

## The Fourteen Rock Edicts of Ashoka (King Piyadasi)

Asoka, who called himself Piyadasi, “Beloved of the Gods,” was the third king of the Mauryan Dynasty in the region corresponding to northern India, where he reigned from about 254 until 232 BCE. He converted to Buddhism in 262 BCE. After that, he had erected many stone monuments proclaiming laws that promoted Buddhism. This is one of the most famous groups of these monuments.

1. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has caused this Dhamma edict to be written.[1] Here (in my domain) no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice. Nor should festivals be held, for Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, sees much to object to in such festivals, although there are some festivals that Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does approve of.

Formerly, in the kitchen of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But now with the writing of this Dhamma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer are killed, and the deer not always. And in time, not even these three creatures will be killed.

2. Everywhere [2] within Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi's domain, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satiyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni and where the Greek king Antiochos rules, and among the kings who are neighbors of Antiochos,[3] everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Wherever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Wherever medical roots or fruits are not available I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals.[4]

3. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus:[5] Twelve years after my coronation this has been ordered -- Everywhere in my domain the Yuktas, the Rajjukas and the Pradesikas shall go on inspection tours every five years for the purpose of Dhamma instruction and also to conduct other business.[6] Respect for mother and father is good, generosity to friends, acquaintances, relatives, Brahmans and ascetics is good, not killing living beings is good, moderation in spending and moderation in saving is good. The Council shall notify the Yuktas about the observance of these instructions in these very words.

4. In the past, for many hundreds of years, killing or harming living beings and improper behavior towards relatives, and improper behavior towards Brahmans and ascetics has increased.[7] But now due to Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi's Dhamma practice, the sound of the drum has been replaced by the sound of the Dhamma.[8] The sighting of heavenly cars, auspicious elephants, bodies of fire and other divine sightings has not happened for many hundreds of years. But now because Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi promotes restraint in the killing and harming of living beings, proper behavior towards relatives, Brahmans and ascetics, and respect for mother, father and elders, such sightings have increased.[9]

These and many other kinds of Dhamma practice have been encouraged by Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, and he will continue to promote Dhamma practice. And the sons, grandsons and great-grandsons of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, too will continue to promote Dhamma practice until the end of time; living by Dhamma and virtue, they will instruct in Dhamma. Truly, this is the highest work, to instruct in Dhamma. But practicing the Dhamma cannot be done by one who is devoid of virtue and therefore its promotion and growth is commendable.

This edict has been written so that it may please my successors to devote themselves to promoting these things and not allow them to decline. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has had this written twelve years after his coronation.

5. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus:[10] To do good is difficult. One who does good first

does something hard to do. I have done many good deeds, and, if my sons, grandsons and their descendants up to the end of the world act in like manner, they too will do much good. But whoever amongst them neglects this, they will do evil. Truly, it is easy to do evil.[11]

In the past there were no Dhamma Mahamatras but such officers were appointed by me thirteen years after my coronation. Now they work among all religions for the establishment of Dhamma, for the promotion of Dhamma, and for the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to Dhamma. They work among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Gandharas, the Rastrikas, the Pitinikas and other peoples on the western borders.[12] They work among soldiers, chiefs, Brahmans, householders, the poor, the aged and those devoted to Dhamma -- for their welfare and happiness -- so that they may be free from harassment. They (Dhamma Mahamatras) work for the proper treatment of prisoners, towards their unfettering, and if the Mahamatras think, "This one has a family to support," "That one has been bewitched," "This one is old," then they work for the release of such prisoners. They work here, in outlying towns, in the women's quarters belonging to my brothers and sisters, and among my other relatives. They are occupied everywhere. These Dhamma Mahamatras are occupied in my domain among people devoted to Dhamma to determine who is devoted to Dhamma, who is established in Dhamma, and who is generous.

This Dhamma edict has been written on stone so that it might endure long and that my descendants might act in conformity with it.

6. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus:[13] In the past, state business was not transacted nor were reports delivered to the king at all hours. But now I have given this order, that at any time, whether I am eating, in the women's quarters, the bed chamber, the chariot, the palanquin, in the park or wherever, reporters are to be posted with instructions to report to me the affairs of the people so that I might attend to these affairs wherever I am. And whatever I orally order in connection with donations or proclamations, or when urgent business presses itself on the Mahamatras, if disagreement or debate arises in the Council, then it must be reported to me immediately. This is what I have ordered. I am never content with exerting myself or with despatching business. Truly, I consider the welfare of all to be my duty, and the root of this is exertion and the prompt despatch of business. There is no better work than promoting the welfare of all the people and whatever efforts I am making is to repay the debt I owe to all beings to assure their happiness in this life, and attain heaven in the next.

