

THE EDICTS OF ASOKA

*Edited and translated by N.A. NIKAM
and RICHARD McKEON*

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF AN ENLIGHTENED INDIAN MONARCH OF
THE THIRD CENTURY B.C. ON MORALITY, RIGHTEOUSNESS, RELIGIOUS
TOLERANCE, AND MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO MAN



More than two thousand years ago a great Indian emperor, shocked by the suffering caused by a war of conquest, changed his conception of law and government. In his Edicts Aśoka published his "change of heart" to his subjects and posterity.

The Edicts were carved on stone pillars and rock faces throughout Aśoka's vast empire. They are not laws in the ordinary sense; they are instructions in morality. They transform governmental administration, religious observance, and social relations by reference to the law of Dharma or morality.

For centuries the pillars and rocks were lost in the jungles, and their language was forgotten. A hundred and twenty years ago they were deciphered for the first time, and since then scholars have slowly learned more and more about this experiment in tolerance and mutual understanding.

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*Jacket photograph from "The Art of Indian Asia"
Courtesy of Mrs. A. K. Coomaraswamy*

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N. A. Nikam and Richard McKeon have prepared a new edition of the Edicts, translated into simple, idiomatic English and arranged to make clear the moral principles Asoka employed. His meditations on morality applied to problems of government, international relations, religion, welfare, security, and peace were intended to stimulate thought and to affect motivation. To the modern reader they seem a novel and forceful approach to problems strikingly like our own.

About the editors . . .

N. A. NIKAM is professor of philosophy at the Maharajah's College, Mysore, India, and secretary-general of the Indian Philosophical Congress.

RICHARD MCKEON is professor of philosophy and Greek at the University of Chicago. He has been to India twice, once to direct a UNESCO seminar and once to advise concerning philosophy and general education.



Cover design: Sārnāth lion capital,
originally surmounted by a Wheel of the Law.
From a column erected by King Aśoka to
commemorate the Buddha's preaching in Sārnāth of
the First Sermon. 242-232 B.C. Polished Chunār
sandstone, 7 feet \times 2 feet, 10 inches.