"Barbara O'Brien's wide-ranging account of Zen history is conveyed with a master storyteller's ability to keep the forest from getting lost in a myriad of trees."

—Barry Magid, author of *Nothing Is Hidden: The Psychology of Zen Koans*

THE CIRCLE OF THE WAY

A Concise History of Zen from the Buddha to the Modern World

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In Appreciation

Those who made this book possible include three Zen teachers: my dharma gate teacher, John Daido Loori (1931–2009); my heart teacher, Tokudo Jion Susan Postal (1940–2014); and Myozan Shofu Dennis Keegan (1947–2016), who famously channeled Dogen and who advised me to stop capitalizing *suchness*. "You're objectifying it," he said. "Don't do that." This proved to be wise advice. In honor of Dennis, *suchness* will not be capitalized in this book. Well, unless it begins a sentence.

I also thank and miss my brother and sister students from Empty Hand Zen Center in New Rochelle, New York, and the Zen community of the Fire Lotus Temple, Zen Center of New York City, in Brooklyn. Fire Lotus is a branch of Zen Mountain Monastery (ZMM) in Mount Tremper, New York, where I first encountered Zen. I trust ZMM and affiliates will continue to thrive under the wise and compassionate leadership of Abbot Geoffrey Shugen Arnold. I hope also that Empty Hand will blossom anew with the right guiding teacher someday.

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And for everyone in the seven directions and three times engaged in the great collaborative effort that is Zen, I am profoundly grateful. May we practice with infinite kindness to the past, infinite service to the present, and infinite responsibility to the future.

Barbara Hoetsu O'Brien
October 16, 2018

THE CIRCLE OF THE WAY

Introduction

A ZEN HISTORY?

I was living in the Fire Lotus Zen Temple in Brooklyn when another student came into the library and asked for a history of Zen. The only one available was the two-volume work by Heinrich Dumoulin (1905–95), first published in English in 1988. I believe this is the only attempt anyone has made at a comprehensive Zen history in a Western language, or in any language as far as I know. In recent years, many scholarly studies have been published dealing with aspects of Zen history, but there's no other single work walking the reader through the whole thing.

Dumoulin's history is a worthy effort, but much of it has been contradicted by more recent scholarship. Further, Dumoulin was a Jesuit theologian, and his understanding of Zen itself went only so far.

I never heard how the other student got along with Dumoulin. But the experience made me think about how much *I* wanted a better history of Zen, especially one that was more succinct and better explained how Zen developed through the centuries. So I decided to write it myself. I hope this narrative will be useful to Zen students, providing background to their practice.

This book is also written for those who see the word *Zen* tacked onto everything from tech products to soap and wonder what it is. Since the Beats introduced Zen into Western popular culture in the 1950s, the term *Zen* has come to signify something wonderfully commercial if not definable. The word can, apparently, mean whatever one wants it to mean.

But the Zen tradition is far from a blank slate. It is a school of Buddhism that developed a unique approach to the Buddha's teachings. It has a rich heritage of literature. And it has a long and messy history.

This task is complicated by the fact that many of Zen's traditional

stories about itself are contradicted by historical scholarship. For that matter, modern scholars don't always speak with one voice about what really happened either. This makes the crafting of a single narrative quite the challenge. Which story do I tell? And what do we do with the traditional stories that don't match historical records?

How the Story Goes

Zen history as described in Zen centers and monasteries follows an established trajectory. The story begins with the life of the Buddha and then moves on to the development of Mahayana Buddhism, the major tradition of which Zen is a part. This is followed by the story of the Six Patriarchs, the founders of Zen in China.

After the Six Patriarchs period comes Tang dynasty Zen, sometimes called the Golden Age of Zen. Here we meet the great masters remembered in the enigmatic koans that Zen is famous for. Zen is transmitted to Korea and Vietnam. As we approach the end of the first millennium C.E., we see the emergence of the schools of Zen that exist today. Zen takes root in Japan and flourishes. And, finally, we reach the modern era and the establishment of Zen outside Asia. The thread that runs throughout this story is the unbroken lineage of awakened masters who transmitted the Buddha's enlightenment directly to each other through the centuries.

This is the standard story, but much of the standard story suffers from a lack of historical corroboration. And in recent decades several academic histories have been published that contradict the standard story and dismantle much of the lineage.

However, many of the academic efforts to document Zen's history are unsatisfactory in their own way. While I rely on scholarly research into names, dates, and who did what, a remarkable number of current scholars specializing in Zen history seem not to grasp anything about what Zen Buddhism *is*. Academic histories dealing with Zen, and many about Buddhism generally, are like books about the history of opera written by tone-deaf people who know nothing about music. And some of them clearly hate opera and don't know why anyone listens to it.

So telling the story of Zen involves diplomatic negotiation between Zen's traditional narratives and historical scholarship, and that isn't simple. I also want to emphasize that this is *a* history of Zen, not *the* history of Zen or everything that ever happened in Zen, which would take a library full of books to tell. Instead, it's a story of how Zen came to be what it is today, and it's as honest a story as I can tell given the challenges to telling any story at all.

The Challenge of Early Buddhism

Any history of Buddhism logically begins with the presumed founder, the man named Siddhartha Gautama who came to be called the Buddha—the One Who Is Awake. That said, we don't know much about him. In fact, outside of Buddhist scriptures, records, and commentaries, there is so little evidence of his life that we cannot say for certain that he lived at all.

The sad truth is that we know nearly nothing for certain about early Buddhism. The few records we have of the early centuries appear to have been written by people with doctrinal or institutional axes to grind. Particularly given the near absence of contemporary corroboration and that the records often contradict each other, we cannot assume any of it is factual.

Buddhist literature says that the Buddha was a prince who left his privileged life on a quest to realize enlightenment and be relieved from suffering. After much difficulty he succeeded, and then he spent the rest of his life teaching others how to realize enlightenment also. This beloved story evolved over time, reaching its classic form in Ashvaghosa's epic poem, the *Buddhacarita*, in the second century C.E.

