LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

The earliest preaching of Buddhism in Han-dynasty China (206 BCE–220 CE) took place in the first two centuries of the Common Era and was thus more or less contemporaneous with that of Christianity on the other side of the Eurasian continent. The correspondence goes beyond this accidental synchronism. Both were universal religions directed at individual salvation, and both were characterized by a strong missionary zeal. Both Christianity, in the first centuries of its existence, as well as Buddhism, by then five centuries old, was disseminated through an empire that had reached its greatest extent, and within which favorable circumstances were created for contact between the center and remote parts of the empire: here the Pax Romana, and in China (until its sudden disintegration at the end of the second century) the well-functioning Han dynasty, which in this period exercised sovereignty over a great portion of Central Asia and thus controlled the trade routes through the barren heart of the continent, along with its oasis vassal states. At the westernmost end of this caravan route, the expansionist determination of a Central Asian people, the Indo-Scythian Yuezhi, during this same period resulted in the formation of a great kingdom that stretched from present-day Bukhara and Samarkhand to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kashmir. The ruling dynasty of the Kushanas patronized Buddhism, which had spread in the last centuries before the Common Era from the eastern Gangetic Plain over the whole of the Indian subcontinent. Here, in the border zone between the Indian world and that of the Hellenized East, arose a hybrid culture that provides evidence of Hellenistic influence, above all in the domain of Buddhist art. Thus the penetration of Buddhism in Central Asia and China originated from a number of centers in northwest India and the Pakistan-Iran border region; it is no wonder that the oldest preachers of Buddhism in China came from several centers, and that the earliest-documented Buddhist community settled in the capital Luoyang on the continuation of the transcontinental trade route.

Just as Christianity in its oldest phase spread through Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire, Buddhism too found its first following most likely among foreigners on Chinese soil: traders of diverse origins,
interpreters, hostages, exiles, and foreign mercenaries, and from this thoroughly marginal position, it drew its equally marginal—in as far as they did not belong to the literate upper class—Chinese faithful. It is thus no wonder that we do not know when Buddhism was introduced to China—picturesque stories about its triumphant entry at royal invitation around the year 60 were long ago unmasked as religious propaganda. The earliest, notably casual, reference to Buddhist monks and laypersons in Chinese historical literature dates from 65 CE, but that is also really our only glance at an embryonic phase concerning which we know nothing more.

More is known about the above-mentioned Buddhist community of Luoyang. In the period between 149 CE, when the Parthian monk An Shigao arrived there and published the first translations of Buddhist texts, and 210 CE, when the “Church of Luoyang” was destroyed in the chaos and devastation that accompanied the last convulsions of the Han dynasty, some ten foreign masters were active there, surrounded by a circle of Chinese faithful of which the number is unknown. We know little of the circumstances in which they worked. There were evidently two “temples” or “cloisters” in or near the city, where people gathered, but nothing is known of the internal organization of the monastic community (saṅgha). The main rules of conduct for monks were probably passed on by foreign masters, and in all likelihood that would have sufficed in this initial phase. The information we have is basically limited to a single aspect: the translation of Buddhist works in Chinese, obviously for the benefit of a growing Chinese flock of the faithful.

The oldest translations were typical products of a first generation that was forced to experiment. The master had a manuscript or recited by heart. If he himself knew enough Chinese (which was seldom the case), he gave a rough oral translation, but usually this was given by a bilingual intermediary. Chinese assistants wrote this down and submitted the sometimes scarcely understandable text to “revision,” in addition to which all sorts of verbal explanations given by the master were worked into the text. The translation work took place with the financial support of pious lay people who hoped to contribute not only to the preaching of doctrine through this “good work,” but also to their own well-being in future lives.

It is no surprise that the products of these oldest “translation teams,” of which about 30 texts remain preserved, are far from exact; they are awkward, worded in a peculiar half-literary Chinese teeming with vulgarisms, and at times, in spite of all efforts of the old Chinese redactors to clarify the text, largely unintelligible. This applies, in particular, to those texts which according to their very specialized content were intended for