

King Aśoka as a Role Model of Buddhist Leadership

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Abstract

3rd century BCE India saw in Aśoka a legendary emperor, widely admired for his political achievements but even more so for his unprecedented humanitarian approach to governance, which was deeply shaped by the Buddhist faith he adopted. His outstanding historical example invites a closer investigation into his character and behaviour patterns in the search for a new role model of cross-cultural leadership excellence. In this work[†] I will contrast the leadership approaches of today which are strongly influenced by the Western academic world with the holistic, human-centred way we can extract from Buddhist teachings. From there I will examine Aśoka's biography and character, as far as we can reinterpret from the available historical material, to extract in what manner and how closely he embodied the Buddhist ideal of leadership. To do so, I will as far as possible make use of archeologic evidence available in the form of epigraphs issued by the emperor. In this way, I hope to inspire leaders, Buddhists or non-Buddhists, to consider and embrace a leadership style which is felt most suitable for a globalised world we live in.

Introduction

We live in a time of globalisation. Friedman realised in his bestseller *The World is Flat* that "it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world."¹ While this might sound exciting at first, it poses new demands on today's leaders who must possess the ability to integrate various cultural, religious and historical traditions with their very different intrinsic and extrinsic needs. There is no universal set of cultural values despite the unifying fact that every living being seeks happiness.² True leadership excellence acknowledges this and as a result, it focuses on stakeholder value (common good).

While the academic field of leadership studies, in which interest has been particularly gaining momentum in the last few decades, still tend to favour common Western values like competition, growth, individual achievements and fulfilment of one's own needs, traditional Asian values such as humility, gratitude and service to one's family and community might provide an antipole.³ The search for Asian role models, however, has not made known many names in the West. *The Art of War* attributed to Sun Tzu (544-496 BCE) might provide one example which has recently gained some popularity in leadership circles.⁴ It is rather peculiar yet significant for the state of affairs in today's business environment that leaders seek guidance in the strategy work of a warlord. It is this unease that motivates me to look out what Buddhism has to say and whether it can find a better role model in King Aśoka.

Aśoka the Great (304-232 BCE)⁵ was an ancient king of the Mauryan Empire which had unified the Indian subcontinent for the first time in its history and under whom it developed to its greatest extent. His legacy almost went extinct in India's later Islamic history until European orientalist began to rediscover it in the late eighteenth century, and, along with it, much we know about Buddhism today. Ever since India's lost child received the highest recognition and adulation by his descendants and internationally. The Republic of India has chosen the Aśoka-Chakra (wheel) as its symbol in the national flag as well as the Four-Lion-Capital (*Ashok stambh*) as the emblem of the republic, and Bollywood portrayed him in a US\$1.9m movie production in 2001 which was shown at Venice Film Festival. H. G. Wells once wrote, "[a]midst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines, almost alone, a star."⁶

To approach the leadership ideals of that time we have to think in the field of good governance. The Canonical texts provide us with several accounts where the Buddha met important political leaders who sought his advice, such as king Bimbisara of Magadha or king Pasenadi of Kosala. From such sermons as well as from the way the Buddha himself lead his community of disciples, we can construct a Buddhist perspective on leadership. Before, however, I

[†] This work was submitted by the author as the thesis for Master of Arts in Buddhist Studies to the Postgraduate Institute of Pāli and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya in Colombo, Sri Lanka (December 2015).

¹ Friedman 2005: 8.

² Worldvaluessurvey.org, (2015). WVS Database. [online] Available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dimovski 2012.

⁵ Other variants are Asoka or Ashoka.

⁶ Wells 1920: 212.



will shortly look into the question what leadership actually is and provide a bird's-eye view of the leadership landscape since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Next, I will present a synopsis of Aśoka's early biography based on the scarce information available to see whether a conjecture of his character can be formed, before I go on and portrait his leadership style, vision, mission and practical implementation based on epigraphs of the emperor himself. Finally, I will contrast this picture with the view about Buddhist leadership presented earlier and conclude why the king is a prominent role for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

Characteristic Elements of Leadership

What is Leadership?

For all sentient beings living in community, humans and animals alike, leadership is of utmost importance for those who are leading and, probably even more so, for those who are led. As community members, we give up, at least to some extent, the control over us and our quest for happiness on which bad leadership can have disastrous effects. No wonder we are naturally interested in what it is that runs in the veins of such figures like Adolf Hitler, Steve Jobs or Lee Kuan Yew. Consequently, 'leadership' is a hot topic for decades with an enormous, ever-growing corpus of academic writing.⁷ Still, not much clarification has been reached as Google is asked around 3 million times a month "What is Leadership?"⁸

Miriam Grace traces the root *lead*, first recorded around 825 CE, back to the Anglo-Saxon Old English word *lædan* (causal form of *lithan* - 'to travel', Proto-Indo-European: *leit-2)⁹ which changed its genuine meaning around four centuries later into 'to guide' and only in the 19th century adopted the concepts of 'influence' and 'exercising of domination'. "By this time," Mrs Grace notes "the term leadership was gaining usage in politics and was used as a way to describe what leaders do."¹⁰ Another source adds that the meaning of 'to be in first place' evolved somewhere in the late 14th century.¹¹

To arrive at a meaningful definition of leadership is more challenging. If Rosen (1984) is correct that "leadership is a role that is understood in terms of the social and cultural context within which it is embedded"¹² we cannot come up with a definition per se but need to define it in the sociocultural context it takes place. To turn the argument around, a definition will only be meaningful within the particular leadership style it tries to define, and as we shall see, there are plenty. Therefore, Rost (1993) dedicated two entire chapters of his book *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* on the changing leadership definitions over the past 200 years and Stogdill concluded: "that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept."¹³ We may avoid this trap by suggesting an adoption of an often cited inspirational quote, attributed to John Quincy Adams: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, [without compromising the happiness of yourself and others,] you are a leader."¹⁴

A Short Overview on Leadership Styles

Assuming that leadership traits are intrinsic, Thomas Carlyle proposed the 'Great-Man' Theory in 1840,¹⁵ which Herbert Spencer strongly objected about two decades later.¹⁶ In the attempt to also consider external forces, Georg W. Allport (1897–1967) identified nearly 4500 mental, physical and social characteristics, categorised in three hierarchy levels. On his concept, the *Trait Theory* tried to isolate but failed to identify a definite set of defining attributes in existing leaders (e.g. Stogdill, 1974).¹⁷ The *Behavioural Theories* offered an alternative approach by focusing on what

⁷ John Storey (2004) illustrated this fact by querying the EBSCO index database on business and management publications showing an increase of articles on leadership from 136 (in 190/71), to 258 (1980/81), 1105 (1990/91) and 10062 (2001/02) (Storey 2005: 2-3).

⁸ According to Adwords.google.com, (2015). *Google AdWords: Keyword Planner*. [online] Available at: <http://adwords.google.com/ko/KeywordPlanner/> [Accessed 11 Sep. 2015].

⁹ Watkins 2000: 48.

¹⁰ Grace 2003: 4, emphasis added.

¹¹ Etymonline.com, (2015). *Online Etymology Dictionary*. [online] Available at: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=lead> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2015].

¹² Rosen 1984: 39.

¹³ Rost 1993: 21ff; Stogdill 1974: 259.

¹⁴ Regarding the authenticity of the source compare Quoteinspector, (2015). Exploring the Origin of Quotations. [online] Available at: <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/07/03/inspire-dream-leader/> [Accessed 16 Sep. 2015].

¹⁵ Carlyle 1841.

¹⁶ Spencer 1896. Spencer argued that Carlyle's heroes are merely socially conditioned and their actions a response and not intrinsic traits.