We have no way to know if any of this story is based on the actual life of a once-living man. This is not to say the story has no value. Great myths don't need to be factual to express truths; see Joseph Campbell or Carl Jung on that point. From the perspective of history, however, the Buddha is more of a hypothesis than a person.

Standard scholarship places Siddhartha Gautama's hypothetical life somewhere in the fifth or sixth century B.C.E. Academically proposed dates for his death range from 486 B.C.E. to as late as 350 B.C.E.

In 2013 traces of an older, Vedic-style shrine—from between the eighth

and the seventh century B.C.E.—were discovered in Lumbini, Nepal, at the site long venerated as the Buddha's birthplace. This may mean that the Buddha lived longer ago than we thought. Or—more likely, I think—it may mean that early myth makers settled on an established sacred site as the place the World Honored One was born.

This leaves us with the teachings, and those are disputed also. The texts assumed to be the oldest scriptures unquestionably were rewritten over the centuries, although it's hard to say how much. Even so, some scholars find the teachings in these early scriptures to be the only compelling argument for a historical Buddha. "This mass of teachings all has a consistency and a coherence that point to a single original intelligence," writes Karen Armstrong, "and it is hard to see them as a corporate creation."[1] Some of the sermons recorded in early scriptures might really have been spoken by the Buddha, Armstrong continues, although we can't say for certain which ones those might be.

I am inclined to agree with Armstrong. However, I can remember my first Zen teacher, the late John Daido Loori, saying that if research proves that the Buddha never existed as a historical person, it wouldn't matter. The teachings, tested and practiced for twenty-five centuries, speak for themselves.

The Challenge of the Early Scriptures

According to the standard history of early Buddhism, the Buddha spent most of his life in northern India, mostly in an area now occupied by the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. If that is so, he probably spoke Magadhi, which was a Prakrit, or a Middle Indo-Aryan language related to Sanskrit. And if *that's* so, at the time he probably lived there would have been no written language in which to record what he said.

At first, Buddhist scriptures were preserved by monks and nuns who memorized and chanted them. This is not at all impossible; the much more ancient Vedas, texts related to Hinduism, had already been passed on for centuries in the same way. In the first century B.C.E., the Buddhists of Sri Lanka are said to have committed their entire scriptural canon into writing. This was the basis of the Pali canon, so called because it was written in

another Prakrit called Pali. Note that the oldest extant copy of the Pali canon dates to about the eighth century C.E., however, and we don't know how much that copy resembles the first-century B.C.E. version.

The Pali canon has three major sections: the Suttapitaka, which are sutras or sermons of the Buddha and his chief disciples; the Vinayapitaka, or just Vinaya, which are the rules of the monastic order; and the Abhidhamma, detailed commentaries explaining natural and physical processes and how the teachings relate to them. Of these, the Suttapitaka and Vinaya have some claim to being old enough to be the words of the Buddha. The Abhidhamma was almost certainly composed and added somewhat later.

Meanwhile, back on the Indian subcontinent, multiple Sanskrit chanting lineages were established. Only fragments of these remain, but before the Sanskrit sutras were lost many were translated into Chinese and some into Tibetan, and from these translations another version of the Suttapitaka has been patched together. Corresponding Chinese and Pali texts are sometimes similar and sometimes not, and which version might be closer to an "original" is often a matter of opinion.

To confuse matters further, in the 1990s scroll fragments unearthed in Afghanistan and Pakistan proved to be the oldest existing copies of these earliest Buddhist scriptures. The scrolls are in Gandhari, another Middle Indo-Aryan language, and date from the first century B.C.E. to the third century C.E. Scholars at first hoped the Gandhari scrolls would shed some light on which scriptures, the Chinese/Tibetan or Pali, were more "original," but that was not to be. Here and there, analyses of chronology and language reveal that something was added or changed. But the consensus at the moment is that most of what we have of these scripture lineages are less like branches of a tree and more like a braided river—a single river with multiple channels that have come to be separated by sediment deposits.[2]

I have written this book assuming that the core teachings of these early scriptures originated with a person we identify as the Buddha, but I acknowledge that we don't know that for certain. And please note that in identifying the uncertainty concerning the dating of early Buddhist scriptures, I don't intend to disparage them; there is considerable wisdom in these texts. It's important to understand that Buddhism has a different relationship

to its scriptures from that of the Abrahamic religions—the "people of the book"—more familiar in the West. We tend to think that scriptures must come with some sort of divine authority to be believed without question. Buddhists would argue that what is written in scriptures should stand or fall on its own merit.

In Buddhism, the scriptures are to truth what a road sign is to a destination. They are valuable pointers to insight, but not insight itself. In these same scriptures, the Buddha advises us to not believe anything on someone else's authority but to realize the truth of it for ourselves.[3]

The Challenge of Western Biases and Historical Dogmatism

As soon as Westerners first distinguished "Buddhism" as a distinctive part of Asian spiritual tradition, they began to impose on it their own ideas of what it should be. Indeed, the term *Buddhism* itself is a Western invention, first used by a British writer in a text published in 1797, which I'm told has no precise counterpart in Asian languages.

Westerners from the nineteenth century to the present have expressed the belief that there must be an "original" or "true" Buddhism—the pure teachings of the historical Buddha—that has been all but obliterated, buried under centuries of Asian mysticism and cultural bric-a-brac. Further, it's presumed this original Buddhism was something very much like the modern, humanistic philosophies many educated Westerners embrace.

The historian David McMahan wrote of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Buddhologists:

> Orientalist scholars located "true Buddhism" in the texts of the ancient past and delimited it to carefully selected teachings, excluding any consideration of living Buddhists, except reformers who themselves were modernizing their tradition in dialogue with western modernity. . . . Sympathetic Orientalists presented the Buddha as a protoscientific naturalist in his own time.[4]

Romantic if improbable notions that the Buddha was an ancient, Asian sage whose teachings were entirely compatible with modern, Western ideals persist to this day. All the messy, mystical, unmodern stuff that permeates Buddhist scriptures is a result of later interpolation, the argument goes.

