

# To Uphold the World: What Two Statesmen from Ancient India Can Tell Us about Our Current Crisis

by Bruce Rich

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The global economy is in desperate need of a global ethic. The world economic system is driving a significant number of all living creatures to extinction. It is a world order — or disorder — that is increasingly undermining the biological foundations of long-term human civilization. In the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon at the 2011 Davos World Economic Forum, the global economy has become a “global suicide pact.”

The global order of the past twenty years has prioritized unleashing market forces over other social values and created a profoundly unstable, interconnected world. It is a world not only of increased inequality and environmental deterioration but, as the recent global financial crisis shows, one that puts at risk the viability of whole societies and nations, not to mention democracy itself.

A decade ago George Soros warned that market fundamentalism was a greater threat to human society than any totalitarian ideology, noting that “the supreme challenge of our time is to establish a set of values that applies to a largely transactional, global society.” In the words of Catholic theologian Hans Küng, “a global market economy requires a global ethic.”

Each new environmental crisis forces us to recognize that an ethic of respect for all life is also an ethic for long-term human survival and well-being.

Yet in the wake of each new crisis, rhetoric notwithstanding, national and international political systems seem to fall back into a default position of business as usual.

In the United States we desperately need a program of social and environmental legislation of New Deal proportions, a program that would incorporate a new ethic of care rooted in the recognition of global mutual interdependence. Increasingly we hear the call for such an ethic by groups such as the Network of Spiritual Progressives.

How can we imagine alternatives? Are there historical precedents for a global ethic of care, and has any government ever tried to put it into practice?

## Ancient Inscriptions Tell of an Astonishing King

An answer to these questions might take us first to, of all places, Kandahar, southeastern Afghanistan.



*The systems created in Ancient India by Kautilya (above), a ruthless technocratic economist, were mitigated by Ashoka, a compassionate Buddhist who ruled from 269 to 232 BCE. Creative Commons.*

Following September 11, 2001, Kandahar, the capital of the Taliban and the al-Qaida terrorist network, symbolized the intolerance, chaos, and terrorism that threaten to erupt anywhere with repercussions everywhere in an increasingly interconnected world. In 2010, after nine years of U.S. military intervention, the Taliban reigned in Kandahar more strongly than ever. The United States continues to seek military solutions to growing political challenges and chaos around the world, not just in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also now in Yemen, and in expanded access to bases in Colombia as a platform for possible interventions in much of Latin America.



*Ashoka, known as Samraat Chakravartin (Emperor of Emperors) ruled most of the Indian subcontinent from 269 to 232 bce and is remembered for his benevolence. Above, a Chakravartin ruler, first century BCE, from Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, India (now at Musée Guimet, Paris, France). Creative Commons.*

Yet Kandahar's history has something profound to tell us. In 1957, Italian archaeologists made an extraordinary discovery there. They uncovered an ancient series of rock inscriptions in the Greek and Aramaic languages (Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Persian Empire, and is also thought to have been the native tongue of Jesus). In the inscriptions, an ancient Indian king calls for nonviolence through the practice of moderation, the honoring of parents and elders, abstention from killing animals, and more. Kandahar and most of present-day Afghanistan were part of this great king's empire. It was a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural state, built on fundamental values of tolerance, nonviolence, and respect for life, according to the inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic. There was more tolerance and respect for life in Afghanistan millennia ago, at least for a time, than today.

To understand the inscriptions in Kandahar, and the origin of the values they proclaimed, we must travel to another place in South Asia, a hill in

southeastern India called Dhauli that visitors have climbed for over two thousand years. About six miles south of the capital of Orissa state, Bhubaneswar, it 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 bce the green fields ran red with the blood of more than a hundred thousand, slaughtered by the armies of the same great Indian king who ruled over Kandahar.