¹⁷ Stogdill 1974: 81.

leaders *do* instead of their personal characteristics (e.g. McGregor, 1960; Blake and Mouton, 1964)¹⁸ and suggested that leader qualities are not hard-wired but that one can be trained to become a leader. Then, Fiedler (1964) set the stage for the *Contingency Theories* proposing that there is not one but many leadership styles which should be selected according to the situation-at-hand.¹⁹ While Fiedler gravitated to the view to match the leader to the situation for best results, Hersey and Blanchard (1969) proposed that adoption by the leader is possible (*Situational Theory*) and John Adair (1973) argued that a leader must balance his actions between ‘task’, ‘team’ and ‘individual’ needs.²⁰ In 1978, McGregor Burns added the moral and motivational dimension to leadership. His later called *Transformational Leadership* emphasised on the leaders’ ability to motivate and empower followers as well as to convert them to moral agents.²¹ The concepts of *Charismatic Leadership*, first introduced by Weber (1947) and House (1976),²² combined aspects of the Transformational Theory with those of the earlier Trait and ‘Great Man’ Theories and received much popularity in the 1980’s and 90’s. Charismatic leaders were believed to provide a ‘heroic’ approach, vision and positive inspiration in times of economic recession but confidence in it has been heavily shaken by some high-profile corporate scandals.²³ From focusing instead on the moral and ethical dimension, introduced by the Transformational Leadership, evolved the *Servant Leadership* (Greenleaf, 1970) putting the leader as a facilitator for the good of the team and organisation. Finally, Gronn (2002) dissociates, in what he calls *Distributed Leadership*, the leadership responsibility from organisational hierarchy proposing that individuals can exert leadership influence despite their levels and roles in the organisation.²⁴

The Buddhist Perspective on Leadership

The brief historical overview just presented shows a continual focus shift on several core issues of leadership which resonate in the Buddhist context: (a) the idea of an inborn leader personality, (b) the identification of determining qualities and behaviour patterns that mark a leader which (c) can or cannot be cultivated / trained, and (d) the ethical and sociological dimension.

Inborn leader personality: At first sight, the view of leadership as an inherited quality resembles the ideas of the *great man* (*mahāpurisa*) and the ideal universal monarch (*cakravartin*)²⁵ which are legendary foretold.²⁶ Even though they are pre-buddhistic in origin,²⁷ they appear in the early suttas together with the description of the 32 characteristics (birth-)marks (*lakṣhanā*).²⁸ Quite frequently, however, do we find in the scriptures the Buddha making use of at his time already established ideas which he gave a different meaning. In the Vassakāra Sutta for instance, his interlocutor presents to him a down-to-earth definition of a *mahāpurisa*²⁹ which perhaps was the established understanding of the time, asking for affirmation. While the Buddha does not reject him, he turns the definition onto a more abstract stratum of benevolence and mental perfection, affirming that he attained such state. Also considering the Buddha’s criticism on the caste norms of his time, it would be a contradictory teaching if he had held the view that one could become a *mahāpurisa* or *cakravartin* by birth, but such qualities must be developed.³⁰ Analogue to the Cakkavatti Sutta narrative

¹⁸ McGregor proposed that a person’s leadership approach is influenced by his assumption about human nature. If holding a negative view, leaders prefer an autocratic style while if holding a positive view, will practise a participative style (McGregor 1957). Blake and Mouton took the theory further in introducing the model of a *Managerial Grid*. By plotting the concern for task (production) on the horizontal axis and the concern for employees (people) on the vertical, they developed five leadership styles by combination of the two extremes each (and centre position). It was proposed that ‘Team Management’, the combination with the highest concern for people and production, is the most effective type of leadership.

¹⁹ Fiedler 1970.

²⁰ Adair 1973.

²¹ Burns 1978. Covey explains: “The goal of transformational leadership is to ‘transform’ people and organisations in a literal sense – to change them in mind and heart; enlarge vision, insight, and understanding; clarify purposes; make behaviour congruent with beliefs, principles, or values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum building.” (Covey 1991: 287).

²² comp. Weber 1947, House 1976.

²³ Lease 2006.

²⁴ Gronn 2002.

²⁵ It. “wheel-turner”.

²⁶ Like in the case of the sage Asita who is said to have predicted Siddhartha Gautama to become either a Cakravartin or a buddha (Nalaka Sutta, SN 3.11). According to the *Aśokavāda*, Aśoka was foretold twice to become a cakravartin; to the maternal grandfather and by the Buddha himself; compare Strong 1989: 203ff.

²⁷ Xing 2005: 14.

²⁸ In reference to the Lakkhana Sutta (DN 30) and others listing these marks, Piya Tan thinks that “[a]ll these sutta passages (...) are preceded by details about the wheel-turner or universal monarch (...). The 32 marks are not mentioned at all at this point.

These passages on the universal monarch were probably composed or finalized **during Asoka’s time** in response to its imperial culture (...), but the tradition of the 32 marks probably went back earlier.” (Tan 2011a: 147), emphasis added.

²⁹ In AN 4.35 the Brahmin Vassakāra by name defines the *mahāpurisa* as (a) to be well educated, (b) eloquent in expounding the meaning of that what has been learned, (c) possessing a good memory and (d) being skilful, diligent and with sound judgement when carrying out tasks.

³⁰ As the Buddha said: “Not by birth is one an outcast; not by birth is one a brahman. By deed one becomes an outcast, by deed one becomes a brahman.” (Vasala Sutta SN 1.7).

it reads that “the Wheel-Treasure (leadership) is not an heirloom from your fathers. (...) you must turn yourself into an Ariyan (noble) wheel-turner. And then it may come about that, if you perform the duties of an Ariyan wheel-turning monarch, (...) the sacred Wheel-Treasure will appear to you(...)”³¹

Qualities and behaviour patterns: The universal teachings of the Buddha are full of advice on qualities beneficial for good leadership. The just mentioned Cakkavatti Sutta defines an ideal leader as one who is (a) righteous, (b) protective, fair and reasonable towards subordinates, (c) uphold righteousness in his domain and (d) cares for the well-being of subordinates.³² A righteous leader should further possess the “*tenfold virtues*” (*dasavidha rājadhamma*) mentioned in the Jātaka tales (Table 1, p. 14).³³ More than the prosaic collection of virtues, however, speak the behaviour patterns of the Buddha himself of what comprises exceptional leadership style from the Buddhist perspective: After the Buddha found the cause of human suffering and a sustainable remedy, he had a clear, ennobling vision and mission of establishing it in the society despite facing insurmountable difficulties.³⁴ By doing so, he provided a role model to his fellowship and generations to come³⁵ which he was leading by example. The Buddha practised what he preached and preached what he practised.³⁶ As the Aggañña Sutta suggests, the true leader does not take up the leadership task out of egotism and thirst for power, but because he is the most capable, trustworthy and ‘best fit for the job’ in the eyes of the subordinates, who in return support him.³⁷ Thus, *integrity* is a determining factor for the true leader.³⁸ Further, the Singālovāda Sutta teaches the *mutual respect* between leader and subordinate.³⁹

Cultivation of leadership: The entire teaching of Buddhism rests on the axiom that good qualities can be cultivated and the buddha-ideal is the embodiment of its highest perfection. The Sutta Piṭaka is testimony of the zealous mentorship the Buddha provided to his disciples and lay followers from all strata of society, being well aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses.⁴⁰ The path of cultivation is per se open to anyone and those who attained the skills required for training can train the not-yet-skilled.⁴¹ In this way, the great leader is not a sovereign but a consultant and catalyst aiming to make himself obsolete while the so taught become “islands of themselves.”⁴² This exemplifies *humility* as another important leadership quality of the Buddha.

³¹ Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta DN 26, emphasis added.

³² “But what, sire, is this Ariyan duty of a Wheel-turning Monarch?”

“This, dear son, that thou, leaning on the Norm (...) honouring, respecting and revering it, doing homage to it, hallowing it, (...) shouldst provide the right watch, ward, and protection for thine own folk, for the army, for the nobles, for vassals, for brahmins, and householders, for town and country dwellers, for the religious world, and for beasts and birds. Throughout thy kingdom let no wrongdoing prevail. And whosoever in thy kingdom is poor, to him let wealth be given. And when, dear son, in thy kingdom men of religious life (...) come to thee from time to time, and question thee concerning what is good and what is bad, what is criminal and what is not, what is to be done and what left undone, (...) thou shouldst hear what they have to say, and thou shouldst deter them from evil, and bid them take up what is good.” (Cakkavatti Sutta DN 26)

³³ “*Dānaṃ sīlaṃ pariccāgaṃ ājjavaṃ maddavaṃ tapam; akkodam avihimsāca khantiṃca avirodhanam.*” (Jātaka, Verse 378); They are: munificence (*dāna*), excellent character, law-abiding (*sīla*), altruism (*pariccāga*), honesty, transparency, accountability (*ajjava*), gentleness (*maddava*), self-control (*tapa*) non-angry (*akkodha*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), forbearance (*khanti*) and uprightness (*avirodhana*).

