

# Vācāguti: Restraint in Speech as the Root of Dhamma in the Edicts of Aśoka

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## Abstract

This paper examines the single principle in Aśoka's inscriptions that most closely approximates a doctrine of expression: restraint in speech (vācāguti). Major Rock Edict XII, the locus classicus for the doctrine, identifies restraint in speech as the root of growth in the essentials of all sects, and specifies it as the compound abstention from praising one's own sect and condemning the sect of others without good cause; where cause exists, criticism is licensed only if done in a mild way (Tola & Dragonetti, 2005). The paper argues that Aśoka's contribution is not a doctrine of free speech but a doctrine of disciplined speech: expression is to be guided by self-restraint (samyama) and by a deliberate management of words, and the sanction for failure is internal — the speaker harms his own sect rather than incurring a penalty from the state (Yahya et al., 2022). A central terminological argument runs through the paper. The parent doctrine is sammā vācā, rendered "right speech" in the translation tradition (Sharda, 2019; Vivek, 2024); but this paper follows the philological sense of sammā as **equilibrium** rather than as a juridical verdict of right opposed to wrong, and reads the doctrine as a discipline maintaining a state of balance in speech — an experiential condition rather than a rule-compliance. On that reading, vācāguti and samyama describe the same work: the maintenance of equilibrium, one in the domain of speech, the other in the domain of self-possession. The paper reconstructs the principle as a system of self-related and other-related self-restraint with the "control of tongue" as the condition of principled coexistence (Bhargava, 2015), analyses it as a civic virtue that is collectively produced rather than individually held (Bhargava, 2022), considers the scholarly challenge that dhamma was instrumental statecraft rather than conviction (Jayswal, 2025; Kumar, 2024), and concludes that Aśoka constructed the earliest documented royal program in which the restraint of public speakers is treated as the enabling condition of a plural public among the sects and the Pali language is nothing but actually living words not merely words in the language.

**Keywords:** King Ashoka, vācāguti, sammā, equilibrium of speech, Sect, religion, free expression, Pali, Philology

## 1. Introduction: Expression Under Discipline

The claim that Aśoka taught something about freedom of speech rests on a genuine textual foundation, but the foundation supports a different building than is usually erected on it. The Aśokan edicts do not announce a right of expression, and they do not recognise a sphere in which a subject may speak without the sovereign's concern. What Major Rock Edict XII sets out is a **normative discipline of speech**: expression is not to be suppressed but guided, and what guides it is self-restraint exercised by the speaker and a considered management of the words the speaker chooses to use.

This distinction is the argument of the paper. Aśoka's *vācāguti* — restraint in speech — is not a restriction imposed from outside upon an otherwise free speaker. It is a practice the speaker is instructed to perform upon himself. The edict does not say that the state will punish those who denigrate the sects of others; it says that whoever does so "only harms his own sect". The entire normative burden is therefore located in the disposition of the person speaking, and the mechanism of compliance is the speaker's own interest rather than the sovereign's coercion. That is a doctrine of managed expression: not the absence of limits, and not the imposition of limits by force, but the cultivation of a speaker who imposes limits upon himself. Three features of the historical and terminological setting must be kept in view throughout, because they condition everything the edict says.

The first is the setting itself. Aśoka reigned c. 268–232 BCE ([Suna & Gadgil, 2026](#)), and the communities addressed by Rock Edict XII were not the institutionalised confessions of a later age. They were **sects in the older sense**: competing ascetic orders, schools and bodies of householders, whose boundaries were doctrinal and practical rather than bureaucratic. To describe the edict as regulating "religion," in the modern sense of a system of organised confessional belonging, would be to import into the third century BCE a category that had not yet formed. This paper therefore uses "sect" throughout, following those translation traditions that render the passage in precisely these terms.

The second is the internal plurality of the realm. Aśoka "cemented the idea of an Indian national identity but sowed the seeds of religious and cultural conflicts that endure today," at the same time as he "ably managed his vast empire, strengthening internal government and further reinforcing the idea of a larger India in the entire Asian subcontinent" ([Testa, 2014](#)). His doctrine of restraint is addressed precisely to that seam — not to conflict between the empire and its enemies, but to conflict among the communities of the empire.

The third is terminological, and it is the one your correction has clarified. If *sammā* names a state of equilibrium rather than a correctness opposed to error, then the doctrine of restraint is not a rule of conduct whose breach is a wrong. It is a practice of maintaining balance, whose breach is a loss of balance — and the difference between those two readings runs through the whole paper. Section 2 sets the reading out, and the conclusion returns to what it changes.

The paper proceeds in eleven further sections. Section 2 sets out the terminology adopted and the reasons for it. Section 3 sets out sources and interpretive cautions. Section 4 establishes the text of Major Rock Edict XII and its four structural elements. Section 5 reconstructs *vācāguti* against the equilibrium sense of *sammā vācā*. Section 6 examines self-restraint in its two forms. Section 7 analyses the compound prohibited act. Section 8 examines the internal sanction and what it reveals about the theory of compliance. Section 9 addresses the question of "free expression" directly. Section 10 registers the instrumentalist challenge. Section 11 considers contemporary resonance and misappropriation, and Section 12 concludes.

## 2. A Note on Terminology

Three terms require definition before the argument proceeds, because the analysis depends on them.

### 2.1 "Sect" Rather Than "Religion"

The compound noun translated "religion" in the widely circulated English renderings of Rock Edict XII is rendered "sect" in other translation traditions. The comparative literature states the passage's rule as follows: "the root for the essential progress of the sects is control of language: one must not exalt one's own sect and criticise the others; if one must do so for some reason, it must be in a moderate form". That rendering is adopted here.

The choice is not merely stylistic. The edict's referent is a plurality of communities defined by doctrine and practice — ascetic orders and their lay followings — rather than by membership in formally constituted institutional bodies. This paper accordingly writes of "sects" throughout its own analysis, and where a source is quoted whose rendering uses "religions," the sense is the same and the substitution is editorial.

