

- Time Line*
- B.C.**
- 269** Ashoka defeats his brothers and becomes emperor.
 - 261** Ashoka attacks Kalinga.
 - 255** Ashoka converts to Buddhism sometime around 255 B.C.
 - 232** Ashoka dies.

THE WORLD OF ASHOKA

KEY Ashoka's Kingdom Cities (ancient and modern) Historic Site

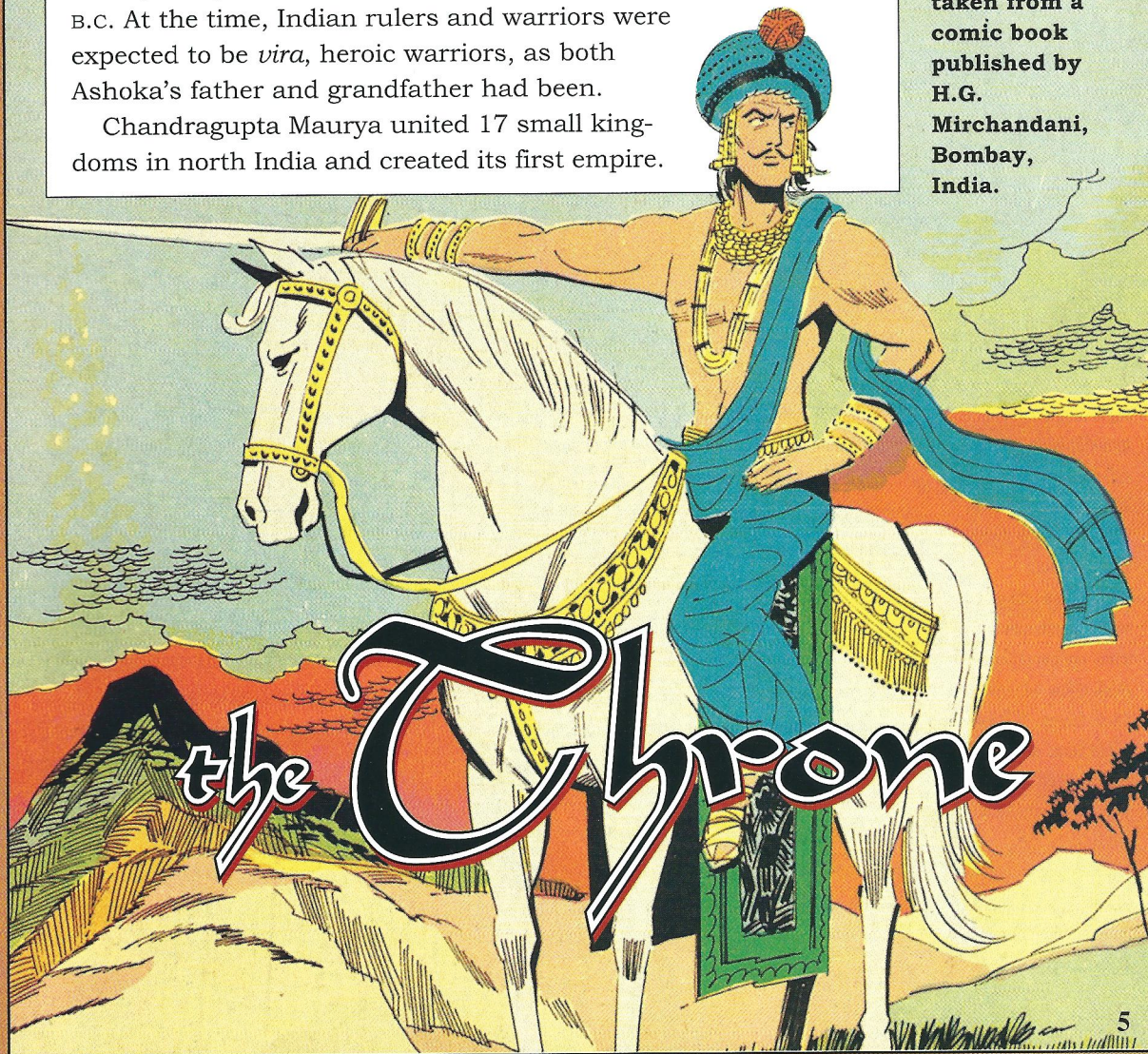
The Road to

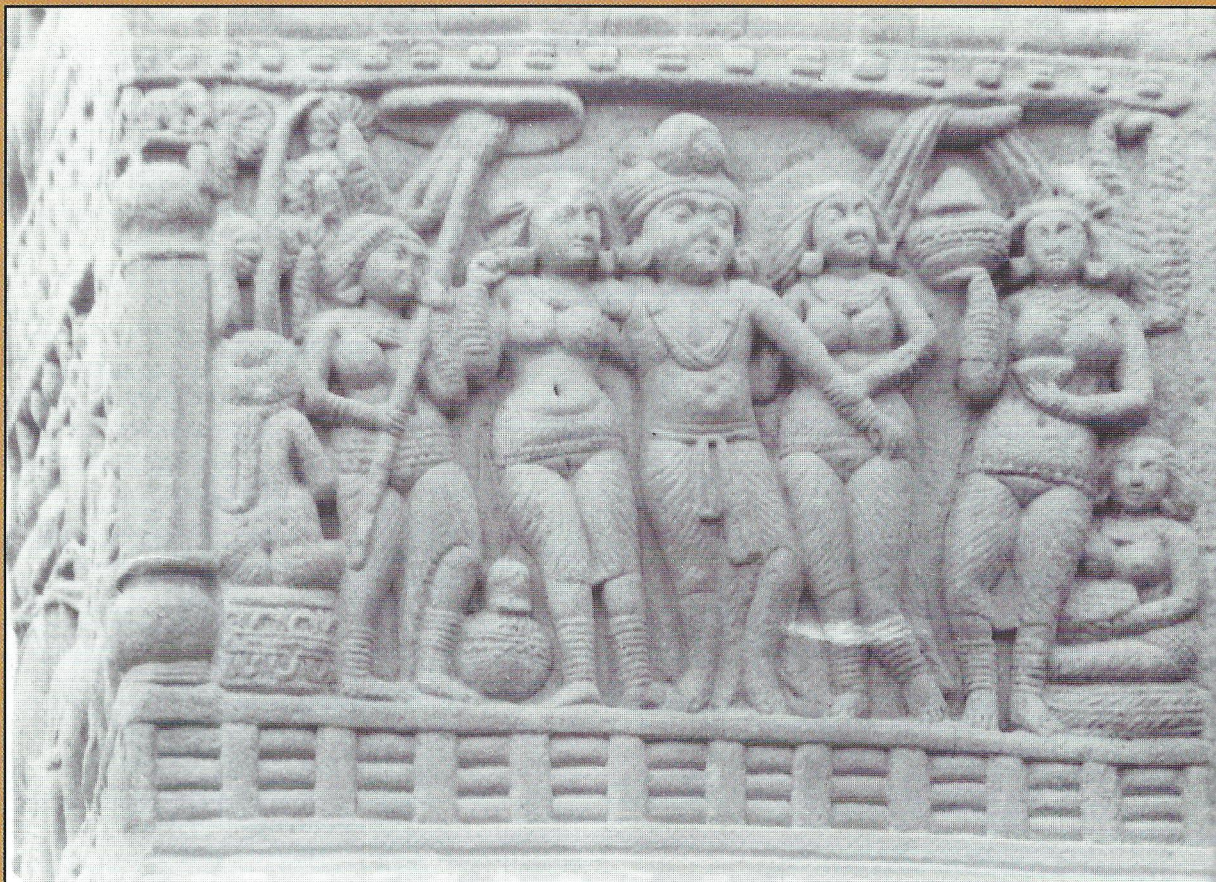
by Donald James Johnson

Emperor Ashoka ruled the Mauryan Empire in India for 37 years. He was the third ruler of the dynasty founded by his grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya, in 322 B.C. At the time, Indian rulers and warriors were expected to be *vira*, heroic warriors, as both Ashoka's father and grandfather had been.

Chandragupta Maurya united 17 small kingdoms in north India and created its first empire.

This image and several on the following pages are taken from a comic book published by H.G. Mirchandani, Bombay, India.





According to tradition, one of Ashoka's queens caused the Bodhi tree to wither because she was jealous of the attention Ashoka showed the tree. This section of a pillar found at Sanchi shows Ashoka supported by two wives and grieving over what has happened.

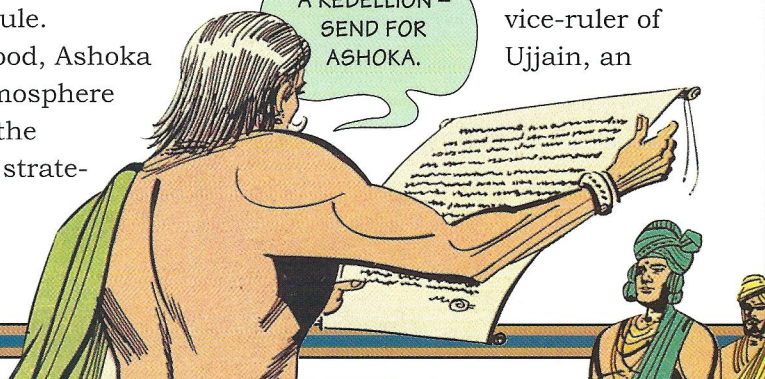
Because the people living in this vast and diverse land were not accustomed to obeying an emperor, Chandragupta worked hard to maintain control. He imitated the policies adopted by **Alexander** of Macedonia and followed the advice of the *Arthashastra*, a text that one of his advisors had written on how a king should rule.

From childhood, Ashoka lived in this atmosphere and knew well the results of such strategies. Legend claimed that

