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.