddhist monasteries, stupas, and missionary efforts flourished. As a result, Buddhism spread not only across the Indian subcontinent but also to various parts of Asia, including Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. Ashoka's legacy as a Buddhist ruler remains integral to the history of Buddhism and its global reach.

The principle of religious tolerance championed by Ashoka continues to be a significant part of his legacy. His advocacy for religious freedom and his support for diverse religious traditions set a precedent for religious pluralism in India. In contemporary discussions about religious tolerance and coexistence, Ashoka's example remains relevant and serves as a source of inspiration for promoting harmonious relations among followers of different faiths.

Ashoka's commitment to environmental conservation is another aspect of his legacy with contemporary relevance. He recognized the importance of preserving forests, protecting wildlife, and maintaining ecological balance. His emphasis on the interconnectedness of all living beings and the need for sustainable practices has resonated with modern environmental ethics and conservation efforts in India and beyond.

In the realm of governance, Ashoka's influence on Indian governance traditions is significant. His model of just and ethical governance, characterized by fairness, accountability, and accessibility to rulers, has had a lasting impact. His principles continue to inform discussions about governance and public administration in India and serve as a source of inspiration for leaders aspiring to create a just and equitable society.

Ashoka's inscriptions, known as Ashokan edicts, provide invaluable historical records of his time. These inscriptions offer insights into his policies, beliefs, and the socio-political context of ancient India. They have been crucial for historians and scholars studying the Mauryan Empire and provide a window into the rich history of the Indian subcontinent.

Beyond historical documentation, Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism and the arts had a significant impact on literature and art during his era. Buddhist literature, art, and architecture flourished under his sponsorship, leaving a rich cultural legacy that continues to be studied, appreciated, and celebrated.

Ashoka's life story and personal transformation serve as an enduring source of inspiration for individuals and leaders. His journey from a warrior king driven by conquest to a compassionate ruler committed to non-violence and social welfare is a timeless narrative of personal growth and redemption. It resonates with those seeking personal transformation, ethical leadership, and a dedication to creating a more just and compassionate society.

In conclusion, Ashoka's legacy and influence extend far beyond his time, touching upon various aspects of governance, ethics, religion, and culture. His principles of compassion, non-violence, and social welfare continue to leave an indelible mark on the Indian subcontinent and serve as a source of inspiration for people worldwide. Ashoka's legacy reminds us of the enduring importance of ethical leadership and the potential for individuals and societies to evolve towards greater justice, compassion, and moral growth.



## CONCLUSION

Ashoka's Dhamma, a testament to the transformative power of a single individual's enlightenment, left an indelible mark on the course of ancient Indian history. His commitment to non-violence, compassion, social welfare, religious tolerance, and ethical governance laid the groundwork for a more humane and inclusive society. Today, Ashoka the Great is celebrated not only as an illustrious emperor but also as a visionary who envisioned a world where empathy and kindness were the guiding principles of governance and daily life. His Dhamma remains a timeless source of inspiration for those seeking to build a just and harmonious society.

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