



◀ King Ashoka had edicts carved on tall pillars to promote peace across India.

Buddhism and the First Unification of India

17.1 Introduction

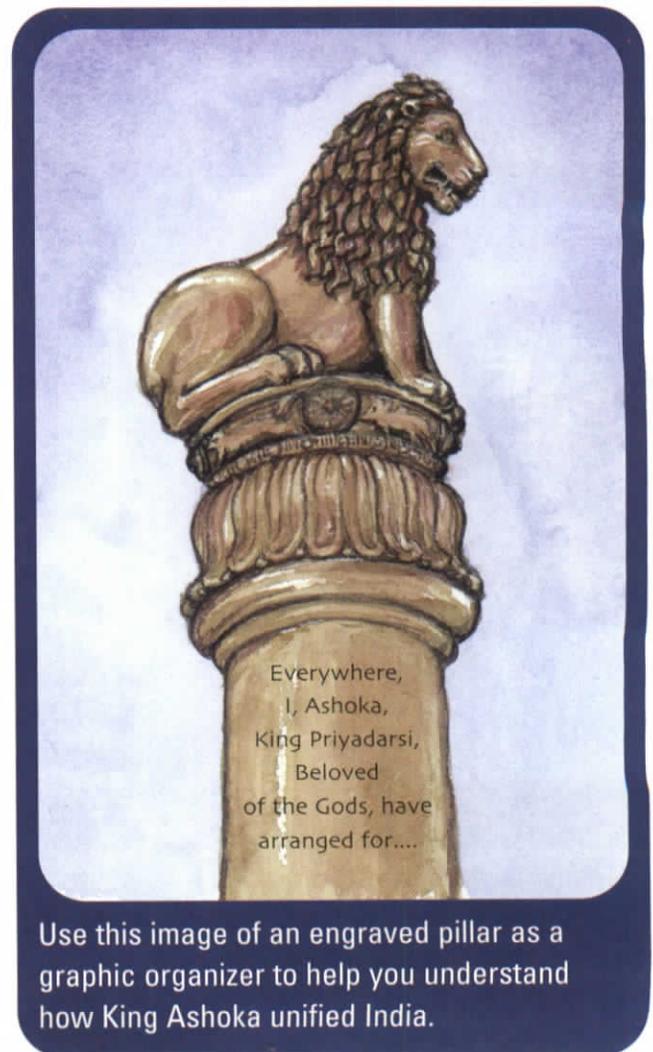
In Chapter 16, you learned about the origins of Buddhism. In this chapter, you will learn how one Indian leader, King **Ashoka**, used Buddhist values to **unify** India.

King Ashoka was part of the Maurya family. They united India for the first time under the **Mauryan Empire**, which flourished from about 322 to 187 B.C.E. The Mauryas, including Ashoka, fought wars of conquest to build their empire. Then a great change came over Ashoka, and he turned to peaceful ways of keeping India united.

The change came about in this way. One day when he was a young man, King Ashoka sat on his horse and looked out over a bloody battlefield. Men and animals lay dying under the hot Indian sun. Ashoka could hear the wounded groaning in pain. With growing horror, he thought of the thousands of people who had been killed or enslaved in his family's war for land. In that moment, he swore to give up violence.

Ashoka's promise led him to the Buddhist religion. He gave up making war and instead created an empire based on Buddhist values. He spread Buddhist beliefs through **edicts**, official messages carved on walls, rocks, and tall pillars.

In this chapter, you will read about how the Mauryan family unified India. Then you'll see how King Ashoka used Buddhist values to rule his empire.



17.2 The Mauryas Unify India

The Maurya family were the first leaders to unify India. This was a major accomplishment because India was so huge and

diverse. The Indian subcontinent covers more than one million square miles. Before the Mauryas united this vast land, it was divided into many small kingdoms.

Chandragupta Maurya began building the Mauryan Empire in the 320s B.C.E. He saw that the kingdoms of northern India were weak. They had wasted a great deal of money and men fighting among themselves. Chandragupta used his great army of 700,000 soldiers and 9,000 elephants to overthrow the rulers of these kingdoms. He conquered and united all of northern India.

Chandragupta kept his empire strong by using force whenever necessary. He was deathly afraid of enemies. He used his powerful army, a network of spies, and torture to keep his subjects in line.