³⁴ “Not to do evil, to cultivate merit, to purify one’s mind - this is the Teaching of the Buddhas.” (Dhp, Verse 183).

As for the mission the Buddha says in the Mahāparinibbana Sutta (DN 16): “I shall not come to my final passing away (...) until my bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, have come to be true disciples — wise, well disciplined, apt and learned, preservers of the Dhamma, (...) are able to expound it, preach it, proclaim it, establish it, reveal it, explain it in detail, and make it clear; until, when adverse opinions arise, they shall be able to refute them thoroughly and well, and to preach this convincing and liberating Dhamma.”

³⁵ In Buddha Sutta (SN 22.58) the Buddha affirms that a buddha is only distinct to his followers, who achieved the goal, in having discovered the path and pointing it out to others. “He knows the path (...) [a]nd his disciples now keep following the path and (...) become endowed with the path.” This implies that the attainment itself is the same.

³⁶ “*yathāvādī tathākārī*”, Mahāgovinda Sutta (DN 19).

³⁷ “Then those beings came together and lamented the arising of these evil things among them: taking what was not given, censuring, lying, and punishment. And they thought: ‘Suppose we were to appoint a certain being who would show anger where anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment! And in return we would grant him a share of the rice.’ So they went to the one among them who was the handsomest, the best-looking, most pleasant and capable, and asked him to do this for them in return for a share of the rice, and he agreed.” (Aggañña Sutta DN 27).

³⁸ In the Vīmaṃsaka Sutta (MN 47) the Buddha taught how one can evaluate whether a teacher or leader is genuine even though not being on eye-level with him.

³⁹ Singālovāda Sutta DN 31.

⁴⁰ “Just as in a pond of blue or red or white lotuses, some lotuses — born and growing in the water — might flourish while immersed in the water, without rising up from the water; some might stand at an even level with the water; while some might rise up from the water and stand without being smeared by the water — so too, (...) I saw beings with little dust in their eyes and those with much, those with keen faculties and those with dull, those with good attributes and those with bad, those easy to teach and those hard, some of them seeing disgrace and danger in the other world.” (Ariyapariyesana Sutta MN 26)

⁴¹ E.g. compare Kāyagātāsati Sutta MN 119.

⁴² It is also evident from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) that the Buddha himself disapproved the idea of taking leadership of his entourage by emphasising to Ven. Ānanda that his disciples need not depend on him for leadership: “Whosoever may think that it is he who should lead the community of bhikkhus, or that the community depends upon him, (...) the Tathāgata has no

Ethical and sociological dimension: In all these aspects of Buddhist leadership pointed out so far, we notice a high esteem on *morality* which, the reader might feel, is rather contradicting to the leadership practice we so often observe in ‘the real world’ and therefore might see it as a fancy and unpractical approach. To become and to stay a leader is a hard fight and should pay off for oneself primarily. The Buddha, however, recognised and valued the pursuit for mundane needs as long as they are conducive to the happiness of oneself and others. To achieve this, however, moral conduct as practised by the Buddhists’ *Five Precepts (pañcasīlā)* is indispensable.⁴³ The Pattakamma Sutta lists the four things that are wished for by people, viz. wealth, fame, longevity and an exalted existence, which, on a closer look, resemble quite well Abraham Maslow’s *Theory of Human Motivation*.⁴⁴ Then follow the four things by which one acquires them: (a) confidence, (b) moral virtue, (c) generosity and (d) wisdom.⁴⁵ Therefore, in the context of Buddhist leadership moral conduct and benevolence are prerequisites and do not contradict the pursuit of reward in principle. As we have seen, the legitimation for leadership is also embedded in a social context and therefore has to take place in their interest (*stakeholder*).⁴⁶ Moreover, the righteous leader must, beyond his area of expertise, lead in moral conduct.⁴⁷ The same can be concluded from the Vanaropa Sutta on generosity, e.g. in the form of communal investment.⁴⁸

King Aśoka as a Leader

Aśoka - the Person

Aśoka⁴⁹ Maurya (304–232 BCE; also: Dēvānampriya Priyadarśin Rājā) was third in a line of emperors of the Mauryan Dynasty (322-185 BCE) which was founded by his grandfather Chandragupta (340-298 BCE) and brought, under him, to its vastest extent until the British Raj, covering almost the entire Indian subcontinent and parts of modern day Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh (Appendix 3). What we know about Aśoka is largely founded on legendary works of predominately Śramaṇic origin,⁵⁰ none of which are contemporary, as well as secondary accounts, viz. *Indica* of the Greek Megasthenes and Cāṇakya’s *Arthaśāstra*,⁵¹ giving us a glimpse of the socio-political environment Aśoka lived in. Archeologic evidence has been brought to light by the orientalis of the 19th and 20th century in the form

such idea (...)” and instead advises his disciples to “be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dhamma as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge.”

⁴³ The Five Precepts are the minimum ethical code, not only for the Buddhist laity, but they are in fact universal as Piya Tan points out in his book *Simple Joys*: “The first precept is against killing, that is, the respect of *life*. (...) The second precept is against stealing (...). When we steal from someone, we are (...) taking away his *happiness*. The third precept is against sexual misconduct, that is, we should not disrespect the body [and take] away that person’s *freedom*. The fourth precept is against falsehood (...). *Truth* is the very basis of wholesome human communication. The fifth precept is against taking anything intoxicative or addictive (...) not to lose *self-control*.” (Tan 2011b: 38ff). Seeing them in this way a comparison with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations will easily prove their general validity. (compare United Nations: “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>)

⁴⁴ Simply put, Maslow starts on the level of physiological needs such as food, water, breathing, sleep, excretion and homeostasis. They must be primarily fulfilled before our desires move up to the next higher levels as there are safety needs like health, personal security, financial security etc. followed by needs of belongingness within a family context, with friendship and intimacies. The needs of esteem - self-esteem, self-respect and self-confidence - are then finally topped by the need of self-fulfilment. The lower four are called deficiency needs, which, if not sufficiently met, will show up, so Maslow, in some psychological form like, for instance, anxiety; compare Maslow 1943.

⁴⁵ Pattakamma Sutta (AN 4.61).

⁴⁶ As defined by R. Edward Freeman, a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of a corporation’s purpose. Stakeholders include employees, customers, suppliers, stockholders, banks, environmentalists, government and other groups who can help or hurt the corporation.” (Freeman 1984: vi).

⁴⁷ compare with Sallekha Sutta (MN 8).

⁴⁸ “Those who set up a park or a grove, the people who construct a bridge, a place to drink and a well, those who give a residence: for them merit always increases, both by day and by night; those are the people going to heaven, established in Dhamma, endowed with virtue.” (Vanaropa Sutta SN 1.47).

⁴⁹ Skt.: अशोक; a-śoka (‘without sorrow’); about the interpretation of the name(s) of Aśoka refer to Vassilkov 2000.

⁵⁰ Among those, Buddhist literature is chief and can be broadly divided into the one of northern (Sanskritic) tradition, most notably the *Aśokāvadāna* of the *Divyāvadāna* (about 2nd century CE, also exists in Chinese versions), and the southern tradition, foremost the *Dīpavaṃsa* (about 4th century CE) and *Mahāvāṃsa* (about 5th century CE). To the former group, we may also assign the travelling accounts of Faxian (Fa-Hien 1886).

⁵¹ alias Kautilya.

Jawaharlal Nehru writes about Cāṇakya: “Chanakya has been called the Indian Machiavelli, and to some extent the comparison is justified. But he was a much bigger person in every way, greater in intellect and action. He was no mere follower of a king, a humble adviser of an all-powerful emperor. A picture of him emerges from an old Indian play—the *Mudra-Rakshasa*—which deals with this period. Bold and scheming, proud and revengeful, never forgetting a slight, never forgetting his purpose, availing himself of every device to delude and defeat the enemy, he sat with the reins of empire in his hands and looked upon the emperor more as a loved pupil than as a master.” (Nehru 1994: 123).

of numerous epigraphs found on rock slabs and pillars from which, thanks to the decipherment of James Prinsep in 1837,⁵² Aśoka can directly speak to us today.

