CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION: ALTERNATIVE PATHS AND PARADIGMS OF BUDDHIST TRANSMISSION

After setting out to retrace paths of Buddhist transmission, what conclusions can we draw at the end of the journey? Patterns of Buddhist transmission overlap with cultural and commercial exchanges due to symbiotic relationships between monastic communities and donor networks in a “moral economy” of merit. Buddhist literary texts employ economic metaphors to encourage donors, including merchants, to make “religious offerings” (deyadharma) of material gifts for the “gift of dharma” (dharmadāna). As the establishment of stūpas and residential monasteries required material resources, donations of surplus wealth sustained the growth of the Buddhist saṅgha. Many examples from Buddhist manuscripts, inscriptions, and archaeological artifacts examined in the previous chapters illustrate economic, social, and political catalysts for the formation and expansion of the Buddhist saṅgha from the time of the Buddha in the fifth century BCE to the end of the first millennium CE. As the saṅgha consolidated its position within and outside of ancient India, Buddhist monks and nuns frequently participated in social and economic dynamics, despite ascetic ideals of withdrawal. Considerable literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence demonstrates that Buddhist institutions played key roles in political legitimation, management of hydraulic systems, and development of interregional road networks for long-distance trade. Routes for commercial exchanges of high-value commodities and cross-cultural interactions have served as conduits for transregional Buddhist mobility, which fluctuated with changing economic and political conditions. An ability to change with shifting conditions of material support and to appeal to wide audiences was a very significant factor in successful Buddhist transmission.

Rather than viewing the spread of Buddhism as a process of gradual diffusion from one point to another along major trade routes, applying a paradigm of “long-distance transmission” to transit zones between South Asia and Central Asia helps to explain uneven flows of Buddhist monks, nuns, and other missionary agents through intertwined
arteries and capillaries that connected multiple nodes of Buddhist literary and material culture within political and economic networks controlled by local rulers, regional administrators, and guilds of merchants and craftsmen. While theories of point-to-point diffusion can account for the gradual spread of static forms of Buddhism between closely connected centers on established major routes, other models provide better explanations for irregular patterns of movement with rapid accelerations and sudden halts, local changes in religious practices and ideologies, and distinctive features of regional Buddhist cultures. The model of long-distance transmission proposed by Erik Zürcher in his later articles to explain anomalous features of early Chinese Buddhism as an alternative paradigm to diffusion by “contact expansion” can be extended more broadly to transit zones in South Asia to clarify different chronological stages and institutional levels of Buddhist movement.

Long-distance networks of the “Northern Route” (uttarāpatha) and the “Southern Route” (daksināpatha) incorporated regional and local micro-networks of individual regions, cities, and shrines, and were linked to overland and maritime routes that connected the Indian subcontinent with the Red Sea and Mediterranean. Literary and epigraphic references and archaeological patterns of distribution of commodities and cultural artifacts point towards significant mobility between distant nodes, complex interactions, and different levels of economic, cultural, and religious exchange. While the northwestern and southern frontiers tend to be viewed as “outside of dharma” (dharmabāhya) due to contact with impure foreigners from orthodox Brahmanical perspectives, Buddhist attitudes are more inclusive, probably in no small part because many of these outsiders were important donors. Ancient Gandhāra (in the northwestern borderlands on the frontier between modern Northwest Pakistan and northeastern Afghanistan) was an especially pivotal and prosperous contact zone between South Asia and Central Asia. Archaeological remains of stūpas and monasteries, distinctive artistic traditions, Kharoṣṭhī donative inscriptions, and Gāndhārī manuscripts from the first centuries CE amply reflect the deep impact of Buddhism. Regional traditions of Gandhāran Buddhism synthesized indigenous and exogenous features from the cultural milieu of the borderland environment and successfully domesticated stories connected with the Buddha and his previous births. Extensive contacts helped to open paths for the transmission of Buddhism beyond South Asia to Bactria in the Oxus valley of western Central Asia and with the Tarim Basin in eastern Central Asia.
Interconnected capillary routes through the deep valleys of the upper Indus River and across high Karakorum mountain passes in northern Pakistan directly linked Gandhāra, Swat, and Kashmir with arterial branches of the so-called silk routes in the Tarim Basin of modern Xinjiang. Petroglyphs and inscriptions from prehistoric to relatively recent periods mirror the multicultural backgrounds of visitors and local inhabitants who drew designs and wrote names on rocks lining these routes. However, architectural remains of stūpas and residential monasteries are not clearly attested before a period of heightened patronage by the Palola Śāhi dynasty of Gilgit in the seventh century. The late establishment of formal Buddhist institutions in this transit zone between more fertile areas of the Swat valley, Kashmir and desert oases such as Khotan in the southern Tarim Basin can be attributed to the difficulties of generating adequate surpluses to support residential communities of monks and nuns in the high-mountain environment. The Tarim Basin also functioned as a critical transit zone for the initial stages of long-distance transmission of Buddhism to China. While hybrid Buddhist rituals were performed in court circles at Pengcheng in the first century CE and foreign Buddhists began translating texts into Chinese at the Han capital in Loyang in the second century CE, the first Buddhist archaeological evidence in the transit zone of Xinjiang can not be reliably dated before the third century CE. As Zürcher has argued, the relatively late appearance of stūpas or monasteries in the Tarim Basin indicates that early Central Asian and Chinese Buddhist traditions resulted from more complex processes of transplantation, transmission, and transformation than diffusion by contact expansion.