Today visitors climb the hill to admire the view and examine the stone edicts the great king had inscribed near the top several years after the battle. When the British deciphered the inscriptions in the nineteenth century, they were astounded to find that they commemorate not a victory but the king's conversion to a state policy of nonviolence and protection of all living things. The king declares his "debt to all beings," announces a halt to almost all killing of animals on his behalf for rituals and food, and proclaims the



establishment of hospitals for both men and animals. He declares religious tolerance for all sects and sets forth principles of good government. Over the years, he commanded similar rock and pillar inscriptions to be made in sites from Afghanistan (including Kandahar) to the southernmost extremes of India. The king's name was Ashoka, which means "without sorrow." Dhauri was the site of Ashoka's victory over the kingdom of Kalinga, the last and bloodiest conquest he needed to unify India.

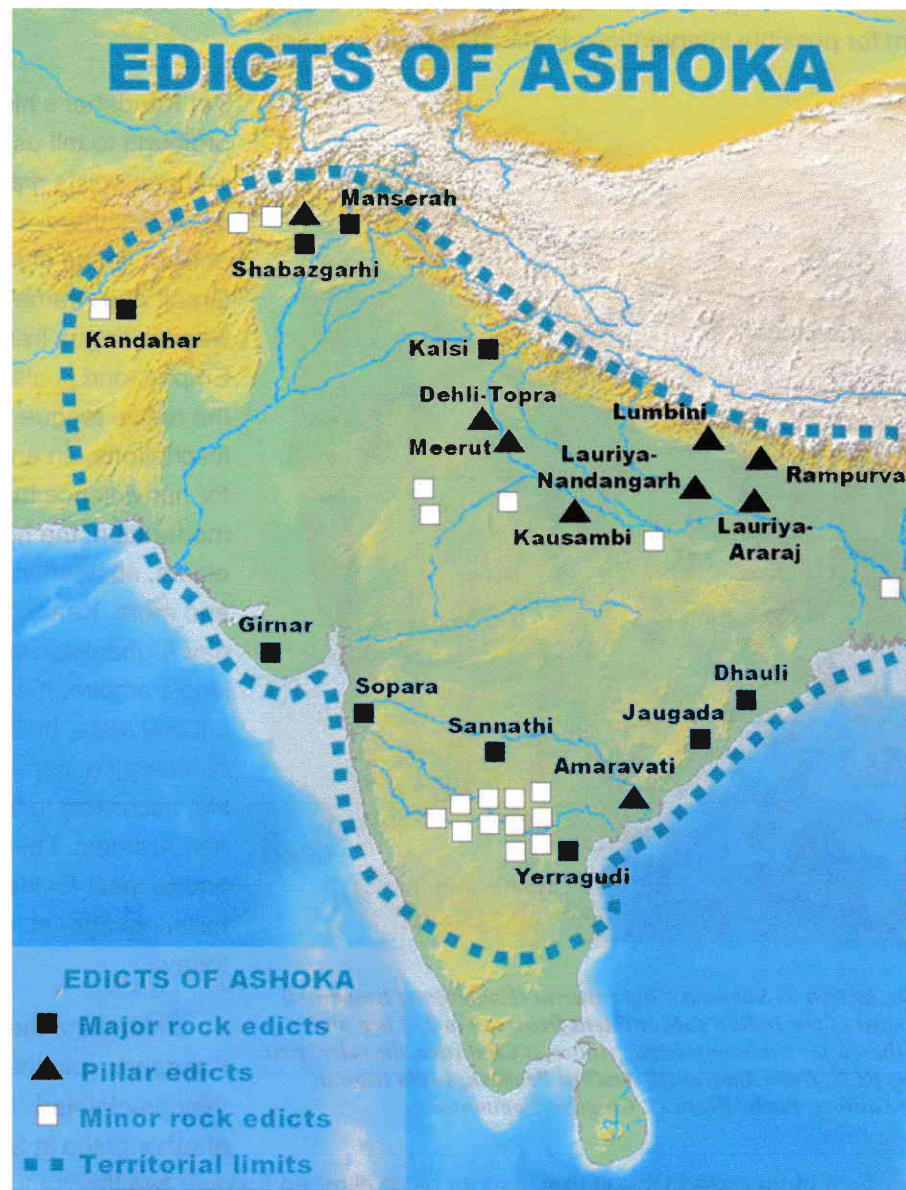
In the other rock edicts scattered over various regions of India, Ashoka declares "profound sorrow and regret" for the slaughter at Dhauri; it is this remorse that fueled his conversion to a new ethic, which he calls Dhamma, "the law of piety." On sixty-foot pillars, which can still be seen today in different parts of the subcontinent, he declares the uniform and equal application of laws, and the establishment of protected natural areas. Even more remarkable from a modern perspective is a pillar edict that amounts to nothing less than a protected species act, listing all the animals the king has declared as exempt from slaughter.