I acknowledge that many things are possible. As I've said, the few records we have of very early Buddhism are fragmented, contradictory, and largely uncorroborated. There may very well have been an early Buddhism that bore little resemblance to what it became later, and perhaps that early Buddhism was somehow more scientific, egalitarian, and less mystical than the religion's later incarnations. But regardless of how appealing that may sound, the true contours of early Buddhism are lost to us.

It may be tempting to sort which parts of scripture are "original" and which are not by judging them against our twenty-first-century worldview. For example, we might want to dismiss supernatural elements as additions but accept nonsupernatural passages as authentic. But Karen Armstrong issues a warning. "We cannot be certain that the more normal incidents are any more original to the legend than these so-called signs and wonders," she writes.[5] And it should be obvious that to judge authenticity according to which texts are in accord with what we already think is to succumb to the ancient demon tempter Confirmation Bias.

Some recent popular books also have speculated that the Buddha wasn't from Nepal and India at all but was perhaps a Persian or Scythian. This hypothetical Persian or Scythian Buddha wouldn't have been in contact with the Brahmanic culture of the Ganges plain, and the elements of Brahmanism that permeate the early scriptures must have been added later, it is argued. Anything is possible; but again, I see more wishful thinking and projection in such views than corroborated history.

My purpose in this book is to trace the history of Zen, a tradition that emerged in China more than a thousand years after the presumed life of the Buddha. I make no claims about any fabled original Buddhism. Instead I will discuss the Buddhism that reached China in the first century C.E. And the theory that best explains the development of *that* Buddhism, the theory that fits the available data and critical analyses, is that it first

developed alongside Brahmanism within the culture of the Ganges plain in the middle first millennium B.C.E. Even so, there was plenty of opportunity for other cultures and religious/philosophical traditions to influence it before it reached China.

The Challenge of Unreliable Records

The early history of Zen in China also is hard to pin down. Even academic scholars must resort to piecing fragments together from very few sources, none of which can be trusted completely. Further, what records that do exist have been edited and reedited over the years by many hands. At times the story of early Zen turns into a story about the story: What do we know? How do we know it?

In 1900, a Daoist monk named Wang Yuanlu discovered a long-hidden door in the centuries-old Magao cave complex in Dunhuang, China. Behind the door was one of the most significant archeological finds of modern times—a library of twenty to thirty *thousand* scrolls and other documents that had been untouched for at least nine hundred years.

The collection did not remain intact for long. Soon European and Japanese archeologists arrived to scoop up scrolls for their museums, unfortunately before the library was properly cataloged. Today the Dunhuang scrolls are scattered around the world in dozens of collections. This has frustrated systematic study of the texts, although scholars now are collaborating to publish images of the texts online to make them available to other scholars. Only a portion of the Dunhuang library scrolls touch directly on Zen history, but some of those that do open quite the can of worms.

Most of the familiar stories told today about Zen's origins or about the revered early Chinese masters come from sources compiled in China during the Song dynasty (960–1279) or later. However, the Dunhuang scrolls reveal that many of the Song dynasty sources are more fan fiction than history. The storyteller writing about these masters is put into the awkward position of trying to sort which parts of their stories might really date to their lifetimes and which are legends that emerged later.

During the time of Zen's development in China—roughly, the sixth

through the thirteenth centuries—the Zen tradition changed course several times as rival teachers and sects gained and lost popularity and imperial favor. Along the way, archival records were revised to enhance the status and authority of the winners. Beneath the serene and enigmatic surface of the traditional narratives are a tangled mess of ancient rivalries and doctrinal disputes.

Many of these centuries-old disputes are relevant to us today, because they are still part of Zen, even if we aren't conscious of them. Traces of them remain in koans, commentaries, and liturgies. Current historical scholarship that brings these old disputes to light isn't always reflected in Zen centers and temples.

At the same time, the academic studies suffer from their own blind spots and bizarre conclusions. Academicians have adopted the astonishing attitude that they must not consider what Zen clergy and teachers say about their own tradition, because "insiders" cannot be objective. This seems to me to be akin to discounting the work of Catholic theologians in deciphering Saint Augustine or the meaning of the Eucharist. One strongly suspects that Western academics would take a different attitude toward a similar tradition that had developed among people who were not so, well, *not Western*.

A theme running through some recent scholarship is that Zen is mostly fakery—a game of deception that doesn't take its own rhetoric seriously. I've found current scholars who are openly antagonistic to Zen, apparently to demonstrate to their peers that they haven't fallen for the hoax. This is not "objective."

It's also the case that there are still big holes in historical research. Zen in Vietnam is largely unexplored, and much less Western academic concern has been given to Korea than to Japan. Even robustly plowed-over Japanese Buddhist history could use more attention paid to the Edo period. Just a hint, Buddhologists.

The Challenge of Language

I hate jargony books, too, but sometimes modern English won't stretch to cover ancient Asian concepts. So, like it or not, I'm going to have to use some terms that may not be widely understood.

Let's start with the term *dharma*. This is a Sanskrit word with no English equivalent. Its root word means "to uphold" or "to support." It's a word found in the Vedas, the ancient scriptures of India that are centuries older than Buddhism. In those texts, the word *dharma* often refers to sacred rituals as well as the cosmic law that binds the universe. By the time the Bhagavad Gita was written (fifth to second century B.C.E.), it had come to mean "sacred duty": the obligations and conduct required of a righteous person. It's as close a word as can be found in Sanskrit to mean "religion," in a broadly understood sense.

In Buddhism, *dharma* (in Pali, *dhamma*) often is defined as "the teachings of the Buddha." But the word usually is used by Buddhists to mean not just doctrine and practice but also the ineffable reality to which the teachings point.

As in Hinduism, dharma in Buddhism can be understood as the law or principle that orders the cosmos. In some contexts, dharma can refer to an event or phenomenon as a manifestation of reality. The meaning of the word expands as insight deepens. Definitions don't do it justice.

