

# TO UPHOLD THE WORLD

What ancient India's Buddhist emperor  
can tell us about our current crisis

By Bruce Rich

**T**he Catholic theologian Hans Küng observed that “a global market economy requires a global ethic.” Yet at the very moment when the need for just such an ethic is more urgent than ever, our national and global systems of governance seem effectively paralyzed in moving toward it.

To reimagine the future, and to describe the elements of a global ethic of care, we can look to what precedents there are for a government that has tried to put such an ethic into practice. Perhaps the most wondrous example takes us to Kandahar, of all places, in southeastern Afghanistan. Following September 11, 2001, Kandahar, capital of the Taliban and Al Qaeda's terrorist network, symbolized the intolerance, chaos, and violence that threaten to erupt anywhere, with repercussions everywhere, in a tightly interconnected world. In 2010, after nine years of U.S. military intervention, the Taliban reigned in Kandahar stronger than ever.

Yet Kandahar's history also has something different to tell us. In 1957, Italian archaeologists uncovered an ancient series of rock inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic (Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Persian Empire). In the inscriptions, a great and ancient Indian king, Ashoka, declares state policies built on fundamental values of tolerance, nonviolence, and respect for life. Ashoka's empire was the greatest empire of its day, stretching from present-day Afghanistan deep into southern India and, in the east, to modern-day Bangladesh. It was a multiethnic, multicultural state and was, for its time and in certain ways, a microcosm of our own globalized world.

To understand the inscriptions at Kandahar and the origin of the values they proclaimed, we must travel to another place in South Asia, a hill in southeastern India that visitors have climbed for over two thousand years. Dhauli, as the hill is called, overlooks a quietly beautiful expanse of bright green rice fields stretching to the horizon. It is hard to imagine a more peaceful place, but in 261 B.C.E., the green fields ran red with the blood of more than a hundred thousand slaughtered by Ashoka's armies.

Today visitors climb the hill to admire the view and examine the stone edicts Ashoka had inscribed near the top several years after the battle. When the British deciphered the inscriptions in the 19th century, they were astounded to find that they commemorate not a victory but the king's conversion to a nonviolent ethic for the protection of all living things. The king declares his “debt to all beings,” announces a halt to almost all killing of animals on his part for rituals and food, and proclaims the establishment of hospitals and medical services for both humans and animals. He calls for tolerance for all religious sects, and he sets forth principles of good government. Over the years, he had similar rock and pillar inscriptions erected throughout his empire.

Dhaulti was the site of Ashoka's victory over the kingdom of Kalinga, the last and bloodiest conquest in a series that unified India. While his name means “without sorrow,” in various edicts Ashoka confesses his “profound sorrow and regret” for the slaughter at Dhaulti, a remorse which led directly to his embrace of the teachings of the Buddha, or the buddhadharma. Though





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inspired by Buddhism, Ashoka's new ethic, which he called *dhamma* (*dhamma* meant "dharma" in the vernacular, Sanskrit-derived language Ashoka spoke), was not strictly Buddhist. It was a secular ethic, which he intended as a code of citizenship and conduct that could be accepted by all the peoples of his empire, the vast majority of whom were not Buddhists.

This secular dharma provided guidance in governance and policy. On 60-foot pillars, some of which can still be seen today in different parts of the subcontinent, Ashoka declares the uniform and equal application of laws. He states that all religious and philosophical sects have an "essential doctrine," the progress of which he will nurture "through gifts and recognition." He calls for the establishment of protected natural preserves and, even more remarkable from a modern perspective, issues an edict that amounts to nothing less than a protected-species act, listing all the animals that are to be spared slaughter.

For all of our ingrained notions of progress, we live in an epoch that in important ways demonstrates a lesser respect for life than we find in the Ashokan ethic. The richer the world economy becomes, the more the collective imagination of those who rule seems to atrophy. Ultimately, all common goals collapse into nothing more than efforts to increase production and trade. Even in a time of crisis, when economic fundamentalism appears to be failing on its own terms, there is a collective failure to imagine alternatives.

Ashoka's great ethical leap rested on paradoxical foundations—the work of an early Indian who wrote that "of the ends of human life, material gain is, verily, the most important." The author of these words was Kautilya, the chief minister of Ashoka's grandfather Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the dynasty under which Ashoka would unite India for the first time. Kautilya was the organizing genius behind the autocratic, centralized state that Ashoka inherited and expanded.