**Catalysts for the Formation and Expansion of the Buddhist Saṅgha**

This particular case study of early patterns of Buddhist transmission highlights the significance of interreligious exchanges and trade networks as dynamic catalysts for the establishment and growth of Buddhist institutions far outside of the homeland of the historical Buddha. Contacts with other religious groups and exogenous migrants to South Asia contributed several important dimensions to Buddhist ideologies, practices, and identities during the initial phases of the emergence of Buddhism in the fifth century BCE and subsequent periods of expansion throughout and beyond the Indian subcontinent. Buddhist traditions arose from interreligious contexts of intense competition between śramaṇas (including Ājīvika and Jain forerunners) and Brahmins who
formulated responses reflected in late Vedic texts (particularly the early Upaniṣads) within and outside of ancient Magadha. Efforts to define Buddhist doctrinal positions in deliberate contradistinction to the views of contemporary rivals in the middle of the first millennium BCE resulted in alternative karma theories, dependent arising, no-self, and other ideological hallmarks of mainstream Buddhism. Shortly after the emergence of the Buddhist saṅgha as a distinct śramaṇa movement, intrareligious contestation led to splits within the community (saṅghabheda) and eventually to separate ordination lineages, different vinaya codes, separate textual classifications and rescensions (which were not necessarily tied to scholastic divisions), and diverse paths (mārgas) and vehicles (yānas) of practice leading to various religious goals of nirvāṇa, pure land rebirth, and Buddha-hood. Such internal developments within the Buddhist saṅgha were directly and indirectly stimulated by external contacts with śramaṇa and Brahmin religious competitors and also by cross-cultural encounters with Iranians, Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Kuśāṇas, and Huns who were assimilated into the social and political milieu of the northwestern borderlands in the late centuries BCE and early centuries CE. Sustained interactions with these “outsiders” (insofar as xenologies were constructed by orthodox Brahmins in Āryāvarta) had significant ramifications and longstanding impacts on Buddhist material culture and transmission beyond South Asia, particularly in regional Buddhist literary and artistic traditions of Gandhāra, Swat, and Afghanistan. While the degree of hybrid cosmopolitanism is more apparent in sculptures produced by Gandhāran ateliers than in Gandhārī Buddhist manuscripts (which nevertheless exhibit distinctive regional features of language and genre), the flexibility of Buddhist traditions to adapt to internal and external changes is rooted in a very early history of transcultural exchange.

The consolidation of patronage networks provided a critical impetus for the expansion of Buddhist communities within political domains and across cultural boundaries. The Mauryan emperor Aśoka is adopted as a paradigmatic patron and ideal Buddhist ruler, but the epigraphic records preserved in his mid-third century BCE edicts do not corroborate Buddhist literary hagiographies in which he is portrayed as an exclusive Buddhist supporter. Instead, his inscriptions clearly demonstrate that he advocated generosity to all śramaṇas and Brahmins and that he made donations of caves to the Ājīvikas. While Aśoka identified himself as an upāsaka, made pilgrimages to Buddhist shrines, and addressed inscriptions to Buddhist communities at Sarnath, Kośāmbī,
Sāñcī, and Bhairat, the growth of Buddhist institutions during his reign can not be attributed to his propagation of Buddhism as an official state religion, but to political, administrative, and economic conditions that facilitated expansion throughout the Mauryan empire (and possibly beyond its boundaries to Sri Lanka, according to accounts in Pāli vamsas). Buddhist missionaries used the example of Aśoka to appeal to other rulers and powerful patrons, although religious patronage and identity was not necessarily exclusive to particular traditions. Erik Zürcher asserted that “There can be no doubt that from the earliest times Buddhism has been a missionary religion *par excellence*” (1999: 6). However, it is not necessary to assume that Buddhist monks and nuns had similar ideological justifications, used the same methods, or sought identical results as modern missionaries. Mandates to “wander the path” in order to “teach the dharma” (*Mahāvagga* 1.11.1) compelled Buddhist monks and nuns to propagate the Buddha’s teachings by reciting and interpreting texts, to establish the presence of the Buddha in *stūpas*, and to expand opportunities for followers to accumulate merit, but they were not exclusively intent on religious conversion. These intrinsic motivations provided strong structural incentives for religious mobility and institutional expansion of the *saṅgha* across political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. An essential aspect of the process of crossing boundaries between South Asia and Central Asia was the establishment of Buddhist communities in prosperous regions of the northwestern borderlands, where material support was available for constructing *stūpas* and building residential monasteries. Initially, *dhammarājika stūpas* were built at important administrative nodes at Taxila and in the Swat valley as early as the Mauryan period, but other nodes such as Bamiyan, Gilgit, and Khotan later emerged as prominent centers of Buddhist literary and cultural production when socio-economic conditions for élite patronage “ripened.” However, conditions for these centers to become “hubs” for multiradial shrines and monasteries were uneven, and links with patronage by ruling authorities are unclear in some cases (i.e. Bamiyan). The early phases of long-distance transmission through transit zones of the upper Indus in northern Pakistan and the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang did not depend on high-level patronage for the establishment of permanent *stūpas* and residential monasteries, since itinerant monks and merchants marked their passages at wayside shrines with images and inscriptions.