Sometimes the terms *Buddhism* and *buddha-dharma* are used as synonyms, but I like to make a distinction between them. *Buddhism* is about history, anthropology, institutions, culture, a body of doctrines. *Buddha-dharma* is something else.

The word *practice* comes up a lot, in Zen centers and in this book. This is practice in the sense of application—the way a doctor *practices* medicine—as well as practice in the sense of gaining in skill. Zen is very much a tradition of practice rather than a tradition of theory or philosophy, although of course some philosophy is involved.

Throughout this book I refer to Zen *teachers* more often than Zen *masters*. "Zen master" can come across as a smarmy Western construct imbued with mystical baggage that is often better avoided. In Japan, one with authority to guide the Zen practice of others is called *sensei*, "teacher." An older sensei may be called *roshi*, "old master." Note that there are no official, across-the-board criteria for who is designated "roshi." A teacher who is called "roshi" shouldn't be presumed to be more qualified than one who

isn't. In Japanese, "Zen master" is *zenshi*, but that's a title used only for especially venerated deceased teachers, not living ones.

Koans are the cryptic and paradoxical questions asked by Zen teachers. They defy rational answers—the "What is the sound of one hand?" stuff. Formal koan introspection first became part of Zen during the Song dynasty and will be more extensively discussed in that part of our story. However, koans do come up in the earlier chapters, so the word needs to be defined.

Readers may be confused by my use of *temple*, *monastery*, or sometimes *convent* as synonyms. In the West we think of a temple as a single building, but in Asia the equivalent of a temple is a complex of buildings with separate designated purposes. Sometimes there are separate living quarters for monastics, but in some parts of Buddhist history monastics ate, slept, and meditated in one stand-alone hall but attended lectures in another and engaged in liturgy services in a third.

About "monastics": I have followed the practice of Zen Mountain Monastery of Mount Tremper, New York, and adopted *monastic* as a gender-neutral noun, standing in for "monk or nun." The Zen record is silent on the activities of nuns for long stretches of time, but there are many clues that nuns were engaged in the same challenges and developments as monks. To say *monastics* instead of just, always, *monks* acknowledges the silent presence of nuns.

And, finally, there's the word *Zen* itself. Zen is the Japanese name for a tradition that originated in China, where it was called Chan. Although we might think of Chan as originating in the late fifth century, when Bodhidharma (probably) arrived in China, I was surprised to learn that the tradition itself wasn't commonly known as Chan until the tenth century or so.

Chan is a Chinese rendering of the Sanskrit *dhyana*, a deeply absorbed meditative state. Zen is called Son or Soen in Korea and Thien in Vietnam. For the sake of simplicity, most of the time I will just call it Zen, a word that has been absorbed into English.

A note on proper names: Many people in Zen history have multiple names. They have birth names, ordination names, sometimes other honorific names. In this book I have stuck to whatever name is most commonly

used for a historic figure rather than clutter up the narrative with explanations that the person originally named John Smith was ordained Dharma Peace, but later he took the name Great Effort, and as abbot he was Glorious Mountain, but the emperor posthumously named him That Old Guy. Standard Pinyin spelling is used for Chinese names and revised romanization for Korean names.

The Dreaded R *Word*

The dreaded *R* word that sends many people scrambling for the exits in screaming panic is, of course, *religion*. Is Buddhism, including Zen, a religion? There are Zen teachers I respect very much who say it isn't and others I respect just as much who insist it is. Although I lean toward the latter opinion, on the whole it's not something that's worth arguing about. However, even though Buddhism teaches that all classifications and nomenclatures are artificial, sometimes when writing a book one must resort to naming things. So sometimes I refer to Buddhism as religion. But let me provide my own definition of *religion* for you.

The standard definition of religion in English dictionaries refers to something that primarily involves worship of gods, and Zen is not that. But Zen is not entirely alone in being not that. If you look at all the traditions in the world that get labeled *religion*, the one thing they all have in common is that they are all about experiencing or connecting with *something* greater than the limited, individual self, but that *something* is not always understood to be an omnipotent or supernatural being.

The word *religion* has obvious Latin roots, but etymologists disagree on exactly what those roots are. One guess is that it comes from *religare*. *Ligare* means "to bind or join together"; the *re-* prefix suggests binding together something that was severed. Buddhism can be understood as a means for people lost in illusion to reconnect to reality, including the reality of who they truly are. I think *religare* fits it nicely.

I point also to the definition of religious faith by the twentieth-century Christian theologian Paul Tillich. "Faith is the state of being ultimately

concerned," he wrote in his lovely book *Dynamics of Faith* (1957). He was explicit that the faith he described had nothing to do with merely believing religious doctrines and claims. "Faith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements," Tillich said.[6] Not a bad description of Zen practice, I say.

The Lineage Problem

The term *lineage* means a lot of things in Buddhism. For example, to this day most Buddhist monks and nuns are ordained under the rules and vows of one of the three extant versions of the Vinaya. Because the Vinaya provides that fully ordained monks (and nuns, for nuns' ordinations) be present at any full ordination, it's understood that these ordination lineages have been unbroken since the time of the Buddha.

In Zen, *lineage* refers to a lineage of teachers who have worked face-to-face with each other through the generations. A Zen teacher is one who has received authority to teach from his or her Zen teacher, who received authority from his or her teacher, and so on. These student-teacher relationships have been charted going back many centuries. A Zen teacher is sometimes referred to as a *dharma heir* or *lineage holder*. Some parts of Japanese Zen have developed grades of lineage holders in which lineage holding by itself doesn't necessarily confer teaching authority. But in most of Zen, through most of its history, it hasn't been that complicated.

This passing of the dharma torch through the centuries is referred to as *transmission*. However, most Zen teachers will tell you that nothing is "transmitted." Transmission is more a matter of a teacher recognizing that the student has realized and clarified the dharma and is ready to begin guiding others. As we'll see, however, the history of the lineages leads us into controversial territory.