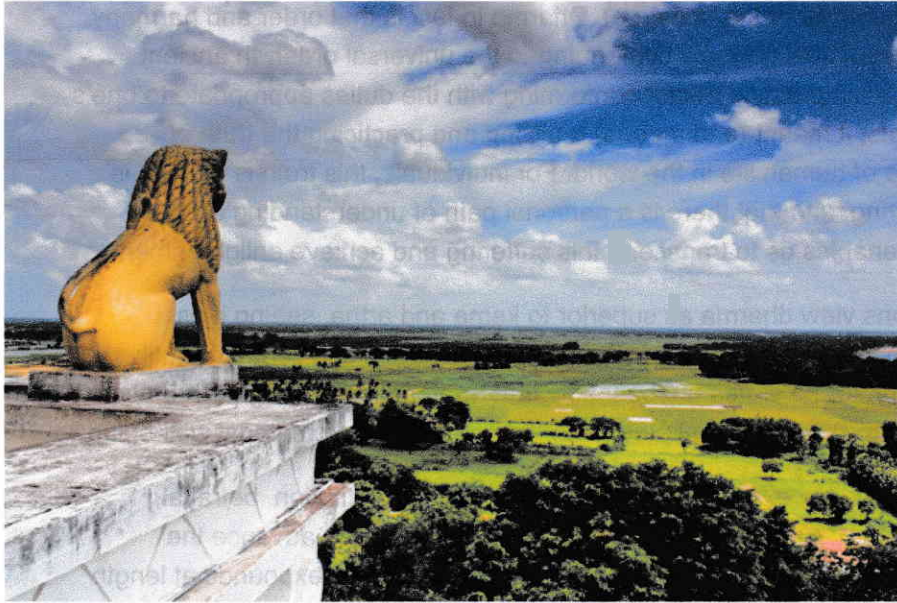
Ashoka goes beyond mere tolerance to state that all religious and philosophical sects have an "essential doctrine," the progress of which he will nurture

"through gifts and recognition." Here we have a remarkable third century bce declaration of ecumenism: beneath the outward form, all religions and beliefs have an essential core that aims for the good and that is worthy of general support.

Ashoka thus poses the more disturbing question of whether there has been any lasting ethical progress in the behavior of states and societies over the past millennia. For our global civilization, fragmented as it is between self-absorbed consumerism and radicalized fundamentalisms, it is an embarrassing question.

We seem to live in an epoch that in important ways gives less primacy to respect for life than the worldview of Ashoka. Contrary to perhaps what one would expect or hope, the richer our world becomes





*In 261 bce, Ashoka's armies slaughtered 100,000 or more in these fields near Bhubaneswar, India. Instead of a victory his monuments commemorate his conversion to a state policy of nonviolence and protection of all living things. Creative Commons.*

While it seems that there must be a limit to every form of wealth, in practice we find that the opposite occurs: all those engaged in acquiring goods go on increasing their coin without limit.... The reason why some people get this notion into their heads may be that they are eager for life but not for the good life; so desire for life being unlimited, they desire also an unlimited amount of what [they think] enables it to go on ... these people turn all skills into skills of acquiring goods, as though that were the end and everything had to serve that end.

as an economic system, the more the collective imagination of those who rule seems to atrophy so that all common goals collapse into 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.