This study has emphasized the central importance of trade as a particularly important economic catalyst for Buddhist transmission and
institutional expansion. Historical patterns of Buddhist expansion were not exclusively determined by economic conditions, but an investigation of trade networks contributes another dimension to typologies of religious transfer, communication, and mobility. As elaborated in the introduction and borne out with concrete examples in the following chapters, the growth of the Buddhist saṅgha and trade networks were mutually imbricated in two major ways:

1. Various classes of merchants played significant roles as patrons of monastic communities and agents of transmission by donating material goods in exchange for religious merit, which functioned as an incentive to accumulate wealth and tied the saṅgha to networks of social support. Buddhism was and is not a “trading religion” in the strict sense that traders, merchants, financiers, and bankers were its only supporters, but epithets of the Buddha as such “caravan-leader” (sārthavāha), Avadāna and Jātaka narratives of his previous lives as a maritime merchant or overland trader, and the worship of Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara who are invoked as protectors of merchants in distress indicate Buddhist efforts to make special appeals to affinities with these groups of potential patrons. Epigraphic attestations of donations by merchants and archaeological distribution of stūpas and monasteries near junctions of trade routes through passes of the Western Ghats and Hindu Kush, at maritime seaports on the Indian Ocean, and urban centers such as Mathura, Taxila, and Peshawar that functioned as administrative, commercial, and religious nodes amply demonstrate a strong nexus between Buddhist institutions and economic networks.

2. Buddhist monastic institutions participated in commercial exchanges and economic transactions despite ideals of ascetic withdrawal, renunciation of material wealth, and normative principles forbidding individual monks and nuns from handling money and buying and selling. It is necessary to read between the lines of normative vinaya prescriptions against the accumulation of property by monks and nuns to find numerous exceptions allowing the monastic community (the corporate saṅgha) to own and distribute a wide range of properties (including landed estates and slaves), accumulate capital from permanent endowments, and lend money on interest through networks of intermediate agents and managers. Furthermore, donative inscriptions of gifts by monks and nuns at Bhārhut, Sāñcī, and other Buddhist sites demonstrate that they...
continued to have private property and were not completely dependent on lay patronage for support. *Vinaya* rules setting conditions for traveling with and seeking donations from merchant caravans and narratives about monks who participated in trade missions and traders who visited monasteries along their routes reflect deep connections between mobile monastic and merchant communities.

Thus, the religious economy of the Buddhist *saṅgha* and more general economic patterns were intertwined and paths for Buddhist transmission and commercial exchange often overlapped due to the embedded nature of religion and economy in social and cultural networks.