## 2.2 Sammā as Equilibrium, Not Correctness/Right

The parent doctrine of Aśoka's vācāguti is sammā vācā, and the translation tradition in our evidentiary base renders it **"right speech"** — the third stage of the noble eightfold path, comprising four abstentions from false, slanderous, harsh and idle speech (Sharda, 2019; Vivek, 2024). That rendering is a translator's choice, and it carries an implication this paper does not accept without argument: that sammā names a standard of correctness against which an utterance may be judged right or wrong.

The **philological case** for the alternative reading rests on the word's own field of meaning. Sammā is the Pāli reflex of Sanskrit samyak/samyag, whose root connections lie with sama — **"even, level, equal, in balance"** — and with the sense of "together, completely, in due order." The term therefore carries, in its earliest layers, the sense of evenness and balance: a going-along-with, a being-level-with, rather than a conformity to rule. Its semantic neighbours are equilibrium, evenness and integrity rather than rectitude. What the English "right" supplies is a juridical and evaluative dimension — the pairing of right against wrong — which the Pāli term does not require and which, on this reading, distorts it.

Three consequences follow for the argument, and they are the reason the reading is worth adopting rather than merely noting.

**First, the doctrine becomes experiential rather than prescriptive.** If sammā vācā names speech-in-equilibrium, then the practice it describes is a state the speaker occupies rather than a rule the speaker obeys. This is consistent with the character of the four abstentions themselves, which are framed as things one refrains from doing rather than as commands one fulfils (Thein et al., 2019). A doctrine of equilibrium is not enforced; it is maintained — and a norm that is maintained rather than enforced belongs to the logic of self-restraint, not to the logic of law.

**Second, the doctrine acquires a diagnostic function rather than merely a prohibitive one.** Hostile speech, on this reading, is not simply wrong; it is disproportionate. The comparative literature identifies exactly this pathology when it records the tradition's awareness "that truth has multiple aspects or facets and that generally man perceives only one of those aspects, clings to it, and in defending it as the only existing one, adopts violent attitudes". Dogmatic attachment to a partial truth is a failure of balance — a speaker over-weighted on one side of his own position — and the remedy is the restoration of evenness, not the imposition of silence.

**Third, the term falls into the same semantic field as samyama.** Aśoka's restraint in speech is glossed in the scholarly reconstruction as samyama, self-restraint, and the "control of tongue" is identified as crucial for morally legitimate and principled coexistence. Samyama and sammā share the root field of sama, evenness; one names the holding-together of the self, the other the evenness of the utterance. That morphological convergence is not decisive evidence, but it is illuminating: on this reading, Aśoka's vācāguti and the Buddhist sammā vācā are describing the same work in two domains — the maintenance of equilibrium, one in the domain of the self, the other in the domain of speech. Section 5 develops this.

I state the position plainly so that it can be assessed rather than absorbed: the translation tradition renders sammā vācā as "right speech" ; this paper renders it as speech in a state of equilibrium, on the ground of the term's philological sense, and where the sources are cited for the doctrine's content — the four

abstentions, the permission to correct, the rejection of both covert and overt sharp speech — the content is unaffected by which rendering is preferred. The gloss is a dispute about the term, not about the doctrine.

**Table 1. Renderings of the edict's disciplinary vocabulary across the translation traditions and this paper**

| Term or phrase                                 | Rendering A                     | Rendering B                                | Adopted here                                              |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| The root of growth in the essentials of all... | "religions"                     | "sects"                                    | "Sects" — nearer the third-century setting                |
| The prohibited reflection                      | "religions" and their adherents | "sect" and its adherents                   | "Sect" — the object regulated is sectarian affiliation    |
| The discipline of expression                   | "Restraint in speech"           | "Control of tongue"; "control of language" | All three as convergent; "restraint in speech" as primary |
| The ethical parent doctrine                    | "Right speech" (sammā vācā)     | —                                          | Sammā vācā as <b>equilibrium of speech</b>                |
| The condition on criticism                     | "cause" and "mild way"          | "Some reason" and "moderate form"          | Both: substantive and modal conditions                    |

### 2.3 A Caution: Equilibrium Is Not Inertness

One further distinction must be drawn, because the equilibrium reading can be pushed too far. Equilibrium in speech is not the cessation of speech, and the doctrine should not be read as recommending silence. The canonical texts expressly reject indifference: the Buddha instructs that if others disparage him, the Dhamma or the Sangha, one "must explain what is incorrect as being incorrect," and the scholarship glosses this as advocating "a calm, clear, equanimous, matter-of-fact recognition of the nature of others' comments and actions, followed by clarifications of the erroneous and the affirmations of the right" (Caruso, 2020). Correction is permitted; it is conditioned — "done with lovingkindness and compassion, and only when there is forward-looking benefit in doing so". The Buddha's own formulation is against both extremes: "One should not utter covert speech, and one should not utter overt sharp speech".

An equilibrium reading is the most natural way to describe this position. The doctrine occupies the middle of a range: not the covert aside, not the sharp retort. It is a balance between two failures of speech rather than a suppression of speech as such. Equilibrium is achieved, not withheld — and this is why the doctrine's positive recommendation is not silence but the honouring of other sects and the willingness to listen to them, and why vācāguti is best described as the management of speech rather than its reduction.

### 3. Sources and Interpretive Method

Three evidentiary streams sustain this study, and they differ in strength.

**The epigraphic text.** The doctrine of restraint in speech is carried principally by Major Rock Edict XII, and its cognate passage recurs in Pillar Edict VI, which translators and analysts cite alongside Rock Edict XII for the same toleration-and-restraint theme. The corpus as a whole comprises **14 Rock Edicts**, supplemented by **7 Pillar Edicts** and further supplemented by Minor Rock Edicts and Minor Pillar Edicts. Royal proclamations on stone are first attested in Aśoka's reign (Dwivedi, 2019), and he reigned c. 268–232 BCE .