Therefore this Dhamma edict has been written to last long and that my sons, grandsons and great-grandsons might act in conformity with it for the welfare of the world. However, this is difficult to do without great exertion.

7. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart.[14] But people have various desires and various passions, and they may practice all of what they should or only a part of it. But one who receives great gifts yet is lacking in self-control, purity of heart, gratitude and firm devotion, such a person is mean.

8. In the past kings used to go out on pleasure tours during which there was hunting and other entertainment.[15] But ten years after Beloved-of-the-Gods had been coronated, he went on a tour to Sambodhi and thus instituted Dhamma tours.[16] During these tours, the following things took place: visits and gifts to Brahmans and ascetics, visits and gifts of gold to the aged, visits to people in the countryside, instructing them in Dhamma, and discussing Dhamma with them as is suitable. It is this that delights Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, and is, as it were, another type of revenue.

9. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus:[17] In times of sickness, for the marriage of sons and daughters, at the birth of children, before embarking on a journey, on these and other occasions, people perform various ceremonies. Women in particular perform many vulgar and worthless ceremonies. These types of ceremonies can be performed by all means, but they bear little fruit. What does bear great

fruit, however, is the ceremony of the Dhamma. This involves proper behavior towards servants and employees, respect for teachers, restraint towards living beings, and generosity towards ascetics and Brahmans. These and other things constitute the ceremony of the Dhamma. Therefore a father, a son, a brother, a master, a friend, a companion, and even a neighbor should say: "This is good, this is the ceremony that should be performed until its purpose is fulfilled, this I shall do." [18] Other ceremonies are of doubtful fruit, for they may achieve their purpose, or they may not, and even if they do, it is only in this world. But the ceremony of the Dhamma is timeless. Even if it does not achieve its purpose in this world, it produces great merit in the next, whereas if it does achieve its purpose in this world, one gets great merit both here and there through the ceremony of the Dhamma.

10. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not consider glory and fame to be of great account unless they are achieved through having my subjects respect Dhamma and practice Dhamma, both now and in the future. [19] For this alone does Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desire glory and fame. And whatever efforts Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, is making, all of that is only for the welfare of the people in the next world, and that they will have little evil. And being without merit is evil. This is difficult for either a humble person or a great person to do except with great effort, and by giving up other interests. In fact, it may be even more difficult for a great person to do.

11. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, speaks thus: [20] There is no gift like the gift of the Dhamma, [21] (no acquaintance like) acquaintance with Dhamma, (no distribution like) distribution of Dhamma, and (no kinship like) kinship through Dhamma. And it consists of this: proper behavior towards servants and employees, respect for mother and father, generosity to friends, companions, relations, Brahmans and ascetics, and not killing living beings. Therefore a father, a son, a brother, a master, a friend, a companion or a neighbor should say: "This is good, this should be done." One benefits in this world and gains great merit in the next by giving the gift of the Dhamma.

12. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, honors both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honors them with gifts and honors of various kinds. [22] But Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honors as much as he values this -- that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. [23] Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honor other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. [24] One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

Those who are content with their own religion should be told this: Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does not value gifts and honors as much as he values that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. And to this end many are working -- Dhamma Mahamatras, Mahamatras in charge of the women's quarters, officers in charge of outlying areas, and other such officers. And the fruit of this is that one's own religion grows and the Dhamma is illuminated also.

13. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. [25] One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died (from other causes). After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dhamma, a love for the Dhamma and for instruction in Dhamma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas.

Indeed, Beloved-of-the-Gods is deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered. But Beloved-of-the-Gods is pained even more by this -- that Brahmans, ascetics, and householders of different religions who live in those countries, and who are respectful to superiors, to mother and father, to elders, and who behave properly and have strong loyalty towards friends, acquaintances, companions, relatives, servants and employees -- that they are injured, killed or separated from their loved ones. Even those who are not affected (by all this) suffer when they see friends, acquaintances, companions and relatives affected. These misfortunes befall all (as a result of war), and this pains Beloved-of-the-Gods.

There is no country, except among the Greeks, where these two groups, Brahmans and ascetics, are not found, and there is no country where people are not devoted to one or another religion.[26] Therefore the killing, death or deportation of a hundredth, or even a thousandth part of those who died during the conquest of Kalinga now pains Beloved-of-the-Gods. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods thinks that even those who do wrong should be forgiven where forgiveness is possible.

Even the forest people, who live in Beloved-of-the-Gods' domain, are entreated and reasoned with to act properly. They are told that despite his remorse Beloved-of-the-Gods has the power to punish them if necessary, so that they should be ashamed of their wrong and not be killed. Truly, Beloved-of-the-Gods desires non-injury, restraint and impartiality to all beings, even where wrong has been done.