If anything is sacred in Zen, it's lineage. Through lineage, Zen presents itself as a tradition that goes back to the historical Buddha, and even to mythical buddhas before Buddha. In most if not all temples, the names of the ancestors are chanted weekly if not daily. One of my teachers, the

late Jion Susan Postal, described having to write the names of her dharma ancestors—all twenty-five-plus centuries of them—in black ink on white silk as part of the preparation for her transmission ceremony. "Thank goodness for Wite-Out," she said.

In truth, the lineage charts were first created in Tang dynasty (618–906 C.E.) China, and they were revised several times before they reached their current form. I believe the ones we have today are accurate—well, mostly accurate—going back eight to nine hundred years, at least, which is still impressive. And I don't see any reason to change the transmission tradition going forward; it's proved to be a useful if not perfect way to maintain the integrity of the tradition. But viewing the history of Zen through the prism of lineage creates a distorted view.

For one thing, the dominance of patriarchal lineage as *the* defining characteristic of Zen effectively erased women from Zen history. We know there were communities of Zen nuns wherever Zen established itself, but only a scant handful of nuns from centuries ago are remembered today. In some cases, male teachers who don't fit on the charts were brushed aside by history also, although it was more common to alter the charts to fit them in.

It's also the case that for most of Zen's history, monks (and possibly nuns) rarely worked with only one teacher. In the early centuries it was more common for a monk to stay with one teacher only temporarily—a few months or years—before moving on to another. This created connection and a healthy cross-pollination among the Zen communities. It also means that, as a teaching tradition, Zen was far more dynamic and complex than one might guess from the charts.

The Challenge of Explaining What Zen Is

In this book I have attempted to put less emphasis on the Lives of Great Men and more on the development of practice and doctrine. Wait, did I just say *doctrine*? Zen has *doctrines*? Don't Zen teachers say that Zen doesn't teach doctrines?

It's generally true that Zen doesn't teach doctrines, especially if we define doctrines as a set of beliefs. Zen discourages merely *believing* things.

However, "doctrines" can also be teachings and principles, and as we'll see, Zen formed and developed within a particular stream of teachings and principles that flowed from India into China and eventually to the rest of the world.

Zen teachers rarely just blurt out that "Zen teaches X," however, because memorizing and accepting doctrines is not the Way. Belief, or intellectual accord, is not enlightenment. The danger of teaching doctrine is that too many people will accept the doctrine as truth without developing genuine insight.

What is realized and called "enlightenment" (or, in Asian languages, "awakening") is a reality so far removed from the way we normally perceive reality that *explaining* it simply doesn't work. Language itself developed to describe conventional reality by slicing it into verbs and nouns, subjects and objects. How does one explain that which is unsliced? Nothing we can say is going to be exactly right.

Most schools of Buddhism have some sort of mediated or incremental system that will, if faithfully practiced, open the student to her or his genuine insight. These systems usually involve learning doctrines that provide a provisional or approximate stand-in for insight until the real thing comes along. The danger with this sort of practice is that people often mistake the provisional for the ultimate. Instead of realizing enlightenment, they become lost in a weed patch of beliefs and opinions.

Zen takes a more direct approach. Most new students are taught little else but how to meditate. Few teachings one might grasp conceptually are offered. The teacher's formal presentations of dharma to assembled students will often be incomprehensible until the student has developed the insight to comprehend them.

The incomprehensible dharma talks and the literature filled with outrageous non sequiturs ("A monk asked Yunmen, 'What is Buddha?' Yunmen answered, 'Dried dung.'"[7]) give the impression that Zen is little more than exotic Asian Dadaism, which is not at all the case. Zen draws upon a rich body of principles developed from many generations of practice and insight. These are not meant to be believed uncritically but used as guides under the mentorship of a teacher. In time, the student breaks through the conceptual fog and clarifies what is being expressed.

Zen is famous for deemphasizing the study of sacred texts. Zen is said to be a "mind-to-mind transmission of dharma without reliance on words and letters." Yet, remarkably, it has managed to accumulate vast amounts of commentaries and other literature over the centuries. Should all those words and letters be ignored?

I think *reliance* is the key word here. Trying to understand Zen through the written word alone is foolish. Zen is a practice of directly engaging with reality without conceptual filters. Words and letters are representations of reality, not reality itself, and they can't be relied upon alone.

On the other hand, it's important to remember that Zen developed in a Confucian culture that venerated mastery of philosophical literature. Men and women entering into Zen practice probably assumed that studying the literature was the key to enlightenment. Chinese masters must have often admonished students to get their faces out of scrolls and spend more time in meditation.

However, it's a mistake to assume those same Chinese masters would have advised students to *ignore* the scriptures, commentaries, poems, sermons, and koans they left us. This vast literature offers invaluable support for practice and guidance on the path to insight. It's also the case that many of the revered Zen teachers of history who advised against reliance on scriptures had themselves studied scriptures as young monks, and they often drew upon those scriptures in the talks they gave to their students, who were presumed to be familiar with those same scriptures. To not *rely* upon words and letters is not the same as avoiding them. So this book will take note of the teachings that Zen *does* present, albeit in its own subtle and enigmatic way, and provide brief introductions to them.

But what is history but stories about people, including Lives of Great Men *and Women*? And Zen ancestors do tend to make great stories. There's the story of the revered patriarch who faced exile and execution. There's the story of a Chinese peasant girl who walked away from a life of farm labor to become a fearsome debater. There's the story of the illegitimate son of an emperor who spent his life rebelling against authority. Along the way there is birth and death, war and peace, intrigue and inspiration—the stuff human life is made of.

Roots and Flowers

Some years ago, I received *jukai*. Jukai is a ceremony in which a lay Zen practitioner vows to observe the precepts and walk the Buddhist path. As preparation, I sewed a *rakusu*, a miniature monastic robe worn over the chest like a bib. Doing this required stitching little strips of cloth together in a pattern meant to suggest rice paddies, all the while reciting the ancient refuges—"I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the dharma; I take refuge in the sangha." *Sangha* refers to the fellowship of Buddhists, whether one community or all Buddhists everywhere.

One day, while the rakusu project was ongoing, I came across a photo of a Laotian monk's robe drying on a clothesline. The robe was sewn with the same rice paddy pattern I was stitching into my rakusu.