**The translation tradition.** The interpretation of the pivotal passage depends on which rendering is used. The version most widely quoted in the scholarship under discussion is that of Nikam and McKeon, reproduced in the interreligious-encounter literature ; Dhammika's 1993 translation is standard elsewhere, and the same passage is cited from both traditions in the work on Aśoka's modern reception ([Larsson, 2021](#)). The variation is convergent rather than divergent, but it warns against treating any single rendering as the doctrine itself — which is why Section 2 has set out the renderings side by side, and why the sammā gloss is presented as a philological reading rather than as a sourced finding.

**The doctrinal background and analytic literature.** The parent doctrine is sammā vācā and the four abstentions. The analytic reconstruction of Aśoka's self-restraints is supplied by Bhargava, both in his account of the roots of Indian pluralism and in his treatment of harmony as a collective virtue. Accounts of ethical verbal conduct within Buddhist doctrine supply the framework of the four abstentions and their opposites. The literature on the making of Buddhist studies supplies the caution that a practice-based tradition resists reduction to a single cognitive concept ([Fuller, 2021](#)). The instrumentalist literature supplies the counter-reading ([Sadiq, 2009](#)).

The method is interpretive. This paper does not enumerate occurrences of the restraint formula across the corpus — no scholarly enumeration exists in the literature consulted, and any count would measure a translator's lexicon rather than the emperor's doctrine. It treats the principle as **concentrated rather than diffuse**: Rock Edict XII as its locus classicus, Pillar Edict VI as its principal cognate, and it specifies the senses in which the resulting doctrine does and does not resemble a modern theory of expression.

#### 4. The Text: Major Rock Edict XII and the Root of Restraint

The passage must be set out in full, because the paper's argument is entirely dependent on it. In the rendering quoted in the scholarship, with the editorial **substitutions of "sects" for "religions"** noted above:

"Beloved-of-Gods, King Piyadasi honors both ascetics and the householders of all sects, and he honours them with gifts and honors of various kinds. But Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this – that there should be growth in the essentials of all sects. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own sect, or condemning the sect of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other sects for this reason. By so doing, one's own sect benefit[s] and so do other sects, while doing otherwise harms one's own sect and the sects of others. Whoever praises his own sect, due to excessive devotion and condemns others with the thought 'Let me glorify my own sect', only harms his own sect."

Four structural elements of this passage carry the argument, and they should be isolated before any interpretation is offered.

**First, restraint is the root, not a virtue among virtues.** The edict states that growth in the essentials of all sects can be accomplished in different ways, "but all of them have as their root restraint in speech". The claim is causal and foundational. Restraint is not one item on a list of commendable practices; it is the condition on which every other measure directed at the flourishing of the sects depends. This is the strongest textual support for the proposition that Aśoka treated speech as a foundational governmental concern rather than as an incidental matter of etiquette.

**Second, the prohibition is compound.** The edict forbids the pairing of two acts in a single breath: "not praising one's own sect, or condemning the sect of others without good cause". What is prohibited is not

criticism as such but the conjunction of self-elevation with other-degradation, and the closing sentence makes the conjunction explicit by naming the thought that animates it: "Let me glorify my own sect".

**Third, criticism is licensed conditionally.** The edict concedes that "if there is cause for criticism it should be done in a mild way". This is a permission with two conditions — substantive (cause) and modal (mildness) — and its presence in the passage demonstrates that the doctrine is a regulation of speech rather than a prohibition of it. The comparative literature renders the same two conditions as "some reason" and a "moderate form".

**Fourth, the sanction is internal and describes an imbalance.** The violator is said to harm his own sect, and the parallel formulation in the same tradition runs that "doing otherwise harms one's own sect and the sects of others". No penalty is threatened. On the equilibrium reading of Section 2.2, this is the decisive feature: the sanction is not a punishment attaching to a wrong but the natural consequence of a loss of balance. The speaker who tries to raise his own sect by lowering another's has destabilised the very relation on which his own sect's flourishing depends — and the edict therefore reports a consequence rather than threatening one.

## 5. Vācāguti and Its Ground in the Equilibrium of Speech

### 5.1 The Doctrinal Parent

The Aśokan doctrine of restraint did not emerge in a vacuum. Sammā vācā, rendered in the translation tradition as right speech, is the third stage of the noble eightfold path as prescribed by the Buddha, and it constitutes a developed ethics of verbal conduct in its own right. In the Anguttara Nikāya the Buddha specifies the four kinds of abstention that constitute it: abstaining from false speech, abstaining from slanderous speech, abstaining from harsh or hateful speech, and abstaining from idle chatter. The same study gives the reasons the Buddha advances: abstaining from these four kinds of speech is favourable not only for maintaining peace and equanimity within an individual but within a society, since harsh or slanderous speech affects the speaker's own peace of mind, false speech undermines the durability of any social group, and idle chatter or gossip "does more harm than any good to the individual and the society". That rationale deserves emphasis, because it is phrased in the vocabulary of equanimity, not of rectitude. The reason a falsehood is to be avoided is that a group founded on falsities "cannot really survive for long and will eventually lead to chaos"; the reason harsh speech is to be avoided is that it disturbs the speaker's own peace of mind. The four abstentions are justified by what they do to the balance of the speaker and the group, not by their deviation from a rule. This is exactly what the equilibrium reading of sammā predicts, and it is the strongest internal support for adopting that reading.

