

THE BUDDHIST HERITAGE ON THE SILK ROAD: FROM GANDHARA TO KOREA

BY M. ASHRAF KHAN*

The Silk Route in ancient times served as a link between the World's greatest civilizations and as a source of knowledge, art, religion and philosophy. This network of ancient caravan paths formed the first bridge between East and West, where two different civilizations came in contact with their respective cultural traditions and religious beliefs, as well as their scientific and technological achievements.

One of the main routes of the Great Silk Route passed through the Karakoram, linking Kashgar with Kashmir and the Gandhara regions. The Karakoram Highway connects the Chinese province with Pakistan and follows the ancient Silk Route, which connected the Heartlands of Asia with the Western fringes and further beyond the entire continent of Europe. Evidences of the history of humankind, ranging from Pre-historic times to the spread of Buddhism from South Asia to China and the Far East, is depicted in the rocky cliffs on the waysides and on rough boulders scattered in the upper valley of the Indus River and its tributaries.

The ancient trade routes also carried scholars, teachers, missionaries and monks of different beliefs and practices, who met and exchanged ideas. The Buddhists as well as Zoroastrians and other missionaries all followed the Silk Route, leaving permanent footprints of their passage.

The ancient greater Gandhara is situated in the North-West of the Indian Sub-continent, with the steep mountain ranges of the Karakoram, the Pamir and the Hindu-Kush bordering it and the dry areas of Central Asia to its rear. A number of races from Central Asia migrated to Gandhara because of its mild climate and plentiful farm products and fruits. This area was an entry point of Western Culture into India and at the same times the exit point of Indian Culture, including Buddhism, to the West. In Gandhara, the diffusion of different cultures developed an art form, during the 1-7th centuries CE commonly known after its geographic name as "Gandhara Art".

The Buddhism's route of introduction into China originated in Gandhara, then reached in

* M. ASHRAF KHAN is a Professor and Director of the Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan

Korea and Japan and other countries. The fame of Gandhara however, rested on its capital, “Taxila“which was a great centre of learning. From the time of the Achaemenians, down through Muslim period, Gandhara continued to establish and maintain a link between East & West, as shown by material evidences recovered from Taxila and other Buddhist centres of Gandhara during the course of archaeological excavations.

Key words: Buddhist Heritage, Silk Road, Gandhara, Korea, Kushan.

The Silk Route, in ancient times, served as a link between the World’s great civilizations and was a source of knowledge, art, religion and philosophy. It formed was a great network of ancient caravan paths from Xian (China) in the East, to Rome in the West. This route formed the first bridge between East & West, which came into being in the 3rd Century BCE and remained until the 16th Century. It not only served as a trade route but also allowed different civilizations to exchange their cultural traditions and religious beliefs, as well as their scientific and technological achievements. As a result of this, active exchange of cultural values and creative enrichment of peoples took place¹.

Kashgar was one of the main junctions of the two principal routes of the Great Silk Route. From Kashgar the road bifurcated further in two routes. The Western route continued over the Roof of the World (Pamir) towards Samarkand, Balkh, Merv, and Nissa, through Parthia, to the shores of the Mediterranean at Antioch, and then on to Rome and Alexandria by ship. The Southern route went to Tashkurgan, in order, to cross the Karakoram, and then on to Taxila. These primary destinations were located on either side of the Indus River, which guided the caravans².

These caravans were laden with “Silk” from China, spices and precious stones from India, Silver goods from Iran, Byzantine cloths and many other goods, and moved through the deserts, passing over the ridges of the mighty mountains and crossing rivers to reach their destinations³. Linking two great civilizations, those of Asia and Europe, the Great Silk Route contributed largely to cultural diffusion and further development of the “Middle Ages”⁴.