Historians have produced a large corpus of literature in which Aśoka's biography was pieced together and, due to the limited space, I mainly leave it to them for a general introduction; an overview of these life events is given in Appendix 1.⁵³ It may suffice to note that the young Aśoka, born around 304 BCE to king Bindusara and his chief queen Subhadraṅgī, grew up, according to the *Aśokāvadāna*,⁵⁴ at the royal court in Pāṭaliputra among many siblings. While he outsmarted them all by his mightiness,⁵⁵ he is also presented as a cruel, impetuous fellow with harsh skin being so physically ugly that he was shunned by his father and mocked by his harem.⁵⁶ Several episodes of immense cruelty accompany his advent to power which earned him the title Aśoka-the-Fierce (*Chaṇḍāśoka*) by his subjects.⁵⁷ Against his father's wish, he finally succeeded him, but it took another four years until his coronation around 269 BCE. Still, his wrathful and barbaric character did not seem to have changed much until the Kāliṅga conquest eight years later, which is often seen by scholars as his turning point from *Chaṇḍāśoka* to the zealous and ardent *Dharmāśoka* we come to know about later.⁵⁸

We have very little information to form a conjecture of Aśoka's character. The legend of his physical blemish weighs very heavily for a group of scholars who claim evidence in a rare depiction in a bas-relief found at Sanchi showing the king pumpkin-faced with belly and supported by women (Appendix 2). Several accounts mention the emperor had fainted at official events.⁵⁹ Based on such evidence, Wig and Scharma have even suggested that Aśoka probably suffered from Neurofibromatosis Type 1 or Morbus Recklinghausen which commonly causes episodes of epilepsy.⁶⁰ Following this hypothesis a little further, one might even assume a tendency to symptoms associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHS) as well as a predisposition to compulsiveness and aggressiveness.⁶¹ On the other hand, the fact that some scholars have rendered his epithet *Piyadassi* as "pleasant-to-look-upon" or "pleasant-to-the-eye" seems rather contradicting.⁶² If we agree that the prince was unwanted by his father due to his unappealing look, it would not surprise that his entire environment was biased upon him,⁶³ maybe even seen him cursed with bad karma, which in return took its toll on Aśoka's personality. Allen observes: "[a]ll in all, Prince Ashoka appears to have been physically afflicted to a degree that disqualified him as a potential heir to the throne."⁶⁴

The most remarkable metamorphosis of his personality ascribed to the Kāliṅga event is another myth. His first wife Maharani Devi, whom he took as a young prince, was a Buddhist, who bore him two children, Mahinda and Saṅghamitta; both became great monastics proselytising Sri Lanka later. Mahinda was twenty when he was ordained by his preceptor Ven. Moggaliputta Tissa, one of Aśoka's advisers. If the *Mahāvamsa* account is correct,⁶⁵ this would put the event around a year or so before the Kāliṅga war. The *Mahāvamsa* also informs us that at this time the pious

⁵² Allen 2012: 153ff.

⁵³ In general, we shall take biographic accounts of Aśoka's life with some caution even though archaeologists could support several events based on artefacts. As John S. Strong has rightfully emphasised, the literary works compiled centuries after the events and which might have reached the authors from oral tradition, serve very different purposes, such as being a chronicle (*vamsa*) in one case while a legend (*vadāna*) or narrative in the other. He further writes: "It is good to remember that the authors of the Aśoka legends were as much in the dark about the content of Aśoka's inscriptions as we were until James Prinsep deciphered them." (Strong 1989: 15ff).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 204ff.

⁵⁵ Geiger 1912: 27.

⁵⁶ Strong 1989: 40ff.

⁵⁷ e.g. Faxian tells a story about a naraka ("purgatory") Aśoka had been built and staffed with the most wicked torturer one could find in the empire to run this place. (Fa-Hien 1886: 90ff). Here, Faxian seems to retell the same story given in the *Aśokāvadāna*. There we read that this place was "lovely from the outside as far as the gate, but inside it was actually a very frightful place, and people called it 'the beautiful gaol'" (Strong 1989: 212). However, the *Chaṇḍāśoka*-Theory also received harsh criticism e.g. from Vincent A. Smith who wrote: "According to the silly fictions which disfigure the Ceylonese chronicles and disguise their solid merits, Asoka waded to the throne through a sea of blood, securing his position by the massacre of ninety-nine brothers, one brother only, the youngest, being saved alive. These fictions (...) do not deserve serious criticism, and are sufficiently refuted by the testimony of the inscriptions [viz. RE V] which proves that the brothers and sisters of the king were still living in the middle of the reign and that they and all the members of the royal family were the objects of the sovereign's anxious solicitude." (Smith 1980: 19). As for RE V e.g. compare with Hultzsch 1991: 33, line (M).

⁵⁸ Geiger 1912: 42.

⁵⁹ Strong 1989: 233, 251, 257.

⁶⁰ Wig & Sharma 2014; Neurofibromatosis is a tumour disorder in the nervous system caused by gene mutation.

⁶¹ Bofinger 2011; Reichardt et al. 2013.

While such 'remote diagnosis' might seem farfetched it could point to certain personal traits of Aśoka like flares of aggression, restlessness or compulsiveness.

⁶² Vassilkov 2000: 466.

⁶³ The *Aśokāvadāna* tells us, that the young Aśoka was reluctant to go to an assessment of the princes saying "Why should I (go)? The very sight of me is hateful to the king." But his mother persuaded him to go and claim his right (Strong 1989: 206ff). This might hint that he received mental support and encouragement to enforce his will.

⁶⁴ Allen 2012: 375.

⁶⁵ Geiger 1912: 42ff.

activities of the king had already started. Hence, with all precaution of ancient dating, it is not unlikely that Aśoka got already influenced by his new faith, before he, around the events of Kaliṅga, formally converted to Buddhism. It seems as if his personality already underwent a change when the war took place. In Rock-Edict XIII, issued around two years after the battle, Aśoka informs his subjects about the deep remorse he felt having witnessed its devastating effects on the population which has brought him to feel a strong inclination towards the Dhamma.⁶⁶ Probably the king, despite the change of attitude which was setting in, was still strongly influenced by the “treatise on statecraft” (*Arthaśāstra*) of his grandfather’s political advisor Cānakya. Probably, the conquest was an operation Aśoka felt necessary to undergo as his emperor’s duty for the good of the empire. Kaliṅga was not only a thorn left unconquered in the flesh of Mauryan empire, right at the doorstep of its heartland of Magadha,⁶⁷ but it had established a supremacy in naval trade through the sea routes to Burma, Lanka,⁶⁸ Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Thailand.⁶⁹ “With main trade arteries of northern India (...) and through the Deccan (...) firmly under Mauryan control, Kaliṅga became the only region conducting unregulated trade”⁷⁰ writes Skinner and Rath claims that “[b]y the war economics Kaliṅga was the biggest financial war business for Asoka to gain out of victory.”⁷¹ Whatever his reasons might have been,⁷² considering that the wrathful and barbaric warrior, as he was attributed before, surely would have been well accustomed to the most terrible bloodsheds of war, it is truly remarkable that he chiselled it in stone, informing his subjects not of a great victory but an utter defeat of morality. He might have realised at this time that true conquest is the conquest of men’s hearts.⁷³

Aśoka’s Vision and Mission

With the annexation of Kaliṅga, Aśoka acted in the boundaries of his heritage and had taken the expansion policy of his father and grandfather to the next logical level. “The king was an absolute ruler within the *Arthaśāstra* tradition of statecraft and Ashoka assumed his authority over his empire to be total. However, the king was also reminded of tradition that his authority was itself not limitless”,⁷⁴ observe Alexander and Buckingham who continue: “It was subject to the laws of *rājadharmā* (*duties of the king*). As such, the king’s responsibilities for the well-being of his people functioned within an ethical and legal framework which was far more powerful than the king himself.”⁷⁵ What makes the *Dharmāśoka* so outstanding is that he extended this responsibility for the common good of the *Arthaśāstra* to all people. Aśoka broadcasted his vision by rock epigraph which he extended to anyone in and beyond his domain,⁷⁶ thus:⁷⁷ “All men are my children. Now (therefore) I desire, what? All should live here happily and be benefited. (...) I also desire for all men that they should obtain it (happiness).”⁷⁸ In a later inscription he added that his orders “may last long as (my) sons and great-grandsons (shall reign and) as long as the moon and the sun (shall shine).”⁷⁹

⁶⁶ “...at that time hundred thousands have been restrained (controlled) slain and on that account many died. (...) slaughter, death and deportation of people is very painful and censurable (...)” (Talim 2010: 59).

