

The Sovereign Mind: Integrating Ashokan Dhamma-Ethics and Meditative Knowledge Systems for Holistic Mental Wellbeing

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between the socio-political ethics of Emperor Ashoka and the meditative traditions of Ancient India through the lens of traditional Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). While classical traditions such as Yoga and Buddhism developed internal techniques for mental regulation through Dhyana (meditation), Ashoka's Edicts established an external ethical framework (Dhamma) that enabled these practices to function at a societal scale.

Drawing on epigraphic evidence in Magadhi Prakrit alongside Yogic and Buddhist textual traditions, the study proposes that Ashoka's governance model constituted a form of state-supported psychological infrastructure. Interpreted through modern frameworks such as Post-Traumatic Growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and environmental psychology (Wilson, 1984), this paper argues that the Mauryan state cultivated conditions conducive to both individual and collective mental wellbeing. In doing so, it offers a historical model for integrating ethical governance with mental health policy.

The contemporary crisis of mental health is often characterized by what Mark Fisher (2009) termed "capitalist realism," where distress is privatized and treated as a chemical imbalance rather than a systemic failure. In contrast, the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka Maurya (r. 268–232 BCE) offers a historical precedent for a "**Therapeutic State.**" Ashoka's "Dhamma" was not a conversion to a religion in the modern sense, but a sophisticated public health intervention. As Thapar (1997) argues, Dhamma was a "civic ethic" designed to integrate a diverse population. However, when viewed through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), it becomes clear that Ashoka was implementing a "Top-Down" cognitive behavioral framework.

Keywords: Ashokan Edicts, Dhamma, Post-Traumatic Growth, Sila-Samadhi-Panna, Social-Emotional Learning, Neuro-Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary approaches to mental wellbeing often frame it as an individual, clinical concern, largely detached from social and ethical contexts. In contrast, classical Indian thought situates the mind within a broader ecological and moral framework, recognizing that psychological stability cannot be sustained in a disordered social environment. The concept of *Sthitaprajna*—a state of mental equilibrium—presupposes not only internal discipline but also external harmony.

Emperor Ashoka represents a unique historical attempt to bridge this divide. Following the Kalinga War, his articulation of *Dhamma* transformed ethical self-regulation into a matter of public policy (Thapar, 1997). Rather than enforcing religious conformity, Ashoka promoted a civic ethic grounded in compassion, restraint, and self-examination. His edicts, distributed and inscribed across the empire, functioned not merely as administrative directives but as instruments of psychological guidance (Hultsch, 1925).

This paper argues that Ashoka's governance can be understood as a form of "cognitive-ethical architecture," wherein external ethical norms (*Sila*) created the conditions necessary for internal mental stillness (*Samadhi*). By aligning insights from the Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist Abhidhamma, and modern psychological theory, the study explores how the Mauryan state fostered a transition from anxiety-producing governance to a system that encouraged reflective awareness and emotional regulation.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a **Qualitative Hermeneutic approach**, specifically focusing on the following four methodological pillars:

1. Comparative Philological Analysis

The primary methodology involves a "side-by-side" linguistic mapping of the **Magadhi Prakrit** used in the Ashokan Edicts against the **Pali** of the *Tripitaka* and the **Sanskrit** of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, i.e. A linguistic comparison is conducted between the Prakrit of the Ashokan edicts and the Pali and Sanskrit of Buddhist and Yogic texts to identify conceptual continuity across traditions (Bronkhorst, 2011).

- **Process:** Identifying technical terms in the Edicts—such as *Sayame* (self-control), *Bhava-shuddhi* (purity of mind), and *Atmapariksha* (self-examination)—and tracing their evolution in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).
- **Goal:** To prove that Ashoka was not using "Dhamma" as a vague moral code, but as a precise application of meditative technology.

2. Historical Case Study: Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)

The paper utilizes the **Kalinga War** as a historical case study to apply modern psychological frameworks to ancient figures which means Ashoka's transformation following the Kalinga

War is interpreted using the framework of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), particularly through Major Rock Edict XIII.

