

# Early Religious Emissaries Between India & China

By Cyril Veliath, S. J.



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## India & China

Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the eminent Indian philosopher, educationist, and historian who served as both president and vice president of India, once made the following inspiring remark: “The end product of education should be a free creative man, who can battle against historical circumstances and adversities of nature.” He later went on to say that on surveying the history of the world, we observe that the 6th century BC was notable for its religious ferment, as it happened to be the age of Confucius and Lao-tzu, the initiators of Confucianism and Taoism in China, as well as Gautama and Mahavira, the founders of Buddhism and Jainism in India. While all these religions in their inimitable ways undeniably strove to enhance the life of the common man and interlace diverse cultures, where India and China are concerned perhaps no religious tradition served to realize this role in a more effective manner than Buddhism. Indeed, one may justifiably state that for several centuries Buddhism served as a key vehicle for the transport and communication of beliefs, faiths, and cultures between these two mammoth nations.

Although Buddhism arose in India in the 6th century BC, it began to wane and fade away around the 7th century AD, and yet even so, for close to a millennium it happened to be a key religion of India. In the course of these centuries many Chinese pilgrims visited India, and on perusing the records they have left, we notice a wide disparity. While earlier records declare that Buddhism prospered, later records state that it was clearly on the wane. Monasteries that were reported as thriving by earlier travelers were perceived to be in shambles by those arriving later in the country. Nonetheless, these records do provide an insight into the character of those individuals, both Chinese and Indians, and of the immense hurdles they needed to surmount in a bid to fulfill their religious missions. Often their trails lured them into arid deserts, bandit-infested regions, dense forests, snow-capped mountains, and stormy seas, all of which they sought to overpower by sheer dint of their religious faith. They were indeed pioneers, in the truest sense of the word.

## Emperor Ashoka (268-232 BC)

Of India's monarchs and rulers, none served to inspire this cultural exchange in a more efficient manner than Emperor Ashoka, of the 3rd century Maurya Dynasty. His was one of the mightiest empires in the

history of the subcontinent, an empire founded by his Hindu grandfather who had converted to Jainism, but Ashoka himself became a devout Buddhist, after a tragic battle. Within his empire, he applied many principles of non-violence, by banning hunting and violent sports, as well as forced and indentured labor. Although he maintained a large and formidable army to keep the peace and sustain authority, he boosted cordial links with nations across Asia and Europe, funded Buddhist missionary activities, and undertook massive building campaigns across the country to benefit the common man. Over 40 years of peace, harmony, and prosperity made him one of the most successful and famous monarchs in Indian history, and he remains an idealized figure of inspiration in modern India. We have good reason to believe that his passion to foster Buddhism served to urge Indian missionaries to travel to nations as far away as China. This perhaps initiated early links between India and China, links that were reinforced by visits of reputed Chinese monks to India, as well as Indian monks to China. I shall present a brief account of some of these visiting monks, who in a multiplicity of ways served also as early envoys of their respective nations.

## Faxian (AD 337-422)

Faxian is known in Japan as *Hokken*. He was a Chinese monk of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, who in 399 undertook a lengthy and daunting journey to India, reaching his destination after six long years. While in India he studied Sanskrit, obtained several Sanskrit texts, and returned to China by sea in 414. He has left us a narrative detailing his mission entitled *Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms*. Although this document does not provide much personal information concerning the author, it serves to rank him among the eminent historians of Southeast Asia and Buddhism. He was born in 337 and ordained a monk at the age of 20, and his primary intention in journeying to India was to obtain copies of the *Vinaya Pitaka*, a scripture dealing with monastic rules for monks and nuns. He also sailed to Sri Lanka where he spent two years, and there while in the city of Anuradhapura he noticed on one occasion a merchant selling fans by the roadside, which to his great surprise happened to be products of his own hometown. The sight moved him deeply and evoked a feeling of nostalgia in his heart.