One of the main arteries of the Great Silk Route passed through the Karakoram, linking Kashgar with Kashmir and the Gandhara regions. The Karakoram Highway connected the Chinese Province of Sinkiang with Pakistan and followed the ancient Silk Route which connected the Heart Lands of Asia and further beyond the entire continent of Europe. More

¹ Voropoera V. and Goryacheva V. (1998) Kyrgyzstan on the Great Silk Roads and Cultural Relationship with India in Journal “*Himalaya and Central Asian studies* Vol-2 No.3 & 4, India, p. 68.

² Shafi Iqbal. M. (1980) *Silk Road to Sinkiang*, Lahore, Pakistan, p. 14.

³ Baipakov, Karl (1991) *Along the Great Silk Road*, ed. By Olga Tatanova Kazakhstan. p. 47.

⁴ Ibid. p. 79.

than 50,000 Petroglyphs and over 5,000 inscriptions in 39 different scripts and languages have been recorded along the Karakoram Highway in the Gilgit_Baltistan area of Pakistan, mainly by the Heidelberg Academy of Germany, in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology and Museums of the Government of Pakistan.

For nearly one thousand years, countless people traveled along this route including Chinese Pilgrims, Hebrew Merchants, Roman artists and travelers of different kinds⁵. Evidences of the human activities are frozen in the rocky cliffs on the waysides and on rough boulders strewn in the upper valley of the Indus River and its tributaries. This history is witnessed in its innumerable Petroglyphs from pre-historic times to the age of the spread of Buddhism from South Asia to China and Far East, presenting, a manifestation of the socio-cultural trends prevailing in different periods of history, in the Gandhara Region, Central Asia, Tibet and China.

The region of Gandhara is situated in the north west of the Indian Sub-continent and includes the steep mountain ranges of the Karakoram, the Pamir and the Hindu Kush. Gandhara in other words is the area in which the Buddhist Religious art was practiced, extending to Swat in the north, Taxila in the east and Jalalabad (Afghanistan) in the west.⁶ Its location is at the point where three major regional units i.e. South, West Asia and Central Asia meet each other. Besides, it continually passed through areas of diverse political powers in ruling from the neighboring areas. It was also on the fringes of prominent civilizations during the ancient period, including the Iranian, Indian and Hellenistic civilizations⁷.

Gandhara has been mentioned as a part of the Achaemenian Empire, having been conquered in the time of Cyrus the Great (558-528 BCE) and it remained under the Persian Empire until it was conquered by Alexander the Great in 326 B.CE. However, after the death of Alexander the Great, the political influence of the Greeks over Gandhara lessened to a considerable extent and in the year 305 BCE it was annexed by the Emperor Chandara Gupta. His grandson, Asoka (272-237 BCE), was the first emperor of this dynasty who converted to Buddhism and devoted himself to the propagation of Buddhism. Gandhara was thus constantly under the heels of foreign rulers, namely Greeks, Scythians, Kushanas, Sassanians, Kidara Khushanas and the White Huns.

The Silk Route was an ideal ground for Buddhism to grow and develop. Buddhism's route of introduction into China originated in Gandhara then reached Afghanistan. Gandhara continued to maintain a link between East & West through "Taxila", which was a great centre of learning and trade from the Times of the Achaemenians, through Alexander the Great, the

⁵ Dani, A.H. (1990) *The Pioneer of Dialogue*, UNESCO Source No.18. p. 11.

⁶ Miyaji, Akira (1988) *The Silk Road & the Gandharan Art of Pakistan. The Route of Buddhist Art Nara, Japan*, p. 176.

⁷ Rhi, Juhjung. (2009). *On the Peripheries of Civilizations: The Evolution of Visual Tradition in Gandhara*, in *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies*, Vol.1, Seoul National University, Korea.

Mauryan Emperor Asoka, the Scythians, the Parthians, the Khushanas, the Huns and even down through the Muslim period to the great Mughals, when a large number of caravan-sarais (halting stations for travellers) were built here.