**Table 2. The four abstentions, with the equilibrium rationale recorded in the sources**

| Abstention              | Prohibited conduct       | Rationale recorded in the source                                                                     |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| False speech            | Telling lies             | A social group based on falsities "cannot really survive for long and will eventually lead to chaos" |
| Slanderous speech       | Speech that divides      | Threat to peace and <b>equanimity</b> within the individual and society                              |
| Harsh or hateful speech | Abusive or hateful words | Affects the speaker's own peace of mind; associated with hate speech and violence                    |

|              |                              |                                                                  |
|--------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Idle chatter | Gossip and unprofitable talk | "Does more harm than any good to the individual and the society" |
|--------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|

The doctrinal elaboration of these categories is carried further in the specialist literature. Analysis of malicious speech (pisaṇavācā) within the framework of sammā vācā, drawing on the Sāleyyaka Sutta and the Abhaya Sutta, identifies the various forms of harmful verbal expression and their ethical implications within Buddhism, and centres on the four aspects of ethical verbal conduct emphasised in the noble eightfold path: refraining from improper words, harmful speech, offensive language, and communication that lacks constructive purpose. That study further examines the psychological, social and karmic repercussions of gossip and other toxic speech patterns, and draws attention to the liberating dimensions of time (kāla) and intention (cetanā) in genuine and beneficial communication. The presence of time among the operative dimensions is significant for the equilibrium reading: when speech is proper is a matter of proportion — of fit between utterance, moment and circumstance — and proportion is the vocabulary of balance rather than of rule.

The literature also distinguishes two normative models operating in Buddhist texts: a prescriptive model, governing what, when, where and how one should speak, and a proscriptive model, governing what one should not. Aśoka's vācāguti draws on both, but it is the proscriptive face that dominates Rock Edict XII. On the equilibrium reading this is unsurprising: the description of a balanced state is best given by identifying the movements that disturb it.

## 5.2 The Permitted Correction: Equilibrium Is Not Silence

An important corrective must be entered here, because the four abstentions are frequently misread as a counsel of passivity, and the equilibrium reading makes the correction sharper rather than softer. In the Buddhist texts the Buddha expressly rejects indifference:

"If you were to be angry or displeased at such disparagement, that would only be a hindrance to you. For if others disparage me, the Dhamma or the Sangha . . . then you must explain what is incorrect as being incorrect, saying: '[For this or that reason] that is incorrect, that is false, that is not our way, that is not found among us.'"

The scholarship glosses this passage precisely: it should not be mistaken as encouragement of indifference to blame and praise, but rather advocates "a calm, clear, equanimous, matter-of-fact recognition of the nature of others' comments and actions, followed by clarifications of the erroneous and the affirmations of the right"; and this does not mean that one cannot point out others' mistakes — "It's just that, according to Buddhist ethics, when one does so, it should be done with lovingkindness and compassion, and only when there is forward-looking benefit in doing so". The Buddha's own formulation is recorded as: "It was said: 'One should not utter covert speech, and one should not utter overt sharp speech'".

Read on the equilibrium gloss, this is a doctrine of the middle, and the scholarship's own word for the recommended bearing is telling: the recognition is to be equanimous. Its two failures are named symmetrically — covert speech on one side, overt sharp speech on the other — and the practice consists in neither. The condition attaching to correction is correspondingly a matter of proportion: a beneficial purpose and a compassionate manner, rendered in Aśoka's edict as a good cause and a mild manner. The structural agreement between the two formulations is the strongest evidence that Rock Edict XII's two-clause rule is a deliberate political application of a pre-existing practice of balanced speech rather than an ad hoc imperial preference.

## 6. Self-Restraint in Its Two Forms: Samyama and the "Control of Tongue"

### 6.1 The Two Kinds of Self-Restraint

The clearest analytic statement of the *vācāguti* doctrine is Bhargava's. Aśoka, he argues, "not only advises people with deeply divergent worldviews to live together face to face but also suggests what the basis for this coexistence could be"; he claims that resources exist in all traditions for the exercise of self-restraints, and that "these self-restraints are of two kinds: self-related and other-related"; everyone should exercise both, "particularly in speech, because this 'control of tongue' is crucial for morally legitimate and principled coexistence" .

Two features of this reconstruction deserve emphasis, because they define what kind of doctrine *vācāguti* is.

**The first is that the restraint is self-restraint.** The norm is not that the state restrains the speaker; it is that the speaker restrains himself. On the reading advanced in Section 2.2, this is not a matter of institutional preference but of conceptual necessity. A standard of equilibrium cannot be enforced, because balance is a condition of the person and not a conformity of the act; no external authority can place a speaker in a state of evenness, any more than it can make him temperate. Self-restraint is the only instrument by which a state of balance can be achieved. This is why the doctrine is not accurately described either as a licence of expression or as its prohibition: it is a third thing, the cultivation of a communicative disposition, in which the speaker is both the object and the agent of the discipline. And it is why there is no enforcement mechanism in the edict — the doctrine's compliance theory is internal, and the speaker who breaches it suffers the injury the edict describes.

**The second is that the restraint is mutual and symmetrical.** Bhargava's two-fold classification — self-related and other-related — captures the reciprocal structure of the instruction. The speaker must restrain the impulse to elevate his own sect, and the speaker must restrain the impulse to diminish the sect of the other. Both restraints fall on the same person, and both are exercised simultaneously. Symmetry of this kind is the signature of a balance rather than of a rule: a rule may be one-sided, whereas a balance is by definition held from two sides at once. This is the sense in which *vācāguti* is a doctrine of "principled coexistence" rather than merely a doctrine of courtesy — the discipline is reciprocal by construction, and no sect is exempted from it.

### 6.2 The Management of Words as a Civic Virtue

A second and complementary reconstruction treats the Aśokan ethic as a civic religion — "more to do with the cultivation of virtues and character than with obedience to law" — and locates the speech doctrine within a class of virtues that are not individual possessions but collective achievements. Central to the Aśokan civic ethic are virtues understood as qualities, dispositions or excellences that lead humans to lead a good and fulfilling life; but these virtues, Bhargava argues, must not be viewed as states of being or actions that embody qualities of individuals conceived separately from one another. Dhamma also involves qualities that individuals acquire as group members — "virtues like restraint on speech and open-mindedness" — and still others that develop when they interact as group members; these latter qualities, "such as the virtues of concordance or harmony, are collective in that they are jointly produced and collectively experienced by every participating member of the community".