⁶⁷ Megasthenes notes: “The royal city of the Calingre is called Parthalis [Parthali]. Over their king 60,000 foot-soldiers, 1000 horsemen, 700 elephants keep watch and ward in ‘precinct of war’.” (McCrimdell 1877: 135ff).

⁶⁸ Megasthenes also reports of economic ties between Kaliṅga and Sri Lanka when he writes: “The island, then, in the great sea, which they call Taprobane [Sri Lanka?], (...) has also herds of elephants, which are there very numerous and of the largest size. These island elephants are more powerful than those of the mainland, and in appearance larger, and may be pronounced to be in every possible way more intelligent. The islanders export them to the mainland opposite in boats (...) and they dispose of their cargoes to the king of the Kalingai.” (Ibid.: 170).

Patel notes that “[t]he culture and commercial intercourse between Ceylon and Kalinga country, which existed from the early times was very intimate and long standing. It can be said certainly that by 5th century B.C., there existed close relationship between the two Kingdoms. According to *Mahāvamsa*, Vijaya, the first King of Ceylon came from Eastern India.” (Patel 2004: 128).

⁶⁹ Rath 2012: 51.

⁷⁰ Skinner 2005: 64.

⁷¹ Rath 2012: 53.

⁷² Lahiri even suggested that “one cannot escape the strong feeling that there is in the emperor’s autobiographical vignette some echo of Siddhartha Gautama, (...). Siddhartha’s decision to renounce the worldly life, his later biographers underlined, was related to a personal trauma [of the four sights].” (Lahiri 2015: 139).

⁷³ As in Dhp, Verse 103: “Though one may conquer a thousand times a thousand men in battle, yet he indeed is the noblest victor who conquers himself.”

⁷⁴ Alexander & Buckingham 2011: 318ff.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Kaliṅga Rock Edict II, Talim 2010: 92.

⁷⁷ Some messages of the king appear on epigraphs placed on several locations of the empire, often far apart; some of them like those near Kandahar even in different languages. As for how these inscriptions have been communicated to the people of the locality, Lahiri explains: “This was done by a specially designated official through a public reading in which those who had congregated at the place inscription were required to listen. So, even if Ashoka’s message was inscribed, its dissemination was oral.” (Lahiri 2015: 129).

⁷⁸ Kaliṅga Rock Edict I, Talim 2010: 85.

⁷⁹ Pillar Edict VII, Hultzsch 1991: 137.

“[T]o protect with Dhamma, to make happiness through Dhamma and to guard with Dhamma” was Aśoka’s clear mission statement.⁸⁰ However, his Law-of-Pity exceeded the *rājadharmā*, the traditional duties of a king. “Ashoka’s dhamma”, Bhatta writes, “may be described as moral law independent of any caste or creed based on the essence of all religions. His dhamma included the least amount of sin and the greatest amount of good done to others.”⁸¹ Its core values, collected from the epigraphs, are given in Table 1.

Core Values	10-fold Rājadharmā
Generosity (PE II)	<i>dāna</i> (munificence, generosity)
“Minimum sins, maximum virtues” (PE II)	<i>sīla</i> (excellent character, law-abiding)
Sense-of-Duty (Kaliṅga RE I), “For the welfare and happiness” (several edicts)	<i>pariccāga</i> (sacrifice, altruism)
Truthfulness (PE II)	<i>ajjava</i> (honesty, integrity, accountability)
Kindness (PE II)	<i>maddava</i> (gentleness)
Self-Control (RE VII)	<i>tapa</i> (self-control, restraint)
Gratitude (RE VII)	<i>akkodha</i> (non-hatred)
Conquest by Dhamma (RE XIII)	<i>ahimsā</i> (non-violence)
Forgiveness ⁸² (RE XIII)	<i>khanti</i> (forbearance, patience)
Purity of Heart (RE VII)	<i>avirodhana</i> (uprightness, conformity)

Table 1: Comparison Of Aśoka’s Core Values With The 10-Fold Rājadharmā Of The Jātaka

The Power of Piety

Expressing and sharing the *raison d’être* and objectives of an organisation in a plausible, easy to understand manner is a talent of exceptional leaders. Yet, it is its implementation and execution that turns it either into tangible results or an utter waste of resources. It takes a persistent commitment from the top, dedication on all executive levels and lifelike feedback and acknowledgement of their results. The enthusiasm with which Aśoka made his *dharmaghoṣa* (*drum of dhamma*) heard of far and wide the empire is probably the most awe-inspiring part of his legend. He felt deeply indebted to his subjects caring like a father and asked his officials to instil this *benevolent parentalism*, as Bhatta called it,⁸³ in the folk and among all ranks.⁸⁴ On the latter he bestows his debt as a debt the officials would owe him back.⁸⁵ Routinely, the epigraphs directly addressed and instructed his officials who were entrusted to carry out his *Law-of-Pity*. They were also in charge to read out the emperor’s words on regular public gatherings.⁸⁶ Specially trained dharma-ministers (*dharmā-mahāmātras*)⁸⁷ were engaged, *surveyors* (*rajukas*) and other officials appointed, to audit the progress every five years.⁸⁸ In this way, state officials were systematically trained and empowered with the necessary resources and competencies.⁸⁹

⁸⁰ Pillar Edict I, Delhi-Topra version. Rendering taken from Accesstoinsight.org, (2015). The Edicts of King Asoka. [online] Available at: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/dharmika/wheel386.html#fn-39> [Accessed 26 Oct. 2015].

⁸¹ Bhatta 2000: 104.

⁸² “(to one) who should wrong [the king]” (Hultsch 1991: 69).

⁸³ Bhatta 2005: 2.

⁸⁴ In Rock Edict VI he proclaims: “I consider it my duty (to promote) the welfare of all men. (...) And whatever effort I am making, (is made) in order that I may discharge the debt (which I owe) to living beings (...)” (Hultsch 1991: 107).

⁸⁵ “See that (you) discharge the debt (which you owe to the king).” (Ibid.: 96).

⁸⁶ “And this edict must be listened to (by all) on (every day of) the constellation Tishya. And it may be listened to even by a single (person) also on frequent (other) occasions between (the days of) Tishya.” (Ibid.: 97).

⁸⁷ “Now, in the past (officers) called *Mahāmātras* of morality did not exist before. But *Mahāmātras* of morality were appointed by me (when I had been) anointed thirteen years.” (Ibid.: 56).

⁸⁸ “Everywhere in my domination the *Yuktas*, the *Rajuka*, (and) the *Prādēsika* shall set out on a complete tour (throughout their charges) every five-5-years for the very purpose, (viz.) for the following instruction in morality as well as for other business (...)” (Ibid.: 52).

