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*Ashok - Emperor Or Monk*

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Many people ask: How can any nation be defended if all of its people adopt nonviolence? It is rather difficult to answer this hypothetical question. However, an emperor ruled over India with nonviolence and compassion in the third century B.C. Ashok was the emperor - emperor of peace and social justice. He did not rule by force or by accumulating goods and means of comfort for himself or by pomp and show. He ruled by sacrificing material comforts and by treating all his subjects equal and with justice. His example can guide us, rulers and administrators, politicians and civil servants, religious leaders and laymen, to establish peace, justice and harmony in present-day world.

Ashok was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya who was a follower of the SHRAMAN (Jain) religion. Ashok succeeded his father, Bimbisar, in 270 B.C. His reign extended from Afghanistan to Madras. In the first year of his reign, he decided to annex to his empire the few remaining small states. First, he conquered Kalinga (Orissa). However, he was touched by the cruelties and horrors, killing and suffering of war. Therefore, he made a determination to give up violence and war, and developed a kind attitude - a humane one.

Although his grandfather and perhaps his father also followed the Jain religion, Ashok rose above communalism and religious intolerance.<sup>1</sup> Many Jain scholars hold that Ashok was neither a Jain nor a Buddhist. He was a just and kind ruler who presented a compromising, non-communal and practical religion for the moral uplift of his people.<sup>2</sup> One day, Ashok saw a Buddhist monk whom he invited to his palace. The monk gave a sermon based on the following verse of DHAMMAPADA:

Heedfulness is the path of deathlessness.  
Heedlessness is the path of death.  
The heedful do not die; the heedless  
ones are like unto the dead.

This is similar to the Jain concept of nonviolence, which teaches us that we

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<sup>1</sup> VEER PAATHAAVALI by Dr. Kamta Prasad Jain, Digambar Jain Pustakalaya, Surat, 1965, page 61.

<sup>2</sup> Jain Dharm by Ratan Lal Jain, Jain Parishad Publishing House, Delhi, page 197.

should be conscientious in our thoughts, speech and deeds. This is the way to practice nonviolence. Ashok was impressed with the peaceful and tranquil attitude of the monk.

Ashok decided to adopt the common teachings of all religions and to devote his life to the benefit of humanity.<sup>3</sup> He employed the principles of ethics as a monumental and effective weapon. He practiced the virtues of nonviolence and compassion in ruling his empire. He earned more power and respect in his own state as well as in the neighboring states. Ashok ruled against animal sacrifices in his empire. Instead of royal pleasure trips and hunting, he instituted pious duties to his subjects. He devoted all his time and energy for the moral, social and economic welfare of his people. He treated all his subjects as his children. He built hospitals for both men and animals. He had trees planted along roads and erected rest houses for travelers. He established a number of institutions for medical, philosophical and religious education. Some of these, including the one at Taxila, in Afghanistan, developed into universal centers for learning - universities.

Ashok had his teachings inscribed on rocks in the various parts of his empire. One of them reads: As far as one feels confidence after having entrusted his child to an intelligent nurse, thinking the intelligent nurse will care for his child well; so that officers were appointed by me for the welfare and happiness of my people. Another one reads: All people are my children, and as I desire for my children that they obtain every kind of welfare, so do I desire my people may obtain every kind of welfare.

Ashok sent monks to Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand and other countries of the region to spread his message of peace. Although, he favored Buddhism, he was tolerant of all religions. One of his precepts reads: All religions deserve reverence for one reason or other. By thus acting, a man exalts his own religion, and at the same time does service to the religion of other people.

In the words of Dr. Kirthisinghe, “Ashok was a man dedicated to peace, and the only emperor in history to forsake warfare after victory in the Kalinga war, devoting the balance of his lifetime serving not only his people, but mankind, with magnanimity and benevolence seldom seen in history. Thus he was able to build the Golden Period of Indian history.”

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<sup>3</sup> VEER PAATHAAVALI by Dr. Kamta Prasad Jain, Digambar Jain Pustakalaya, Surat, 1965, page 61.

After independence, the Ashok lion symbol was adopted as the State Emblem of India and his wheel of life appears on the Indian National Flag. A Government of India publication described the significance of these symbols in the following words:

The National Emblem is symbolic of contemporary India's affirmation of its commitment to world peace and goodwill.

The four lions - symbolizing power, courage and confidence - rest on a circular abacus.

The abacus is girded by four smaller animals - guardians of four directions: the lion of the north, the elephant of the east, the horse of the south and the bull of the west.

The abacus rests on a lotus in full bloom exemplifying the fountainhead of life and creative inspiration.

The motto 'SATYAMEVA JAYATE', inscribed below the emblem in the Devanagari script, means 'Truth Alone Triumphs'.