This is the most theoretically significant formulation available for the present topic, and on the equilibrium reading it acquires a further dimension. If *vācāguti* is the maintenance of balance in speech, and if concord is a good that is jointly produced and collectively experienced, then the equilibrium in question is not private. It is a condition of the community — held, like the balance of a bridge, only so long as the strains

on both sides are proportionately borne. The consequence is that a speaker who fails to restrain his speech does not merely fall short of an individual ideal; he removes a support from a structure that others are also holding up. That is exactly what the edict's language of "harming one's own sect and the sects of others" describes, and the equilibrium reading explains why the two harms are stated together rather than separately: a disturbed balance injures both sides of it.

The practical content of the doctrine is also spelled out in the comparative literature. The reading is that in Rock Edict XII "the root for the essential progress of the sects is control of language: one must not exalt one's own sect and criticise the others; if one must do so for some reason, it must be in a moderate form"; and, further, that one should even honour the other sects in one way or another. The same study identifies the doctrinal reason why the tradition was necessarily tolerant: it's essentially non-violent position prevented it from adopting an attitude of intolerance, which is almost always accompanied by a spirit of aggressiveness; and a contributory factor was "the awareness that truth has multiple aspects or facets and that generally man perceives only one of those aspects, clings to it, and in defending it as the only existing one, adopts violent attitudes". That last proposition is the equilibrium reading stated as a diagnosis: hostile speech arises from disproportion — a single facet of a many-faceted truth inflated to the whole, and then defended at the expense of the rest. Read against it, Aśoka's restraint doctrine is a remedy for cognitive imbalance as much as for moral failure. The management of words begins with the management of certainty.

### 7. The Prohibited Act: Self-Praise Conjoined with the Condemnation of Another's Sect

The edict's prohibition is frequently described as a prohibition of sectarian criticism, and that description is inaccurate in a way that matters. The prohibited unit is compound, and the closing sentence of Rock Edict XII identifies the mental state that constitutes it:

"Whoever praises his own sect, due to excessive devotion and condemns others with the thought 'Let me glorify my own sect', only harms his own sect."

Three elements of the compound act should be distinguished, and the equilibrium reading illuminates each.

**The act is a rhetorical pairing.** Praise of one's own sect and condemnation of another's are treated as a single operation, not two separable ones. The diagnosis is structural: the condemnation is the instrument of the praise, and the two are one act. On the equilibrium reading, this is why the pairing rather than the criticism is prohibited — the pairing is the mechanism of unbalance. To magnify oneself at another's expense is to gain elevation by transferring weight to the other side of a relation, and no balance can be built that way. This also explains why the edict can license criticism on its own terms: a criticism offered for cause and in mild form does not use the other's diminution as its own elevation, and so does not disturb the balance.

**The motive is named.** The forbidden thought is explicitly "Let me glorify my own sect". Aśoka therefore regulates not only the form of speech but the purpose that animates it. This is an unusually ambitious legislative target, and it is intelligible only on a doctrine of self-restraint: a state cannot police intentions, but a speaker can examine them. The naming of the motive is also what makes the prohibition a rule about equilibrium rather than about content. Two utterances with identical propositional content may differ entirely in whether they are balanced: one may be a correction offered for cause, the other a self-elevation conducting itself through another's humiliation.

**The consequence falls on the speaker, and it is stated as a loss of balance.** The passage's verdict is that the speaker "only harms his own sect". The comparative literature concurs in the reading: when a person insults, demeans or even hurts the followers of other sects, "he is degrading the sect he professes and the beliefs he believes in". The same study records the positive counterpart — that Aśoka respects all followers of sects, whether of the same or of different beliefs, and that one should help develop their faith while respecting the opinions of others; when one respects different sects, one honours and exalts one's own sect and beliefs. The symmetry of the two statements is the equilibrium doctrine in miniature: denigration lowers the speaker's own side, and respect raises it — because in each case what rises or falls is the relation, and the speaker is inside it.

**Table 3. The structure of the prohibition in Rock Edict XII**

| Element                            | Formulation                                                                                 | Analytic significance                                                    |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Prohibited pairing                 | Praising one's own sect while condemning the sect of others without good cause              | The unit regulated is the compound rhetorical act, not criticism as such |
| Named motive                       | "Let me glorify my own sect"                                                                | Regulates purpose, not merely the form of the words                      |
| Substantive condition on criticism | "Cause for criticism" must exist; "some reason" in the alternative rendering                | Admission of reasoned criticism                                          |
| Modal condition on criticism       | Criticism "should be done in a mild way"; "in a moderate form" in the alternative rendering | Constraint on the manner of licensed criticism                           |
| Predicted consequence              | The speaker harms his own sect                                                              | Internal, non-coercive; a loss of balance rather than a penalty          |
| Positive alternative               | It is better to honour other sects                                                          | Replacement of prohibition by a constructive norm                        |

## 8. The Internal Sanction: A Theory of Compliance Without Coercion

What is most distinctive about the Aśokan regulation of speech is its enforcement theory, and on the equilibrium reading that theory ceases to look eccentric and begins to look necessary.

The edict threatens no penalty. It predicts a loss. The speaker who denigrates others "only harms his own sect," and the parallel formulation records that doing otherwise "harms one's own sect and the sects of others". The compliance mechanism is therefore a matter of self-interest rightly understood. Aśoka does not say "you may not speak thus, or you will be punished"; he says "speaking thus injures what you most value."

**Three consequences follow, and they define the doctrine's character.**

**First, the sanction requires no enforcer, and this follows from the nature of the norm rather than from a policy choice.** Because the norm is a state of equilibrium rather than a rule of conduct, breach is not a transgression requiring an adjudicator but a disturbance requiring correction; and because equilibrium is a condition of the speaker, the disturbance registers in him first. Hence the absence of any administrative apparatus — and also the absence of justiciability in the ordinary sense. There is no forum in which a claim of violation could be brought, and no remedy available to a party injured by another's

speech. This is a genuine limit, and it has been noted in the scholarship as a caution about the isolation of Aśoka's ideas and the uncertainty of their transmission.