The Great Khushans opened contacts with the Roman World, with far-reaching consequences in terms of cultural and commercial fields. The Archaeological Excavations at Taxila have revealed numerous items of commodities, art objects, and materials of everyday use, coins and extensive architectural remains which clearly show that such contacts were established⁸. The Indo-Greek princes, the descendants of Alexander the Great's companions, were Buddhists and it was under their rule that the amazing art style that combined Hellenic forms and characteristics with Buddhist attitudes was begun. The advancement of Buddhism towards the east carried it first to China and later to Korea and Japan⁹.

This Buddhist art presents a heterogeneous social picture of a time when there was a medley of foreign immigrants, including Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Kushans and Huns. On account of their diverse origins, these people professed different religions and customs and even used different scripts for writing. Similarly, Gandhara Buddhist monasteries, especially at Taxila, are superb examples of the planning & execution of monastic architecture. The best examples of these are at Jaulian, Mohra Moradu, Pipplan at Taxila, and Takht-e-Bahi, District Mardan, Butkara-I, Saidu Sharif, and Amluk Dara in Swat Valley.

The real amalgamation and cultural interaction between East & West began during the rule of the Kushan dynasty, and Gandhara was located in the heart of the Kushan Empire. The events in the history of Buddhist Art, such as the creation of a Buddha image, and the remarkable development of relics of Buddha's life story, took place after the last half of the first century CE. At that time the Kushans (nomads from Central Asia) founded a great empire extending from Central Asia to India. The emergence of this great empire changed the region of North West India from a frontier district to a hub of events. Not only did it become a junction between Central Asia & the Sub-continent but it was also a link with places as far as away as the Mediterranean world.

The Kushan dynasty was an empire open to the outside and had the ability to assimilate different cultures. The coins used by this dynasty, for example, which depict gods of three different worlds- (Greco-Roman, Iranian and Indian) testify to this theory.

The architecture of Gandhara is represented mainly by a multitude of stupas and monasteries. These reflect the influence of Greek and Roman forms, but are essentially Sub-continental. Archaeological excavations, however, have revealed a great deal of monumental splendor in the remains of Buddhist religious establishments, Stupas and monasteries, uncovered at

⁸ Dani A.H. (1988) Taxila; Meeting Ground of East and West International Seminar on Integral Study of Silk Roads. Roads of Dialogue.

⁹ Boulnois, L. (1966). *The Silk Road*, London, p. 93.

a large number of places such as Charsada, Sehr-e-Bahlol, Takht-e-Bahi, Shah-ji-ki-Dheri, Jamal Garhi, Taxila and Swat. The city of “Charsada” is one of the most important sites so far discovered in the Gandhara region, where the remains of the ancient capital of Gandhara once known as “Pushkalavati” can be found. This city was on the famous trade route linking China and the West.

Recent archaeological excavations carried out in the different areas of Gandhara, such as those at Badalpur, Jinan Wali Dheri, Takht-e-Bahi, Charsada, Amlukdara, and Balukili Gumbad, have shown that Gandhara art continued up to the 8th Century CE, since a number of statues of Buddha, the Bodhisattva and religious donors were made from Stucco in those centuries. During the 9th Century CE, when Turkish rulers had gained power over Central Asia, Gandhara lost its position as an important centre, being replaced by other mountain regions¹⁰.

After the inception of the Buddhism, during the 6th/ 5th Centuries BCE, the Buddha ordered his monks to “wander for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men”¹¹. This command initiated one of the greatest missionary movements in world religious history, a movement that over the next millennium disseminated Buddhism from the shores of the Caspian Sea in the west, to the Inner Asian steppes in the north, the Japanese isles in the east, and the Indonesian archipelago in the south. Buddhist missionaries typically followed long-established trade routes between the geographical and cultural regions of Asia, arriving in China by at least the beginning of the 1st millennium CE and reaching the rest of East Asia within another few hundred years¹².

Although Confucianism was introduced to Korea before Buddhism, its ideological peak occurred later through the interaction of Neo-Confucianism during the late Goryeo and early-Joseon periods¹³.

