Knowledge is power, as Francis Bacon observed more than three hundred years ago; and communication has become, with the subsequent progress of science, an instrument both of power and of knowledge. The numerous paradoxes of our times may be epitomized in the contradiction between the vast increase in means of communication made available by science and technology and the construction of barriers to prevent political intercourse, economic exchange, or cultural influence. Communication is essential to science as a form of inquiry and to democracy as a form of political and social community. Progress in science has provided materials and methods to solve men's problems; it has also made possible the construction of instruments of mass destruction and has been made subject to a variety of political restrictions on inquiry and communication, determined by the variety of political institutions under which they are imposed. Progress in democracy has justified the hope that men have found the means to govern themselves and to promote individual freedom and human rights together with the common good. The power of the instruments of mass communication, which is employed or manipulated differently in different political and social circumstances, has operated to
reduce the diversity and the tolerance essential to free communication.

The problems of civilization and society are largely problems of power, and in particular of political and economic power. Yet peace and welfare cannot be secured by political negotiations and economic arrangements alone. When truth and the values of the spirit are treated only as instruments of power, they are transformed by oppositions of power into fanaticism which seeks to impose one view of truth by the use of arbitrary power. The fanaticisms of our times have many causes. One, which is frequently alleged, is the fear, real or trumped up, of an opposed irrational fanaticism. Opposition to fanaticism tends to breed fanaticisms dedicated to the destruction of error. Tolerance seems a weakness in a conflict of powers; yet tolerance is the only rational alternative to organized irrational clashes. The cause of fanaticism, underlying fears and tensions, is ignorance of other historical traditions of thought and culture. Since the close of the First World War men have been shut up, in varying degrees of isolation, within their particular national and cultural traditions. Political thought in particular has often been based during that period on philosophies which have had no place for divergence in thought and, therefore, no respect for the thought of others. They have glorified power and violence, developed the conception that man is controlled wholly by economic necessities, and reduced all other views of values to ideologies by which men may be manipulated and deceived.

Profound as their influence has been, the pursuit of political power and the accumulation of economic goods have not been the unique or even the dominant themes of the history of civilization. Empires have been conquered and have fallen to pieces; classes and peoples have acquired dominance over other men and have been dislodged. Even these movements have been more than clashes of bare power, and they have been influenced by other contemporaneous processes of growth and decay, which they in turn have influenced—religions have spread and declined; cultures have found broad humanistic and spiritual expression and have been turned to selfish and materialistic objectives; reason has been respected for its efficacy in discovering truths and in putting them to work and has been suspected as an instrument of self-deception in rationalizations and of manipulation in ideologies. Epic and tragic poets have depicted clashes of loyalties in which power and position come into conflict with other values and often yield to them. Prophets and theologians have found in charity and holiness motivations for turning from worldly to eternal values. Moralists have appealed to criteria that transcend wealth, fame, and pleasure, and to motives that go beyond selfish interest. Political philosophers have sought in reason and order the foundation for institutions and policy. In
addition to revolutions to seize power, men in all cultures have withdrawn from the world in more profound revolutions to set up religious, intellectual, and social communities in which other values would eliminate motivations to power and to acquire material gain. Men secure in power have paused to consider the uses to which power might be put for human betterment.

The Edicts of Asoka, which are presented in a new edition in this volume, are an outstanding instance of this interaction of power with other values in practical action. They are the proclamations of a man who had acquired enormous power but who had undergone a change of heart. They illustrate the universality of the transformation of power by other values, cultural, social, and moral. They have a universality which transcends national and cultural limits: they seek mutual understanding and confidence based on understanding, and they express ideas which recall the reflections of other thoughtful potentates, like Marcus Aurelius, oppressed by the inhumanity of the operations of power. They have a universality which transcends class limits: they treat mankind as a family in which rich and poor, powerful and humble, have comparable duties and identical rewards. They have a universality which transcends legal and disciplinary limits: they combine the instrumentalities of power with those of education and meditation, and they transform law by love, reason, and tolerance.

Asoka was an emperor and conqueror who was afflicted by repentance after the short and sanguinary Kalinga war. He revealed himself a philosopher in the consequences he draws from his repentance—a political philosopher who expressed himself in proclamations and laws, bounding his country with Rock Edicts to publish his ideals and aims to his neighbors and to his subjects along the frontiers, erecting Pillar Edicts in the important places of his empire to express his moral and social objectives, and dedicating in the Cave Edicts places for religious observance; and a moral philosopher who found a substitute for conquests by arms in conquest by Dharma, by righteousness and morality. He was a religious leader who turned from external observances to internal meditations, from temporal possessions to eternal truths. But above all he was a teacher and, in particular, a teacher of understanding and tolerance.

