

# **Ashoka's Choice: Mass Murder or Compassion**

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The Emperor Ashoka could be considered a patron of this conference. He is regarded as an ancestral sovereign of the enlightened kingdom of Shambhala. Shambhala vision inspired the Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche to create Naropa University, which has been a driving force behind this conference.

Ashoka is the Indian emperor of whom the British historian H.G. Wells wrote: “Among the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone—a star.”

Ashoka was a sacred administrator who took a deep interest in foreign policy, religious tolerance, the administration of justice and humanitarian affairs. He is credited with starting one of the first hospitals in human civilization. He extended his concern not only to the realm of human beings, but also to animal life and the environment.

What we know of this extraordinary leader comes to us from a series of stone inscriptions that have survived in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some are amazing -- 30 to 40 foot high columns in beautiful polished stone, surmounted by extraordinary animals like a noble bull, a magical horse or a magnificent lion.

We could sum up the story of Ashoka with a single line from one of his edicts: “The sound of the drum has been replaced by the sound of the Dharma.”

This refers to the aspect of Ashoka that many of you will know. Having attained victory on the battlefield at Kalinga, now in modern-day Orissa, Ashoka stood on the battlefield among the corpses of his enemies. In the distance he saw a monk walking on the battlefield. This moment is very beautifully described in one of Sharon Salzberg's books, *Loving Kindness*. She imagines the emperor standing victorious on the battlefield, amidst the stench of victory, seeing the monk in a saffron robe, carrying nothing but a begging bowl. So struck was he by the monk's composure and radiance, that he said to himself: “How is it that I, the victorious Emperor Ashoka, who has everything, on seeing this monk with only a robe and bowl, feel that I have nothing?”

Thus it is said that Ashoka, the mighty conqueror, a man of war, abandoned the path of violence and was transformed into one of the greatest humanitarians of his age.

According to the Tibetan tradition, Ashoka was a mass murderer. He came to power by eliminating hundreds of his opponents and at one point is said to have erected a vast killing ground, a kind of human abattoir, known as “Ashoka’s Hell”. Here he ordered that ten thousand people to be put to death. In this account of Ashoka’s transformation, a Buddhist monk strays into the killing ground and through the power of his meditation in the midst of the carnage, brings both the Emperor and his chief executioner to the path of enlightenment.

This was Ashoka’s choice. To continue as a mass murderer or to choose the path of compassion. It is a choice we all face in our lives today.

Everyday we are involved in mass murder. In the Shambhala tradition this period of time is known as the dark age. It is an era of extreme aggression. One way or another most of us are citizens of countries at war. In fact it is hard not to be involved in at least some aspect of the more than 20 wars currently being waged across the globe. Most of us are inescapably involved in war economies in our countries and some would say that the global economy as a whole is the economy of a world at war.

Extreme aggression is the first characteristic of the dark age. The second characteristic is extreme materialism. The devastation they wreak together is terrifying. It is precisely this dreadful confluence of aggression and materialism that makes this conference so necessary.

Rampant materialism, raging greed and consumption have reached proportions where their consequences amount to a war of aggression waged not only against specific nations. This war threatens the survival of our species as a whole. It threatens the survival of countless other species. It threatens the biosphere of our planet.

There is a third characteristic of the dark age. At this time of intense international anxiety, when the world is trapped in a spiral of hatred and fear, it is natural that extreme violence of all forms should erupt. It is also in the nature of beings that dark times such as these should give rise to profound wisdom and compassion.

The way in which wisdom and compassion arise in such times is symbolized in the stories of Ashoka. A spiritual figure appears on the battlefield of Kalinga. Similarly, a monk appears on the killing ground of Ashoka’s Hell.

These startling, perhaps mythic, images are directly relevant to this conference. Their central meaning is as relevant today as it was for Ashoka and the people of his age. This goes directly to the heart of the social vision of the Buddha. I mention this not to convert anyone to Buddhism, but because his social vision, like that of many other great spiritual leaders, speaks to the choices we all have to make, both as individuals and as members of our national and global societies.

Some of you will know that a distinctive insight of the Buddha was that the strong sense we all have of having a solid, fixed personal identity is something of an illusion. If there is no “me”, then what is the basis on which we are so demanding and possessive about what is “mine”. Rather than seeing the world as a collection of separate entities, the Buddha’s vision stressed the interrelated and interdependent nature of all that exists.

For forty-five years he travelled ceaselessly across the North Gangetic Plain establishing countless communities of practitioners, based on this understanding.

With the destruction of the idea of self, went the destruction of the idea of possession. This is the heart of the term that the Buddha gave to his closest followers – the bhikkus and bhikkunis. The best translation of these terms is “those who wish to share”. The alms bowl still carried by bhikkus and bhikkunis to this day is a “Bhiksha patra”. It literally is “the bowl of sharing”.

Thus, the so-called Buddhist begging bowl is a living manifestation of the profound intention to share with others, to serve others, and to transcend the stream of selfish consumption.

The early followers of the Buddha, like thousands of his disciples to this day, did not ask for anything that was not offered. They committed themselves and others to a completely different relationship based on the pooling and redistribution of wealth.

At the sites of ancient Buddhist communities you come across huge stone troughs into which the bhikkus and bhikkunis placed everything that had been put into their bowls, creating a huge potluck meal they shared as an entire community.

Where did they go to collect this food? They went to the houses of all the castes and sub-castes of the highly stratified society in which they lived. They made a particular point of going to the poorest areas of the communities and collected food offerings from the outcastes.

They were challenging the entire social structure of class and caste. Their robes are another example. Why were the original robes saffron or brown? The Brahmins at the top of the social order wore white. Saffron or brown were the colours of the outcastes, the mark of extreme social stigmatization. This was the colour in which the early sangha wrapped themselves. At the urging of the Buddha, they went to charnel grounds and the waste areas of villages, to salvage scraps of cloth, sew them together to make robes, then dye them saffron or brown and sometimes yellow.

Not only were robes the symbol of identification with the most oppressed members of society, but they were also part of the Buddha’s revolt against gender bias. Men and women shaved their heads, and men shaved their beards. Both sexes wore saffron robes. It is said that as the lines of bhikkus and bhikkunis walked along the highways and byways, it was impossible to tell the difference between men and women.

This was deliberate. Thousands of outcastes flocked to the Buddha, as did thousands of women who left their households and the oppression of patriarchal domination. These revolutionary communities were demonstrating that what was most important was not the differences between people, but their common humanity.

It is these same robes today that monks use in the forests of Thailand to protect trees from the ruthless destruction of commercial loggers. Their deep ecological action to protect the forests is to wrap the trees in saffron robes. This saves them because the robes wrapped around the tree trunks make it clear to all that to kill the trees would be tantamount to a slaughter of the most revered members of the community.

So this then is what Ashoka, the killer, saw across the battlefield and what he encountered in his own hell – the symbols of a different world view, a different way of living on this planet with others, a vision of reverence for all life.

Ashoka's choice was to abandon the path of aggression and to choose the path of compassion. To abandon the illusion of a separate existence and to embrace the reality of interdependence. To abandon the path of individual consumption and embrace the path of common sharing.

He didn't become a monk. Nor do we have to. What he chose was a way of governing, a way of living in society that was wrapped in the intention of wisdom and compassion. Wrapping ourselves in that intention is the challenge we face. It is the challenge of this conference.

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