It was perhaps Aristotle who first noted this pathology; in his *Politics* he wrote:

## The First Economist

Ashoka's great ethical leap rested on the most paradoxical of foundations, the work of a man 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, after the final bloody conquest of Kalinga, unite India for the first time. Kautilya was a contemporary of Aristotle, but he came close to taking economic means as ultimate ends, precisely the phenomenon Aristotle witnessed personally and warned about, half a world away. In Indian myth, in fact, Kautilya is represented as Chanakya, the prototype of a wily chief minister and political adviser. Kautilya was probably the organizing genius behind the autocratic, centralized state that Ashoka inherited and expanded.

As one of history's first and greatest political thinkers, Kautilya wrote the first treatise on political economy, the *Arthashastra*. *Artha* in Sanskrit means wealth or material well-being while *sastra* can be translated as science, so the *Arthashastra* describes the science of wealth or, quite literally, economics. Kautilya interprets *artha* as the sustenance and wealth that men produce from the earth, and, to quote him directly, "that science which treats of acquiring and maintaining the earth is the *Arthashastra*." Kautilya declares that economic prosperity is both the underpinning and the most important priority of society and the state.

To understand Kautilya's remarkable originality, it is useful to recall that in traditional Hindu culture dating back to the second millennium bce, life was seen as possessing three goals: *kama* (the pursuit of sensual pleasure), *artha* (the pursuit of wealth), and *dharma* (spiritual good through the following of the

right law and duty in harmony with the order of the universe). Dharma in fact is that order and harmony, so following dharma means realizing spiritual good by conforming to the universal order. In ancient Hindu society (as well as modern), this in practice meant conforming with the duties appropriate to one's caste and station in life. For Buddhists, it meant (and means) realizing and practicing the truth of Buddha's teachings about the nature of human life in the world. For individuals, this truth is that life is transient and characterized by suffering, and that there is a personal path of understanding and compassion for all living things that enables us to transcend this suffering and achieve enlightenment.

Both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions view dharma as superior to kama and artha, seeing it as something that overarches them and includes them in a higher spiritual order. In this context Kautilya appears as a materialist revolutionary, for he states unabashedly that "material well-being (artha) alone is supreme ... for spiritual good (dharma) and sensual pleasures (kama) depend on material well-being."

Kautilya also urges a ruthless realpolitik. He explicitly advocates espionage, prostitution, betrayal, duplicity, burglary, political assassination, ruthless opportunism, and other tactics to advance the interests of the state. But Kautilya's realism is technocratic rather than despotic; he expounds at length on the minutiae of taxation, irrigation, foreign policy, corruption and its prevention, and sustainable management of natural resources, all as means to assure the material and political well-being of society and the state.

He is a very modern man; his modern political avatar would probably be Henry Kissinger. If reborn as an economist today, Kautilya's sensibility would make him at home in any high-level international meeting of finance ministers.

After Kautilya's treatise was rediscovered and translated into Western languages in the early 1900s, social theorist Max Weber marveled that "in contrast with this document, Machiavelli's *Prince* is harmless." According to Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, "Kautilya brought the whole historical period into being," of which Ashoka's reign was the apogee. Much of Ashoka's governance — in fact the organization of the society he reigned over — was based on the worldview and recommendations of the Arthashastra. We know this because there are correlations between some of Ashoka's recommendations in his edicts and the measures set forth in the Arthashastra. In addition, the reports of Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the court of Ashoka's grandfather Chandragupta, described a rich, well-ordered empire reflecting in remarkable detail many of the prescriptions in Kautilya's famous treatise. 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 and reverence for life.