Although he travelled to India by land, he decided to return to China by sea. His entire trip spanned 14 years, and in the course of the journey he set foot in 30 different nations. Like his outward journey,

his return by sea also proved perilous and terrifying, and the fact that he had undertaken this journey when he was over 60 years of age is a sign of the deep religious fervor that moved him. The late French scholar Christian Cochini describes a poignant incident in the life of the man, prior to his departure to India. Faxian was made a monk when he was just three years old, out of sheer necessity. After the premature death of his three brothers, his parents, terrified at the thought of losing him as well, entrusted him to the care of Guanyin, the Bodhisattva (or *Bosatsu* in Japan) of compassion, at a local temple. At the age of 10 however, when his father died, he refused to return home despite the wishes of his family, insisting that it was not on account of his father that he had accepted religious life but in order to renounce the world. However, on the death of his mother he did return to his hometown in order to offer her his final respects, but he then promptly returned to his abbey. On returning to China he translated some of the texts he had brought with the assistance of an Indian monk named Buddhahadra (known as *Chüeh-hsien* or *Fo-hsien* in China, AD 359-429) and eventually died at the age of 86.

### Kumārajīva (c. AD 343-413)

Kumārajīva was a Buddhist scholar and translator par excellence. He is famed for his in-depth grasp of Buddhism, and revered as one of the greatest translators of Buddhist scriptures. He translated from Sanskrit to Chinese, and his many acclaimed translations include the Lotus Sutra (called *Hokekyō* or *Myōhōrengekyō* in Japan), the Meditation Sutra, the Wisdom Sutras, and many others. Kumārajīva was a child of noble ancestry, raised in the Central Asian city of Kuchā. His father was an Indian of the brahmin caste of Hinduism who hailed from a distinguished family, while his mother was a Kuchean princess. He entered monastic life when he was seven years of age, and this was a step he decided to take under a desire to imitate his pious mother, who, after getting the consent of her husband, realized in time her precious dream of becoming a Buddhist nun.

Kumārajīva was ordained a monk at 20 years of age, after which his mother set out for India in order to continue there her life as a nun. Yet prior to her departure, on being aware of her son's desire to disseminate the doctrines of Buddhism in the east, she alerted him concerning the magnitude of the task lying before him, of the need on his part to rely upon his own strength, and of the lack of any benefit that would accrue to him on account of this mission. To this, her son is said to have retorted: "The way of the Bodhisattvas of Mahāyana is to seek the interests of others, and to ignore oneself. If I can transmit the doctrine of Buddha and lead to enlightenment living beings who have fallen into a life of illusion, then, even if I have to endure the greatest tortures, I will not have the least regret."

Kumārajīva passed away on Aug. 12, 413 and with his demise was lost not just a Buddhist monk and translator but a scholar, envoy, and diplomat of the highest order, a true builder of bridges between India and China.

### Bodhidharma (c. AD 470-543)

Bodhidharma is generally believed to have been the founder of Zen Buddhism. Zen is referred to as *Chan* in China, and these two words are said to have arisen from the Sanskrit word "Dhyana" or meditation. On arriving in China he communicated the disciplines of meditation to his disciples, and several aphorisms are attributed to him. Bodhidharma is viewed as the 28th patriarch of Buddhism and the first Chinese patriarch, an almost legendary figure. He is said to have been the son of the ruler of Kanchipuram, a historical kingdom now located in the state of Tamilnadu in South India, and he arrived in China in 520. He then had an interview with the Chinese emperor, but his enigmatic replies to the emperor's many questions resulted in his prompt dismissal. He thereupon took leave of the emperor and sought admission in the Shaolin Temple, but since the monks of the Shaolin Temple appeared hesitant to welcome an odd individual like him, he took up residence in a nearby cave instead and spent nine years facing a wall, immersed in profound meditation.