And this moved me deeply. Time and distance collapsed; cultural and sectarian differences melted away. With my vows and stitches I was entering the great sangha, the community of people walking the Buddha's path throughout space and time.

In ways that may be hard for an observer to understand, Buddhist history is not simply a matter of intellectual interest to those who practice it, because that history is subtly but inextricably woven into the living practice. And this is true because Buddhism is not a belief system, a philosophy, or something that can be done in isolation. It *is* the ongoing, collaborative effort of the students and teachers, the monastics and laypeople, who receive teachings from the ancestors and pass them on to new generations.

Zen is one stream of that collaborative effort, now branching into Western lineages even as it continues to flow in Asia. And, if I may say so, the history of Zen is a great story. I hope you enjoy it.

1

BUDDHISM BEFORE ZEN

THE BUDDHISM that eventually would reach China first developed in north-central India, in an area roughly contained within the modern Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Then, as today, the Ganges River flowed through this homeland of Buddhism, on its way from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal.

Most scholars believe that the Sanskrit-speaking Indo-European nomads who are sometimes—probably erroneously—called Aryans migrated into this area from the Indus River valley around 1000 B.C.E. These so-called Aryans were warrior-herdsmen organized into familial clans. Their most significant contribution to civilization was their remarkable scriptures, the Vedas. The oldest of these, the Rig Veda, was composed no later than 1100 B.C.E. and possibly a great deal earlier.

The archeological evidence tells us that by 500 B.C.E., nomadic warrior-herdsman life along the Ganges was giving way to farming and commerce, and the old system of clan rule was being challenged, sometimes violently, by new monarchies. This was the world into which our hypothetical Buddha was born. Legends notwithstanding, he probably was not a prince but part of a clan, the Shakya, "one who is capable."[1] For this reason, some Buddhists call him Shakyamuni ("sage of the Shakya").

North-central India at the end of the Vedic period was a dynamic time and place for philosophy and religion. The early Buddhist scriptures describe many encounters between the Buddha and other spiritual seekers who fell along many points on a wide continuum, from traditionalist Brahmins to all manner of *sramanas*, meaning "renunciates," who were ascetics who

rejected the religious establishment of the time. The most prominent new religious movement of the Buddha's day (and several centuries thereafter) was not Buddhism but Jainism. The original Jains were followers of a teacher named Mahavira, who may have been a contemporary of the Buddha.

The Brahmins had long been guided by the ancient Vedas, which emphasized ritual, sacrifice, and the propitiation of gods. But by the mid-first millennium B.C.E., many were reflecting deeply on the reality beyond the rituals. What is the fundamental nature of existence? What is the fundamental nature of the self? And what is the relationship of an individual being to the vast, unknowable cosmos?

These reflections are recorded in the Upanishads, several scriptures written by countless anonymous authors over a period of a few centuries, beginning sometime between 800 and 500 B.C.E. The older Upanishads are important to early Buddhism because nearly all the concepts presented in the Buddha's teachings were introduced in them. However, the Buddha didn't borrow from the Upanishads as much as reinterpret them.[2] And, often, he disagreed with them.

The Upanishads touch on many things, but their primary message is about *Brahman*—absolute realty, or the basic, permanent, unifying essence of the universe. Further, the innermost core of all living beings also is a permanent essence, which is the *atman*, or self.

Brahman and atman are of one essence, the Upanishads say, but most people don't perceive this. The ideal is to personally realize the unity of atman and Brahman and thereby be liberated from samsara, or the cycle of reincarnation.

But the Buddha taught something radically different—*anatman* (*anatta* in Pali), "no atman," or "nonself." This is not necessarily to say there is no self. Rather, what we think is our permanent self is an ever-changing stream of physical, mental, and sensory processes. We are verbs, not nouns.

Besides anatman, existence is marked by two other conditions. One of these is impermanence. Everything conditioned or compounded is impermanent, the Buddha said. And the other is, in Pali, *dukkha* (in Sanskrit, *duhkha*), which often is translated as "suffering," but its meaning is closer to "stressful" or "unable to satisfy."

Life is dukkha, the Buddha said, and dukkha is caused by craving. We spend our lives on a hamster wheel of craving, pursuing what we think will satisfy us. We may sometimes get what we want, but soon enough we feel dissatisfied again—all the things we desire are impermanent, after all—and so we want something more.

The primary root of that craving is *avidya*—"ignorance." In the Upanishads, avidya is ignorance of atman, but the Buddha described avidya as *belief* in atman. In Buddhism, avidya is the first in a repeating series of factors that keep us tied to material existence and to dukkha.

If there is no permanent essence of "me," then what am I? The Buddha taught that the individual is a temporary confluence of conditions, including form, senses, cognition or perception, mental formations (which includes predilections, biases, and the rest of our general psychological messiness), and awareness or consciousness. These conditions work together seamlessly to create the unified experience of being a singular, permanent "I." But none of these conditions is a permanent, stand-alone self, the Buddha said. Not even self-awareness.

Yet the Buddha also warned against believing that there is no sort of existence beyond this life. He proposed a "middle way" between eternalism—belief in a permanent, individual self—and nihilism, in this case belief that this worldly existence is all there is. And to compound confusion, he refused to answer direct questions about the self, particularly whether one "has" a self or not, which might seem to leave some wiggle room for those determined to hang on to one.

This "middle way" teaching has been subject to many interpretations, but the most common explanation is that the true nature of our existence is so far outside our ordinary experience and reference points that it defies explanation. Even if it could be put into words, we wouldn't understand the words, and the Buddha refused to answer direct questions about it because he didn't want his words to harden into a doctrine that is merely believed. To understand the teaching, one must realize enlightenment for oneself. And if we truly realize the nature of what we are, we would know why "Do I have a self?" is as absurd a question as inquiring about what sort of cheese was used to make the moon.