- **Framework:** Using the **Tedeschi-Calhoun model of PTG**, the paper analyzes Major Rock Edict XIII.
- **Analysis:** We categorize Ashoka's recorded remorse (*Anutape*) not as a sign of weakness, but as a "seismic cognitive shift" that led to the five domains of growth: personal strength, new possibilities, improved relationships, appreciation for life, and spiritual change.

3. Environmental Psychology & Biophilia Mapping

This methodology examines the physical infrastructural elements described in the edicts **Major Rock Edict II** and **Pillar Edict VII**—such as wells, trees, and medicinal plantings—are analyzed using environmental psychology and the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984).

- **Mapping:** Correlating the placement of edicts (public thoroughfares) and the provision of shade trees/medicinal herbs with the "Restorative Environment Scale."
- **Theory:** Applying E.O. Wilson's **Biophilia Hypothesis** to argue that Ashoka was intentionally lowering the "Social Stress Index" to make the populace more receptive to meditative practices.

4. Cross-Disciplinary Synthesis (Neuro-Ethics)

Concepts from Buddhist psychology are compared with modern cognitive science, particularly theories of motivation and emotional regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Damasio, 1994) which means the paper synthesizes **Buddhist Abhidhamma** (the psychology of mental factors) with modern **Neuro-ethics**.

- **Process:** Comparing the "Restraint of the Senses" found in the Edicts with the "Executive Function" of the pre-frontal cortex.
- **Goal:** To establish a "Top-Down" (State Policy) and "Bottom-Up" (Personal Meditation) model for mental health.

METHODOLOGICAL SUMMARY TABLE

Method	Source Material	Analytical Lens
Hermeneutics	Brahmi/Prakrit Inscriptions	Linguistic & Contextual Meaning
Comparative Analysis	Yoga Sutras & Pāli Canon	IKS Meditative Logic
Behavioral Mapping	Major Rock Edicts IV, XII	Cognitive Dissonance & Reframing
Spatial Analysis	Pillar Edict VII	Environmental Psychology & Biophilia

Data Sources

- **Primary:** Inscriptions of Asoka (Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol I) by E. Hultzsch.
- **Secondary:** Peer-reviewed journals in *Clinical Psychology*, *South Asian Studies*, and *Neuroscience*.

This multi-modal approach ensures the paper is grounded in hard historical evidence (Epigraphy) while remaining relevant to contemporary mental health policy.

The Ethical Foundation: *Sila* as Cognitive Hygiene

Classical Indian traditions emphasize that meditative stability requires an ethical foundation. In both the *Yoga Sutras* (Patanjali, trans. Bryant, 2009) and Buddhist teachings (Bodhi, 2000), moral discipline (*silā*) precedes concentration (*samadhi*) like the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and the *Tripitaka* agree that meditation (*Samadhi*) is impossible without a foundation of moral conduct (*Sila*). As Gombrich (2006) notes, the "ethicization" of society is the first step toward psychological liberation.

1 Internalization of the Law

Ashoka's edicts extend this principle to the societal level. In Major Rock Edict IV, the symbolic transition from *bherighosha* (the sound of war) to *dhammaghosha* (the sound of righteousness) reflects a profound shift from coercion to ethical internalization (Hultzsch, 1925). From a psychological perspective, this aligns with the movement from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which is associated with greater cognitive coherence.

By promoting non-violence and restraint, Ashoka reduced conditions that contribute to psychological instability. Ethical conduct thus functions as a form of cognitive regulation at both individual and collective levels:

Original Prakrit (Girnar):

"Bherighoso aho Dhammaghoso... darsayitu janasa vimanani ca hatini ca agikhandhani ca annani ca divyani rupani."

"Through the practice of Dhamma, the sound of the war drum (Bherighosha) has become the sound of righteousness (Dhammaghosha)."

Analysis: "The sound of the war drum has become the sound of Dhamma... showing the people displays of heavenly chariots, elephants, and balls of fire."

From a psychological perspective, this represents the transition from **Extrinsic Motivation** (fear of punishment) to **Intrinsic Motivation** (ethical alignment). According to **Deci & Ryan (2000)**, this shift reduces "Cognitive Dissonance," allowing for the mental clarity required for deep meditation.