Ashoka's father disliked him because he was unattractive. Yet, at the same time, he admired his son's determination and ambition, and sent him to crush a revolt in Taxila, a city on the empire's northwest frontier. After the mission proved a military and diplomatic success,

Ashoka became vice-ruler of Ujjain, an

A REBELLION -
SEND FOR
ASHOKA.



According to the Arthasastra

The *Arthasastra* states that relations among kingdoms follow the Law of the Fishes: big fish eat little fish — meaning, big kingdoms eat smaller kingdoms. The book also explains how a prince can keep his small kingdom from being “eaten up” by a larger state. It advises princes: “If you are not prepared to be cruel and to kill men as the fisher kills the fish, abandon every hope of great success.”

In this amoral (having no morals) world of the fishes, you must never trust anyone. Imagine a political map, the *Arthasastra* suggests, with your state at the center, circled by other kingdoms. Whatever kingdom borders yours is your enemy. Kingdoms that border your enemies are your friends, because they are enemies of your enemies. Kingdoms on their borders are your enemies, and so on. But, if you conquer and absorb the first ring of enemies, then friends become enemies, and enemies become friends. (See mandala diagrams at right.) Therefore, in foreign relations with your neighbors, there are no lasting bonds, only temporary alliances.

Because small kingdoms are almost always threatened by their neighbors, leaders must be cunning to survive. The *Arthasastra* suggests several strategies that a ruler may use when dealing with neighboring kingdoms. They include:

Sweet talk: Use soothing words; act in an accommodating way; offer to agree on policies such as non-aggression pacts and treaties. Remember: Might is above right, and right proceeds from might.

Power: Be well-armed; demonstrate your strength; threaten others; be ready to use aggression of any kind.