⁸⁹ “My *Lajukas* [*Rajuka*] are occupied with the people, with many hundred thousands of men. I have ordered that either rewards or punishments are left to their discretion, in order that the *Lajukas* should perform (their) duties confidently (and) fearlessly, that

While the emperor's zealous activities were still compatible with the tradition of his forefather's adviser Cāṅkya,⁹⁰ his character was to take matters into his own hands and meet his subjects in person. "He thought of personally moving among them, preaching them, and holding religious conferences and discussions with them. Such movements through the country among his people he calls 'pious tours', which was Asoka's own invention."⁹¹ Such occasion were not just public relations events, but opportunities to walk his talk and lead by example; opportunities on which he demonstrated his *policy of respectful pluralism* to other sects,⁹² especially to the powerful Brahmin cast, and mingle with the saṅgha. He tried to establish himself as a role model exemplifying the results of his policy in many edicts for others to follow the royal example. We hear about the massive planting of trees along the main roads, well digging and building of rest houses,⁹³ cultivation of medical herbs and building of hospitals, even veterinary.⁹⁴ He promoted non-violence (*avihiṃsā*) by banning animal sacrifice, protecting wild and domestic animals⁹⁵ and advocated vegetarianism by example.⁹⁶ The classical Buddhist texts add to these praise many legends of tireless promotion of Buddhism, such as the creation of 84.000 cetiyas all over Jambudvīpa.⁹⁷ That these activities perhaps were not merely an act of deep devotion and public welfare but farsighted business management, which served the common good, becomes apparent when we look at their economic dimension in a moment. We may add that the king had a tendency to micro-manage, as we read about his open-door-policy in the Rock Edict VI that "[r]eporters have to report to me the affairs of the people at any time (and) anywhere, while I am (eating) within, the harem, in the inner apartment, at the cowpen, in the palanquin, and in the park."⁹⁸

Since the time of the Buddha, the mercantile and business class, who by now had organised themselves into guilds, was gaining political and economic influence and simultaneously turning to Buddhism as an alternative to Brahmanism. The *Vaiśya* and *Kshatriyas* castes more and more shared values and goals for economic success. As Alexander and Buckingham noted, "the urban merchant guilds which emerged in the stable political environment of the Mauryan state shared with the Kautilia-Ashoka approach an understanding that wealth must be gained ethically and that economic activity was at all times subject to dharma."⁹⁹ Trade benefited hugely from the infrastructure investment and so did the Mauryan government in the form of taxes and enhanced mobility of its administration and military forces within the vast empire.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand "[t]he spread of Buddhism was related directly to long-distance trade", observes Foltz. "For missionaries, as for anyone else, the only viable means by which to overcome the inherent dangers and difficulties of travel was to join a merchant caravan. In many cases, the missionaries were merchants themselves. As Buddhism spread and the tradition of wandering ascetics gave way to the founding of monasteries, the lay followers who supported these institutions financially were often travelling businessmen."¹⁰¹ Herein, the spread of Buddhism is twofold: While Aśoka was instrumental in the global spread of Buddhism by sending missionaries to the border countries,¹⁰² he in return attracted pilgrimage to the homeland of Buddhism. Pinning down all the important places of the life of Gautama Buddha with pillars and stupas, webbed together with a modern road system, can be seen as a profitable, pre-touristic investment. One could even further argue that the conversion to Buddhism by Aśoka probably was half-faith, half business strategy. At least we can agree with Thapar

they should bestow welfare and happiness on the people of the country, and that they should confer benefits (to them)." (Ibid.: 124).

⁹⁰ The *Arthaśāstra* says: "If a king is energetic, his subjects will be equally energetic. If he is slack [and lazy in performing his duties] the subjects will also be lax and, thereby, eat into his wealth. Besides, a lazy king will easily fall into the hands of his enemies. Hence, the king should himself always be energetic." (Kautilya 1992), III.iii "Duties of a King".

⁹¹ Radhakumud 1995: 26. In Rock Edict VIII the king speaks exclusively of such tours: "In times the *Dēvānāmpiyas* [kings] used to set out on so-called pleasure-toys. On these (tours) hunting and other such pleasures were (enjoyed). But when king *Dēvānāmpiya Priyadarśin* had been anointed ten years, he went out to Sāmbōdhi. Therefore tours of morality (were undertaken) here. On these (turn) the following takes place, (viz.) visiting Śramaṇas and Brāhmaṇas (and) making gifts (to them), visiting the aged and supporting (them) with gold, visiting the people of the country, instructing (them) in morality, and questioning (them) about morality, as suitable for this (occasion)." (Hultzsck 1991: 60).

⁹² "King *Dēvānāmpiya Priyadarśin* is honouring all sects: (both) ascetics and householders, with gifts and honours of various kinds. But *Dēvānāmpiya* does not value either gifts or honours so (highly) as (this), (viz.) that a promotion of the essentials (is possible) in many ways." (Ibid.: 65).

⁹³ compare with Vanaropa Sutta (SN 1.47).

⁹⁴ compare Rock Edict II.

⁹⁵ compare Pillar Edict V.

⁹⁶ "Here no living beings must be killed and sacrificed. (...) Formally in the kitchen of king *Dēvānāmpiya Priyadarśin* many hundred thousands of animals were killed daily for the sake of curry. But now, when this rescript on morality is written, then only three animals are being killed, (...). Even these three animals shall not be killed in future." (Hultzsck 1991: 51). The 'many hundred thousands of animals' seem to be an obvious exaggeration which casts doubt on the Kālīṅga account of victims.

⁹⁷ compare Strong 1989: 109ff.

⁹⁸ Hultzsck 1991: 107.

⁹⁹ Alexander & Buckingham 2011: 230.

¹⁰⁰ Rath 2012: 18ff.

¹⁰¹ Foltz 2000: 3.

¹⁰² According to the *Mahāvamsa*, Aśoka sent several learned monks incl. his son Ven. Mahinda, to Kashmir-Gandhara, Mysore and Konkan, Maharashtra, to the Hellenic empire, towards Nepal, Suvāṇṇabhūmī (Burma/Thailand) as well as to Sri Lanka. (Geiger 1912: 82).

that “Buddhism in the context of society as it was then, was not just another religion. It was the result of a widespread movement towards change which affected many aspects of life from personal beliefs to social ideas. Any statesman with an understanding of the period would have had to come to terms with such an important new development.”¹⁰³

In any way, Aśoka’s huge engagement in spreading the dhamma undoubtedly had a very positive influence on the *foreign affairs* as well as on the domestic pacification taking place in the Mauryan state. We have to remind ourselves of the magnificent *change management* which must have taken place to integrate the defeated Kalinga and to compensate the victims of war in order to prevent unrest inland. Maybe, the conquest of Sri Lanka by dhamma must also be seen in this light considering the close ties between the island and Kalinga as mentioned before. Sending the missionaries meant to build strong strategic alliances with foreign rulers which Asoka maintained e.g. with the Cholas, Pandas and Keralaputras in India and outside India with Greeks, Persian and the Siam kingdoms.¹⁰⁴

Around 20 years after he retired the drum of war to play the drum of dharma, Aśoka reflected “[w]hatever good deeds have been done by me, those the people accept and those they follow. Therefore, they have progressed and will continue to progress by being respectful (...). This progress among the people through Dhamma has been done by two means, by Dhamma regulations and by persuasion. Of these, Dhamma regulation is of little effect, while persuasion has much more effect.”¹⁰⁵

What Makes Aśoka Prominent As A Role Model?

The term *role model*, coined by the sociologist Robert K. Merton, describes a reference individual (“avatar”) with distinctive behaviours and values which are emulated by others, who, in this way, adopt the role model. The role model is distinct from the more comprehensive reference individual in so far as it is a partial identification in terms of the role(s) selected.¹⁰⁶ Parents are our early role models in many ways so that we are predisposed to inherit many, but not all of their values and behaviour patterns. However, since our brain’s neural circuitry is malleable and can be rewired through neuroplasticity, we can adopt new role models and change course.

So it might have happened to Aśoka. His legend, as so far described, seems to provide a perfect example of turn-around from Saulus to Paulus, and, despite some little variety, is repeated in literature in unison, even though, as mentioned earlier, literary evidence is very hollow. While scholars generally agree that Aśoka was, as Basham puts it, “the greatest and noblest ruler India has known, and indeed one of the greatest kings of the world”,¹⁰⁷ only a few have stepped forward and cast a critical eye on his legend.¹⁰⁸

It is peculiar that the two main Buddhist sources, the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Mahāvamsa* show little agreements about Aśoka’s life events. Even more so, they do not mention the so important Kalinga war,¹⁰⁹ which we know about from the 13th Rock Edict, only rediscovered in 1822 by Major James Tod at Gimar and deciphered a little while later. Earlier we have compared Aśoka’s vision and mission with similar passages from the Jātakas but since it is believed that the tales, at least in some parts, are of later origin, we cannot safely rule out a chicken-or-egg dilemma.¹¹⁰ Even if academics concluded that Aśoka’s influence on the saṅgha, which he quite certainly had,¹¹¹ was so strong to materialise in the Pali canon at sutta level,¹¹² we would find it fit very harmoniously and non-contradicting within the Buddha’s teaching. The emperor seemed not very concerned with deep philosophy but with the tangible practices as an *upāsaka*, values which were widely agreeable among other religions, too.

