
Buddhism and Buddhist Scholars of Kashmir

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Behind the present turmoil lives the Kashmir which has historically remained a centre of learning and excellence. Two thousand years or more ago, Kashmir was a great Buddhist learning centre and some of the famous legendary Buddhist councils were held there. From then onwards it continued to be one of the principal centers of Sanskrit and other learning. Then nearly a thousand years ago, Arab and Persian influences first affected Kashmir and later under Muslim rule, Persian became the recognized official language. Thus Kashmir experienced successively or in unision Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim influences, creating a mixed but harmonized culture which is so evident even today in Kashmir.

Kashmir is known as Sarada Peeth, the seat of the goddess of learning. The Buddha himself is reported to have said that this beautiful valley would be the best place for meditation and prayer.¹ Buddhism came to Kashmir soon after the Buddha's time. The climate of free-thinking and philosophical discussion initiated by Buddhism continued over the ages in this land of Sarada. Asoka was the first great royal patron of Buddhism in Kashmir. In the third century B.C., he created the capital of Kashmir at Puranādhishthana (now called Pandrethan) near present-day Srinagar.² He built hundreds of *chaityas* and *viharas* and settled 5,00/- -Buddhist monks in the valley. With the Kushans came, the golden age of Buddhism in Kashmir. *Chaityas*, *viharas* and *stupas* were built all across the valley. Most importantantly the great Kushan ruler Kanishka held the Fourth Buddhist Council at Harwan near Srinagar in the first century A.D.

With the Fourth Buddhist Council, in India the Mahayana form of Buddhism gained predominant importance over the earlier Hinayana form. Instead of the ascetic religion, the new form of

Buddhism was filled with the joyous beauty of life and of nature that is seen everywhere in the valley. This marked the beginning of a great spread of the Buddhist faith northwards to other countries of Asia and rest of the world. In the course of time Buddhist monasteries of the valley became great centres of Buddhist study and research. Large numbers of authentic Buddhist Texts and expository commentaries were composed by distinguished Buddhists, in Sanskrit who adorned these centres of Buddhist studies. These centres not only produced numerous great scholars but also attracted numerous Buddhist scholars from other countries to the valley. The centres of Buddhist learning produced numerous Kashmiri Buddhist scholars who also started to work and went to neighboring countries like Afghanistan, Central Asia, China and Tibet etc. in order to propagate Buddhism with the result we find that Kashmir played a vital role in development of Buddhist Philosophy and literature. In the Chinese and Tibetan collections of Buddhist Texts we find names and details of considerable numbers of Buddhist scholars and monks from Kashmir, who undertook translation of various Buddhist texts. We find presence of number of Buddhist monks and scholars from Kashmir in Central Asia, Khotan, Kashghar, Tibet and China.

The legendary story of the glorious role played by Kashmir in the development of Mahayana and its propagation in distant Central Asia and China is still preserved in Buddhist texts and translations in Ceylon, Tibet, and China. Kashmir became a high school of Mahayana Buddhism during the time of Kaniska's rule and after, and attracted scholars and pilgrims from distant lands who studied the Buddhist texts at the feet of the learned pundits of the valley. In this paper I will try to highlight the contribution of Kashmiri monks and scholars who have played great role in propagating Buddhism in China. Like many other countries, Buddhism entered through various roads, in China. The geographical situation of Kashmir makes its borders congruous with Central Asian countries, Persia, Chinese, Turkistan and Afghanistan; and Kashmir played with honours the role of the preceptor of Buddhism in Tibet, Ladakh, Khotan and China.

A continuous stream of erudite Kashmiri monks, proficient in linguistics gifted with the audacity of explorers contributed immensely to the spread of Buddhist learning in Central Asia and China.

In the book of N.K. Singh, *Buddhism in Kashmir* he has coded from Dr. P.C. Bagchi it says as

“Kashmir takes the leading part in the transmission of Buddhist traditions directly to China. The number of Buddhist scholars who went to China from Kashmir is larger than that of those who went from other parts of India. Kashmir was the most flourishing centre of Buddhist learning in India in this period. It was the centre of the most powerful Buddhist sect of Northern India.”³

Much of the missionary activity of the Kashmirian Buddhists seems to have been centered round the celebrated *Kumarajiva* who must have made many intimate connections with the Kashmiri scholars of his time while he was receiving education in Kashmir.⁴ At the age of eight years *Kumarajiva* (344-413) son of an Indian monk and a Koutchean princess, arrived with his mother at Ki-Pin (Kashmir). The celebrated Buddhist scholar's biography is preserved in a Chinese work called *Kao Seng Techoam (ch.II.)* which was compiled in 519 A.D.⁵ In Kashmir *Kumarajiva* was entrusted to a Sarvastivadin scholar Baridhudatta. *Kumarajiva* learnt *Madhyama-agama* and *Dirgha-agama* under his learned teacher. After three years stay in Kashmir, intelligence and manner won him many admirers among his friends and teachers and it is said that on *Kumarajiva* departure, many Kashmiri scholars accompanied him to Kucha. On the way he visited several centres of Buddhist studies in Central Asia. While on their journey to Kucha. In Kashgar, on the way to Kucha he studied the *Abhidharma* with six *padas*. It was here that he was introduced by *Suryasena* to the Mahayana doctrine.⁶ *Kumarajiva* made a special study of *Madhyamika* treatise. The king of Kashgar wanted to retain him in his court but the Kuchean