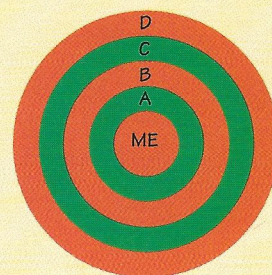
Bribe: Offer gifts, donations, or foreign aid; make an agreement to share the spoils of war.

Divide and conquer: Divide the opposition; use treachery or treason to make them distrust their leaders or allies; sow dissension in the enemy camp.

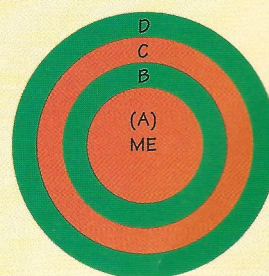
Illusion: Create the wrong impression; promise things you do not mean to do; use fraud, tricks, and spies; pretend you are stronger than you actually are.

important province in central India and a center of Buddhism. In Ujjain, Ashoka met Devi, the beautiful daughter of a local merchant. She was a devout Buddhist, and they soon fell in love, married, and had two children.

Ashoka was not the heir to the throne. His father had made it clear that he wanted Ashoka’s older brother to be the next emperor. After their father died in 273 B.C., Ashoka and his brothers fought for several years over who

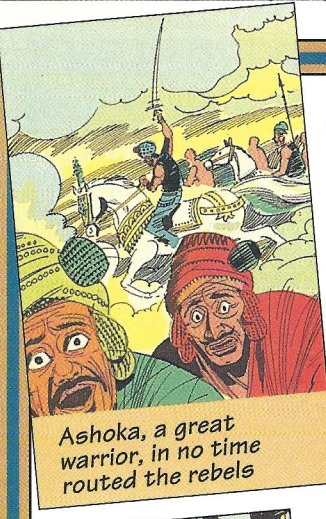


**A is my enemy,
B is my friend,
C is my enemy,
D is my enemy.**



**A is absorbed
into my circle,
B becomes my
enemy,
C becomes my
friend,
D becomes my
enemy.**

Alexander, king of Macedonia, ruled from 336 B.C. to 323 B.C. He is usually referred to in history books as “Alexander the Great.”



Ashoka, a great warrior, in no time routed the rebels

would rule. Some sources accuse Ashoka of killing his older brother. Buddhist tradition credits Ashoka with murdering "99 brothers." Whatever the actual details may be, Ashoka was officially crowned king of the Mauryan empire in 269 B.C.

Buddhist legends also stress Ashoka's cruelty during the early years of his reign. One source said that he had all 500 of the women in his court killed because some of them said he was not very good looking. Others said that Ashoka was obsessed with establishing his authority and practiced various ways of having people tortured. Following the example set by Alexander and other west Asia rulers, Ashoka person-

ally accompanied his troops as they campaigned to enlarge his empire. Then came the Kalinga campaign, and everything changed.

In Ashoka's time, the people of India practiced many different religions. Buddhism, although relatively new, was spreading rapidly, especially among merchants. Some of Ashoka's wives were Buddhists. His nephew Nigrodha, a son of a brother that Ashoka had ordered murdered, became a Buddhist monk. Thus it was in this atmosphere of traditional kingship based on armed forces and fear and the growing popularity of Buddhism that Ashoka spent the first eight years of his reign. ¶

Donald James Johnson served as a consulting editor for this issue.



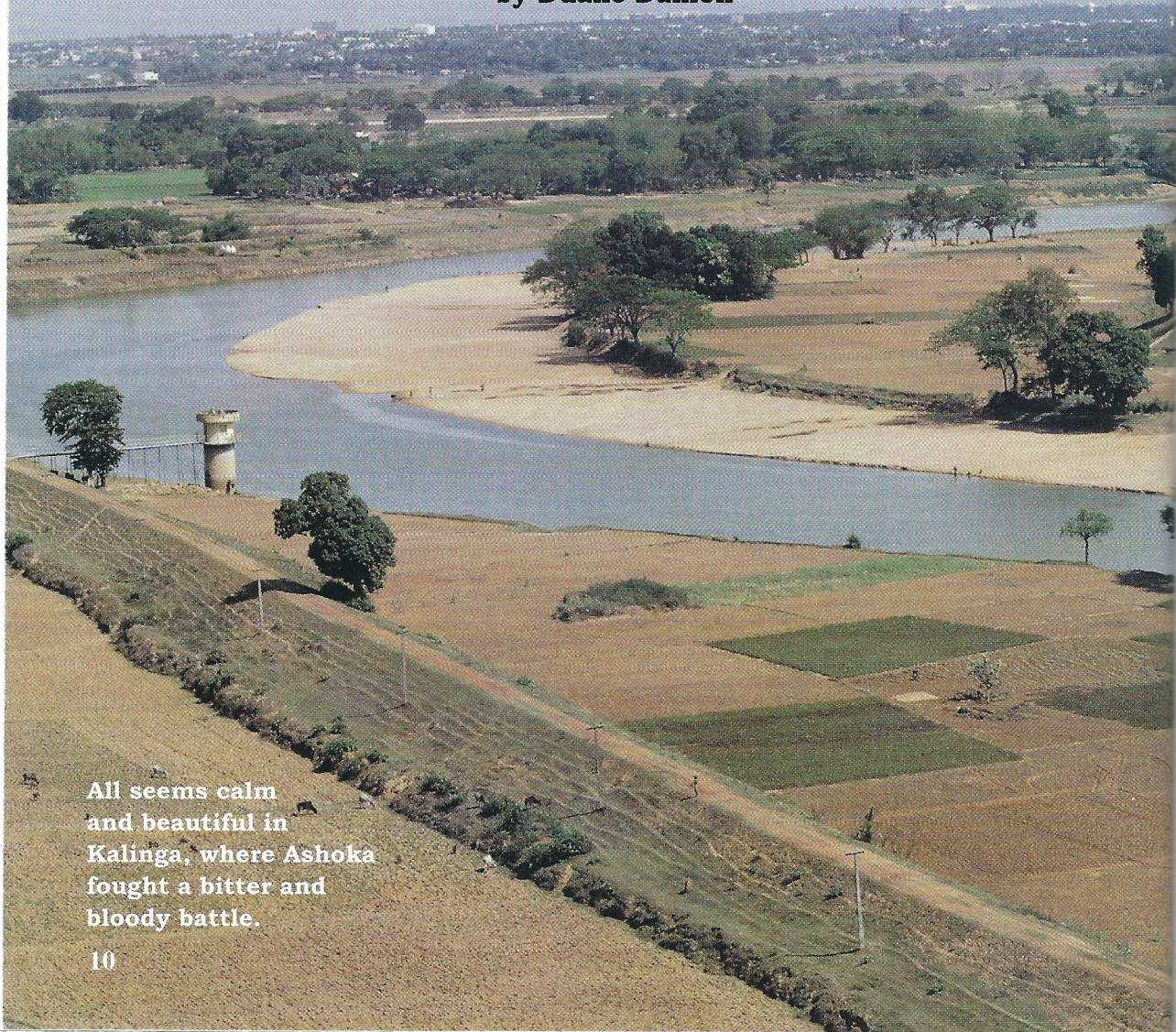
The rebels laid down their arms.