In one of his most famous sermons, the Buddha described the physical, sensory, and mental conditions whose confluence make "me" as being on fire with lust, hate, and delusion. We are "aflame, I tell you, with birth, aging & death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs."[3] The path to liberation requires letting go even of this thing we call "myself."

To fully appreciate what's being said here, note that the people of the Buddha's world conceptualized fire very differently from the way we do. They thought of fire as an element that pervades everything but that manifests as flame only when it attaches to fuel. As flame, it is hot, agitated, dependent, trapped. Just so, the individual is trapped to the fuel of sensations and perceptions, and because he is ignorant of the truth of his existence, he clings to this same fuel for solace and safety. The things we seek for comfort and gratification are in fact what bind us to stress and disappointment.

Liberation from the trap requires thoroughly realizing the truth of existence for oneself. Only then can the one trapped as a flame be "extinguished" and set free.

Oh, and the Sanskrit word for a flame's extinguishment? *Nirvana*.

To be extinguished doesn't mean the end of all existence. The people of the Buddha's world thought that when liberated from fuel, fire passes into a different sort of existence. The monk and scholar Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains, "According to the ancient Brahmans, when a fire was extinguished it went into a state of latency. Rather than ceasing to exist, it became dormant, and in that state—unbound from any particular fuel—it became diffused throughout the cosmos."[4]

Nirvana is associated with serenity and bliss, but the Buddha refused to describe it further. It is so far outside our standard reference points that it is beyond language and imagination, he said. Even to speak in terms of existence or nonexistence misses the reality.

You still may be asking, If there is no permanent self, who is it that realizes enlightenment? Who is it that "goes out"? Who is it that is reborn? The Brahmins believed that at death an individual atman transmigrates into a new body for a next life, but such a thing is impossible according to the Buddha's teaching. Yet Buddhists still speak of rebirth. What is that? The short answer is that these are matters that must be personally realized to be

understood. It's also the case that these questions would become a major source of further doctrinal analysis—and of sectarian division—in the centuries to come. We'll be revisiting these questions throughout this book.

The Path

> One way to make sense of the bewildering proliferation of Buddhist schools, doctrines, and practices over the last 2,500 years is to see them as a single, creative, ongoing effort to deal with the central problem of samsaric existence, which is the erroneous belief in an enduring, permanent self. Whether it is Zen, Pure Land, Theravada, or Tibetan Buddhist practice, all Buddhist paths teach practices that will effectively destroy the belief in this self.
>
> —Frances Dojun Cook, *How to Raise an Ox*

Having described the disease, the Buddha then turned to the remedy—*magga*, the path.

The Buddha taught that one cannot be liberated by intellectual acceptance of doctrines. If your life is the *Titanic*, merely "believing in" doctrines amounts to rearranging the deck chairs. Liberation requires inner realization of the truth of the teachings. Only deep, directly experienced insight can penetrate the fog of illusion.

In what is recorded as his first sermon, the Buddha presented an outline of eight areas of practice that encompass all parts of one's life. Through practice of this noble eightfold path, one can be *awakened* (the Sanskrit word *bodhi*, commonly translated into English as "enlightenment," more literally means "awakening") to an entirely different way of perceiving and experiencing reality, including oneself. Although it may not be immediately obvious, the practice of each part of the path ultimately is about loosening the grip of ego and training oneself to live a less self-centered life.

Among other things, the path prescribes attending to one's views and intentions and living an ethical and honest life. Morality is important not because a god has commanded us to behave but because our misbehaviors

stem from belief in a self. We lie, cheat, scam, assault, and do various other damaging things to other people ultimately because we are trying to protect or gratify the self. Through living honestly and harmoniously with others, we learn that "I" am not the center of the universe, after all.

The cultivation of such selfless virtues as compassion, loving-kindness, empathy, and equanimity (remaining upright in distress, not being sucked into "taking sides") is an essential antidote to the ego's demands. Somewhat paradoxically, the practice of these virtues is both prerequisite for realizing enlightenment and the living manifestation of enlightenment. Likewise, the moral precepts of Buddhism describe the natural activity of enlightened wisdom in the phenomenal world, but they are spelled out and codified in order to function as training wheels for those who are still deluded.

Anything to which our ego attaches is a barrier to enlightenment, and egos can attach to anything. Even the Buddha's teachings, if practiced fanatically, can be turned into something for the ego to cling to. Other religions are to be respected, not opposed, to avoid falling into the ego trap of thinking one's own path superior.

About a third of the path deals with mental discipline, which includes meditation. The eightfold path names three areas of mental discipline, which are effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Although mindfulness may be the hotter topic at the moment, here I want to just touch on concentration.

The Sanskrit word for "concentration" is *samadhi*, from root words that mean "to bring together." It refers to the deepest level of meditative absorption, where self is forgotten, and subject and object merge. Samadhi is associated with the *dhyanas*, a word usually translated as "meditation" or "contemplation." The dhyanas are levels of meditative experience described by the Buddha.

Centuries later, in China, a Buddhist teacher who specialized in meditation was a "dhyana master," and some of those dhyana masters went on to become Zen ancestors. The name dhyana, pronounced *ch'an* by the Chinese, eventually stuck to the school.

Before we leave the Buddha and his teachings, let us acknowledge that there is much in the early scriptures for modern-day secularists to admire. The Buddha opposed animal sacrifice and the nascent caste system of his

time. He advised against blindly following teachings just because they are written in holy books or spoken by respected teachers. He did not directly address the existence of gods, but his teachings left nothing for gods to do. The natural world is ordered by natural laws, he said, and our lives are shaped by our own thoughts, words, and deeds according to the natural law of karma.

Early Buddhism after the Buddha

The Buddha is said to have founded the original order of monks and nuns. However, in the beginning there were no monasteries. The first monastics were literally homeless. They lived together during monsoon seasons, but the rest of the year they traveled, probably in small groups, sleeping under the trees and living on alms.