Buddhism was introduced into the Korean peninsula from China by the monk Sundo, who arrived in Goguryeo in 372 CE. After a few years Buddhism achieved a prominent position in Korea. In 384 CE. the Indian monk, Malananda, brought Buddhism from the Chinese State of eastern Chin (317-420) to Baekje, where it also was favorably received. During King Nulchin’s reign (417-458), Buddhism was introduced into Silla, but it was not until 527 CE. that it was officially accepted. During this period Buddhism was also introduced to Japan. By the time when Silla united the country in 668, Buddhism had become the national ideology of the country.

¹⁰ Miyaji, Akira, op cit As No.4, p. 180.

¹¹ T.W. Rhys Davids. Trans. Pali Vinaya Texts, *The Patimokkha Mahavagga* I-IV,part-1, Oxford, 1881, Vol. 13, p. 112.

¹² Robert, E. Buswell, Korean Buddhism in East Asian Context, in *Korean Buddhist Art*, Korean Art Society Journal, No.3, 2010, p.54.

¹³ *Handbook of Korea*, Korea Foundation, Hollym, Korea, 2003, p.37.

During the period of the Goryeo Dynasty, however, Buddhism achieved remarkable results. The period of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) is marked the end of the “Golden Age” of Buddhism in Korea. The National ideology during the period of the Joseon Dynasty was Confucianism; therefore Buddhism received a set-back at. However, it was able to recover its position once again during the Japanese occupation, and continued to reorganize itself and after the liberation of Korea in 1945, when it emerged as a strong and living religion in Korea.

After its adoption in Korea during the 4th Century CE, during the Three Kingdoms Period, Buddhism was adopted as the official state religion in each of the three kingdoms namely, Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla. It remained the state religion through dynastic changes over the next seven centuries in Unified Silla and Goryeo, until the 5th Century CE.¹⁴

During the Three Kingdoms Period, at the time when Buddhism was introduced to Korea, the Korean Peninsula was divided in to three separate kingdoms: Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla. Buddhism arrived first in the northern kingdom of Goguryeo and gradually spread to Baekje in the south west, finally reaching southeastern Silla during the 5th Century CE. In 372 CE a monk was invited from China to the northern kingdom of Goguryeo, bringing Chinese texts with him. As a result, Buddhism was quickly accepted by the royalty.

Buddhism was carried from Goguryeo to the south western kingdom of Baekje, in 384 CE, and there too the royal family received it. During the reign of King Song (523-554 CE) there is a record of a monk, Kyomik, who returned from India with new texts. He is considered the founder of one of the main schools of Buddhism. In Silla, it was the common people who were first attracted to Buddhism. In about 530 CE, the Korean monks traveled to Japan to teach about the Buddhism to the people of Japan.

In 668 CE, Silla conquered the other kingdoms and Buddhism became the central cultural force uniting the peninsula. This period is known as the Unified Silla Period. Throughout this time, Buddhism continued to prosper and grow, both academically and culturally, producing some of the finest Korean art, in terms of Temples, Pagodas and statues. The Avatamsaka Sutra and the Lotus Sutra were much studied, while the people worshipped Amitabha (the Buddha of Light), and Alalokitesvara Bodhisattva (the Bodhisattva of Compassion). Towards the end of the United Silla Period, the Ch’an School (Korean ‘Son’, Japanese ‘Zen’) was introduced from China and this added new dimensions to Korean Buddhism.

Buddhism remained the dominated intellectual influence during the latter part of the Goryeo Dynasty (935-1392 CE). It is believed that Goryeo had diplomatic relationships with the Wu kingdom and records indicate that there was considerable travel by Korean monks to China, especially to Wu, in the early Goryeo period. The four great monks close to Wang Kon, namely Kyongju, Chungdam, Kung-yang and Chanyu, had all studied in China. Hence the appearance of a stylistic correspondence between the Buddhist arts of these two nations is

¹⁴ Henrik Sorensen (2010), Korean Buddhism in the Far East, in *Korean Buddhist Art*, Korean Art Society Journal, No.3, p.38.

quite pragmatic¹⁵.