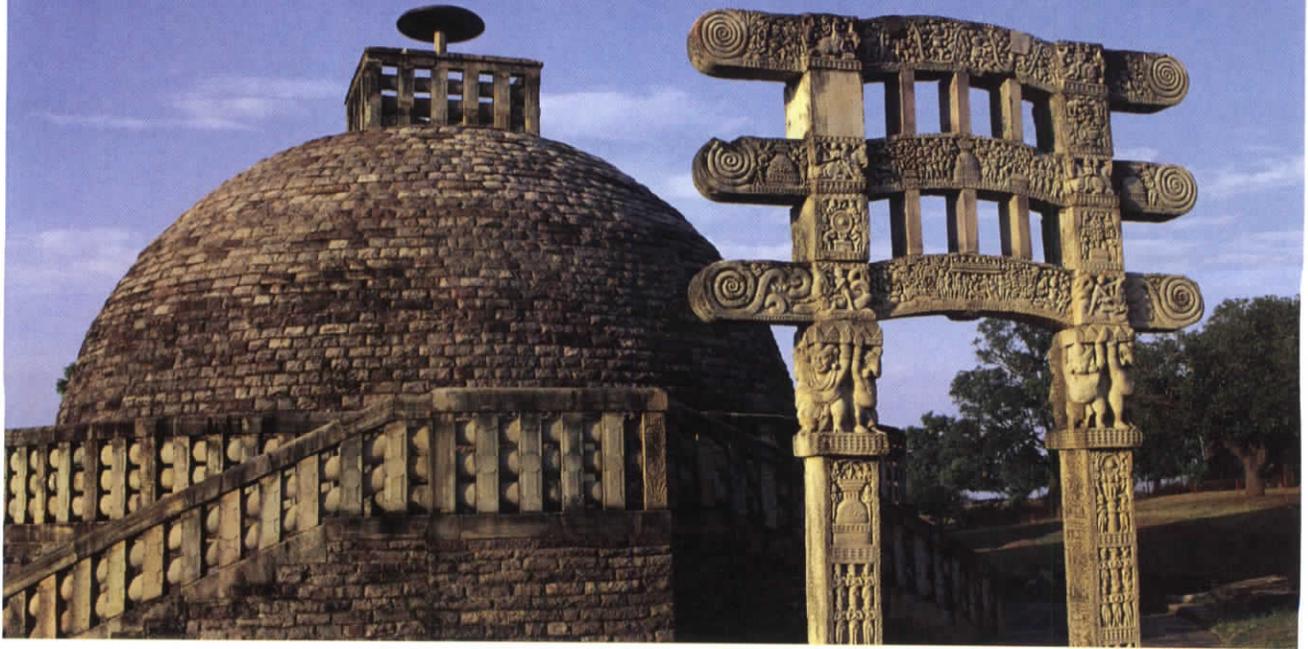
Chandragupta's rule was harsh, but it was successful in some ways. He created a strong central government. He wrote laws. He made sure

farmers had water for their crops. To help connect the parts of his empire, he built a royal road over 1,000 miles long.

Toward the end of his life, Chandragupta gave up his power. Tradition says that he became an ascetic (a person who has given up worldly pleasures). He lived in poverty and traveled with **monks** (simple holy men). Meanwhile, the empire grew even larger. Under Chandragupta's grandson, King Ashoka, it included nearly all of the Indian subcontinent.



monk a holy man who devotes his life to religious practice



17.3 Ashoka's Rule

The Mauryan Empire reached its height during the reign of King Ashoka. He ruled the empire from about 269 to 232 B.C.E.

During the early part of his reign, Ashoka expanded the empire to the south and east through a series of wars. Then, after one especially brutal battle, he made his decision to reject violence.

Ashoka decided to embrace Buddhism. He supported the Buddhist values of love, peace, and nonviolence. As a Buddhist, he respected all living things. He gave up hunting and became a strict vegetarian. (A vegetarian is someone who does not eat meat). He visited holy Buddhist sites. Perhaps most amazingly, Ashoka gave up wars of conquest. Never again would he fight another kingdom for its land.

Ashoka wanted his people to follow the Buddhist path. He urged them to be kind, respectful, and moral (behave in right ways). He told them to respect their elders, to tolerate people of different religions, and to treat their servants well. Ashoka saw himself as a wise and loving father figure. He often referred to the people he ruled as his children.

Ashoka also spread Buddhism beyond India. According to tradition, he sent his son, Mahinda, to Ceylon, a large island off India's southern tip. (Today it is called Sri Lanka.) Mahinda converted the king to Buddhism, which became the official faith of the kingdom.

Not all of Ashoka's actions reflected Buddhist values. He was a practical ruler. He allowed slavery and permitted people to be executed for serious crimes. He still kept a strong army. Although he gave up conquest, he did not return any of the lands the Mauryas had already conquered.

King Ashoka built this dome, called a *stupa*, to hold sacred objects associated with Buddhism.

edict a command that is obeyed like a law

One of Ashoka's edicts is inscribed on this pillar in the city of Delhi. Ashoka's pillars were 40 to 50 feet high and weighed over 100,000 pounds. They usually had a statue of an animal at the top. The pillars were polished until they shone like glass.



17.4 Ashoka's Edicts

Ashoka wanted a strong, united empire guided by Buddhist values. To spread those values to his people, he had **edicts** carved into walls, rocks, and tall pillars in public places so the greatest number of people could see them.

Ashoka's edicts were designed to promote four main goals:

Buddhist Values These edicts promoted the Buddha's teachings. They asked people to be loving and respectful, and to practice nonviolence. They said people should not get too attached to worldly things, such as money. They also told people to act morally (do right rather than wrong).

General Welfare These edicts promoted people's well-being. They were intended to make sure people had good health, shelter, clean water, and enough food.

Justice These edicts were concerned with fair laws. They also described the way people were to be treated in court and jail.

Security These edicts were concerned with enemies of the Mauryan Empire and people who were not citizens. They often dealt with issues of peace and conquest.

Ashoka's four goals were intended to give his empire a strong foundation. His reign is still remembered in India as a time of great achievements and progress. But his dream of a united empire did not last. About 45 years after his death, the empire broke apart into separate kingdoms.

A more lasting legacy was Ashoka's support of Buddhism. As you have read, Ashoka introduced Buddhism to Ceylon. Later, around the start of the Common Era, Buddhism spread from northwestern India to Central Asia. From there it traveled to China, Korea, and Japan. (See map on page 121.)

17.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how India was unified for the first time under the Mauryan Empire. The Mauryas created their empire through a series of wars and conquests. This changed when King Ashoka turned away from violence. Ashoka adopted Buddhist values. He kept India united through wise edicts. These edicts promoted Buddhism, general welfare, justice, and security.

In the next chapter, you will learn about the next great Indian empire, the Gupta Empire. In some ways, the Guptas were similar to the Mauryas. In others, they were quite different. As you will see, their rule led to many remarkable achievements.



The symbol seen on this pillar of Ashoka and on the flag of India is called the Ashoka Chakra or the Wheel of the Law. It symbolizes the perpetual movement and change that is part of all life.