The Shaolin Temple today has earned a reputation owing to its links with Chinese martial arts. Historians, however, have shown that although in due course Bodhidharma came to be accepted by the Shaolin monks, there is no evidence that he communicated a knowledge of martial arts to them. A notable incident linked to Bodhidharma concerns his acceptance of a disciple, who was to become the second patriarch of Zen. He was a man in his forties and a Confucian scholar, and in order to prove his sincerity he apparently cut off his left arm while standing in the snow. Bodhidharma thereupon accepted him as a pupil, presented him with a bowl and a robe as symbols of the transmission of authority, and gave him the name Huie or "efficient wisdom", under which name he came to acquire worldwide renown.

Bodhidharma is reported to have died between the years 526 and 557, but the circumstances surrounding his death are unclear. Today he is revered greatly, not just by the practitioners of Zen Buddhism but by the people of Tamilnadu and practitioners of the martial arts as well, particularly the martial arts of China.

### Xuanzang (c. AD 602-664)

Of the Buddhist Masters we know there is none who has attained the fame of Xuanzang (*Photos 1, 2 & 3*). He was a spiritual and scholarly colossus, and in Japan today he is known as *Genjo*. He was a monk of the Chinese Tang Dynasty, and the purpose of his departure for India in 629 was to acquire Sanskrit texts. He returned to China in 645 with 657 Sanskrit scriptures, several Buddhist images, and relics of Sakyamuni Buddha, and busied himself with translating the texts. In due course, he translated 1,330 fascicles from Sanskrit to Chinese. Xuanzang is also noted for the extensive record of his travels to India that he has left. It is not only a sweeping and substantial record of the Orient, but an unrivalled reference work in Indian history. Despite the fact that permission to leave China was denied to him by the emperor,

Photo 1: Author



*Statue of Xuanzang at Nalanda*

he managed to leave for India in secret, but on his return to China 17 years later he was awarded a hero's reception by the same emperor who had denied him permission.

There are two issues linked to his residence in India that draw our attention. One is the time he spent at the great Buddhist University of Nalanda, and the other is the personal rapport he established with the great Hindu Emperor Harshavardhana. Nalanda University was undeniably a leading educational institution of the ancient world (Photos 4 & 5). In Xuanzang's time its entire area was enclosed by a brick wall, and it had numerous halls, observatories, dormitories, and over 100 lecture halls. The copying of manuscripts was a vital aspect of university life, and the library alone is said to have comprised three vast edifices. Xuanzang declares the student strength to have been about 3,000, and the graduates hailed from places as diverse as Java, Tibet, Central Asia, China, and Mongolia. Besides Xuanzang and Yijing (a Chinese pilgrim who followed Xuanzang to India and Nalanda), the university had vast numbers of world-renowned scholars, such as Padmasambhava of Tibet (also known as *Guru Rinpoche*), as well as Shantideva and Chandrakirti of India, among others. It was indeed a rendezvous for the literati of China and India, men who in unique ways guided the destinies of their respective nations.

Harshavardhana was an Indian emperor favorable to Buddhism, and what we know of him comes mainly from the records of Xuanzang. The links uniting these two, a Chinese scholar and an Indian emperor, are obvious from the way Xuanzang chose to portray him. Xuanzang writes that the monarch was so immersed in doing good that he at times forgot to eat and sleep. He always had scholars around him, and chiefly scholars of Nalanda University. Every five years he celebrated a religious festival at the end of which he dispersed his entire personal wealth to others, and on one occasion, after having given away all he had, he begged his sister to find him an old garment, which he needed

Photo 2: Author



*Xuanzang Memorial Hall at Nalanda*

Photo 3: Author



*Xuanzang Memorial Pillar in India*

in order to worship the Buddhas of the 10 regions of space.

In 664, after having returned to China and after having successfully concluded his translations, Xuanzang serenely passed away, firm in the faith that he would be reborn within the Inner Court of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. His memory, however, survives as a forcible reminder to people of India and China of how much they have in common with each other.