However, with the downfall of Goryeo Dynasty in 1392, Buddhism slowly declined as the new rulers of the Joseon Dynasty adopted Neo-Confucianism. At the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty, geomancers were consulted to find the ideal site for a new capital, and they chose an ancient place called “Hanyang“, which was later renamed “Seoul“, and which has been the centre of culture and learning for the peninsula since that time. The name means “capital” in Korean and was probably derived from the ancient Indian place most dear to the Buddha: Sravasti. In Chinese, “Sravasti“ became “Sarobol“ and finally Seoul in Korean.

In 1910, the Joseon Dynasty came to an end with the annexation of the country to Japan. But still today, about half of the population of Korea is Buddhist. Buddhism for the elite was not only a religious belief, a practical guide to life and a means to salvation after death, but it was also a way of asserting political power and subsuming the society under that power.

Buddhist Sculptures in Korea:

The Korean sculptural heritage evolved in two important areas; in the cult images of the Buddhist religion and in the art of sculptures. However, the origin of the Korean sculptures can be traced to Chinese culture, though it soon began to go its own way and take on typically Korean characteristics up to about the middle of the 7th Century CE. The Korean sculptures were predominately influenced by styles from the Chinese Sui dynasty (581-617 CE) and early Tang dynasty (618-906 CE) styles which were already a few decades old before their influence was felt in Silla.

After 770 CE, the state patronage of Buddhist Art stopped and the result was a diminution of Chinese influence. For instance, the folds in the Buddha’s garments became more stylized in the second half of the 8th century and from the beginning of the 9th century, a progressive Koreanization can be observed in the two dimensional treatment of the body (of the Buddha) as well as in the broadening of the face.

Most statues of Korean Buddhist art are made of cast iron gilded with gold leaf and gold powder. The ancient statues, however, were made from cast iron or wood. The common subjects statues of Buddhist Korean art include:

- a) Sakyamuni: This is the historical Buddha, usually depicted with a bare shoulder and both hands in his lap, or one touching the floor.
- b) Maitreya : The Future Buddha.
- c) Amitabha : The Buddha of light and of the Western Paradise
- d) Vairocana: The cosmic Buddha, usually depicted holding up his index finger
- e) Bhaisagyaguru: The Medicine Buddha, usually holding a bowl for medicine.
- f) Avalokitesvara : The Bodhisattva of Compassion.

¹⁵ Marilyn M. Rhie (1988), *Korean Culture Vol.9, No.2*, Korean Cultural Service, Pub. California, U.S.A, p.23.

- g) Mahasthrapraptā: The Bodhisattva of Power, usually carrying a lotus.
- h) Samantabhadra: The Bodhisattva of Practice, usually carrying a lotus.
- i) Manjusri: The Bodhisattva of Wisdom, usually riding on a lion when alone.

In Korea, many statues of Sakyamuni Buddha, Vairocana, Bhaisagya and Maitreya have been produced, as well as the “Time Buddhas”, such as the 1,000 Buddhas or 3,000 Buddhas, the “Multi Buddhas” such as the 53 Buddhas or 10,000 Buddhas, and the “Direction Buddhas” such as the Four or Five Direction Buddhas¹⁶. The early sculpture of the Three Kingdoms Dynasty adopted the iconography and styles of those produced in the northern and southern regions of China. One source of sculptures was the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), characterized by the frontal stance of the figures, the flaring edges of their garments and the flame-like decoration on the halos.

Korean sculptures are, however, highly selective in their interpretations of foreign models, sometimes incorporating multiple styles from different regions of China. During the first half of the 7th Century, sculptures of the pensive figures became very much popular in all three kingdoms.

Since the Silla monks traveled to Tang China (618-906), the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures, and returned with ever greater knowledge of numerous Buddhist sects, so the art of this religion embodied a convergence of multiple influences. United Silla statues have an undeniable sensuality, from their round faces and dreamy expressions to their curvaceous bodies. In essence, the style of this period can be characterized as an international style cutting across much of East, Central and South Asia.

