INTRODUCTION: THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Ann Heirman (Ghent) and Stephan Peter Bumbacher (Tübingen)

The aim of the present work is to examine the spread of Buddhism in order to gain a deeper understanding of the way in which Buddhism found its way into countries and regions different from its area of origin. Before we invite the kind reader to follow us on our journey, however, we first of all have to ask: What is Buddhism? An immediate answer offers itself: Buddhism is an abstraction, as is any religion. Why? No single religion represents a coherent and definite system of concepts and notions, for several reasons. First of all, religions evolve and develop. The transcendent Buddha of the later Mahāyāna was significantly different from Gotama Siddhattha of the early Hinayāna as preserved in the Pāli canon. Just as the Jesus of the early wandering charismatic preachers of the first decades after his execution was different to the Jesus discussed at the council of Nicea in the early fourth century. Second, no single member of a religion can be aware of all possible interpretations. This holds true for the specialists like priests, monks, or university professors as well as, and even more so, for the lay believers. What the ordinary Chinese of, say, the Chang’an area of the late second century AD could know about Buddhism—based on the few texts that were translated by then into Chinese—differed substantially from what an elite monk at the Tang court would have known thanks to the comprehensive libraries available to him. Furthermore, lay believers may have had a different understanding of the various elements of their religion than the religious specialists as their view may still be informed by the earlier “folk-religious” tradition of their primary socialisation. We are, therefore, well advised to consider Buddhism in particular and religions in general as complexes consisting of a more or less “essential core” of concepts shared by most adherents (although they may understand them differently!) and layers of “secondary shells” of individually formed notions which may differ considerably from one believer to the next.

We may then ask: after various Buddhist traditions had left their areas of origin and spread into new territories, how did they enter these new environments? Did they adapt themselves or were they adapted? Which
difficulties did they encounter? Was the spread a single event or did it consist of several waves? The period to be examined in each region under discussion is primarily the period from the first appearance of Buddhism until the time when it disappeared, or, instead, when it had acquired a solid basis. As we did not want to produce a work in several volumes we had to limit ourselves geographically. Thus we follow the traces of Buddhism from its area of origin to the Far East, thereby crossing Central Asia, China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea and Japan. As we will see, this is not a single route, or a straightforward voyage, but a long journey with many side routes, with back and forward movements, and numerous encounters.

This journey is conditioned by many factors. Geographical, social, political, economic, philosophical, religious, and even linguistic environments all played their role. The desert separating the Central Asian mountains from the heart of China hampered the transmission of Buddhist monasticism for several centuries, while the belief in the sacred mountains of Tibet and in the divinity of the king as a mountain-hero facilitated the king’s transformation into a *bodhisattva* and a *buddha*. A lack of state sponsorship in the most western regions of Buddhist expansion made it impossible for the Buddhist communities to grow. Severe economic crises, the collapse of international trade, and the success of Islam made them disappear. State sponsorship in China, Tibet, Mongolia and Korea, however, brought the Buddhist community and state affairs into a close relationship and influenced the faith of the *sangha*. Esoteric Buddhism promoted itself as a prime protector of the state, and as an excellent curator of physical health. Still, in India, it could not stop the gradual shift of the traditional supporters of Buddhism to Hinduism, a shift that dried out the financial resources of the monasteries, and undermined their existence. In other regions, financial support continued to flow in, and monasteries developed into powerful economic centres. As Buddhism went its way, linguistic borders were frequently crossed and translation activities became of prime importance. Translation lead to a natural as well as an artificial selection of texts, or created an overwhelming and sometimes confusing richness of similar, but yet different or even contradictory words of the Buddha instead. Choices were made, and these choices further influenced the direction the Buddhist community would take.

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