

CHAPTER 20

“ BOOK OF THE
LATER HAN AND
HISTORY OF THE HAN

“A GOLDEN MAN”

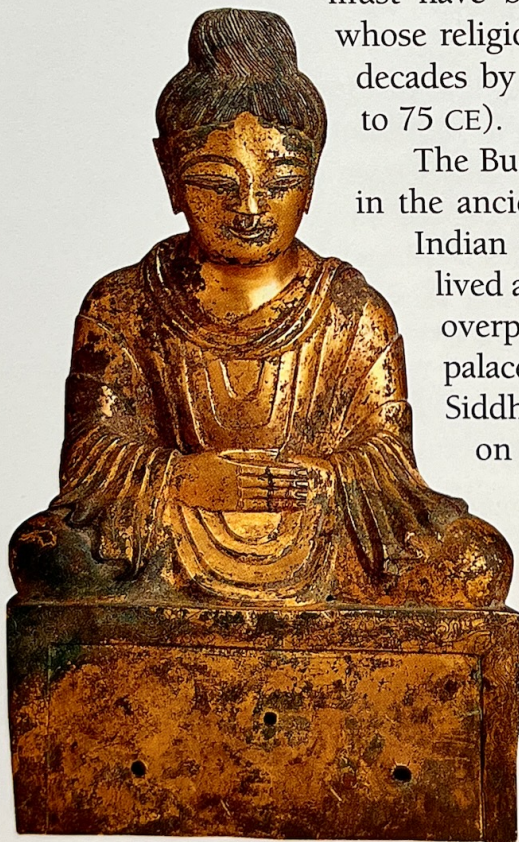
BUDDHISM AND THE SILK ROAD

“ Fan Ye, *Book of the Later Han*,
445 CE

In a dream Emperor Ming saw a golden man, great and tall, the nape of his neck aglow. When he questioned his assembled ministers about him, one of them said, “In the east there is a god, whose name is Fo, a rod six feet [about 12 feet or 4 meters] in height and golden in color.”

Intrigued, the emperor sent a messenger to the West to find out about this god—or at any rate, that’s the story as reported in the *Book of the Later Han* written by Fan Ye in 445 CE. Later scholars thought that the golden man of the dream must have been the Buddha, a holy man of India, whose religion had been known in China for several decades by Emperor Ming’s time (he ruled from 58 to 75 CE).

The Buddha (this title means “enlightened one” in the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit) was an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama who lived about 500 years before Emperor Ming. His overprotective father kept him closed up in the palace to shield him from the world’s harshness. Siddhartha was curious about what was going on outside the palace walls, so he sneaked out of the palace grounds and went in search of the daily life of ordinary people. For the first time the sheltered prince saw poverty, physical suffering, and



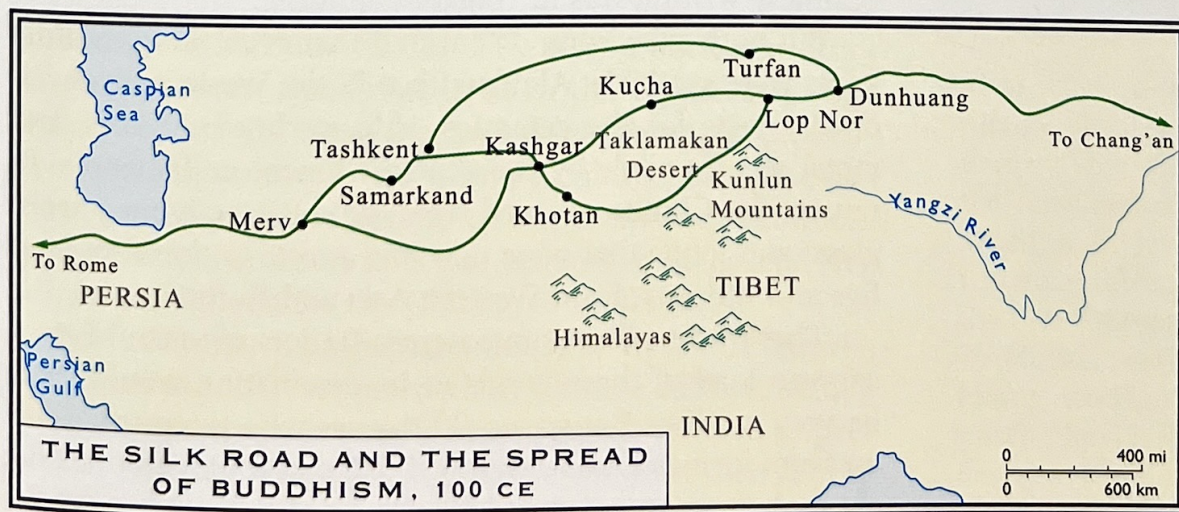
Chinese artists studied the works of artists from other lands. This figure of the Buddha, although made in China, looks much more like statues made in India, the Buddha’s homeland, and his face looks more Indian than Chinese.