The people of the city gave Ashoka a grand welcome.

HIS SACRED MAJESTY'S REMORSE

by Duane Damon



All seems calm
and beautiful in
Kalinga, where Ashoka
fought a bitter and
bloody battle.

With increasing strength, make war; when you have a clear advantage over a neighbor, march against him.

So wrote Kautilya, chief minister to Emperor Chandragupta, in his handbook on royal politics entitled *Arthashastra*. Indeed, the advice seemed to express the aims of the emperor, whose conquests had created much of the Mauryan Empire. For Chandragupta, warfare had been an end in itself. For his grandson Ashoka, it would be the unlikely road to a new way of life.

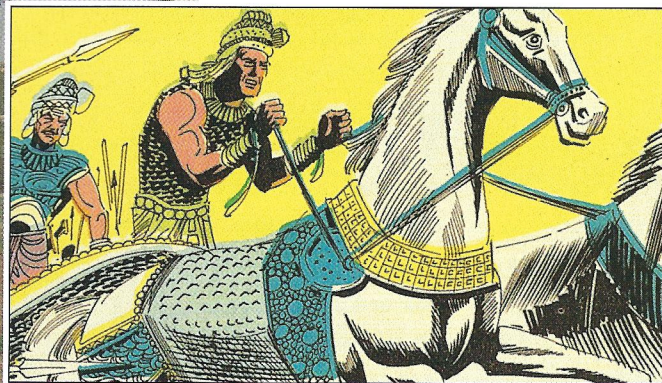
The first eight years of young Ashoka's rule showed little promise of enlightenment. Known to his subjects as *Devanampriya Priyadarshin* ("Beloved of the Gods, Of Gracious **Mien**"), Ashoka

attended to both his royal duties and his private pleasures. Yet, like his grandfather and his father Bindusara, Ashoka had an eye for real estate. And, like his forebears, he maintained a standing army to help him acquire it. To the south-east, the rich coastal kingdom of Kalinga (present-day Orissa) offered a tantalizing prize. Nestled against the Bay of Bengal, Kalinga's location was ideal for a profitable trade with the nations of Southeast Asia. Its position between the Mahanadi and Godavari rivers offered easy control of land and water traffic across the kingdom.

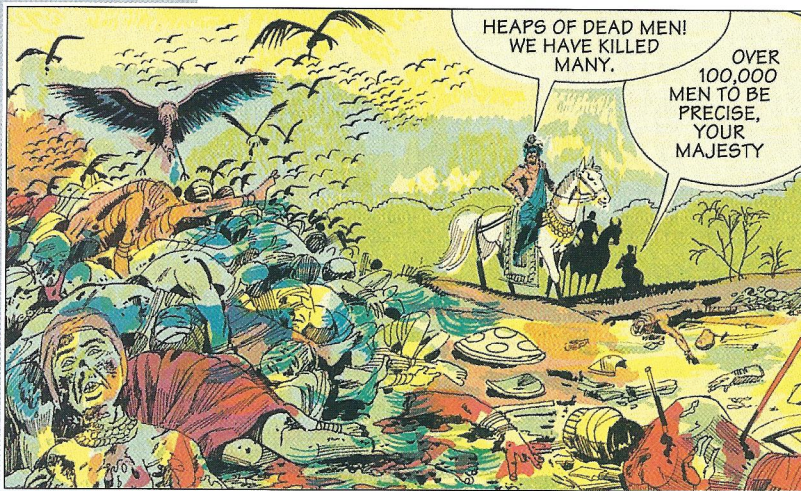
Mien refers to the way in which a person behaves.

Further, the minister Kautilya had told him of the supply of excellent war elephants in Kalinga's forests. "Victory for a king," he wrote, "depends primarily upon elephants."

In the ninth year of his reign, Ashoka moved on Kalinga. We know little of the campaign or his army. Five decades earlier, his grandfather Chandragupta's imperial forces had numbered 700,000 men, 10,000 chariots, and 9,000 elephants. Ashoka's army must have been as large. His swift, merciless assault on the tribes of Kalinga in 261 B.C. soon brought them to their knees. The cost for the defeated was high. By Ashoka's own reckoning — carved



Ashoka's army invaded Kalinga.