From the 6th CE, Buddha sculptures in Korea had characteristically Korean (i.e. broad) faces with high cheekbones, along with drapery styles which shows the influences of the Six Dynasties in China, characterized by the symmetrical arrangements of the garments. The Maitreya Bodhisattva, or the Future Buddha, was worshiped in royal and aristocratic circles in the early 7th Century and all of the Three Kingdoms. Therefore some of the finest images of this Buddha demonstrate the Korean mastery of the bronze-casting techniques and refinement in every detail.

However, a new style of thin monastic garment that left one shoulder bare appears in 8th and 9th Century Buddha images in Korea, after Korean monks began traveling to Tang China, Central Asia and as far as India. In contrast, the stone images carved during from the 7th Century have heavy garments covering both shoulders and were made in all kinds of material, such as bronze, clay, and wood¹⁷.

In this context it can be presumed that the early examples of statues of Buddha and other

¹⁶ Gyeongju National Museum (Art Hall), Exhibition Catalogue Publication Korea, 2002 p.54 .

¹⁷ Youngsook Pak (2010). Buddhist Art in Korea ,in *Korean Buddhist Art*, Korean Art Society Journal, No.3, p.62.

deities of the Buddhist pantheon (5-6th CE) exhibit iconographic and stylistic ties to their Chinese models, with their elongated faces, harsh facial features, sharp linear folds of the garments, and stiff, central poses. This adoption of Chinese models was inevitable given both the early stage in the development of Buddhism and its icons in Korea and also the nature of religious statuary which dictates adherence to existing archetypes.

By the later periods (7-8th CE) however, Korean Buddhist sculpture had matured both conceptually and stylistically. The famous “Paekche smile” on the small Buddha statues of the Paekche kingdom, the elegant and individualistic representations of meditating (or Pensive) Buddhas from the 7th Century, and the technically and stylistically unsurpassed sculptures in the 8th Century cave temples of Sokkuram, are some of the most striking examples of the native development of Buddhist sculptures in Korea. Similarly, the Sokkuram and its sculptures in particular are the best examples of Korean ingenuity and represent the essence of Korean style in the framework of Buddhist art of Korea.

REFERENCES

- Baipakov, Karl. 1991. *Along the Great Silk Road*. Edited by Olga Tatanova. Kazakhstan: Kramos.
- Boulnois, L. 1966. *The Silk Road* London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Buswell, Robert E. 2010. "Korean Buddhism in East Asian Context." *Korean Art Society Journal* no. 3.
- Dani, Ahmed Hasan. 1988. Taxila: Meeting Ground of East and West. In *International Seminar on Integral Study of Silk Roads*.
- . 1990. "The Pioneers of Dialogue: Merchants, Scholars and Missionaries." *UNESCO Sources Silk Roads: A Dialogue Renewed* no. 18 (September).
- Exhibition Catalogue. 2002. Gyeongju National Museum: Korea.
- Handbook of Korea*. 2003. Seoul: The Korea Foundation.
- Miyaji, Akira. 1988. The Silk Road & the Gandharan Art of Pakistan. In *The Route of Buddhist Art*. Japan: Nara.
- Pak, Youngsook. 2010. "Buddhist Art in Korea." *Korean Art Society Journal* no. 3.
- Rhi, Juhjung. 2009. "On the Peripheries of Civilizations: The Evolution of Visual Tradition in Gandhara." *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies* no. 1.
- Rhie, Marilyn M. 1988. "Buddhist Sculpture of the Early Koryo Dynasty." *Korean Culture* no. 9 (2).
- Shafi, Iqbal. M. 1980. *Silk Road to Sinkiang*. Lahore, Pakistan.
- Sorensen, Henrik. 2010. "Korean Buddhism in the Far East." *Korean Art Society Journal* no. 3.
- Voropovera, V. , and V. Goryacheva. 1998. "Kyrgyzstan on the Great Silk Roads and Cultural Relationship with India." *Himalaya and Central Asian Studies* no. 2 (3 & 4).