**Second, the sanction makes the doctrine a matter of civic education rather than criminal law.** A norm that operates by predicted self-injury must be taught if it is to operate at all, which is consistent with the reconstruction of dhamma as a civic religion concerned with the cultivation of virtues and character rather than with obedience to law. Balance in speech, like balance in bearing, is something the governed must come to want to practise, because no one will compel them to. The same observation explains the dissemination programme — the proclamation of the edicts to ordinary people through royal officials — as an instrument of formation rather than of warning.

**Third, the sanction is symmetrical with the prohibition, and symmetry is its whole logic.** Because the prohibited act is the conjunction of self-praise and other-condemnation, the injury predicted is correspondingly directed at the speaker's own sect. The sanction fits the offence not by severity but by symmetry: the speaker who tries to magnify his own sect by diminishing another's is told that he has diminished his own. On the equilibrium reading this is not merely elegant but exact — the doctrine describes a relation, and the sanction consists in the relation's collapse being felt by the party who disturbed it. The logic is self-cancelling rather than punitive, and it is the reason the doctrine can be stated in a single sentence without any machinery of penalties.

## 9. What Aśoka Taught and What He Did Not: "Free Expression" Under Discipline

It is now possible to answer the question the paper began with, and the answer is a discrimination rather than a verdict.

**Aśoka did teach that expression must be guided by self-restraint and by a thoughtful management of words.** The text is explicit: restraint in speech is the root of growth in the essentials of all sects, and it is specified as the compound abstention from self-praise joined to the condemnation of another's sect. The scholarly reconstruction specifies the mechanism: self-restraints of two kinds, self-related and other-related, exercised particularly in speech, with the "control of tongue" as the condition of morally legitimate and principled coexistence. The virtue thus cultivated is collective, jointly produced and collectively experienced.

**Aśoka did not teach a right of free expression.** There is no Aśokan text recognising a sphere of utterance immune from concern, and no Aśokan text vesting in a subject the standing to speak notwithstanding a sovereign's disapproval. The normative architecture runs the other way: it begins with a duty of the speaker and grounds that duty in the speaker's own communal interest. Where a modern free-expression doctrine asks what the state may not do to the speaker, the Aśokan doctrine asks what the speaker owes to the community of speakers.

**Aśoka did condition criticism rather than prohibit it.** The two-clause rule — no condemnation without good cause, and mildness, or moderation, where cause exists — preserves the truth-seeking function of criticism while imposing a constraint of proportion on its manner. This is not a ban, and it should not be described as one. The doctrinal background confirms the reading: the four abstentions are justified by their effects on equanimity and social durability, correction of others' errors is expressly permitted when done with lovingkindness and compassion and only where there is forward-looking benefit, and the Buddha's own recorded instruction is against both covert speech and overt sharp speech.

**Aśoka also supplied a positive norm, not merely a negative one.** The edict does not stop at prohibition. It recommends honouring other sects on the ground that by doing so "one's own sect benefit[s] and so do

other sects," and the same tradition records the exhortation that "concord is good" and that all should be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others. The proposed conduct is therefore not silence but attention — and that is why the restraint doctrine is best described as the management of speech rather than its reduction.

**Table 4. What the Aśokan speech doctrine does and does not claim**

| Question                                 | Aśokan position                                                                    | Textual basis                                                          |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Is expression free?                      | Not addressed as a right; expression is to be guided by self-restraint             | "All of them have as their root restraint in speech"                   |
| What is the standard?                    | Equilibrium in speech, not conformity to a rule                                    | Sammā read as evenness; abstentions justified by effects on equanimity |
| What is prohibited?                      | The compound act of praising one's own sect and condemning another's without cause |                                                                        |
| Is criticism permitted?                  | Yes, conditionally: where cause exists, and in a mild or moderate manner           |                                                                        |
| Who bears the norm?                      | The speaker                                                                        | Self-related and other-related self-restraint                          |
| How is it enforced?                      | Not enforced: the speaker harms his own sect                                       |                                                                        |
| What is recommended?                     | Honour toward other sects; attentive listening; concord                            |                                                                        |
| What category of community is addressed? | Sects — ascetic orders and their householders, not organised confessions           |                                                                        |

## 10. The Instrumentalist Challenge

An honest treatment must register the scholarly challenge to the sincerity of the programme, because the challenge bears on how the speech doctrine should be characterised rather than only on how Aśoka should be judged.

One line of scholarship reads dhamma as "a sophisticated and pragmatic instrument of statecraft," engineered to address the immense administrative and social challenges of ruling a vast, diverse and recently conquered empire; by promoting a universal ethical code, Aśoka sought to foster social cohesion, streamline administrative control and create a new, paternalistic basis for imperial legitimacy, consolidating Mauryan political authority through "soft power" rather than sheer military might. A sharper formulation holds that dhamma was not merely a personal spiritual quest but "a sophisticated and calculated political ideology designed to consolidate and legitimize imperial power," functioning as the ideological glue binding the ruler, the bureaucracy, the territory and populace, the fort, the treasury, the army and the ally into a cohesive, stable and centrally controlled empire. A third reading, drawing on the international-relations literature, argues that ideational variables such as dhamma were bound up with material interests serving the strategic goals of Aśokan hegemony in the international system of South

Asia. A fourth, less cynical but equally structural, observes that the unification of the empire most likely necessitated the establishment of an ideology capable of incorporating regional and local diversity, and that Aśoka may have been the first monarch to recognise the necessity of an ideology to guarantee the consolidation of power within the empire — a recognition made abundantly clear by the concept and dissemination of Dhamma (Naulakha, 2023). A fifth register treats the programme as ethical statecraft: not merely a religious doctrine but "a detailed outlet of ethical principal" aimed at social harmony, tolerance, non-violence and the welfare of the common mass, establishing a moral order transcending sectarian boundary.