*Changing Paradigms for Buddhist Transmission within and beyond South Asia*

In order to explain why Buddhist transmission was successful in the South Asian homeland of the historical Buddha and his followers as well as in the distant northwestern borderlands and the transit zones of Central Asia, a counterintuitive question may be posed: how did the Buddhist *saṅgha* make itself attractive to diverse audiences of patrons, devotees, and monastic recruits? The worthiness of the *saṅgha* as a fruitful “field of merit” for donations to ripen and bring higher rewards than the initial material gift was ostensibly based on a formal separation from the social economy. However, strong evidence for interrelated Buddhist and economic networks synthesized in this treatment of patterns of long-distance transmission and trade indicates that such a separation was more doctrinal than actual. Politically powerful patrons who gained social legitimacy as rulers and commercial constituencies whose donations led to greater rewards were not the only audiences that were receptive to Buddhist appeals, but their support was highly instrumental in the institutional growth of the *saṅgha*. Although social, political, and economic catalysts for Buddhist transmission have been emphasized in this book, numerous other religious “attractors”, including ideologies, devotional rituals, and meditative practices, also stimulated Buddhist expansion by drawing adherents with wide-ranging interests and levels of commitment. For example, the doctrine of selflessness (*anātman*) could be deployed as a semantic incentive to make generous donations, since avarice entailed karmic punishments of rebirth as a pig, hungry ghost, or consignment to...
hellish states. Opportunities to earn merit through devotional worship of stūpas and images was and continues to be a central concern of both élite and non-élite practitioners. The production of merit through meditation has traditionally been associated with monastic specialists, who developed paths of practice and thought for attaining religious goals of awakening, release from the cycle of worldly rebirth, and transcendence of mundane patterns of cognition. To posit that one of these examples is necessarily more internal, intrinsic, or “endogenous” as a motivation for attraction to the saṅgha than so-called “exogenous” factors is to prioritize a particular location for Buddhist traditions in the realm of philosophical thought, ritual practice, or meditative techniques. Rather than constructing a dichotomy between internal religious causes and external social conditions or reifying a ‘protestant’ hierarchy of primary ideological beliefs over secondary vulgarizations, it would be more fruitful to develop integrative models in which attractors and catalysts are correlated in a dynamic system of Buddhist formation, transmission, and transformation.

Flexible processes of “locativization” and translation certainly contributed to Buddhist transmission outside of South Asia. The transposition of religious topologies to locations outside of the Buddhist heartland was facilitated by portable relics and images that established a locative focus for the Buddha’s presence. If material surpluses were not immediately sufficient to build monumental stūpas for the Buddha’s physical relics, devotees could worship “commemorative” relics of images of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, or stūpa drawings or establish caityas for venerating the “dharma body” (dharmakāya) of the Buddha in written texts and other materials. Worship of texts was privileged as a direct connection with the Buddha’s presence, particularly according to Mahāyāna viewpoints that regarded the Buddha’s dharmakāya as superior to his corporeal forms. Translations of Buddhist texts reflect cross-cultural movement across linguistic boundaries, and careful analysis of the distribution of manuscripts, variant readings, and different recensions can provide clues to links between Buddhist literary centers. While studies in the transmission of textual traditions have helped to clarify the literary history of monastic ordination lineages, the intellectual history of prominent ideas, and the relative chronological development of Buddhist genres, much work remains to be done to incorporate this work into a comprehensive understanding of broader patterns of Buddhist transmission.
CONCLUSION

Following multiple paths of transmission between South Asia and Central Asia has illuminated dynamic interactions between regional cultures in the northwestern borderlands with the aim of providing alternative perspectives on the history of Buddhism and the history of religions. Rather than reinforcing a dialectic opposition between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Buddhism by rehashing outdated arguments over an Indianizing Buddhist religious conquest beyond the frontiers of South Asia or a Chinese transformation or Sinification of Buddhism, this investigation shows that the hypothesis of Buddhism as a monolithic unchanging religion must be reconfigured. A relational network approach to long-distance transmission challenges assumptions about a straightforward diffusion of Buddhism from India via Central Asia to China. Multidirectional movement by agents of Buddhist transmission (monks, nuns, pilgrims, missionaries, merchants, and migrants) who selectively left traces of their journeys in literary texts, inscriptions, and material artifacts indicates more complex patterns of transmission than an oversimplified flow of influence in a single direction along a fixed route. As they consolidated multifaceted links between religious, economic, and political nodes along multiple lines of communication, they formed their own parallel exchange networks, thus enhancing possibilities for cross-cultural contact and transfer. The consolidation of Buddhist networks of religious mobility greatly enhanced the pace and process of transmission, which proceeded in variable stages depending on local, regional, and transregional contingencies (including socio-political stability or instability, environmental and economic conditions of sufficient material surpluses, and shifts in patronage patterns). It remains to be seen if trade networks played comparative roles as catalysts for long-distance transmission in other Buddhist geographical and historical contexts that were beyond the scope of this inquiry: Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (where the role of maritime networks may have been analogous to the overland networks examined here), Tibet and Himalayan regions where itinerant trading communities continued to migrate across mountain routes until recently, and East Asia (only early Chinese Buddhism has received brief attention, but patterns of expansion to Korea and Japan need reconsideration). The comparative relevance of situating mutually embedded religious, economic, political, and social networks in historical contexts will continue to illuminate interactive patterns and dynamics in the history of religions.