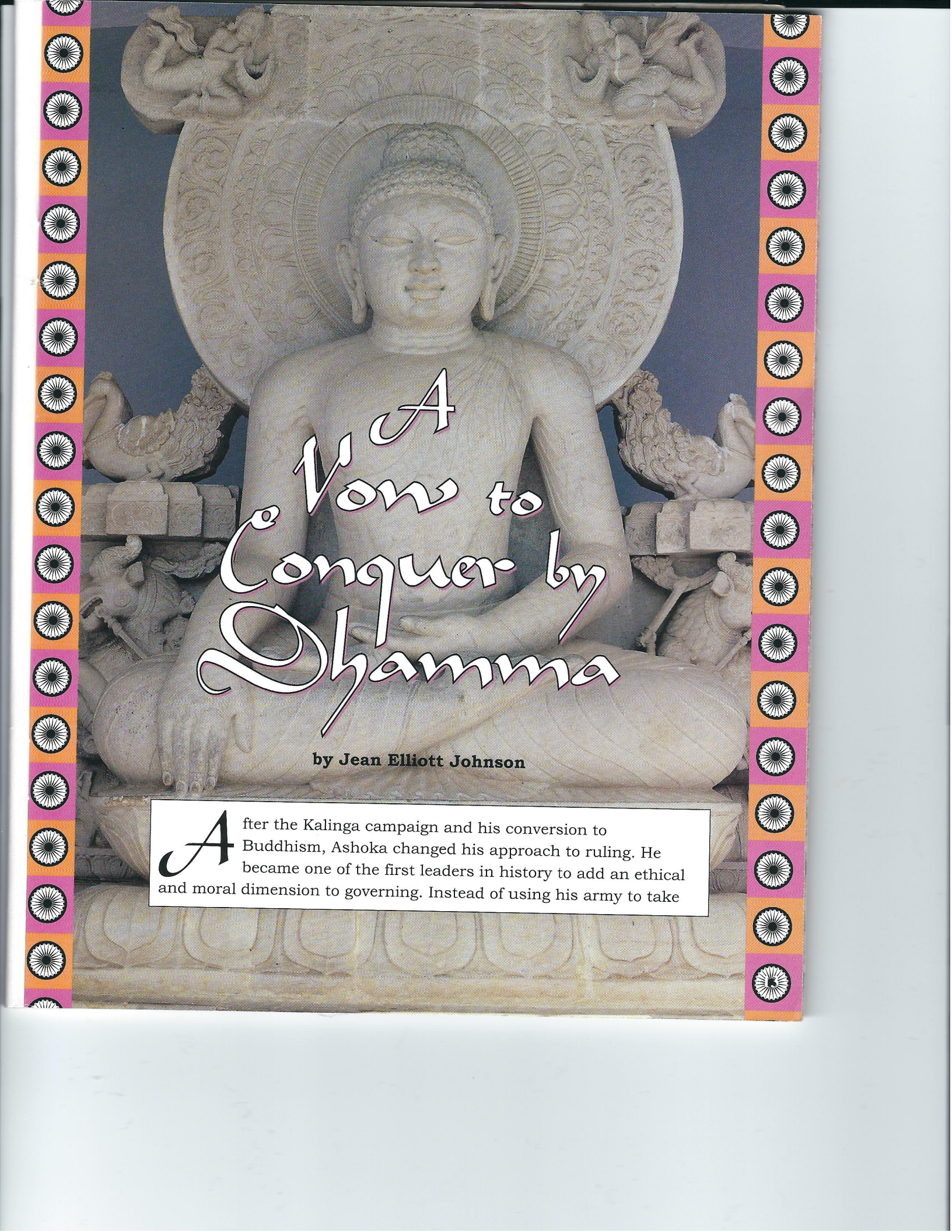
into a stone pillar and known as his “13th Rock Edict” — “one hundred and fifty thousand in number were the men [prisoners] who were deported thence, one hundred thousand in number were those who were slain there, and many times as many who died.”

Ashoka, however, felt no sense of triumph as he surveyed his prize. For the first time, we are told, the weight of his deeds bore down upon him like a great millstone. War, he realized, brought unspeakable suffering to the population. Wives became widows; children were made orphans. Pain and loss were everywhere. As the 13th Edict recorded, “When an unconquered country is conquered, slaughter, death, and deportation of people [are taking place] there. Thus arose His Sacred Majesty’s Remorse for having conquered the Kalingas...” Gone was the pride of the victori-

ous warrior. In its place were emotions unlike any that Ashoka had ever felt before. He actually began to experience deep regret for his actions and even sorrow for the victims of his conquest. Such a profound and sudden shift in Ashoka’s thinking was bound to make itself felt in action as well.

“Just after the taking of Kalinga,” other rock edicts related, “His Sacred Majesty began to follow Righteousness, to love Righteousness, to give instruction in Righteousness.” Yet, what was this “Righteousness” that the Edicts reported so passionately? According to the legends, it was after Kalinga that Ashoka abandoned the ways of war and converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. It was at this time that he took up the doctrine of *ahimsa* (“non-violence”) and the belief in the sanctity of all living creatures. So great was Ashoka’s devotion to his newfound Buddhist ideals that he resolved to share them with his entire kingdom. Thus did His Sacred Majesty embark on a new campaign — one that was under a new commander. ¶