Regarding the connection to the cakravartin Basham writes that “[t]he occurrence of this word in certain obviously late passages of the Pali canon, such as the Cakkavatti-sīhanāda-sutta of the Digha-Nikaya seems to be a post-Asokan reflection of Asoka’s regime. In this sutta, the ideal cakravartin follows a policy very like that of Asoka, and he conquers the world without fighting, as Asoka believed he was doing. We suggest that this text was composed soon after Asoka’s reign, to warn his successors of the evil results which would follow if they abandoned his policy of

¹⁰³ Thapar 1960: 44.

¹⁰⁴ Rath 2012: 23.

¹⁰⁵ Pillar Edict VII (rendering taken from Accesstoinight.org, (2015). *The Edicts of King Asoka*. [online] Available at: <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/dhammika/wheel386.html> emphasis added)

¹⁰⁶ Merton 1968: 356ff.

¹⁰⁷ Basham 2001: 53.

¹⁰⁸ A detailed discussion of scholarly criticism can be found in Seneviratna 1994: 203ff.

¹⁰⁹ Basham observes “[o]ne would expect the compilers of this cycle of legends to have recorded the story of the Kalinga war and Asoka’s repentance and embroidered it with many supernatural incidents. Instead, they ignored it.” (Basham 1982: 132ff).

¹¹⁰ Datta 1988: 1810ff.

¹¹¹ e.g. compare MRE III, in which Aśoka advises monks and nuns to listen and remember several teachings of the Buddha. Also, it is believed that under his auspice the 3rd Synod took place in which the saṅgha was purged of heretic sects and their views debated in the *Kathāvattu*, the fifth book of the Theravādin Abhidhamma Piṭaka.

¹¹² And the same could be claimed of the *Arthaśāstra* (Olivelle 2013: 25ff).

Dhamma.”¹¹³ Basham also makes a valid point when reminding us that the word *pajā*, which Asoka uses in his soothing vision ‘*save munise pajā mama*’¹¹⁴ could also be rendered as ‘subjects’ instead of ‘children’.¹¹⁵

Further scepticism against Aśoka’s leadership qualities has been raised by some scholars based on the fact that the Mauryan Empire started to decline right after the emperor’s demise and ceased to exist about fifty years later. Mostly, financial collapse due to religious generosity¹¹⁶ and expansion of bureaucracy, military weakness due to the policy of pacifism and strong Brahmanical resentments have been put forward as arguments in this regard.¹¹⁷ While analysing this area further is material for another study, it seems a not uncommon pattern in history that further generations appear not to be capable of matching with the achievements of their mighty predecessors. It is legitimate to look for causes in role models’ behaviour, the very fact that their heritage crumbled is, however, to some extent also testimony to their eminence. It is one challenge to undertake a business and quite another to exploit it. Such criticism should not diminish his value of a role model.

The historical Aśoka definitely has made himself a Buddhist emperor by exporting the faith to the world and by firmly establishing it inland.¹¹⁸ The legendary *Dharmāśoka* broadcasted distinctive behaviours and values which are undoubtedly inspiring. His transformative style of leadership strongly resembles what we would call servant leadership today. Deeply rooted in humanistic convictions which he developed himself by insight, he aimed to serve *all* stakeholders for the good and prosperity of the entire community.

What do we really know about Aśoka? Is it, in the end, all legend and Buddhist propaganda without any practical value in our leadership context? I think Allen is not fully correct when he writes that “Ashoka’s song has survived the vicissitudes of some 2270 years. And yet, (...) the man himself still remains intangible, more myth than real personage, (...) a subject seemingly fit only for academics and not the wider world.”¹¹⁹ Ashoka’s song has touched not only academics but has gained wider popularity. However, it seems to be of recent origin. Thapar observes that in contemporary India “[i]t is felt that a long political tradition beginning with Asoka, of conscious non-violence and a toleration of all beliefs political and religious, continued unbroken through the centuries culminating in the political philosophy of Gandhi.” Though, she concludes that “[n]o later king [than Aśoka] of any standing, tried consciously to adopt these principles as the basis of his policy.”¹²⁰ While Aśoka might be a rather untouched role model by any particular individual, there is a recent example of adoption: *Ashoka* is an organisation which support social entrepreneurship worldwide. Founded 1980 by Bill Drayton with today over 3000 fellows in more than 70 countries, the organisation provides start-up financing, professional support and access to a global network of businesses and social sectors for entrepreneurial talents realise their innovative ideas and solve social problems.¹²¹

Drawing a wide line between these two figures, a contemporary resemblance to Aśoka might be found in the biography of Bill Gates who orchestrated as CEO of Microsoft, its “jihad”¹²² against the concurrent web browser Netscape Navigator in the late 1990s.¹²³ In a U.S. antitrust law case, the company was accused of abusing its market position to crush the rival product and was found guilty of unlawful market manipulation in 2000. On the zenith of his power, Gates, who’s business practices already came under attack earlier,¹²⁴ was faced with the breakup of his brain-child Microsoft, which could be warded off in a settlement in 2004. Around that time, Gates founded with his wife the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Crediting his philanthropic spirit to his mother, who passed away in

¹¹³ Basham 1982: 135, emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ Hultsch 1991: 93.

¹¹⁵ Basham 1982: 137.

¹¹⁶ An argument levelled on the narrative of Aśoka’s last days described in the *Aśokāvadāna* in which he is described as draining the state treasury by almost fanatically giving away a large amount of gifts to the Buddhist community; compare Strong 1989: 286ff.

¹¹⁷ Barua 1946: 347ff.

¹¹⁸ Basham writes: “Between the parinirvana [of the Buddha] and the time of Asoka we have but scanty evidence of what was happening to Buddhism. Archaeological evidence is virtually lacking, but after Asoka it is abundant.” (Basham 1982: 140).

¹¹⁹ Allen 2012: 354.

¹²⁰ Thapar 1997: 214.

¹²¹ Ashoka.org, (2015). Ashoka - Innovators for the Public. [online] Available at: <http://www.ashoka.org>. Further compare: The Positive Approach, (2015). A is for Ashoka: Its Remarkable Work Supporting Social Entrepreneurs - The Positive Approach. [online] Available at: <http://www.thepositiveapproach.global/the-ashoka-organisation-and-its-remarkable-work/>.

¹²² TIME.com, (2015). Microsoft’s ‘Jihad’ Jam. [online] Available at: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,15926,00.html> [Accessed 3 Oct. 2015]

¹²³ Wikipedia, (2015). United States v. Microsoft Corp.. [online] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_v._Microsoft_Corp. [Accessed 3 Oct. 2015]

¹²⁴ Community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com, (2015). Business | Apple-Microsoft Lawsuit Fizzles To A Close -- ‘Nothing Left’ To Fight About | Seattle Times Newspaper. [online] Available at: <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19930602&slug=1704430> [Accessed 3 Oct. 2015].

1994,¹²⁵ he became one of the greatest philanthropist of our time with more than US\$ 31bn of donations until 2014.¹²⁶ It would be an exciting study to compare his example with Aśoka more deeply.

Besides all the myth surrounding Aśoka, he is a historical example to prove that people-centred leadership can be holistically successful¹²⁷ and that humanism does not have to compete against the pursuit of monetary profit. In the dominating capitalistic societies of today, the goal of ongoing growth seems sometimes so bizarre overvalued that it is seen endangered if generosity and piety for the weak of a society and for the environment eat up too much investment. The ultimate asset, which ought to be grown, is the *happiness of all beings* and Aśoka exemplifies how leaders can practically achieve it.

Conclusion

What leadership is and which personal traits, whether inborn or acquired, make a great leader is a long debated and heavily studied subject for centuries with ambiguous results. Approaches and skill sets vary with the ultimate aim of leadership which is all too often a blend of ego-centric and investor-centric instead of stakeholder-centric goals (common good).

