

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS FOR THE EMERGENCE AND TRANSMISSION OF BUDDHISM WITHIN SOUTH ASIA

Interpreting the past is a critical concern for Buddhist communities, despite stereotypes that associate mystical disregard of history with Buddhism and other South Asian religious traditions. Flexible narratives about the past have shaped Buddhist identities by providing models of meritorious action and have contributed to expansion beyond northeastern India by establishing locative links to the Buddha's presence. Stories about the Buddha's life and the formation of the *saṅgha* connect his birth, awakening, teachings, miraculous performances, and recruitment of followers to specific places and temporal frameworks. Hagiographical accounts of the rediscovery of the "True Dharma" (*saddharma*) taught by previous Buddhas in earlier ages and the turning of the "Wheel of Dharma" (*dharmacakra*) in the present auspicious age (*bhadrakalpa*) may seem ahistorical, since the accomplishments attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha are not particular to his own historical circumstances.¹ Although restrictive views of history as an objective chronicle of past events would deny any value to traditional identifications of links between causes in past lives and consequences in present or future lifetimes in Buddhist literary sources, maximalist conceptions of history as an effort to understand "how human actions are significant and have a notable impact on our world" (Nattier 1991: 139) provide more scope for understanding why interpretation of past actions was important for present concerns.

The aim of this chapter is to clarify geographical and chronological contexts for patterns and processes in the formation of Buddhism in ancient and early medieval South Asia and its transregional expansion

¹ For literary traditions about Buddhas of the past, auspicious present aeon (*bhadrakalpa*), and the future, see Nattier, Jan. 1991. *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist prophecy of decline*. Berkeley, Calif: Asian Humanities Press, 19–26; Strong, John. 2001. *The Buddha: A short biography*. Oxford: Oneworld, 20–21, Table 1.1 and Strong 2004a: 25–49. Nattier emphasizes that "...it is a central contention of virtually all schools of Buddhism that the Buddha's experience is by definition repeatable and is accessible (at least in theory) to all living beings" (1991: 7–8).

outside of the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the northwestern frontiers of areas of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Beginning with the period of the historical Buddha's lifetime in the fifth century BCE, the chronological range of this overview extends to the late first millennium CE. A detailed macrohistory of South Asian Buddhism is beyond the intended scope, but significant junctures between political, economic, and social networks for Buddhist mobility are emphasized in an effort to identify factors and catalysts for cross-cultural transmission. An historical-critical approach to literary, epigraphical, numismatic, and archaeological sources elucidates regional variation and different actors, features, stages, and levels of Buddhist movement, which fluctuated considerably with shifting political and commercial alignments. This effort to investigate the role of trade exchanges, intercultural encounters, and inter- and intrareligious relationships in the establishment, expansion, and decline of Buddhist institutions spurs several questions, which are addressed throughout the chapter. What was at stake for Buddhist communities in formulating stories about the Buddha's present and past lives, describing the formation of the *saṅgha*, and locating events in regional settings? How did interactions with other groups, including competing renouncer movements, Brahmins, and exogenous migrants, shape Buddhist perspectives and practices? What do available sources from within and outside of Buddhist traditions reveal about the impact of social and economic changes on Buddhist institutions? Which roles did Buddhist models of exchange, patronage, and supramundane power play in commerce and socio-political legitimation?

In the following subsections, which are structured diachronically and regionally, I explore the formation and transmission of Buddhist ideologies and institutions in changing historical and cultural environments, since Buddhist traditions did not originate autonomously or remain static.

- A. Initial Phases of the Establishment of Buddhist Communities in Early India
- B. Legacy of the Mauryans: Aśoka as *Dharmarāja*
- C. Migrations, Material Exchanges, and Intercultural Interactions in Northwestern Contact Zones
- D. Saka Migrants and Mediators between Central Asia and South Asia
- E. Dynamics of Mobility during the Kuṣāṇa Period