

Ashoka

Ashoka the Great was the son of Bindusara, the second Mauryan Emperor, and the grandson of the founder of the Mauryan Empire, Chandragupta. To ascend the throne after his father's death, Ashoka killed his brothers and became king of the Mauryan empire. He reigned the empire from c. 268 to 232 BCE from Patliputra, the capital city of the empire.

During his eighth year as king, he conquered Kalinga after a brutal war that killed thousands and caused mass destruction. After this incident, Ashoka became drawn to Buddhism and propagated Ashoka dhamma, or righteous conduct, widely across his empire.

King	Ashoka
Empire	Mauryan Empire
Rule	c. 268 to 232 BCE
Father	Bindusara
Religion	Buddhism
Known for	Spreading Buddhism, Brahmi Edicts

Ashoka History: Early Life

Much of the information available today about Ashoka is through Ashoka's edicts, which are long inscriptions containing detailed accounts of Ashoka's life, Buddhist legends, and life in ancient India. However, these edicts do not describe the early life of this great Mauryan king. In his early life, Ashoka contributed to suppressing the revolt at Takshshila and governed the city of Ujjain.

According to the Sri Lankan texts, *the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa*, Ashoka reigned for 37 years and ascended the throne 218 years after the death of Gautama Buddha. Here is some more information about Ashoka's history:

- Ashoka was born around 304 BC to the second Mauryan king, Bindusara, and queen Dharma.
- His grandfather was Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan Empire.
- Ashoka was made the Governor of Avanti by king Bindusara after being impressed with his weaponry and intelligence.
- Ashoka killed 99 of his brothers to follow up his father as the king of the Mauryan Empire.
- Some ancient texts suggest that before converting to Buddhism, Ashoka was an extremely violent king with an elaborate torture chamber disguised as a beautiful palace.
- After converting to Buddhism, Ashoka became known as Dharmashoka due to the pious acts he used to carry.

Ashoka History: Conversion to Buddhism

Ashoka converted to Buddhism a while after the Kalinga war. His father, Bindusara, was a Brahmin devotee, while his mother, Dharma, was an Ajivika devotee. Ancient texts state that Ashoka was neither impressed by Brahmins nor Ajivikas. He converted to Buddhism after the Kalinga war. Some other texts also suggest that Ashoka became drawn to Buddhism when Samudra, a Buddhist monk, displayed his magical powers after being imprisoned and tortured in “Ashoka’s Hell.”

Here is some more information about Ashoka. After his conversion to Buddhism, Ashoka became involved in constructing temples and stupas. Here are some of the stupas and temples that he constructed:

- Dhamek Stupa, Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India
- Nalanda Mahavihara (some portions like Sariputta Stupa), Bihar, India
- Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India
- Barabar Caves, Bihar, India
- Butkara Stupa, Swat, Pakistan
- Mahabodhi Temple, Bihar, India
- Bharhut stupa, Madhya Pradesh, India
- Taxila University (some portions like Dharmarajika Stupa and Kunala Stupa), Taxila, Pakistan
- Deorkothar Stupa, Madhya Pradesh, India
- Bhir Mound (reconstructed), Taxila, Pakistan

Ashoka’s Dhamma

After his conversion to Buddhism, Ashoka became involved in preaching the righteous way of life, or Ashoka Dhamma. After his eighth and ninth years ruling the Mauryan empire, he visited the Bodhi tree to propagate Dhamma. During his early days as a Buddhist convert, he became involved in performing social welfare activities.

The Brahmi Edicts also reveal that by his tenth to eleventh years as king, he became a Buddhist sangha and toured the entire empire in 256 days. Ashoka became active in propagating Ashoka Dhamma, or the righteous way of life.

Concept of Ashoka’s Dhamma

Ashoka Dhamma has no formal definition, but as a concept, it is described as a righteous way of living. After converting to Buddhism, Ashoka started propagating dhamma throughout his empire after issuing his 14 Edicts. Ashoka’s dhamma is based on the 10 principles of Lord Buddha, which are shared below:

1. To be truthful and uphold total integrity.
2. To be gentle and kind.
3. To be liberal while avoiding egoism.
4. To be willing to put one’s own pleasure aside for the subjects’ well-being.
5. To develop patience.
6. To live a humble life to inspire the subjects.
7. To be free of all forms of hatred.
8. To uphold a high moral standard.

9. Respect for the public's viewpoint to create peace and concord.
10. To practise non-violence.

Ashoka Edicts

Ashoka's edicts are long-form inscriptions made on rocks that narrate the story of his life and the propagation of Dhamma. Ashoka Dhamma is wrongly believed to be a sort of new religion. It was neither religion nor philosophy. It can rather be viewed as a set of guidelines dictating the right way of living. The features of dhamma are inscribed on his rock edicts and consist of the following:

- Edict I - Prohibition of animal sacrifice.
- Edict II - Building rest houses and wells and planting trees.
- Edict III - Parents must be obeyed, and teachers must be revered.
- Edict IV - Abolition of death sentences.
- Edict V - Humane treatment of slaves and servants.
- Edict VI - Discouragement of superstitious practices.
- Edict VII - Toleration of all religious sects.
- Edict VIII - Provision of human and animal health care.
- Edict IX - Buddhist monks and Brahmins should be respected.
- Edict X - Prefer dharma conquest instead of conflict or glory.
- Edict XI - Provisions to help the elderly and poor.
- Edict XII - The practice of Ahimsa (non-violence) and truthfulness.

Ashoka History: Kalinga War

The Kalinga War was a significant event in Ashoka's life history. The king fought the Kalinga war in the eighth year of his ascension to the throne. The war was fought between the independent kingdom of Kalinga and the Mauryan empire from c. 262 BCE and ended c. 261 BCE. It is said that in this war, a million men and animals were killed, and another million were captured by the Mauryans.

Kalinga war is said to be the turning point in Ashoka's life because after the war, all the devastation caused by him in the war led him to Buddhism. After deep feelings of repentance, Ashoka converted to Buddhism and became known as Dharmashoka. We have also shared information about Ashoka's Dhamma UPSC below.

Death of Ashoka

Sri Lankan traditions of Ashoka history suggests that Ashoka died around 232 BCE, during his 37th regnal year. During his last days, Ashoka fell severely ill and eventually passed away. As per the *Ashokavadana*, here are some of the events that happened when Ashoka was on his deathbed:

- The king made generous donations to Buddhist sanghas from the state treasury.
- When his ministers denied him access to the state treasury, he donated his personal possessions to the sangha.

- After donating all of his possessions, the only thing he possessed on his deathbed was a myrobalan fruit.
- Ashoka eventually donated the myrobalan fruit also to the Buddhist sangha.
- According to legends, when Ashoka the Great eventually passed away, his body burned for seven days and nights.

