Ashoka's Rock and Pillar Edicts

To make his Buddhist-based laws known to everyone in his empire, Ashoka had them inscribed on rocks and pillars that were placed all over modern-day India, Nepal, and Pakistan. As a result, these writings are known as Ashoka's Rock and Pillar Edicts. They are the primary historical source for most of what we know about Ashoka and the period during which he ruled the Maurya Empire.

To this day, only nineteen of the pillars survive, six of them with Ashoka's lion symbol on the top. They average between 40 and 50 feet in height.

Pre-Reading Questions: Contextualization

1. What is another word for edict?

2. Why did Ashoka have his edicts inscribed on rocks and pillars?

3. Why is it significant that 19 of the pillars have survived to modern day?
Ashoka's Rock and Pillar Edicts

1. All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness
2. both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men.

3. [Y]our aim should be to act with impartiality [fairness; evenhandedness]. It is because of these
4. things -- envy, anger, cruelty, hate, indifference, laziness or tiredness -- that such a thing does not
5. happen. Therefore your aim should be: "May these things not be in me." And the root of this is
6. non-anger and patience...Failure in duty on your part will not please me. But done properly, it will win
7. you heaven and you will be discharging your debts to me.

8. Happiness in this world and the next is difficult to obtain without much love for the Dharma, much
9. self-examination, much respect, much fear (of evil), and much enthusiasm. But through my
10. instruction this regard for Dharma and love of Dharma has grown day by day, and will continue to
grow. And my officers of high, low and middle rank are practicing and conforming to Dharma, and
11. are capable of inspiring others to do the same. Mahamatras [Ashoka's officials responsible for
12. making sure Dharma was followed] in border areas are doing the same. And these are my
13. instructions: to protect with Dharma, to make happiness through Dharma and to guard with

15. [King Ashoka] honors both ascetics [religious people] and the householders of all religions [...] By
16. so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's
17. own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive
18. devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his
19. own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the
20. doctrines professed by others.

21. Whatever good deeds have been done by me, those the people accept and those they follow.
22. Therefore they have progressed and will continue to progress by being respectful to mother and
23. father, respectful to elders, by courtesy to the aged and proper behavior towards Brahmans and
24. ascetics, towards the poor and distressed, and even towards servants and employees.

25. There is no gift like the gift of the Dharma...One benefits in this world and gains great merit in the
26. next by giving the gift of the Dharma.

27. Therefore this Dharma edict has been written to last long and that my sons, grandsons and
28. great-grandsons might act in conformity with it for the welfare of the world. However, this is difficult
to do without great exertion.

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Lines 1-2: What message is Ashoka trying to convey to his people?

Lines 4-8: What two values does Ashoka claim are the key to being an impartial and fair person?

Lines 4-8: What's another word for "duty" in Buddhism – when Ashoka says, "Failure in duty on your part will not please me."

Lines 10-17: What is the "Dharma" Ashoka is referring to in this document?

Lines 19-24: What is Ashoka promoting in this section of the text and why?

Lines 26-29: According to Ashoka, who should people respect?

Lines 34-35: What does Ashoka expect of future generations?