**Ashoka**, also spelled **Aśoka**, (died 238? BCE, India), last major [emperor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/emperor-title) of the [Mauryan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauryan-Empire) [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) of [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India). His vigorous patronage of [Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism) during his reign (c. 265–238 BCE; also given as c. 273–232 BCE) furthered the expansion of that [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion) throughout India. Following his successful but bloody conquest of the [Kalinga](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kalinga) country on the east coast, Ashoka renounced armed conquest and adopted a policy that he called “conquest by [dharma](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dharma-religious-concept)” (i.e., by principles of right life).

In order to gain wide publicity for his teachings and his work, Ashoka made them known by means of oral announcements and by engravings on rocks and pillars at suitable sites. These inscriptions—the [rock edicts](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rock-edicts) and pillar edicts (e.g., the lion capital of the pillar found at Sarnath, which has become India’s national emblem), mostly dated in various years of his reign—contain statements regarding his thoughts and actions and provide information on his life and acts. His utterances rang of frankness and sincerity.

According to his own accounts, Ashoka conquered the Kalinga country (modern [Orissa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Odisha) state) in the eighth year of his reign. The sufferings that the war inflicted on the defeated people moved him to such remorse that he renounced armed conquests. It was at this time that he came in touch with Buddhism and adopted it. Under its influence and prompted by his own [dynamic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynamic) temperament, he resolved to live according to, and preach, the dharma and to serve his subjects and all humanity.