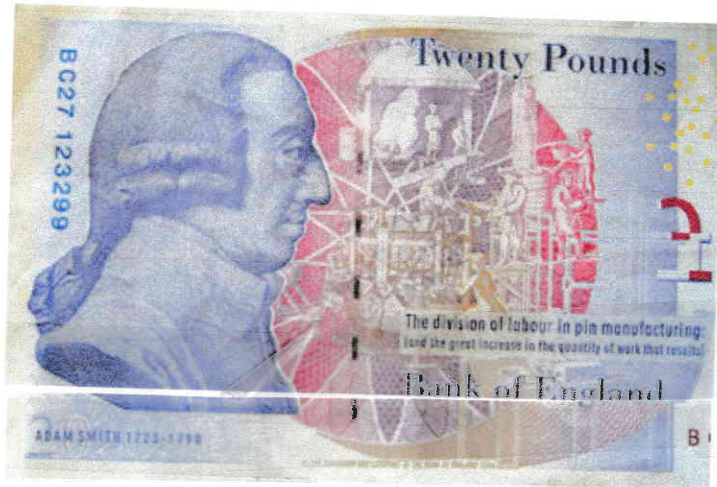
### **Ethical Economics: Amartya Sen and Adam Smith**

The award of the Nobel Prize for Economics to Amartya Sen in 1998 marked an official recognition of the need to restore a framework of values and ethics within which all economic and political action takes place. Sen has been a voice for this perspective, and in his own writings he refers to Ashoka and Kautilya as paradigmatic figures. In a series of lectures on ethics and economics given at the University of California in 1986, Sen observed that economic thought can be divided into two schools: one that takes the "engineering," logistical approach, and the other that takes an ethical, moral, and political stance. Kautilya embodies the engineering, technocratic approach, which asserts that promoting economic gain has to be the primary goal of policy, since an economic foundation underlies all other social goals and values. The problem then is of means — how to promote effectively more of the same. (Sound familiar? Recall the Clintonite slogan "It's the economy, stupid.") The ethical approach can be



found in Ashoka, Aristotle, and (surprisingly to some) Adam Smith.

Smith's writings have been distorted and misappropriated to stand for the primacy of the free market as the basis of society. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (less cited than *The Wealth of Nations* but equally critical for the underpinning of his thought), Smith goes to great lengths to emphasize the moral and collective values that are essential for social cohesion, and he attacks in some detail those who advocate the primacy of economic utility. Smith emphasizes that three values uphold the social order: justice, prudence, and beneficence. Justice is by far the most important; a society can exist without beneficence



*Adam Smith, long considered the original apostle of free markets, was in fact a highly ethical economist: more Ashoka than Kautilya.*  
Creative Commons/Toban Black.

(magnanimity, compassion, and public spiritedness) though it will be "less happy and agreeable" if based on short-term mercenary concerns where no man feels he owes society any obligation. But "justice," he emphasizes, "is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice ... 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. This appears to be true for Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who told the *Financial Times* in 2009 that there is one book he always carries with him when he travels, a copy of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Among the lessons of the book, Wen Jiabao observed, is that "Adam Smith wrote that in a society if all the wealth is concentrated and owned by only a small number of people, it will not be stable."

The year 2009 also marked the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*; in an introduction to a new edition of the book, Sen emphasized the renewed relevance of Smith's earlier work in the debates over the future of capitalism spawned by the global economic crisis. "It would be ... hard to carve out from [Smith's] works any theory of the sufficiency of the market economy, of the need to accept the dominance of capital," Sen wrote. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Sen observes, Smith "extensively investigated the powerful role of non-profit values" and argued that "humanity, justice, generosity, and public spirit are the qualities most useful to others."

## Ashoka's Ethical Revolution

Everyone who studies Ashoka's edicts comes away with the conclusion that they embody something new and unprecedented in history. Ashoka speaks not just to his own subjects but also to future generations and all humankind.