In the context of **Cognitive Dissonance Theory**, Ashoka was replacing a "Fear-based Stimulus" (*Bherighosa*) with a "Value-based Stimulus" (*Dhammaghosa*). By changing the empire's sensory environment, he moved the populace from a state of **Hyper-vigilance** (survival mode) to **Reflective Awareness**. The *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and the *Tripitaka* agree that meditation (**Samadhi**) is impossible without a foundation of moral conduct (**Sila**). Without *Sila*, the mind remains in a state of *Vikshepa* (agitation).

Sila as Pre-frontal Cortex Regulation

In the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali defines *Yamas* (restraints) and *Niyamas* (observances) as the prerequisites for mental stillness. Without these, the mind remains in a state of *Vikshepa* (agitation).

Major Rock Edict IX: Ashoka contrasts "huge and useless" ceremonies with the "ceremony of Dhamma," which includes proper treatment of servants and non-injury to living beings.

Analysis: This is the social scaling of **Sila**. From a neuro-ethical perspective, habitual ethical conduct reduces the "threat response" of the amygdala. When a society adopts non-violence (*Ahimsa*), the collective cortisol levels drop, allowing for higher-order cognitive functions.

Cognitive Dissonance and the Bherighosha-Dhammaghosha Shift

The transition from *Bherighosha* (the war drum) to *Dhammaghosha* (the sound of Dhamma) in **Major Rock Edict IV** is a masterclass in **Cognitive Reframing**. Ashoka acknowledges the psychological dissonance of a ruler who seeks peace through conquest. By changing the state's "sonic environment," he signaled a change in the collective subconscious of the empire.

Case Study: Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) and the Kalinga Transformation

Ashoka's transition from a conqueror to a "Dhamma-representative" is a historical archetype of **Post-Traumatic Growth**. Ashoka's response to the Kalinga War provides a historical example of post-traumatic growth. In Major Rock Edict XIII, he expresses remorse for the suffering caused by the conflict (Hultsch, 1925). This acknowledgment reflects a process of cognitive and emotional restructuring consistent with PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

His subsequent policies—emphasizing compassion, tolerance, and non-violence—demonstrate a reorientation of values. This aligns with key dimensions of PTG, including enhanced empathy, moral reflection, and spiritual development.

Importantly, this transformation was institutionalized through governance. Ashoka's personal ethical shift became the basis for a broader social framework aimed at reducing suffering.

Original Prakrit (Shahbazgarhi):

"Yo pi ca atavi Devanampriyasa vijitavyam bhotu, tatra pi anuneti anunijhapeti. Anutape pi ca prabhava Devanampriyasa."

"Even upon the forest-dwellers in his dominions, His Sacred Majesty looks kindly... for His Majesty possesses the power of remorse (*Anutape*)."

Analysis:

The Remorse: In **Major Rock Edict XIII**, the word **Anutape** is crucial. It is not just "sorry"; Ashoka confesses that the slaughter at Kalinga "*weighs heavily on his mind.*" The term **Anutape** (Remorse/After-heat) functions as **Tapas**— Ashoka used the trauma of Kalinga as *Tapas* to burn away the "King-Ego," replacing it with *Metta* (Loving-kindness), i.e., a purifying heat that allowed him to cultivate universal compassion (**Metta**). He utilized his trauma to stabilize not only his own mental health but the collective psyche of his subjects. This mirrors the modern clinical approach to PTG where a patient uses a "seismic event" to rebuild a more resilient, compassionate world-view.

The Growth: **Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004)** define PTG as positive psychological change resulting from a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. Ashoka's subsequent promotion of meditation and non-violence suggests that he used his trauma to cultivate universal compassion (*Metta*), thereby stabilizing his own mental health and that of his subjects. Ashoka's confession in **Major Rock Edict XIII** is perhaps the first recorded instance of a Head of State documenting a personal psychological crisis.

"One hundred and fifty thousand persons were thence carried away captive... many times as many died... This is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty." (Hultzsch, 1925).

According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004), PTG involves five domains: personal strength, new possibilities, improved relationships, appreciation for life, and spiritual change. Ashoka exhibits all five, but important three of them are:

1. **Personal Strength:** The shift from *Candashoka* (Cruel Ashoka) to *Dharmashoka*.
2. **Relationships:** His call for "concord" (*Samavaya*) in **Major Rock Edict XII**.
3. **Spiritual Change:** His deep immersion into the Buddhist Sangha as a *Lay Disciple* (Upasaka).