Four consequences follow for the present argument.

**The instrumentalist reading relocates the doctrine's significance without diminishing it.** If *vācāguti* is a governance instrument, it is an instrument calibrated to a specific threat: inter-sectarian invective within a plural and recently conquered empire. On this reading, the Aśokan state perceived the restraint of sectarian speech as a condition of internal cohesion — which is precisely what the edict's own causal claim asserts, that without restraint the essentials of no sect can grow.

**The equilibrium reading survives the instrumentalist challenge intact, and this is worth noting.** The instrumentalist accounts concern motive: they ask whether Aśoka believed the ethic he promulgated. The equilibrium reading concerns content: what the promulgated ethic is. A doctrine that describes balance in speech remains a description of balance whatever the emperor's reasons for promulgating it, and an instrument engineered to reduce inter-sectarian conflict is, by that very fact, an instrument for restoring equilibrium.

**The readings agree on function and differ on motive, and motive is not recoverable.** All five accounts describe a norm that is universal in form, addressed to the cohesion of a plural realm, and connected to the security of the state; they diverge only on whether Aśoka believed it. This paper therefore treats the function as established and the motive as disputed.

**The doctrine's content is unaffected by the dispute.** Whatever the emperor's motivation, the text remains the earliest sustained royal treatment of the relation between pluralism and speech, and it remains the earliest statement that restraint in speech is the root of sectarian flourishing. The history of motive and the history of doctrine are separable enquiries.

## 11. Contemporary Resonance and Misappropriation

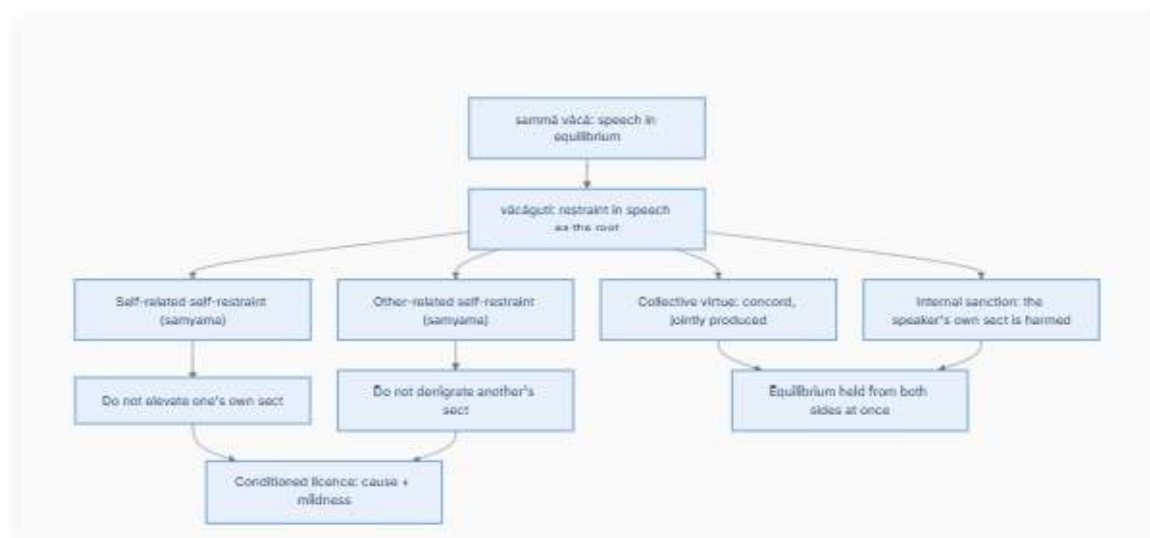
The doctrine's contemporary relevance is chiefly visible in three phenomena, one constructive, one cautionary, and one methodological.

**Aśoka's reception as a resource for pluralism.** The Twelfth Rock Edict can be read as offering "a tantalizing portrait of ... a strong form of religious tolerance, a positive and proactive approach toward religious difference," and Aśoka's vision has been lauded by figures including Amartya Sen and the Dalai Lama as an inspiration for contemporary troubles. Larsson's reading of the edict identifies within it an emphasis on literacy in the doctrines of others — "all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions" — together with the cultivation of virtues necessary for the flourishing of spirituality, including humility in theology ("not praising one's own religion") and temperance ("restraint in speech"), and possibly even a covenant, since what Dhammika renders as "contact" between religions can also be translated as concord. The euphoric register of earlier commentary survives in the record of Luzzatti's assessment of the edict as "the gospel ... of the great Buddhist king, the epitome of real freedom of conscience," reconciling two antagonistic principles by placing religious freedom under "the custody and

inviolable guarantee of religion itself," with the state's task centred on arousing two feelings at once: "ardour for one's own belief, respect for the beliefs of others" (Larsson, 2022).

**The misappropriation of the precedent.** The cautionary phenomenon is that Aśoka's speech doctrine is invoked by movements that act against it. The irony is documented: the 969 movement in Myanmar uses a pillar representing Aśoka in its own logo, notwithstanding that the emperor himself urged respect for other religions and restraint from condemning others — as not only a moral good in itself but because the effect of criticising others is often to "deprave" one's own religion (Walton & Hayward, 2014). The same body of scholarship notes that the question of the Buddha's own attitudes toward other religions has been richly debated, with one assessment holding that Buddhist texts contain the message that the Buddha's teachings may offer the most direct or useful path to liberation while other teachings can also offer insight and spiritual growth, while other scholars point to negative portrayals of practitioners of other Indian faiths in the Buddhist scriptures. Larsson's broader conclusion is that Buddhist kingship functions as precedent, potentiality and pitfall for pluralist projects — the pitfall being exactly this availability of the symbol to purposes contrary to the doctrine.