Ashoka's Dhamma can be seen as a practical code for promoting Adam Smith's three foundational social values. Ashoka's edicts emphasize key elements of justice: uniform, due process of law — perhaps even equal application of the same penalties to all people regardless of caste or class — and religious tolerance. He declares his commitment to quickly hear complaints and efficiently dispatch

business, as well as his compassion for the poor, the aged, and for prisoners. The edicts also record regular grants of clemency, thereby reinforcing an ideal of justice. And they call for restraint, abstention from violent action, and frugality; in other words, they call for prudence, which for Smith combines understanding with self-command. Ashoka's emphasis on charity and donations, as well as his promulgation of public hospitals and public works of benefit to humans and nonhumans, is a policy of beneficence toward all life.

Historians believe that Ashoka may have seen his Dhamma as a practical solution to the challenge of holding together a multinational empire. The Kautilyan analysis of the state is in most regards a technocratic one, clearly insufficient as an ideology to unite a vast multicultural polity. Rational analysis of the acquisition and management of wealth and power is useful in building the economy and the state but alone cannot 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.

Though Ashoka developed his policies roughly 2,300 years ago, some elements of them seem more progressive than some aspects of political discourse in the United States during the past thirty years.

Certainly Ashoka had no reservations about establishing a state-supported system of medical treatment centers, and the idea of government-sponsored veterinary hospitals as a social obligation for other sentient creatures is something not even the most left-wing Democrat would suggest. Ashoka, while not abolishing the death penalty, seems to have had more reservations about its use than some U.S. state governors. He expresses compassion for prisoners — neither a widespread public sentiment nor a priority for most politicians over the past decades in the United States. He declares that he has spread his public works beyond his borders to neighboring lands, endowing abroad hospitals for humans and animals, and propagating useful and beneficial plants. We could do worse than focusing our foreign aid priorities more on public health and ecology.

He bans feeding animals the remains of other animals, a measure that would have prevented the spread of mad cow disease in the United Kingdom. The idea that a head of state in the Western world should also urge at least partial vegetarianism on the grounds of empathy for other living creatures is again one we can hardly imagine. Ashoka's emphasis on the role of the state to make expenditures and donations through public works is in marked contrast to the emphasis on privatization that has dominated much economic and political thinking over the past decades. And his edicts also include specific injunctions on improving the efficiency and transparency of public administration.



*The Indian Nobel economist Amartya Sen is probably the best known exponent of values-based economics today. In his introduction to Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he wrote approvingly that Smith argued that "humanity, justice, generosity, and public spirit are the qualities most useful to others." Creative Commons/ForumPA.*

## Beyond Rational Self-Interest: Reverence for Life Anchors Society

A reflection on Ashoka's great experiment raises the critical question of whether social ethics and governance can over the long term be rooted simply in negotiated or agreed-upon rational rules — the project of the Enlightenment — or whether the cultural glue that holds society together ultimately derives an important part of its perceived authority from a shared belief in transcendent values. For Ashoka, Dhamma is not religious in a conventional Western sense of belief in a monotheistic god. But it is a belief in underlying transcendent principles governing existence beyond the shorter-term calculations of material advantage and power in Kautilyan statecraft.

Vaclav Havel has written that “If democracy is not only to survive but to expand successfully ... it must rediscover and renew ... its respect for that non-material 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 led to the oblivion of being and history. This shortsightedness 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.”

The analysis of Hans Küng is similar: he calls, above all, for an ethic of planetary responsibility in place of the “ethic of success,” a new global ethic based on “concern for the future and reverence for nature.” Havel observes that the more the technological forces of globalization bring us together, the more aware many become of their residual differences. In our globalized world bereft of transcendence, our situation is like that of prisoners in a common planetary penitentiary “in which the inmates get on each other's nerves far more than if they see each other only occasionally.”

The necessity for a grounding in the transcendent does not necessarily mean the belief in a personal God in the Western sense, as Ashoka's Dhamma shows. Indeed many have characterized Buddhism as a fundamentally atheistic belief system. But it does imply an orientation beyond the present, the imminent, and the purely human — it offers a sense of humankind's place in an order and cosmos, the meaning and purpose of which is not short-term use and gratification. As Küng writes, “Only the bond to an infinite offers freedom in the face of all that is finite.”