Central to Buddhist philosophy is the ultimate common good of happiness¹²⁸ and the way leading to it. Therefore, Buddhism offers many teachings which are practically useful in leadership, too; most of them strongly focused on morality, integrity and humanity. While Buddhism is not devoid of notions of an inborn “super-leader” (*mahāpurisa*), all core emotional and intellectual qualities, necessary for a leadership genius, are ultimately learned and need to be perfected. Leadership happens in a social context in which the leader fulfils a demand for leading and therefore he *serves* his subordinates. While the very nature of leading is *acting*, leadership qualities are best described as conducive leadership tasks such as the “*tenfold virtues*” (*dasavidha rājadhamma*) contrasted with Aśoka’s values in Table 1 (p. 14). This mission and its implementation must be in harmony with the vision of a common good and exemplified in every activity of the leader.

Emperor Aśoka is a prominent example of Buddhist leadership style put into practice. Even though much of his biography is clouded in myths and history, his ministry has survived more than two millennia as having been exemplary in good governance concerned with social welfare without compromising business growth. His personal leadership style is well in harmony with Buddhist ideas. Whether he adopted those merely out of faith or out of rather strategic considerations is debatable even though his devotional motives surmount. Since at his time the ink of the canon was not dry, we can not definitely say whether Aśoka’s leadership is an exact implementation of Buddhist views readily available to him or whether his example might have shaped Buddhist scriptures so that they now appear matching today. In fact, reciprocity seems quite likely. However, that Aśoka’s leadership style qualifies as Buddhist is secondary inasmuch as its significance lies in its achievements for the common good and that his role model can be adopted by Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. Nevertheless, the Buddhist community owes him great respect for his achievements as without his zealous work to spread the Buddhist teaching, not much of it might have survived in the world today. It would be very beneficial for our today’s society if Aśoka’s example inspired more leaders to dream more, learn more, do more and become more for the well-being of a globalised community.

¹²⁵ Inc.com, (2015). How Bill Gates's Mother Pushed Him to Be a Philanthropist. [online] Available at: <http://www.inc.com/business-insider/how-bill-gates-mother-pushed-him-to-be-a-philanthropist.html> [Accessed 23 Oct. 2015].

¹²⁶ Forbes.com, (2015). Forbes Welcome. [online] Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/top-givers/> [Accessed 23 Nov. 2015].

¹²⁷ For a recent study about results of people-centred leadership also compare Mckinsey.com, (2015). How centered leaders achieve extraordinary results. [online] Available at: http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/leading_in_the_21st_century/how_centered_leaders_achieve_extraordinary_results [Accessed 3 Nov. 2015].

¹²⁸ that is the eradication of suffering.

Appendix 1



Figure 1 Summary Of Approximate Life Events Of Aśoka
Main Sources: Smith 1980, Allen 2012, Radhakumud 1995



Appendix 2

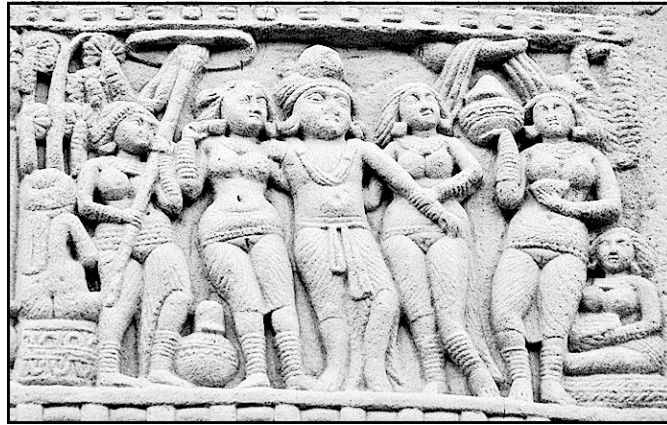


Figure 2 King Aśoka Faints And Is Supported By His Surrounding Queens;
Torana bas-relief at Great Stupa, Sanchi (Photo by Andrew Whittome)



Figure 3 Stone Portrait With Brahmi Inscription (Marked) 'Ranyo Ashoka';
Sannati Kanaganahalli Sculpture (Source: karnatakatravel.blogspot.sg)

Appendix 3

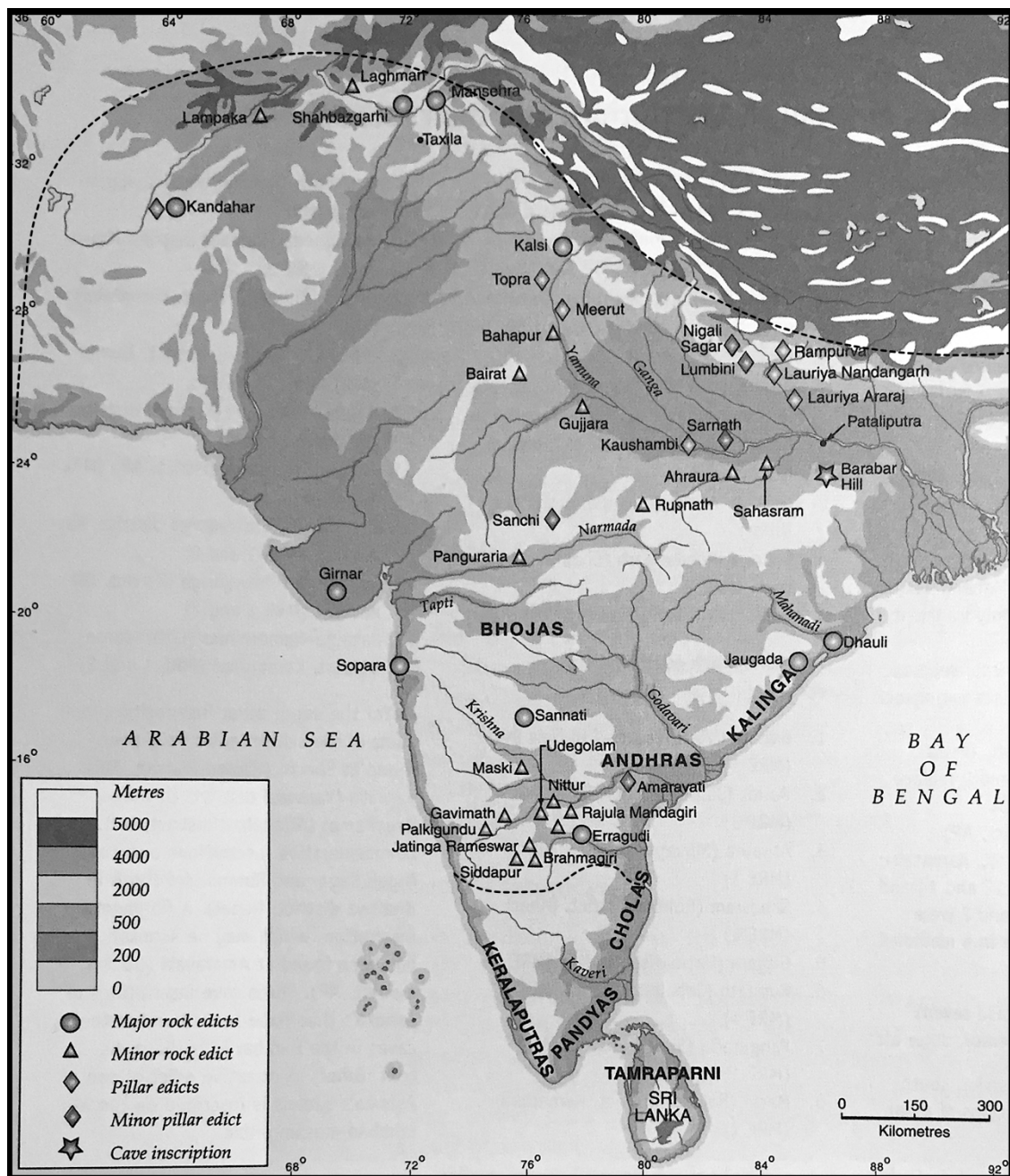


Figure 4: Conjecture Of Mauryan Empire Around 250 BCE And Locations Of Epigraphs (Singh 2008: 328; borderlines - - added)

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