The Edicts as "Public Meditation" (Appamada)

Ashok did not merely issue laws; he issued Psychological Exercises designed to foster Metacognitive Awareness.

Self-Examination and Awareness: Pillar Edict III encourages individuals to reflect on their actions and recognize their limitations (Hultsch, 1925). This parallels meditative practices such as *vipassana*, which cultivate awareness of mental processes (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Cognitive Reframing and Tolerance: Major Rock Edict XII promotes respect for diverse traditions, reducing intergroup conflict. This can be interpreted as a form of cognitive reframing, similar to strategies used in modern psychology to regulate negative thought patterns (Tajfel, 1974).

Together, these edicts function as tools for cultivating metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation at a societal level.

1. *Atmapariksha* (Self-Examination) and Mindfulness in Pillar Edict III

Pillar Edict III functions as a guide for self-observation, identical to the objective of **Vipassana**:

Original Prakrit (Delhi-Topra):

"Kayane meva dekhati: 'Iyam me kayane kate' ti. No mina papam dekhati: 'Iyam me pape kate' ti, iyam va asinave nama."

"A man sees only his good deeds... but he does not see his evil deeds... This is what is called a sin... This is difficult to see."

Analysis: "A man sees only his good deeds... but he does not see his evil deeds... this is what is called a sin (*Asinave*)." This command for self-inventory is identical to the objective of **Vipassana** or **Sakshi Bhava** (Witnessing Awareness). By encouraging citizens to observe their own **Kodhe** (Anger), **Nithuliye** (Cruelty), and **Mane** (Pride), Ashoka was scaling "Mental Vigilance" to an entire population. This aligns perfectly with the **Jungian concept of the Shadow** and the Buddhist practice of **Sati** (Mindfulness). Ashoka identifies specific mental "pollutants" (*Asinave*):

- *Kodhe* (Anger)
- *Nithuliye* (Cruelty)
- *Mane* (Pride)
- *Isuya* (Envy)

By carving these into pillars in public squares, Ashoka transformed the city into a meditative space. Every time a citizen passed a pillar, they were prompted to engage in **Metacognitive Awareness**—thinking about their thinking.

In **IKS**, these are the *Kleshas* (afflictions). By mandating that citizens look for these within themselves, Ashoka was scaling the practice of **Sakshi Bhava** (Witnessing Awareness) to a national level. He recognized that "sin" is a psychological blockage (*Asinave* literally means "leakage" or "influx" of impurities) that prevents mental wellbeing.

2. *Pratipaksha Bhavana* (Cognitive Reframing) in Major Rock Edict XII

In **Major Rock Edict XII**, Ashoka advocates for religious tolerance as a mental discipline:

Original Prakrit (Girnar):

"Na ca veta-pashandasa puja va para-pashanda-garaha va no lhu-ka siya... tatra tatra prakarane."

"One should not honor only one's own religion and condemn the religions of others... On the contrary, others' religions should be honored."

Analysis: This is a social application of **Patanjali's *Pratipaksha Bhavanam*** (*Yoga Sutra* 2.33)—cultivating an opposite, positive thought to neutralize a negative one. By reducing inter-group conflict, Ashoka lowered the "Social Stress Index" of his empire.

The Socio-Environmental Landscape

Ashoka's policies also addressed environmental determinants of mental health. His edicts describe the planting of trees, construction of wells, and provision of medicinal resources (Hultsch, 1925).

These measures align with environmental psychology, which emphasizes the role of natural settings in reducing stress and enhancing wellbeing (Wilson, 1984). Access to green spaces and basic resources contributes to physiological stability, which supports mental regulation.

Ashoka's integration of ecological and ethical considerations reflects a holistic understanding of wellbeing. The Ashokan system recognized that mental health is tied to physical surroundings. **Major Rock Edict II** and **Pillar Edict VII** documents the creation of "healing environments":

Original Prakrit:

"Manus-chikicha ca pasu-chikicha ca. Osadhani ca... sarvatra harapitani ca ropapitani ca."

