

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Asoka

---

The national emblem of India is a replica of the Lion Capital of Sarnath. This symbol features four lions standing atop a circular abacus. (The fourth lion is hidden from view.) At the center of the abacus, beneath each lion, there is a Wheel of the Law. The abacus itself is girded by four smaller animals. They are guardians of the four directions -- the elephant in the east, the bull in the west, the lion in the north, and the horse in the south. This magnificent emblem has a very interesting history. It actually came into existence long before the Republic of India was born. Its original creator was a famous Indian emperor by the name of Asoka (also spelled as Ashoka). He was the third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty. As a devoted Buddhist, Asoka erected the Lion Capital of Sarnath near Varanasi (present-day Benares) to mark the spot where Buddha first proclaimed his gospels of peace and emancipation. During his reign, he went to great lengths to promote Buddhism. He sent monks to faraway places. He built several monasteries and constructed numerous *stupas* (dome-shaped structures for housing Buddhist relics). Thanks to his patronage, Buddhism was able to spread beyond India. Today, it has more than 350 million followers worldwide.



Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Asoka and his strong devotion to Buddhism is how he came to embrace it in the first place. For that, we must start from the beginning of his life.

Asoka was born around 304 B.C. Since very early on, he had made a name for himself as being extremely talented and brave. But no matter how accomplished he was, he did not really have a chance to be the heir apparent of his father, Bindusara, because he was not the eldest son. To get what he wanted, he supposedly killed many of his half-brothers while Bindusara was lying on his deathbed. After eliminating all the competitors, he became the natural candidate for the kingship. He ascended the throne around 272 B.C. At this point in his life, Asoka was downright ruthless. His atrocities earned him a rather unpleasant nickname -- *Chandal* Asoka or the Evil Asoka.

Upon securing his power, Asoka launched a series of military campaigns. As successes kept rolling in, the territory of the Mauryan dynasty was growing fast. Throughout his reign, Asoka had full control over almost the entire Indian subcontinent. His empire even included lands in present-day Afghanistan. But just as the kingdom reached its maximum, Asoka suddenly put a stop to his grand plan of expansion. Literally overnight, this once bloodthirsty emperor had a change of heart. He no longer felt like invading other countries. He came to accept the teachings of Buddhism and chose to pursue a policy of nonviolence (*ahimsa*). His rude awakening occurred after his conquest of Kalinga around 265 B.C. He was apparently shattered by the aftermath of the conflict. Right then and there, Asoka decided to convert from Hinduism to Buddhism. He denounced not only wars, but also any form of violence. He became a vegetarian and gave up hunting completely. He re-examined the existing legal codes and made the new laws less harsh. He inscribed his edicts on sandstone pillars and had them placed

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

throughout the kingdom as a way to communicate his thoughts and actions. He built hospitals for people and animals alike. He founded several universities and commissioned the construction of roads and irrigation systems. Most importantly, he exercised great tolerance over different religions. He allowed competing faiths to co-exist in harmony. For the rest of his life, Asoka remained a devoted Buddhist. He never waged another war.

In his own words, Asoka once said, "All men are my children. I am like a father to them. As every father desires the good and the happiness of his children, I wish that all men should be happy always." This complete change in attitude would have never occurred to Asoka had he continued to be his old self. It was precisely because Asoka had changed so much in terms of his personality and behavior that he later earned another nickname -- *Dharma* Asoka, or the Pious Asoka.

Asoka died around 232 B.C.

Asoka

## Questions

---

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which of the following about Asoka is true?
  - A. His empire covered almost the entire Indian subcontinent.
  - B. He founded the Mauryan dynasty around 272 B.C.
  - C. He converted to Christianity after he defeated the kingdom of Kalinga.
  - D. He was Bindusara's eldest son.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Which of the following about the Lion Capital of Sarnath is correct?
  - A. It was found near Mumbai.
  - B. Asoka erected it to mark the spot where he slew his half-brothers.
  - C. It features four lions standing directly atop a full-bloom lotus.
  - D. It is now the national emblem of the Republic of India.
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Before converting to Buddhism, what religion did Asoka follow?
  - A. Islam
  - B. Christianity
  - C. Hinduism
  - D. Taoism
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Approximately how long did Asoka reign?
  - A. 30 years
  - B. 50 years
  - C. 40 years
  - D. 60 years
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Why did Asoka convert to Buddhism?
  - A. because he was rescued by a monk
  - B. because he did not want any more violence or bloodshed
  - C. because he married a Buddhist
  - D. none of the above

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Which of the following was NOT something Asoka did to promote Buddhism?
- A. He erected the Lion Capital of Sarnath.
  - B. He built many *stupas* and monasteries.
  - C. He sent monks to other countries.
  - D. He eradicated all the neighboring kingdoms and converted them to Buddhism.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Which of the following statements is correct?
- A. A *stupa* means a dome-shaped palace.
  - B. *Dharma* Asoka means the Evil Asoka.
  - C. Asoka was once nicknamed *Chandal* Asoka.
  - D. *Ahimsa* means violence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Which of the following animals can NOT be found on the Lion Capital of Sarnath?
- A. horse
  - B. lion
  - C. elephant
  - D. dragon