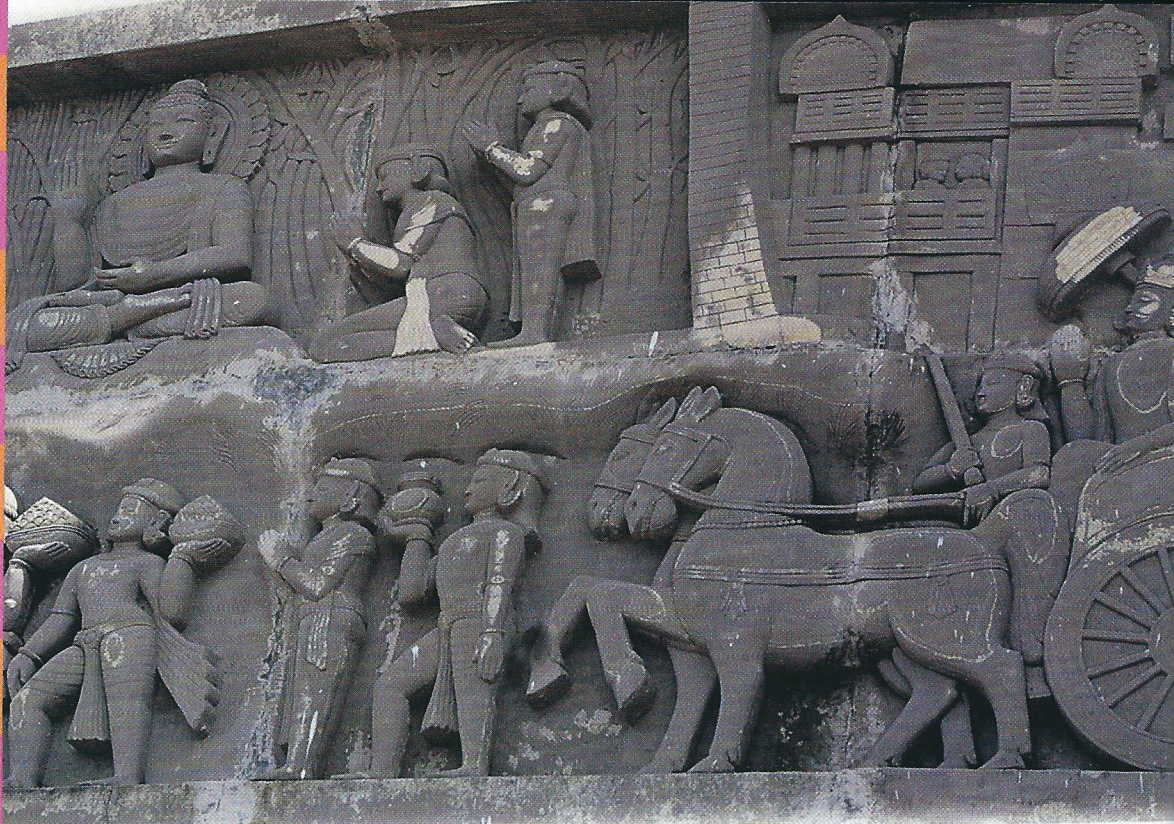
Duane Damon lives in Lutz, Florida, and is a regular contributor to CALLIOPE. His nonfiction book for young readers on the arts of the Great Depression will be published in 2001.



A How to Conquer by Dhamma

by Jean Elliott Johnson

After the Kalinga campaign and his conversion to Buddhism, Ashoka changed his approach to ruling. He became one of the first leaders in history to add an ethical and moral dimension to governing. Instead of using his army to take



Among the carved images that adorn the peace memorial in Kalinga is a relief showing Ashoka leaving the palace (above) and an image of the Buddha (previous page).

control of new territory, Ashoka wanted conquests to result from righteousness and virtue.

Ashoka was greatly influenced by Buddhism, but he was careful to keep his own personal religious beliefs separate from his duties as leader of a diverse empire. Rather than try to convert Indians to what he believed, he respected the many differences among his subjects and urged each person to be tolerant.

The centerpiece of Ashoka's new public policy was *dhamma*, a Buddhist term that he adapted and defined in his own way. The concept of *dhamma* was close to the Hindu idea of *dharma*, which means "that which supports or

upholds" the universe. *Dharma* refers to the way things or people ought to behave. Each part of the universe has its *dharma* — its attributes or appropriate way to act. The sun shines and the moon reflects. Rivers flow, snakes bite, cows give milk, and wheat seeds grow into wheat. *Dharma* also applies to human beings: Teachers teach and students learn. Parents set the rules and children obey. If everyone and everything tries to carry out its role, the universe will function harmoniously.

When early Buddhists spoke of *dhamma*, they meant the Buddha's teachings. These included being compassionate

toward all living things, including animals and plants, and trying not to hurt anything any more than was necessary. Buddhist *dhamma* also encouraged people to avoid stealing, to speak the truth, not to gossip, not to envy others, and to do work that did not harm others.

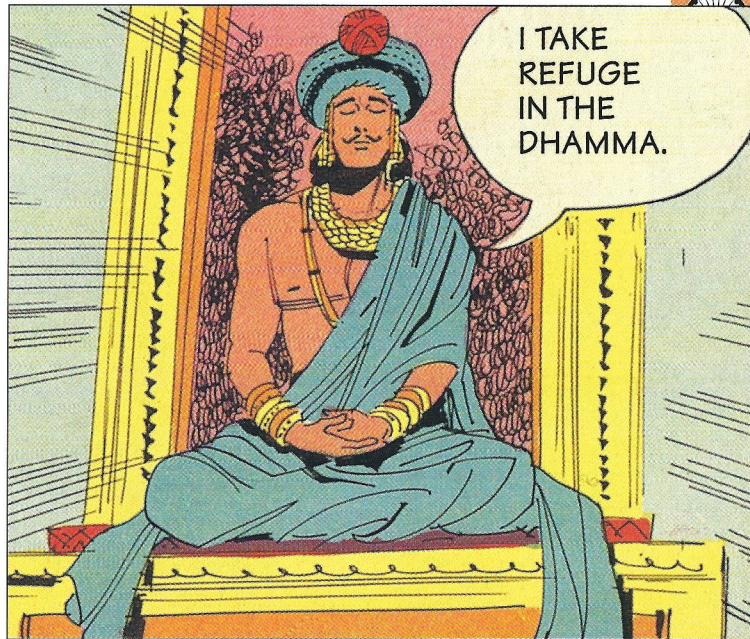
Ashoka defined *dhamma* as the:

...non-slaughter of animals for sacrificial purposes. Non-violence toward human beings, proper attention to kinsmen, welfare of mother and father, welfare of the aged and many other kinds of moral behavior.
(Rock Edict IV)

Ashoka believed that anyone, whether **Jain**, Buddhist, a follower of Brahmanism (the most common religion in India at the time), or a holy man faithful to some other religious system, could practice *dhamma* as he defined it. He also hoped that if everyone followed *dhamma*, his diverse kingdom would be united, and everyone would be content.