Now it is conquest by Dhamma that Beloved-of-the-Gods considers to be the best conquest.[27] And it (conquest by Dhamma) has been won here, on the borders, even six hundred yojanas away, where the Greek king Antiochos rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas and Alexander rule, likewise in the south among the Cholas, the Pandyas, and as far as Tamraparni.[28] Here in the king's domain among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Nabhakas, the Nabhapamkites, the Bhojas, the Pitinikas, the Andhras and the Palidas, everywhere people are following Beloved-of-the-Gods' instructions in Dhamma. Even where Beloved-of-the-Gods' envoys have not been, these people too, having heard of the practice of Dhamma and the ordinances and instructions in Dhamma given by Beloved-of-the-Gods, are following it and will continue to do so. This conquest has been won everywhere, and it gives great joy -- the joy which only conquest by Dhamma can give. But even this joy is of little consequence. Beloved-of-the-Gods considers the great fruit to be experienced in the next world to be more important.

I have had this Dhamma edict written so that my 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 Dhamma only, for that bears fruit in this world and the next. May all their intense devotion be given to this which has a result in this world and the next.

14. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has had these Dhamma edicts written in brief, in medium length, and in extended form.[29] Not all of them occur everywhere, for my domain is vast, but much has been written, and I will have still more written. And also there are some subjects here that have been spoken of again and again because of their sweetness, and so that the people may act in accordance with them. If some things written are incomplete, this is because of the locality, or in consideration of the object, or due to the fault of the scribe.

## NOTES

1. Girnar version issued in 257 B.C. These fourteen edicts, with minor differences, are found in five different places throughout India. In two other places, they are found minus numbers 11, 12 and 13.
2. Girnar version, issued in 257 B.C.

3. The Cholas and Pandyas were south Indian peoples living outside Asoka's empire. The Satiyaputras and Keralaputras lived on the southwest seaboard of India. Tamraparni is one of the ancient names for Sri Lanka. On Antiochos see Note 28.
4. By so doing, Asoka was following the advice given by the Buddha at Samyutta Nikaya, I:33.
5. Girnar version, issued in 257 B.C.
6. The exact duties of these royal officers are not known.
7. Girnar version, issued in 257 B.C.
8. This probably refers to the drum that was beaten to announce the punishment of lawbreakers. See Samyutta Nikaya, IV:244.
9. Like many people in the ancient world, Asoka believed that when a just king ruled, there would be many auspicious portents.
10. Kalsi version, issued in 256 B.C.
11. This seems to be a paraphrase of Dhammapada 163.
12. The Greeks (Yona) settled in large numbers in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan after the conquests of Alexander the Great, although small communities lived there prior to this.
13. Girnar version, issued in 256 B.C..
14. Girnar version, issued in 256 B.C.
15. Girnar version, issued in 256 B.C.
16. Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, was known in ancient times as either Sambodhi or Vajirasana.
17. Kalsi version, issued in 256 B.C. Asoka obviously had the Mangala Sutta (Sutta Nipata 258-269) in mind when he issued this edict. The word here translated as ceremony is //mangala//.
18. Other versions substitute the following up to the end of the edict. It has also been said: "Generosity is good." But there is no gift or benefit like the gift of the Dhamma or benefit like the benefit of the Dhamma. There a friend, a well-wisher, a relative or a companion should encourage others thus on appropriate occasions: "This should be done, this is good, by doing this, one can attain heaven." And what greater achievement is there than this, to attain heaven?
19. Girnar version, issued in 256 B.C.
20. Girnar version, issued in 256 B.C.
21. Similar to Dhammapada 354.
22. Girnar version, issued in 256 B.C.
23. Asoka probably believed that the essentials (//saravadi//) of all religions were their ethical principles.
24. (//Ta samavayo eva sadhu//). This sentence is usually translated "Therefore concord is commendable." //Samavayo// however comes from //sam// + //ava// + //i//, "to come together."
25. Kalsi version, issued in 256 B.C. Kalinga corresponds roughly to the modern state of Orissa.
26. The Buddha pointed out that the four castes of Indian society likewise were not found among the Greeks; see Majjhima Nikaya, II:149.

27. Perhaps Asoka had in mind Dhammapada 103-104.

28. Antiochos II Theos of Syria (261-246 B.C.), Ptolemy II Philadelphos of Egypt (285-247 B.C.), Antigonos Gonatos of Macedonia (278-239 B.C.), Magas of Cyrene (300-258 B.C.) and Alexander of Epirus (272-258 B.C.).

29. Girnar version, issued in 256 B.C.

English rendering by Ven. S. Dhammika

The Wheel Publication No. 386/387

ISBN 955-24-0104-6

Published in 1993

BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

KANDY SRI LANKA

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DharmaNet Edition 1994

This electronic edition is offered for free distribution via DharmaNet by arrangement with the publisher.

DharmaNet International

P.O. Box 4951, Berkeley CA 94704-4951