king sent messengers asking him to return. So Kumarajiva was constrained to return and was welcomed by the king personally in Kucha. At the age of twenty, Kumarajiva received regular ordination living in the new convent of the Kuchean king. A Kashmiri *vinaya* master, Vimalaksa, who travelled from Kashmir to Kucha and thence to China introduced him to *Sarvastivada vinaya*. Hence Kumarajiva acquired great proficiency in all branches of the Buddhist learning and his fame spread far and wide. Buddhists from Khotan, Kashgar, Yarkand and parts of Eastern Turkestan and were attracted towards him. While Kumarajiva was in Kucha, Ku-Kien -the Chinese emperor of the former Tsin dynasty, sent an envoy to request Kuchean king to send Kumarajiva to China. The king refused to send the pious monk. So the Chinese emperor sent his general Lu-kuang to subdue Kucha. Kuchean king was defeated and Kumarajiva was taken as prisoner to China. Kumarajiva was already known to Chinese people. He was brought to Chinese capital Ch'ang-ngan in 401 A.D. where he was welcomed by the Chinese Emperor made him his *Rajaguru* and requested him to propagate the Buddhist faith in his empire. Kumarajiva organized a translation bureau where the Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese language. To the bureau eight hundred scholars were attached and a marvelous work of translation was accomplished under Kumarajiva's headship. Being himself an ardent follower of the new faith, the king held in his hands the original texts as the work of translation was going on. It is reported that under Kumarajiva's supervision more than three hundred volumes were translated and Nanjio's catalogue attributes forty nine works of Kumarajiva. Besides a large number of translation works, two original works viz., a treatise on "*Tattva*" in two chapters and a commentary on Vimalakirti sutra are attributed to Kumarajiva. Throughout his stay in China he continued his devotion towards the propagation of Buddhism with his deep knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and its various schools. His activities could work a revolution in the Buddhist religion and literature in China. He had a large following among the Chinese Buddhists. Some of these became

famous authors of Buddhist treatises. Famous Chinese traveler Fa-Hien also was one of his disciples. It was Kumarajiva who advised him (Fa-Hien) to write his *Account of the Buddhist Kingdoms*. Kumarajiva passed away in 413 A.D.

A Kashmiri monk, Sanghabuti, reached the northern capital of China in 381 A.D.⁷ His activities can be traced till 383-84. At the request of Chinese scholars, he translated some Buddhist text like Vinayapitaka from Sanskrit to Chinese. He also wrote an exhaustive commentary on it. It is not known whether he returned to Kashmir or passed the rest of his life in china. While Sanghabuti was in China a greater Scholar name Gautam Sangha went from Kashmir to the northern capital China with a number of Kashmirian followers. He stayed for few years at Ch'ang-ngan, where he translated a number of Buddhist texts into Chinese. Being a master of Abhidharma he wrote several books on this branch of Buddhism and also revised many previous translation texts.

Among celebrated Kashmiri monks who were adventurous enough to travel across the high mountains into China, the name of *Buddhayasas* stand high. He was the only son of a Kashmiri Brahman. His father was a non-believer in Buddhism who once, is said to have assaulted a Buddhist monk. Retribution followed soon. The hand that had struck the monk was paralyzed and realizing his misdeeds he searched for the monk and invited him to his home and honored him well. To show his deep reverence to the monk he offered his only son Yasa to be taken into his fold. Yasa was taken to distant countries and was given instructions in Buddhist lore. At the age of twenty seven he completed his studies and thus became a full-fledged Buddhist monk. Now Buddhayasas started for foreign countries. He first went to Kashgar in response to an invitation from the ruler who had invited three thousand Buddhist monks on a religious congregation. Amongst such a large number of invitees the ruler was so highly impressed with the striking appearance and manners of Buddhayasas that he invited him to live in the palace. The ruler became his devout follower and kept him in Kashgar for a number

of years. Here he came in contact with Kumarajiva who was traveling to Kucha and who stayed in Kashgar for some time. Both of them worked together at some translation. When Kucha was invaded by the Chinese the chief of Kashgar went to its aid leaving Yasa in charge of his son. But he was too-late, Kucha having meanwhile fallen to the Chinese general and Kumarajiva taken as a prisoner to China. Buddhayasas was pained to hear this news. He remained in Kashgar for ten years more and then went to Kucha and at last he could find a chance to join Kumarajiva in the Chinese capital Chang-ngan. He worked with Kumarajiva for sometime and himself translated some works into Chinese. Four Sanskrit works are attributed to him which he translated between 410-413 A.D. one of these is the translation of the *Akasagarbha bodhisattvasutra*. He also translated the *Dighagama* and the *Dharmagupta vinaya* into Chinese. One more work ascribed to him is the translation of the *Dharmagupta Pratimoksha*. It is believed that Buddhayasas returned to Kashmir after Kumarajiva death.⁸