**Resonance in the ethics of modern communication.** The most direct contemporary continuation of *vācāguti* is not in state regulation but in applied Buddhist ethics. Recent work on malicious speech integrates elements of Buddhist ethics with contemporary mindfulness practices to propose the application of these principles in today's world, with particular emphasis on interpersonal and virtual communication, and highlights the relevance of the doctrine in addressing modern challenges such as conflict resolution, ethical communication and the restoration of harmonious social relationships in an increasingly interconnected society. Comparable work grounded in the principles of false speech (*musāvāda*) and *sammā-vācā* extends the analysis beyond explicit lying to include selective disclosure, strategic silence, framing and the construction of illusory success operating at structural rather than individual levels (NIMMAHNRATANAKUL, 2026a, 2026b). That extension is precisely a doctrine of the management of words, and on the equilibrium reading it is even more clearly so: selective disclosure, strategic silence and framing are all questions of proportion — of how much is said, when, and in what measure — rather than of truth and falsehood as such.



## 12. Conclusion

The argument of this paper can be reduced to seven propositions, with their limits attached.

1. Major Rock Edict XII articulates a doctrine of restraint in speech (vācāguti) that identifies restraint as the root of growth in the essentials of all sects, prohibits the compound act of praising one's own sect while condemning another's without good cause, licenses criticism where cause exists provided it is done in a mild way, recommends the honouring of other sects as the better course, and predicts that the violator harms his own sect .
2. The standard the doctrine sets is **equilibrium rather than correctness**. The translation tradition renders the parent doctrine as "right speech," but the Pāli sammā carries the sense of evenness and balance, and its semantic field is that of sama rather than of a juridical right opposed to wrong. On that reading — which this paper adopts as a philological position rather than a sourced finding — sammā vācā names speech in a state of balance, an experiential condition rather than a rule-compliance. The reading is supported internally by the rationale the sources record for the four abstentions: they are justified by their effects on equanimity within the individual and durability within society, not by their deviation from a rule. And it is supported by the vocabulary of the recommended bearing itself, which the scholarship describes as a "calm, clear, equanimous, matter-of-fact recognition" followed by clarification of the erroneous and affirmation of the right (Caruso, 2020) — a description of balance, not of silence.
3. The doctrine is the political transposition of a pre-existing ethics of verbal conduct. Sammā vācā comprises four abstentions — from false, slanderous, harsh and idle speech — and is justified by its effects on individual equanimity and social durability, with the analysis of malicious speech (pisaṇavācā) elaborating the categories in terms of improper words, harmful speech, offensive language and communication lacking constructive purpose, and identifying the roles of time and intention in beneficial communication.
4. The doctrine regulates criticism rather than forbidding it. The doctrinal background makes this explicit: one must explain what is incorrect as being incorrect, and pointing out others' mistakes is permitted — provided it is done with lovingkindness and compassion and only when there is forward-looking benefit in doing so, and provided one avoids both covert and overt sharp speech. The two named failures are named symmetrically, and the practice lies between them; Aśoka's two conditions, cause and mildness, translate this into a rule of public conduct.
5. The doctrine operates by self-restraint in two forms — self-related and other-related — exercised particularly in speech, with the "control of tongue" identified as crucial for morally legitimate and principled coexistence. On the equilibrium reading, self-restraint is not one enforcement option among several but the only possible instrument, since a state of balance in a person can be achieved by that person alone. The virtue cultivated is collective rather than individual: restraint on speech and open-mindedness are qualities acquired as group members, and concordance or harmony is "jointly produced and collectively experienced by every participating member of the community" . The management of words is, on this account, a contribution to a good that no speaker can produce alone, held from both sides at once.
6. The doctrine is enforced internally rather than coercively, and this follows from the nature of the norm. The sanction is that the speaker harms his own sect, and the complementary formulation records that the violation harms both one's own sect and the sects of others; the comparative reading is that one who insults or demeans the followers of other sects degrades the sect he professes. On the equilibrium

reading, the sanction is not a punishment attached to a wrong but the collapse of a relation felt by the party who disturbed it. The doctrine therefore has no forum, no remedy and no justiciability — a limit that follows necessarily from its compliance theory rather than from any oversight in its drafting.

7. The instrumentalist challenge to the sincerity of the programme does not alter the doctrine's content, and the equilibrium reading is insulated from it by construction. Whether dhamma was pragmatic statecraft engineered for a vast, diverse and recently conquered empire, a calculated political ideology binding the limbs of the state, a strategic deployment of ideational variables in the service of hegemony, an ideology necessitated by the incorporation of regional diversity, or an ethical statecraft aimed at social harmony, tolerance and the welfare of the common mass, the text remains the earliest sustained royal treatment of the relation between pluralism and speech, and its causal claim remains the same: without restraint in speech, the essentials of no sect can grow. The instrumentalist accounts dispute motive; the equilibrium reading describes content; and content is not altered by motive.

What Aśoka bequeaths on this question is therefore neither a charter of free expression nor a licence to silence, but a doctrine of speech under discipline: expression is not to be suppressed, and it is not to be left unmanaged; it is to be held in balance by the speaker's own restraint, and the restraint is owed not to the sovereign but to the community of speakers whose concord it makes possible. That is a more demanding position than either of its caricatures, and it has one feature that no modern speech regime has been able to reproduce: it seeks compliance without coercion, and it locates the entire burden of a functioning plural public in the disposition of those who speak. And in reading sammā as equilibrium rather than as correctness, the doctrine acquires a diagnostic sharpness that the juridical rendering obscures. If hostile speech is a breach of rule, the remedy is prohibition, and prohibition is what modern law supplies. If hostile speech is a loss of balance — the inflation of one facet of a many-faceted truth until the rest must be suppressed — then the remedy is the restoration of proportion, and the only instrument capable of restoring it is the speaker's own restraint. The English word "right" invites the first reading, and Aśoka's vācāguti belongs to the second. It means equilibrium. The Pali language is nothing but actually living words not merely words in the language.

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