One of history's first and greatest political thinkers, Kautilya wrote the first treatise on political economy, the *Arthashastra*, which means "science of wealth." Kautilya saw economic prosperity as both the underpinning and the most important priority of society and the state. For a person of his time and place, this was a revolutionary view of the world. Traditional Indian culture had long established the view, shared by both Hindus and Buddhists, that the pursuit of spiritual

good was superior to and superseded the pursuit of material gain. In contrast, Kautilya asserted that "material well-being alone is supreme," for the benefits of life's other two main realms—the spiritual and the sensual—"depend on material well-being."

Kautilya was also an advocate of a ruthless realpolitik. He explicitly advocated espionage, political assassination, and betrayal and duplicity in numerous forms in his long list of tactics to advance the interests of the state. Indeed, shortly after the *Arthashastra* was rediscovered and translated into Western languages in the early 1900s, the sociologist Max Weber marveled that "in contrast with this document, Machiavelli's *Prince* is harmless." But Kautilya's realism was technocratic rather than

despotic. His overriding concern was to assure the material and political well-being of society and the state, and to that end he also expounded at length on such matters as the minutiae of taxation, irrigation, foreign policy, corruption and its prevention, and sustainable management of natural resources. One imagines he would find himself quite at home today in any high-level international meeting of finance ministers.


According to the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, the whole historical period of which Ashoka's reign was the apogee was brought into being by Kautilya. Much of Ashoka's governance—in fact, the organization of the society he reigned over—was based on the worldview and even the specific recommendations of the *Arthashastra*. Without abandoning Kautilya's administrative system, Ashoka attempted to transcend the Kautilyan view of the world through a new social ethic and politics of nonviolence.

Nobel Laureate in economics Amartya Sen has observed that from its origins, economic thought can be divided into two schools: a technocratic "engineering" approach on the one hand, and on the other, one that takes an ethical, moral, and political stance. Kautilya embodies the former school, which asserts that since an economic foundation underlies all other social goals and values, the promotion of economic gain has to be the primary goal of public policy. The latter, ethical approach is represented by such figures as Ashoka, Aristotle, and, to the surprise of many, Adam Smith.

Smith's writings have been widely distorted and misappropriated, and many cite him as a principle advocate of the free market as the basis of society. Today,



Above: Text from an Ashokan pillar bearing the edicts of Ashoka. Left: Ashokan pillar at Vaishali in Bihar, India



Smith's most famous work is *The Wealth of Nations*, but his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is no less crucial to his thought. In the latter work, he goes to great lengths to emphasize the moral and collective values that are essential for social cohesion, and he attacks those who advocate the primacy of economic utility. Smith emphasizes that three values uphold the social order: justice, prudence, and beneficence. Of these, justice is by far the most important, for "if it is removed, the great, immense fabric of human society...must in a moment crumble to atoms."

One could argue that *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a better basis for understanding the challenges of economic globalization than the technical works of numerous contemporary economists. Indeed, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao told the *Financial Times* in 2009 that it is the one book he always carries with him when he travels, noting, "Adam Smith wrote that, in a society, if all the wealth is concentrated and owned by only a small number of people, [the society] will not be stable."

One might view Ashoka's dhamma as a practical code for promoting Adam Smith's three foundational social values. Ashoka's edicts emphasize such key ideals of justice as a fair, just, and efficient legal system; protections for the poor, the aged, and prisoners; and, as noted, religious tolerance. The edicts also call for restraint, frugality, and abstention from violent action—in other words, prudence. By promoting charity, establishing public hospitals and public works, and instituting programs of benefit to humans and nonhumans, Ashoka made beneficence toward all life a matter of policy.

Many historians believe that Ashoka may also have seen his dhamma as a practical solution to the challenge of holding together an empire comprising a multitude of principalities and cultures. The Kautilyan, technocratic analysis of the management of wealth and power was useful in building the economy and the state but alone was insufficient to inspire unity or long-term loyalty. Dhamma provided a common civic ideology, based on a secular reinterpretation of the shared transcendent values of the time.

Those who study Ashoka's edicts come away with the conclusion that they embodied something new and unprecedented. But for us today, they provide a most powerful precedent. Ashoka spoke not just to his own subjects; he speaks to us and to our world.