The problems brought by the relentless penetration of the logic of economics and technology into every sphere of life will not be solved by more economics and technology. A way forward will come from mindfulness and reverence for the world and life, from an acceptance — and social practice — of values beyond and outside the interventions of instrumental reason, but which could guide and limit these interventions in a different spirit. In the Jewish tradition the concept of *tikkun* involves collaborating with God to heal and transform the world; every individual is thought to have a special *tikkun*, a particular role or mission in accomplishing this. *Tikkun* recalls some aspects of dharma, the concept of each person having a specific role or duty within a transcendent order that upholds the world.

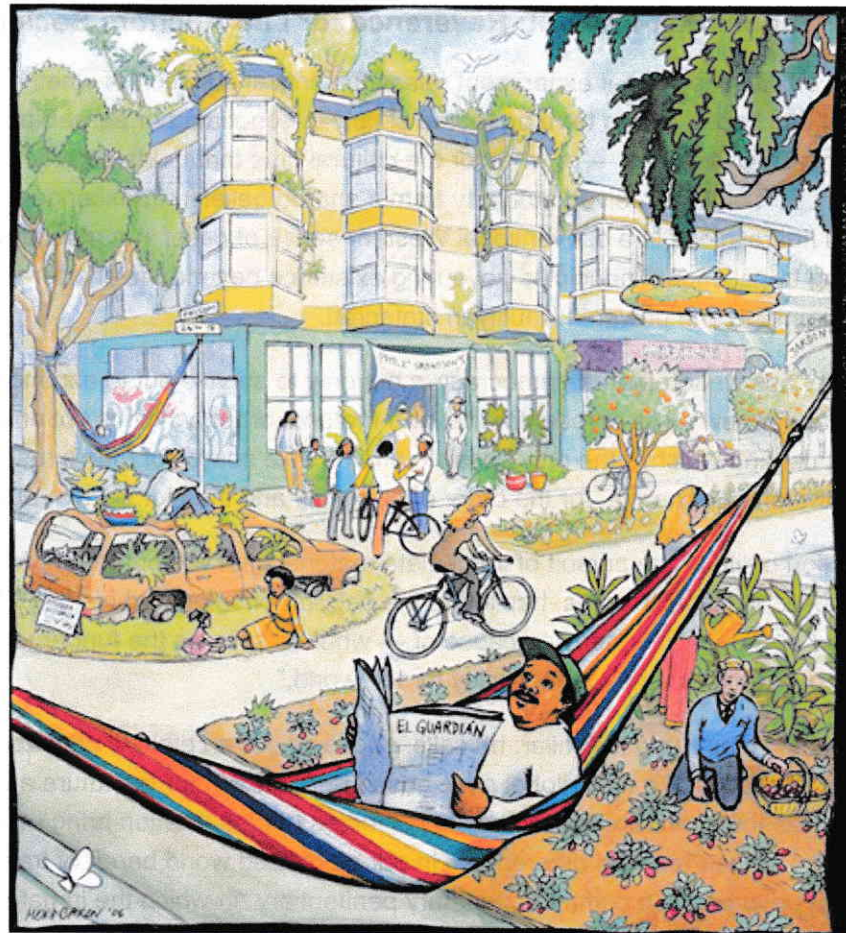
The ancient Egyptians had *maat*, a concept similar in some respects to dharma. *Maat* meant order, morality, individual duty, self-control, also artistic symmetry and balance. *Maat* was grounded in the cosmic order, in the transcendent, and was personified in the pharaoh. In the words of historian Paul Johnson, “To break an artistic canon, to infringe pharaoh's law, to sin against god; all were a denial of *maat*.” When justice, social order, prosperity and compassion prevailed in the land, there was an



abundance of *maat*. The opposite of *maat*, Johnson tells us, “was not change, but covetousness, associated with deceit and violence.... ‘The man who lives by *maat* will live for ever, but the covetous has no tomb.’” Ashoka also had a belief in the transcendent rootedness of his Dhamma, declaring that “Dhamma is effective for all time, for even if its object is not attained in this life, endless merit is produced in the life to come.”