death. Shocked, he went farther out into the world, searching for truth and understanding. While meditating under a tree, he reached what he called the Four Noble Truths:

1. All existence is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by wanting things.
3. Therefore, if you don't want anything, you won't suffer.
4. You can stop wanting things if you keep to the right path in eight ways: by having the right view, thought, speech, behavior, means of earning a living, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

The Buddha said that if people are tied to wanting things, they won't be able to leave the world even when they die. They'll get reborn again and again until they finally manage to stop craving material objects. Then the cycle of rebirth will be broken, and they will enter Nirvana, where individual personality is lost and merges with the Eternal: the unchanging, everlasting part of the universe.

Buddhism spread throughout South Asia, but it took a while for it to arrive in China. A lot of obstacles stood in the way. First, there was a formidable physical barrier: the Taklamakan Desert between the two areas is so harsh that locals still call it the "Land of Death." It has very few oases and its high winds produce many sandstorms. And once you've made it out of the desert, things don't improve too



THE SILK PEOPLE

Some scholars think that Roman soldiers first saw silk in the hands of the Parthians, people who lived in what is now northeastern Iran. The Parthians told the Romans that they had gotten it from mysterious people in the East, whom the Romans then called the Seres: silk people. The Parthians took on the role of middlemen between the Romans and the Chinese, buying silk and then selling it at a profit.

much—you come to another desert, the Gobi, and some of the highest mountain ranges in the world.

Second, the Chinese and South Asians had such different ways of life and such different languages that even once they encountered one another, they had a great deal of difficulty communicating.

Third, even if there had been a road, and even if the mountains and desert hadn't stood in the way, it was a long, long distance to travel.

But just like Prince Siddhartha, the people of China weren't content to remain inside their homes. Like him, they were curious. And they had another motivation for travel—trade. At the time that Buddhism was spreading through Asia, in the late-first century BCE, Chinese silk appeared in Rome.

How did it get there? It probably didn't come directly from China. Most likely Chinese merchants traded silk with someone, who traded it to someone else, who traded it again until it reached Italy. In any case, the Romans were eager for more of the luxurious fabric and for the spices that they imported from Asia. The *History of the Han*, written about 100 CE and quoting a text from 91 BCE, says that at first, trade was mostly in curiosities: the Parthians, people who traded between Asia and Europe, “offered to the Han court large birds' eggs, and [Syrian] jugglers.” The Chinese were intrigued by the Westerners, noting that they had ostriches and that they wrote “in rows running sideways” (Chinese writing was in vertical columns).

But both sides soon discovered that even more exciting items were available. Along with silk, the Westerners developed a taste for the ceramics, jade, perfumes, spices, and metal objects made by the skilled Chinese craftspeople. In return, the Chinese wanted wool, gold, silver, ivory, jewels, glass, and foods that were new and exotic to them, such as figs and walnuts, from Western Asia and Europe.

These were all precious items. Traders who could get a caravan-load of these goods to its destination would soon be very wealthy. But so would thieves who intercepted the caravan. As merchants developed different routes around and through the mountains and deserts, bandits waited to attack.

66 Ban Gu, *History of the Han*, first century CE

Two-humped Bactrian camels can carry up to 500 pounds at a time and can go for many days without water. Without them, the Chinese would have found it nearly impossible to carry out trade across the shifting sands of the Silk Route.



A merchant captured and sold into slavery after trying to earn a fortune through trade in luxurious items might agree with the Buddha that attachment to material objects brings suffering.