Analysis:

- **Phyto-therapy:** Planting medicinal herbs for humans and animals.
- **Biophilia:** Digging wells and planting shade trees to provide sensory relief.

By planting medicinal herbs (**Phyto-therapy**) and shade trees (**Biophilia**), Ashoka supported the parasympathetic nervous system of his citizenry. As **E. O. Wilson (1984)** stated about **Biophilia Hypothesis**, it suggests that humans have an innate tendency to seek connections with nature, such connections with nature reduce cortisol, creating a biological state conducive to the meditative practices Ashoka encouraged. Ashoka utilized this to ground the meditative practices. A mind cannot be "sovereign" if the body is in a state of heat-stress or dehydration. The Ashokan state provided the **Homeostasis** necessary for **Dhyana**.

- **Botanical Intervention:** Planting of banyan trees and mango groves.
- **Hydraulic Engineering:** Digging wells every half-mile.
- **Medical Pluralism:** Establishing hospitals for both humans and animals, and importing medicinal herbs (*Oshadhi*).

This documents the world's first state-sponsored **Phyto-therapy** and **Environmental Psychology** program. In Ayurvedic terms, this was the creation of a *Sattvic* environment. By planting shade trees and digging wells (*Kupa*), Ashoka was regulating the **Vata** (anxiety/movement) of the empire, creating a calm "External Homeostasis" that invited the citizenry to engage in internal meditation.

Socio-Cognitive Reframing: Major Rock Edict XII

This edict is a seminal text for **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)**. Ashoka argues that by disparaging another's sect, one harms their own.

- **IKS Link:** This is the externalization of *Pratipaksha Bhavana* (Yoga Sutra 2.33). When one feels the impulse to hate (the "negative thought"), one must consciously cultivate its opposite—respect for the "Other."
- **Modern Parallel:** This pre-dates modern "In-group/Out-group" bias theories in social psychology (Tajfel, 1974).

Ashoka's model moves beyond the "Clinical Model" of mental health to an "Ecosystemic Model." It posits that the "Sovereign Mind" is not one that rules others, but one that has attained sovereignty over its own internal impulses.

Comparative Framework: Ashokan Policy and IKS

Concept	Ashokan Edict (Prakrit Term)	IKS Meditative Practice	Modern Psychological Equivalent
Self-Observation	Pillar Edict III (<i>Atmapariksha</i>)	Vipassana / Sakshi Bhava	Metacognitive Awareness
Compassion	Rock Edict XIII (<i>Anutape</i>)	Karuna / Metta	Post-Traumatic Growth
Tolerance	Rock Edict XII (<i>Samavaya</i>)	Pratipaksha Bhavanam	Cognitive Reframing
Control	Rock Edict VII (<i>Sayame</i>)	Chitta-Vritti-Nirodha	Emotional Regulation
Environment	Rock Edict II (<i>Osadhani</i>)	Ayurvedic Dinacharya	Environmental Psychology

CONCLUSION

The synthesis of Ashokan edicts and Indian Knowledge Systems reveals a sophisticated model of wellbeing that integrates ethical governance with psychological development. Ashoka's approach demonstrates that meditation and mental discipline cannot be fully effective in isolation; they require supportive social, ethical, and environmental conditions.

By institutionalizing values such as non-violence, self-examination, and inter-sectarian respect, Ashoka effectively externalized key principles of meditative practice. This created a reciprocal system in which public ethics reinforced private mental discipline.

The Ashokan model represents an integration of structural and individual approaches to mental health:

- **Top-down:** Ethical governance shaping behavior
- **Bottom-up:** Individual cultivation of awareness

This dual framework aligns with contemporary perspectives that emphasize the interaction between social systems and personal wellbeing. Ashoka's approach demonstrates how ethical and environmental interventions can reinforce psychological resilience. By embedding ethical principles into public life, he created conditions that supported awareness, emotional balance, and resilience. This model remains relevant for contemporary mental health discourse, which increasingly recognizes the importance of systemic and ecological factors.

The relevance of this model extends beyond its historical context. In an era where mental health is frequently individualized and medicalized, Ashoka's example suggests the importance of systemic and ecological approaches. The "sovereign mind," in this framework, is not merely an inward achievement but a socially supported condition—one that emerges from the alignment of personal practice and collective responsibility.

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