### Yijing (AD 635-713)

Yijing was also a Chinese monk of the Tang Dynasty, who set out for India in 671 and returned to China in 695 with plentiful scriptures and Buddhist relics. As a child he had great esteem for his two illustrious predecessors, Faxian and Xuanzang, and dreamed of following in their footsteps. To quote Cochini in his *50 Great Masters of Chinese*



Photo 4: Author



Ruins of Nalanda University

*Buddhism* (Macau Ricci Institute, 2015): “His indomitable courage, his determination to take risks, the tremendous hardships he suffered, and finally the success that rewarded his persevering enterprise have earned him a place with the other two, forming a triad of great pioneers in whom Buddhism, like the whole Chinese nation, rightly takes pride.”

Yijing was 10 years old when Xuanzang returned to China and was welcomed by the emperor. When Xuanzang died in 664, Yijing, who was then 29, attended his funeral presided over by the emperor, and in 671, at the age of 37, he finally set off on his voyage to India. On reaching Nalanda, he spent 10 years at the university, involved in study, research, the accumulation of scriptures, and in the copying of Sanskrit texts. The word “shingon” or “true word” derives from the Sanskrit word “mantra” meaning an ineffable mystical doctrine. Yijing speaks of the existence of literature related to this doctrine at the university of Nalanda, and he declares that he himself received training in this esoteric doctrine, though he was unable to gain total mastery over it.

Twenty-five years since leaving China, and after having set foot in 30 nations, Yijing returned in 695, to receive a warm welcome from the Empress Wu Zetian. From then on, until his death on Feb. 16, 713 at the age of 79, he remained fully engrossed in translating the 400-odd scriptures he had brought back with him, with the assistance of friends like the monk Siksananda (*Jisshananda* in Japanese), a task for which he earned the title “Master of the Tripitaka”. The word Tripitaka refers to the three sections into which the ancient Buddhist scriptures of India are divided.

Both on his way to India and his return to China, Yijing provisionally stayed in the kingdom of Srivijaya in southern Sumatra, where he engaged in Sanskrit study. His writings are said to contain the first reference to the Malay kingdom of Srivijaya-Palembang, and he visited the kingdom in 671 after a voyage of less than three weeks from Canton. This was during the first stage of his journey to Nalanda, and the ruler of Srivijaya assisted him greatly on his voyage.

Photo 5: Author



Ruins of Nalanda University

He was all in praise of the high level of Buddhist study at Srivijaya, and urged Buddhist monks to spend time studying there prior to proceeding to Nalanda. William J. Duiker and Jackson J. Spielvogel, in *World History* (Eighth Edition, Volume 1, 2015), present the following translation of his words: “Buddhist priests number more than 1,000, whose minds are bent on learning and good practice. They investigate and study all the subjects that exist just as in the Middle Kingdom (Madhya-desa, India); the rules and ceremonies are not at all different. If a Chinese priest prefers to go to the West in order to hear (lectures) and read (the original), he had better stay here one or two years and practice the proper rules and then proceed to Central India.”

## Conclusion

The individuals I have referred to thus far (that is, Chinese, Indian, and others) rank among the leading Buddhist scholars the world has ever known, and yet this list is by no means exhaustive. There are indeed other sages and intellectuals like Vajrabodhi (AD 671-741, Amoghavajra (AD 705-774), and Subhakarasimha (AD 637-735) (usually known in China as *Jin Gangzhi*, *Bu Kong*, and *Shan Wuwei*), the three valued masters of esoteric Buddhism who together were referred to as the “three great heroes of the Kaiyuan reign”, as well as Paramartha (*Zhen Di*, AD 499-569), and Silabhadra (*Jiexian* AD 529-645) the leading priest at Nalanda University and personal tutor of Xuanzang. This, however, is not to belittle the countless other nameless monks of the massive Chinese terrain, who defying all the terrors of the deserts, mountains, and seas ceaselessly persisted in their quest for India, the land of their master, the Lord Buddha. They were indeed envoys in the truest sense of the word, for what they transmitted was not just a religion but an entire culture.

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