If one were to venture a definition of the core of Ashoka’s “essential doctrine,” indeed of his whole Dhamma, it would be reverence for life, rooted in a Buddhist ethic of compassion for all sentient beings. Albert Schweitzer, who coined the term early last century, said:

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.



*To build our own future, here whimsically imagined by Mona Caron in her Utopian San Francisco series (see our Art Gallery at [tikkun.org/daily](http://tikkun.org/daily)), the author argues we will need Kautilyan realism as well as Ashokan idealism. Credit: Mona Caron ([monacaron.com](http://monacaron.com)).*

This sort of ethics goes beyond the realm of mutually just treatment of human beings. Reverence for life means upholding the world — embracing, but also anchored outside of, purely human-centered action.

## Transcending the Tragedy of Politics

Yet the gap today between such an ideal and the paralysis and weakening of governance around the world seems as great as ever. We must also view Ashoka’s ethical and political project in its tension with Kautilyan values in the context of what Max Weber called the “tragedy of politics.” We cannot ignore the fact that part of the basis of politics is violence, power, and force. In politics, Weber said, “It is *not* true that good can only follow from good and evil from evil, but ... often the opposite.” This understanding is the basis too of Reinhold Niebuhr’s question, couched as a statement, to James Bryan Conant, the President of Harvard, immediately after World War II: “How much evil we must do in order to do good.”

Thus the greatness of Ashoka lies not only in his conversion to the policy of Dhamma following Kalinga, but in his heroic effort to reconcile the underlying, tragic tensions between the traditional ethical duty

(dharma) of the king and warrior, which prioritizes force and violence; the revolutionary materialism of Kautilya and his espousal of the pursuit of economic power (artha); and a universal ethic of nonviolence.

Ashoka sought and fought to reconcile and transcend what in his time and for most of human history has been irreconcilable. He seems to have believed that ultimately it would be possible to reconcile in practice social duty, political duty, and a universal ethic of respect for all life and nonviolence. He wagered on transcending the tragedy of politics. For his time he was wrong. Much of the failure was rooted in the cumbersome, top-down nature of governance that may have been the only mode possible for a large sub-continental area at the time.

We have yet to find a satisfactory articulation of a global ethic, which everyone from Christian theologians to Vaclav Havel, George Soros, and even terrorists such as Osama bin Laden call for. Havel has said a common ground for transcendence in our age would begin 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. It must expand simply as an environment in which we may all engage in a common quest for the general good.” 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 inevitability that the past of non-Western cultures will become a part of the West’s own cultural future. The future, he wrote, will neither be Western nor non-Western — it will inherit elements of all cultures. And this is one more reason why Ashoka’s grand experiment is so timely today. His life and 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 the global system offers historically unprecedented practical means (through the Internet and the proliferation of global networks of social movements) for a bottom-up, self-organizing politics of enlightenment. Such a politics would be a worldwide political project — based on the values of the “essential doctrine” that is the core of Ashoka’s Dhamma — for a global system grounded in reverence for life, nonviolence, tolerance, inclusion, benevolence, self-control, and justice.

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 try to put into practice what for his times must have seemed even more utopian. In comparison, a second New Deal seems like a modest proposal indeed.

We will need Kautilyan realism as well as Ashokan idealism to achieve such a transformation. But such a project has been slumbering in human history for a long time. In the words of the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, written when the twentieth 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.”

*Bruce Rich is a public interest attorney whose professional focus on finance and ethics, as well as numerous visits to South Asia, inspired the writing of To Uphold the World: A Call for a New Global Ethic from Ancient India, with a Foreword by Amartya Sen and an Afterword by H.H. The Dalai Lama (Beacon Press, 2010). He can be reached at [brucemrich@gmail.com](mailto:brucemrich@gmail.com).*

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