Ashoka sent Officers of Righteousness throughout the empire. Their mission was to spread the idea of *dhamma*, thereby ensuring that all Ashoka's subjects were being treated well and that people were judged fairly and punished appropriately for crimes. Ashoka also ordered hospitals built for human beings and for animals, and he supervised the growing of medical herbs. He urged his subjects to make pilgrimages instead of hunting, and he had roads constructed, resthouses built, trees planted, and wells dug to aid travelers. Ashoka urged his subjects to bring their concerns to him at any time of the day or night. Many of these activities were based on

Jain refers to a follower of Jainism, a Hindu religion that resembles Buddhism. Jainism stresses the importance of reverence for all living things and encourages a simple and strict lifestyle.





This relief at the Kalinga peace memorial honors the *chakra* or “wheel.”

good Buddhist principles, but Ashoka made them general principles for everyone.

Ashoka wanted to be an ideal ruler called a *chakravartin*, the king who “turned” (*vartin*) the “wheel” (*chakra*) of righteousness and moral authority. According to Indian mythology, a *chakravartin* had ruled the world during the mythical golden age. This was an ancient time when poverty, ill-will, violence, and wrongdoing did not exist because the king’s purity ensured a peaceful and prosperous existence. Ashoka consciously tried to present himself as a *chakravartin* in order to establish his connection with past traditions. He claimed a

great wheel had appeared to him in the sky, signifying that he was a *chakravartin*.

Ashoka protected and supported monasteries, universities, and scholars that promoted *dhamma*, and even sent Buddhist missionaries to other parts of Asia. Yet, of all his policies, perhaps the most significant are those that encouraged people of all religions to follow their beliefs and to avoid praising their own faith while insulting someone else’s. He stated:

One should honor another man’s sect [beliefs], for by so doing one increases the influence of one’s own sect and benefits that of another man; while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one’s own sect and harms another man’s.
(Edict XIII)¹

Certainly, Ashoka’s rule by *dhamma* was very different from rule by force. As a result, for many, Ashoka is one of the greatest rulers who ever lived. 🙏

Jean Elliott Johnson served as a consulting editor for this issue.

¹ This translation is adapted from *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* by Romila Thapar, published by Oxford University Press, 1997.

THE EDICTS OF ASHOKA

by Jean Elliott Johnson

Carved inscriptions instructed the people how to live according to *dharma*. This pillar is one of many Ashoka had erected more than 2,200 years ago.

During his reign, Emperor Ashoka issued numerous **edicts**. These he had carved on stone pillars and on the sides of large rocks throughout India. The edicts contain mainly moral advice. Historians have used, and continue to use, these statements to piece together what happened during Ashoka's reign because no official history was written. While Ashoka explains his reasons for the edicts, it is important to remember that they represent what Ashoka hoped was true,

or what he wanted people to do and believe. They do not necessarily tell exactly what happened. Even so, they are an excellent source about Ashoka.

Twelve years after my coronation, I ordered edicts on dharma to be inscribed for the welfare and happiness of the people...[Edict VI] Some of the edicts have been inscribed again and again because of the charm of the teachings [and in hopes that] men may follow their directions after hearing them repeatedly. [Rock Edict XIV] ¹

An **edict** is an official public proclamation or order.

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¹ This translation is adapted from *The Edicts of Asoka* by N.A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, published by the University of Chicago Press, 1959.

The edicts mention little about Ashoka's personal life, but one indicates that he "became enlightened 10 years after coronation" [Rock Edict VIII]. Another tells about his reaction to the Kalinga campaign, and how it caused him to renounce war as a means of extending his own territory. However, that same edict stated:

King Ashoka, remorseful as he is, reminds even the forest peoples who live in the royal dominions...that he exercises the power to punish the wrongdoers. For King Ashoka desires all beings should be safe, self-restrained, calm in thought, and gentle.

One edict explains Ashoka's idea of good government: "government by *dhamma*, administration according to *dhamma*, and protection through *dhamma*." He sent ministers all over his realm to spread the idea of *dhamma*:

Twelve years after my coronation I have ordered thus! Everywhere in my dominions, the officers will embark on tours of inspection every five years in order to instruct people in the dhamma as well as for other purposes. They will

instruct my subjects that obedience to father and mother is excellent; generosity to friends, acquaintances and relatives, to

***Brahmans** and **ascetics** is excellent; excellent is refraining from the slaughter of animals; and it is*

good not only to spend little, but to own few possessions. [Brahmagiri Rock Edict III]

This is the only edict that mentions spending little and recommends owning few things. Perhaps the merchants objected to this approach, which may explain why Ashoka abandoned it. Other edicts provide more information about his ministers:

Since I have been crowned 13 years, I have appointed officers of dhamma...They are employed among the servants and masters, among Brahmins, the destitute and the aged, for their benefit and happiness...The officers are busy promoting the welfare of prisoners, in preventing harassment and securing release for those who have children, or who have been overwhelmed with calamity or are old. [Rock Edict V]

I have given my ministers independent authority in judgment and punishment. But it is desirable that there should be uniformity in judicial procedure and punishment. [Rock Edict IV]