If one were to venture a defining characteristic of Ashoka's dhamma, it could be summarized in Albert Schweitzer's term "reverence for life." For Schweitzer, "the great fault of all ethics hitherto has been that they believed themselves to have to deal

only with the relations of man to man. In reality, however, the question is what is his attitude to the world and all life that comes within his reach. A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as well as that of his fellow man." For Ashoka, the attitude of which Schweitzer speaks was rooted in Buddhism's ethic of compassion for all sentient beings.

Although some of Ashoka's innovations lasted for many centuries (for example, his establishment of state-supported hospitals for humans and animals), his grand vision of a vast and inclusive polity based on reverence for life and nonviolence did not last beyond his reign. Ashoka attempted to institute his project through a cumbersome, top-down structure of governance. While this was the only possible way at the time to bring rule to the whole of the subcontinent, it also probably made eventual failure inevitable.

Today, there are many who, like Hans Küng, see the increasingly urgent need for a global ethic that can hold together a planetary society. But how are such common core values to be recognized and practiced? How can they be translated into political measures at the national and international level? Can we, in other words, envisage a dhamma for the 21st century, one that, unlike Ashoka's, would develop from a bottom-up process of global self-organization rather than be imposed from the top down?

Are there any more pressing questions we face than these?

The urgency of the matter is well expressed by former Czech president Václav Havel, who writes, "If democracy is not only to survive but to expand successfully...it must rediscover and renew...its respect for that nonmaterial order, which is not only above us but also in us and among us, and which is the only possible and reliable source of man's respect for himself, for others, for the order of nature, for the order of humanity and thus for secular authority as well." The "reduction of life to the pursuit of immediate material gain without regard for its general consequences," in Havel's words, has exacerbated—and is an underlying cause of—what he sees as the fundamental problem of our time: "lack of accountability to and responsibility for the world."

Although we have yet to find a satisfactory articulation of a global ethic, we can find signs of it struggling to emerge. To give but one example, one of the most remarkable developments of the past 25 years has been the bottom-up proliferation around the world of literally millions of nongovernmental, civil-society groups. These groups, according to U.C. Berkeley sociologist Manuel Castells, have been spawned in

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reaction to the one-sided excesses of economic globalization. Some seek new, common grounds of meaning and spirituality, often in projects of social and environmental justice; others are based on the defense of identity as defined by history and locality. The need for a grounding ethic also poses dangers, since some of these movements go beyond the defense of identity to the denial of the other through religious fundamentalism or ethnic hostility. This suggests that an ethic that does not embrace the universal will plunge our world into still more chaos.

Havel writes that a common ground for transcendent values in our age begins with finding “a new and genuinely universal articulation of that global human experience...one that connects us with the mythologies and religions of all cultures and opens for us a way to understand their values.” The celebrated 19th-century British historian Arnold Toynbee recognized a similar need—and opportunity. He pointed out that the non-Western cultures of the world have realized that Western culture and history have become a part of the culture and history of every other society on earth. We now have to realize that the West cannot escape the past of non-Western cultures becoming a part of its own cultural future. The future, he wrote, will neither be Western nor non-Western; rather, it will inherit elements of all cultures. This calls to mind one more reason why Ashoka’s grand experiment is so timely today. His realm spanned East and West at the time of what was an incipient economic linking together—indeed a kind of globalization—of the civilizations

of most of the ancient world.

Unlike Ashoka’s time, or indeed all times past, today’s global system offers unprecedented practical means—through the Internet, new technologies, and the proliferation of global networks of social movements—for a grassroots, self-organizing politics grounded in reverence for life, nonviolence, tolerance, inclusion, benevolence, self-control, and justice. Such a politics would be a worldwide political project that restates for the 21st century the values of the “essential doctrine” that is the core of Ashoka’s dhamma.

The vision thus stated sounds wildly utopian, but we have Ashoka to remind us that long ago a great leader of the world’s most powerful empire dared to put into practice just such a vision. To achieve such a transformation, we will need Kautilyan realism as well as Ashokan idealism. But the project has been slumbering in human history for a long time. In the words of the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, written when the 20th century was still young, “Ashoka’s thought had been standing on the wayside for all these ages longing to find a refuge in the mind of every man.” This moment may now be arriving. ▼

Bruce Rich has worked as senior counsel with major national environmental organizations to promote environmental and social standards for international development. His professional focus on finance and ethics, as well as numerous visits to South Asia, inspired the book from which this article is in part adapted: *To Uphold the World: A Call for a New Global Ethic from Ancient India*, with a foreword by Amartya Sen and an afterword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama (Beacon Press, 2010).