Still, the potential rewards were great, so traders kept working, often with bodyguards to protect them. The various routes known as the Silk Road became well traveled—all 4,000 miles of them. Not only did traders move goods, but they also brought new ideas and beliefs, which were examined and rejected or accepted. Among these beliefs was Buddhism. In fact, some of the early Buddhist monks in China were originally merchants, or the sons and grandsons of traders. But unlike a jade sculpture or a gold coin, when an idea is passed along to someone else, it often changes.

Buddhism had entered China by at least the first century CE. At first, most Buddhists lived in the capital and large trading centers (because the traders had brought the religion into the country). But Chinese culture was quite different from the Indian society of Prince Siddhartha's time. Some practices and concepts that Indians could accept very easily were difficult for the Chinese to understand.

For example, Buddhist monks left—and still leave—their families and never married. In Chinese culture, having children was very important. Chinese people showed respect to their parents by having children to carry on their family line. They also showed respect by not harming their parents'

GOOD BEHAVIOR

Most religions have rules that followers are supposed to obey. One example is the Ten Commandments found in the Jewish and Christian Bible. Another is the Five Precepts of Buddhism, which prohibit killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying or slander, and drinking alcohol.

gift to them: their own bodies. They were supposed to avoid doing anything to harm themselves, including cutting their hair. Buddhist monks, on the other hand, shaved their heads, and some burned cones of incense on their scalps to prove that they could concentrate even when in pain.

The Chinese saw history in 500-year cycles, which they considered to be very long. The Indians imagined eternity in millions of years.

The soul was an important concept in Buddhism, where the soul is reborn into another body after death. But this was a new concept to the ancient Chinese, who did not accept the idea of an eternal soul. And how can you worship your dead ancestors—a central ritual in Chinese tradition—if they've been reborn? They might be sitting next to you while you were sacrificing to them in Heaven. This was unimaginable.

Most Chinese gods accepted sacrifices, but the Buddha was not a god. In any case there was no sense in sacrificing when the point is to stop wanting material objects. Still, the emperor sacrificed to the Buddha, because this was the traditional way to express reverence and because the Chinese initially did not understand the Buddhist texts very well.

Very few people in either China or India knew both the language of the sacred texts of Buddhism and literary Chinese. This meant that many of the works were translated into another language and then into Chinese—or into two other languages and only then into Chinese. Every time a text is translated some of the original meaning is lost, so confusion and misinterpretations filled the early Buddhist texts in Chinese.

The Chinese Buddhists did manage to find some familiar ideas that helped them to understand and accept the new religion. A document written by a scholar named Xiang Kai and recorded in the *Book of the Later Han* mentions sacrifices dedicated to both a Daoist god and the Buddha. Xiang points out a basic similarity between Buddhist ideals and the Dao: “The Dao is pure and empty; it values non-action. Loving life and hating killing, it reduces desires and eliminates extravagance.” He even speculates that the Buddha and the founder of Daoism were the same person:

66 Fan Ye, *Book of the Later Han*,
445 CE



"Some say that Laozi went in among the barbarians and became the Buddha."

This new Buddhism led to many changes in different parts of Buddhist life, including art. In Chinese Buddhism the worship of images is so important that the religion was also known as **xiang jiao**. The desire for attractive and precious objects of worship led to growth in the arts, and some of the greatest sculpture, architecture, and painting in China come from Buddhist temples.

Buddhism also helped relieve the problems of younger brothers. Monasteries provided an honorable and useful profession for boys who were left without a way to earn a living when their older brothers inherited the family's property and rank. The monasteries gradually became independent of the government and stopped paying taxes. They set

up hospitals and organizations to help people in need, rescuing orphans and providing for homeless people. Some monasteries even came to serve as banks.

Even people's daily lives changed when they became Buddhists. The new ideas of reincarnation and **karma** influenced their behavior, as did tales of terrifying hells reserved for people who behaved badly.

Buddhism as practiced in China spread throughout East Asia and remains an important world religion. It has continued to change and grow through the millennia and to influence the private and public lives of billions of people in China and around the world.

Siddhartha was shocked at the suffering he saw when he sneaked out of his palace. When he saw the serenity and contentment of a monk, he was convinced that the only way to escape pain was through a life devoted to religion.

像教

xiang + *jiao* = "image" + "teaching," "religion"

Eventually, all Chinese religions adopted the use of images of gods.

Karma is the overall sum of the good and bad deeds that you perform, which determines whether you will be punished or rewarded in your next life.