Asoka sums up his teaching in a single word, “Dharma.” His Edicts make it clear that he conceived his mission to consist in defining, publishing, and propagating Dharma; and the strength and originality of his teaching are underlined by the meaning he gave to that ambiguous term. “Dharma” means the insights and precepts of religion and piety; it also means the principles and prescriptions of ethics and morality. The basic problems of religion and morality are illustrated vividly in the differences among the interpretations that have been made of his teachings:
it is sometimes held that Aśoka’s conception of Dharma is essentially Hindu, with a Buddhist tinge; sometimes that it is basically Buddhist, in reaction to Brahmanic ideas; sometimes that it is a generalization of morality, freed from sectarian limitations and that, consequently, both translations of Dharma—the “laws of piety” and the “laws of morality”—have been held to be misleading. This is a controversy which belies the basic teachings of the Edicts. With remarkable clarity, Aśoka recognized the interplay of the various dimensions of the moral life: it reflects a man’s duties as determined by his station in life; it reflects a basic order in the universe and a truth discerned in that order; it is a bond uniting people in their associations in families, communities, religions, and nations; it is a fundamental insight, differently expressed in different cultures and religions, which serves as a basis for mutual understanding and peace; it is a guide to action and to self-realization and happiness; it is achieved by action, advanced by instruction, and protected by sanctions, and in turn it provides a basis for policy, education, and justice; it is discovered by self-scrutiny, meditation, and conversion, and it entails renunciation of whatever is inconsistent with it.

The Hindu conception of Dharma concentrated on a rule of life, adapted to the caste and station of each man, by which his whole duty—moral, social, and religious—was determined. Each caste had its own Dharma, but Dharma was also the moral order and the truth, rta or satya, transcending the gods and preserved by them. The Buddhist conception of Dharma turned from the theological and metaphysical aspects of Dharma, as absolute truth and highest reality, to concentrate on its operation in the laws of nature and the relations of men. Dharma is the King of Kings, and it is manifested in the properties, ground, and cause of a thing or a person. Aśoka’s conception of Dharma separates it from caste distinctions, religious ceremonial, and theological dogmas; his instruction in Dharma denudes it also of the anagogic interpretations of the career of man developed in Buddhist doctrines of rebirth, the four truths about sorrow, and the ways of deliverance in Nirvana. His Dharma depends on insight and change of heart; it has its applications in individual actions and in human relations; it finds its objective in happiness in this world and in heaven.

Aśoka attributes his own interest in Dharma to repentance for the violence and cruelty of the Kalinga war. The change of heart brought about by his reflections on war inspired him to the promulgation of his Edicts by providing an insight for moral reform. His interest throughout is practical in its orientation. He devoted himself to study of Dharma, to action according to Dharma, and to inculcation of Dharma, but the three are inseparable—the study of Dharma translates Dharma into concrete action; action ac-
ording to Dharma provides examples to guide in-
culcation; inculcation of Dharma, although it de-
pends on instruction, supervision, administration, and
institutions, is achieved finally only by meditation
and study.

The study of Dharma is a study of attitudes and
motives which transforms the customary principles
of action. The change of heart brought about by
Aśoka’s reflections on war provided him with the
insight which he employed in all his moral reforms.
The moral equivalent for war is found when the
impulse to conquest by violence yields to the desire
for conquest by morality (Dharma-vijaya). Evil ac-
tions and good actions are both transformed in the
process. Liberality, thus, is a virtue, but all other gifts
are unimportant when compared to the gift of
morality (Dharma-dāna). The gift of morality, in
turn, suggests a basis for the distribution of riches
based in morality (Dharma-saṁvibhāga), for acquaint-
ance with men based in morality (Dharma-saṁstava),
and for kinship among men based in morality
(Dharma-saṁbandha). Sacraments, in like fashion,
have their place in religion, but the sacrament of
Dharma (Dharma-maṅgala) makes all other rites and
ceremonials unimportant. Pleasure is a legitimate
motive to action, but true pleasure is pleasure in
morality (Dharma-rati), and Aśoka took pleasure in
abandoning the customary royal pleasure tours for
moral tours (Dharma-yātrās). The foundation of law
and the guidance of its administration must be found
in morality, and therefore Aśoka transformed his
system of administration by instituting a new cate-
gory of high officials charged with the promulgation
and supervision of morality (Dharma-mahāmātras).
Their function was to lead people to attachment to
morality and to action according to it as well as to
increase the morality (Dharma-ṭīḍdhi) of people al-
ready devoted to morality (Dharma-yukta). People
devoted to morality (Dharma-yukta) include those
inclined to morality (Dharma-niśrīta), those estab-
lished in morality (Dharma-adhiśṭhita), and those duly
devoted to charity (dānasamāyukta). As one reads the
Edicts, the linguistic mark of Aśoka’s study of
morality becomes apparent in the combination of the
word “Dharma” with another word signifying an
activity or an attitude which defines Dharma as
applied to act or motive and which is itself trans-
formed in that definition. Aśoka’s statement of the
three dimensions of his purpose uses the same device
to express his devotion to study of Dharma (Dhar-
ma-pālana), to action according to Dharma (Dharma-
karma), and to inculcation of Dharma (Dharma-anu-
śiṣṭi).