Gunavarman:

One of the greatest sons of Kashmir who was responsible for converting the whole of Java and neighboring islands to the Buddhist faith was Gunavarman. He was born in 366 A.D.⁹

He was a prince of the royal family of Kashmir. His grandfather Haribhadra being a tyrant was banished from his kingdom and had to spend the rest of his life as a wanderer in mountains and marshes. His father, Sanganand, also was an exile. From his very childhood Gunavarman was religious by nature and at an early age he thoroughly grasped the Buddhist Scriptures and committed thousands of sutras to memory. It appears that at that time the king of Kashmir died issueless and the nobles and ministers decided to invite Gunavarman to be the king. But he was so imbued with the religious and missionary zeal that he refused the offer and instead started on a long pilgrimage to the holy Buddhist places in India. He then went to Ceylon where he was warmly welcomed by the Buddhist

community. He worked with eminent scholars there and was responsible for helping to modify the customs of the people of Ceylon. Thence, he went to Java. Fa--Hien tells us that in 418 A.D. Brahmanism flourished in Java and the Buddhist were not worth mentioning. This position, however, changed altogether only a few years later due to the preaching's of Gunavarman. The king and his family were the first to be converted by him to the Buddhist fold in 423 A.D. and the population soon, followed suit. Being a Kashmiri, Gunavarman was most probably a Sarvastivadin which explains the study of this school of philosophy by the Javanese Buddhists.¹⁰

Gunavarman's fame spread far and wide and emissaries from the neighboring islands came in large numbers inviting him to visit their homeland. At last, the emperor of China also came to know about his work and the Buddhist theologians there requested him to send emissaries to Java to ask Gunavarman to visit China. When they came to him, he agreed to go to Nanking where he reached 431. A.D. After converting nearly all the islands on the way. In Nanking, the emperor himself went out to receive him and built a magnificent monastery for him. Jetavanvihara after the name of the famous monastery in India. Gunavarman was, however, destined to live only for a year in Nanking where he died in 432 A.D. but it seems that this last year of his life was of intense activity since no less than fourteen works were either translated or written by him in this year.

Dharmamitra:

A famous Kashmirian monk teacher of Dhyana or meditative school. He translated several Sanskrit works on meditation into Chinese language and also taught a large number of students in this branch of Buddhist philosophy. He was quiet worker. At first he had gone to Kucha where the authorities would not allow him to proceed to China. He however evaded the frontier guards and reached Tun-huang in 424 A.D. where he founded a monastery. He is said to have translated twelve texts.¹¹

Buddhavarman another Kashmiri monk went to western China shortly before 433 A.D. and being a specialist in Vibhāsa translated *Mahāvibhāsa sastra* in sixty chapters during the year 437-439 A.D.¹²

Ratnacinra:

In Chinese there is a name A-mi-chen-na. The Sanskrit equivalent of this name is Adisena. This is the name of a Kashmiri Buddhist monk who was known as Ratnacinta. He was a specialist in *Vinaya*. He went to China reaching Lo- Yang in 693 A.D. he found a monastery there named Tien-chu-see, "the monastery of India" and translated seven works from Sanskrit between 693 to 706 A.D. *Ekaksharsdharani* are amongst many works translated by him into Chinese and he passed away in 721 A.D.¹³

Now I would like to mention here that there are several other Kashmiri scholars who have contributed and earned fame among China and Central Asia, as we can find their names in Books and articles as they are; Vimalaksa, Buddhajiva, Punyatrata,¹⁴ and there are some more names which appear in Chinese, they are T'ien-si-tsai, Mu-lo-she--ki, Prānjnabala¹⁵ etc.

Kashmir took active part in the transmission of Buddhist Traditions directly to China. The number of Buddhist scholars who went to China from Kashmir is longer than that of those who went from other parts of India. Kashmir was the most flourishing centre of Buddhist learning in this period. It was the centre of the most powerful Buddhist sect of Northern India, the Sarvastivāda.¹⁶ An article by Nalinaksha Dutt, *Kashmir Buddh Jayanti Number*, which speaks about a Buddhist tradition that Buddha is said to have made a forecast to Vajrapani and Madhyandian that a disciple of Ananda would propagate his religion in Kashmir, a land of blue forests 'Nilanilam Vanarajim'. His forecast proved true; Kashmir not only propagates Buddhism to China, Central Asia and other countries, but also was an important academic centre for the studies and learning in that era.

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