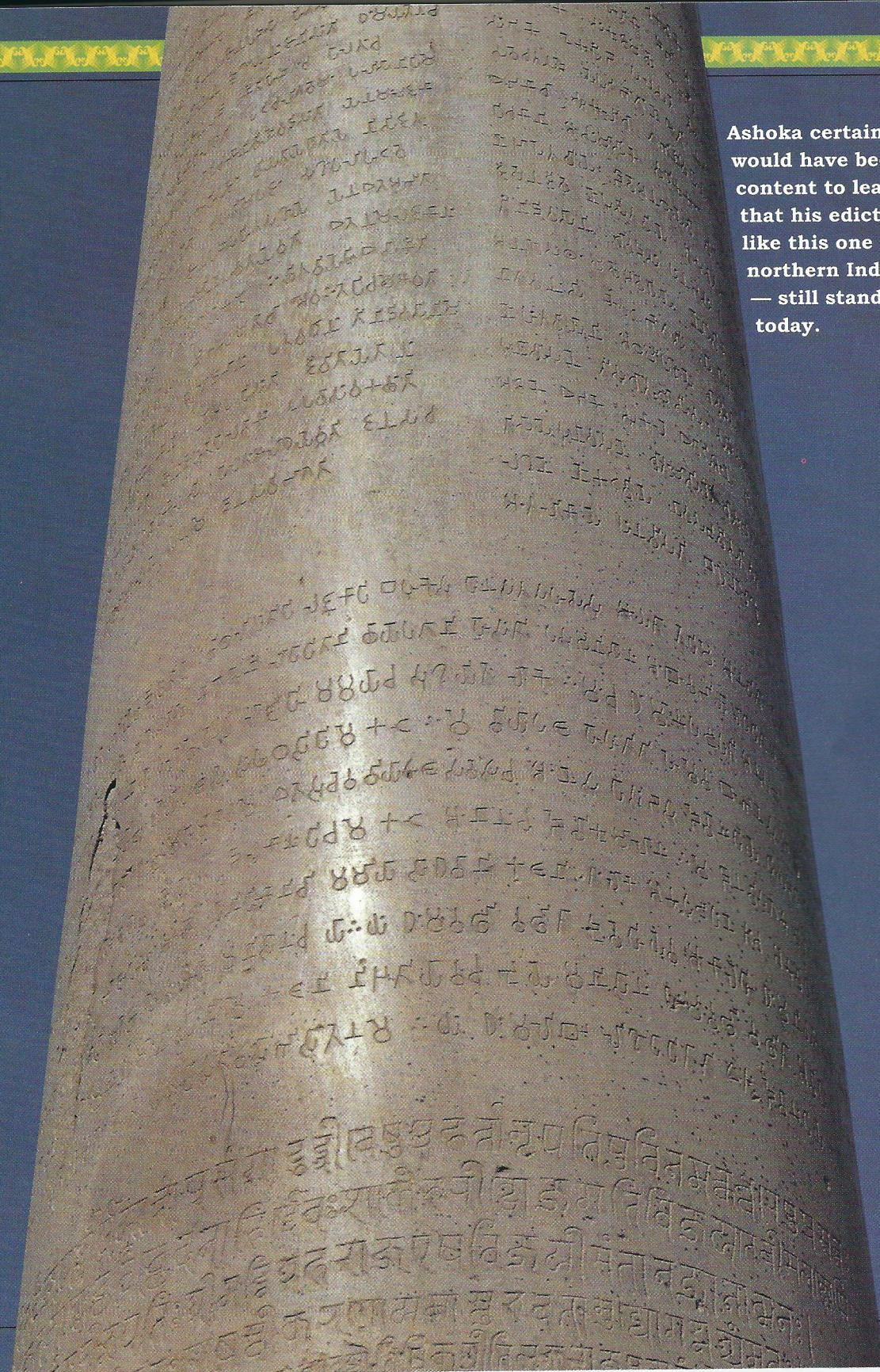
I have made arrangements that officials may have access to me and may report on the affairs of my people at all times and in all places – when I am eating, when I am in the harem or my inner apartments, when I am attending to the cattle, when I am walking or engaged in religious exercises. [Rock Edict VI] ¹

Ashoka also described how he toured his empire:

He [Ashoka] visits priests and ascetics and makes gifts to them; he visits the aged and

Brahmans are members of the priestly class, the highest class in Hindu society, and are considered the guardians of the Hindu traditions.

Ascetics are people who lead a life that is strict and free of usual comforts and pleasures because they believe it can help them reach a higher spiritual state.



Ashoka certainly would have been content to learn that his edicts — like this one in northern India — still stand today.

gives them money; he visits the people of rural areas, instructing them in dhamma and discussing it with them. [Ashoka] takes great pleasure in these tours, far more than could result from other tours. [Rock Edict VIII] ¹

The rock edicts describe several of Ashoka's other policies. For example: *Everywhere in the empire...King Ashoka has arranged for two kinds of treatments, of men and animals. And those medical herbs that are beneficial to men and animals have been brought and planted wherever they did not exist. Roots and fruits, too, have been brought and planted wherever they did not exist. On the highway, wells have been dug, and trees planted for the use of men and animals. [From Rock Edict II] ¹*



Ashoka gave up the royal hunt, which traditionally had been held each year. He recommended that his subjects replace hunts with pilgrimages, in part because when people took long journeys to holy places in distant parts of the kingdom, they helped unify the country.

The Ashoka pillars were topped by capitals (the top part of a column) with reliefs of lions and other animals supporting a giant *chakra* to symbolize that Ashoka was a *chakravartin*. 🏹

Donald James Johnson served as a consulting editor for this issue.

The writing on this pillar in Nepal is clear and precise — a sign that Ashoka wanted his edicts read and followed.