The study of Dharma is not only the basis of con-
crete action according to Dharma; it is also an action.
It is action affecting the principles of action. Study of
Dharma achieves the purification of one’s fundamen-
tal beliefs by returning one’s scrutiny to oneself, to
self-examination which is the basis of moral action, and to self-exertion which is the means of moral progress. Such knowledge of self leads to recognition of the diversity of ways by which others come to their interpretations of Dharma, and that recognition gives tolerance and the sanctity of life the force of principles. Respect for others is both a consequence and a source of purification of one’s own aspirations and beliefs. The conquest of Dharma provides insight into true glory. The gift of Dharma gives meaning to material possessions and material gifts in the light of the kinship of mankind. Devotion to Dharma gives direction to all law and furnishes means to relate physical welfare to happiness. Granted insight and devotion to morality, Dharma can be defined in concrete terms appropriate to the actions of a man and the relations among men. Dharma, in the individual, consists of few sins and many good deeds, of avoidance of evil and passions—of anger, cruelty, rage, pride, and envy—and of cultivation of kindness, liberality, truthfulness, inner and outer purity, gentleness, saintliness, moderation in spending money and acquiring possessions, self-control, compassion, gratitude, and devotion. These are all manifestations of attachment to morality and love of it. Dharma, in human relations, takes the form of a moral code which is repeated in several of the Edicts: obedience to mother, father, elders, teachers, and those in authority; respect for teachers; proper treatment for members of the priestly and ascetic orders, relatives, slaves and servants, the poor and unfortunate, friends, acquaintances, and neighbors; liberality to ascetics, friends, companions, relatives, and the aged; abstention from slaughter of living creatures.

The study of morality and action according to morality take their concrete form for Aśoka himself in the inculcation of morality. There are only two means of inculcating morality—prescriptions and meditation—and prescriptions are ineffective without insight into oneself and the consequences of one’s action, without the turning about in one’s basic motivations which gives meaning to remorse and conversion, and without meditation on oneself which is the foundation of understanding and purpose. Aśoka’s inculcation of morality is a sensitive and shrewd combination of inspiration and constraint, of ideal example and administrative sanction. He instituted officers of morality, charged with instruction, with the imposition of penalties, and with the distribution of honors and gifts; and he included in the duties of other officials the supervision of morality. Several of the Edicts take the form of instructions to his officials in which he tells them, in pragmatic language, that he expects what he conceives to be good to be translated into action and to be put into effect by appropriate measures. He proclaims his adherence to Buddhism, but he draws up his own list of Buddhist texts which treat of morality and instructs...
monks and nuns to study them. He proclaims tolerance for all faiths, regards all men as his children, and seeks understanding with other countries, near and far, based on confidence and morality. He makes provision for the health and well-being of his people, introduces judicial reforms, provides amenities for the performance of religious observances. He proclaims his readiness to pardon offenses against himself, but he specifies that he has power of retribution if the ways of the offenders are not improved or the offense is unpardonable; he proclaims prescriptions, policies, and penalties; he recognizes the importance of insight, and he is confident that his example will be more effective than his power and will transcend the limitations of time and the confines of his empire.

The Edicts of Asoka form part of a large body of literature, drawn from all cultures, which seeks power not in domination of men or accumulation of possessions but in conquest of self, in understanding of others, and in contemplation of truths within the scope of reason and goods within the scope of action. It finds expression sometimes in art and poetry; sometimes in religious meditation, philosophical reflection, or humanistic or scientific inquiry; sometimes in the labors by which the mechanisms and materials required for human welfare are developed and controlled. It sometimes erects a city of God, a republic of letters, a commonwealth of mankind, or an academy of science removed from the rivalries and vices of the city of men. It sometimes lays down precepts to guide the sage or the saint, the humble man or the sinner, and to make him immune to changes of fortune and threats of power. It sometimes provides insights and motivations by which human communities are transformed and human beings are liberated for the realization of potentialities unsuspected and inaccessible in other societies.

The classics of this literature may take on a new importance and a new power in the world today. They may recall us to the ideal of tolerance of divergent opinions and open up the way to build communities which take their strength from diversity and freedom and which recognize the possibilities of a world community based on a like tolerance and diversity and guided by a sense of the responsibilities imposed by the present world situation. The progress of communication has made unavoidable world community of some kind; insight into the values of tolerance, reason, love, and sensitivity derived from the reflections of poets, saints, philosophers, and statesmen will provide means by which to make it a genuine community based on genuine communication. Such insight will provide no weapons for the struggle for power which is also a consequence of progress of communication; but struggles for power are seldom won by either opponent—they are often forgotten together with their protagonists, or recorded as a memorial to what was destroyed. Their causes are removed by peace and order and understanding.

Richard McKeon