To distinguish the Buddha's disciples from the many other wandering and alms-collecting sects, the early monks and nuns made themselves patched-together robes sewn from "pure" cloth. This was cloth no one else wanted. The monastics would scrounge for cloth in rubbish heaps and charnel grounds, and the main part of the robe, the *samghati*, was made of pieces sewn together in a pattern that symbolized a rice field. Boiling the robes in vegetable matter—flowers, roots, bark—dyed the cloth a spiced orange color; hence, "saffron robe."

Buddhist records tell us that a disciple named Mahakashyapa claimed leadership of the monastic order after the Buddha died. Mahakashyapa is said to have called a great council of enlightened monks—nuns got cut out of the picture rather quickly, it seems—to determine how to maintain the dharma going forward. The Buddha's sermons and his rules for the monastic order were recited from memory, and the council agreed that these were the Buddha's teachings. To preserve them, the next few generations of monastics memorized and chanted them.

Historians are highly skeptical that any such council took place, but the memorizing and chanting part of the story likely is true. As noted in the introduction, the Indo-European people who composed the Vedas had already preserved the many thousands of verses of those ancient scriptures for

centuries by a process of memorizing and chanting, so they were practiced at it. In time, there were Buddhist chanting lineages in multiple dialects.

About a century after the Buddha is believed to have died, a major split occurred between a school calling itself Sthavira ("the elders") and one called Mahasamghika ("those of the great assembly"). Sthavira and Mahasamghika further split into several subschools. It's hard to say how deep or rancorous these divisions were at first or even exactly why they occurred. What records we have of the split were written long after and give conflicting accounts, although they leave an impression that the Sthaviravadins were bigger sticklers for rules than were the Mahasamghikas.

The Mauryan Empire and Ashoka the Great

Although the early scriptures describe vast numbers of monks and nuns practicing and preaching the Buddha's dharma, it's more likely the early disciples made up a small and largely overlooked sect. According to the standard history, it was Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.E.) who touched off a series of events that put Buddhism on the map, so to speak.

Alexander's campaign to conquer the world reached the Punjab in 326 B.C.E. The Punjab was also the western border of Magadha, the dominant kingdom of the Ganges plain. The Buddha is said to have spent much of his life in Magadha, which originally occupied about the same territory as the modern Indian state of Bihar. But in Alexander's time, more than a century later, its borders had expanded west to the edge of the Punjab and east to the Bay of Bengal.

Alexander had planned to push farther east. But his weary soldiers had heard stories of the vast army of Magadha, and they imagined the mighty Ganges lined with thousands of fresh troops and trumpeting war elephants. They refused to go on, and so Alexander's legendary conquests ended in the Punjab, and he died three years later in Babylon.

While Alexander was stalled in the Punjab, he was accompanied by a local mercenary named Chandragupta Maurya. In 321 B.C.E. Chandragupta succeeded where Alexander failed by seizing the throne of Magadha. The enterprising Chandragupta expanded his new Mauryan Empire to fill most of modern-day India and a portion of what is now Bangladesh.

After Alexander's death, his vast territories were claimed by his Macedonian generals. One general, Seleucus I Nicator (ca. 358–281 B.C.E.), came to rule a large part of what is now Turkey and much of today's Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Seleucus encouraged Greek settlements in his vast territory. These settlements, combined with those left behind by Alexander, introduced considerable Greek influence into west and central Asia.

In 305 B.C.E., Seleucus marched on Chandragupta's empire. This adventure did not go well for Seleucus, and the Mauryan Empire grew to include much of modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan as a result. Chandragupta abdicated to his son Bindusara in 297 B.C.E. and retired to be a Jain ascetic. After Bindusara came Ashoka, whose reign began about 268 B.C.E.

Figure 1. An Ashoka pillar rises above ruins at Vaishali, Bihar, India. The pillar marks the place where the Buddha is said to have preached his last sermon.

Photo 89889637 © Maythee Voranisarakul Dreamstime.com.

Ashoka the Great (ca. 304–232 B.C.E.,) is remembered as a brutally ruthless military conqueror—until about 260 B.C.E., that is, when he beheld the bloody results of his conquest of Kalinga (near today's Orissa). The

wholesale slaughter and deportation of survivors weighed heavily on his mind. In one of the great conversion stories of all time, Ashoka renounced war and conquest and declared that his rule would be guided by the Buddha's dharma. We know this because Ashoka's story is told in his own words on the thirteenth of fourteen major "rock edicts" inscribed on boulders and sometimes in caves throughout his empire, along with other sorts of inscriptions. Edicts also were carved on magnificent stone pillars, forty to fifty feet high, which were topped with elaborately carved animals, most often Asian lions.

Ashoka's edicts are widely considered to be the earliest archeological evidence of Buddhism. As such, they are the first solid thing that anchors Buddhism into the larger narrative of human history. They've been discovered in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, as well as India. Most were written in the local Prakrit rather than classic Sanskrit, which at that time was used only by Brahmins. Many were in scripts of disputed origin that would someday confound archaeologists. Edicts in the western Mauryan Empire were in Greek, however, and one inscription discovered near Kandahar in 1958 was written in Greek and Aramaic.

In his edicts Ashoka proclaimed his faith in the Buddha and his dharma, but he did not attempt to teach Buddhist doctrines. In fact, all religions were welcome in his empire, he said, as long as they respected each other. The emperor was more interested in the way people manifested the dharma in their behavior. In the second pillar edict, for example, he said, "Dhamma is good, but what constitutes Dhamma? (It includes) little evil, much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness and purity."[5]

Ashoka also used dharma as a diplomatic tool, sending emissaries carrying his edicts to the rulers of other states, near and far. The thirteenth major rock edict claims that the rulers of the Seleucid Empire, Egypt, Macedonia, and the island that is today's Sri Lanka ("Tamraparni"), among others, had received his emissaries and been "won" to the dharma. The rulers of the Seleucid Empire, Egypt, and Macedonia don't seem to have noticed, but the mission to Sri Lanka was a rousing success. According to ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka, Ashoka's own son and daughter, who had been ordained monk and nun and who practiced in a subschool of Sthavira, came to the island and converted the king. Today's Theravada Buddhism—the dominant

school of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—developed from the branch of Sthavira Buddhism that was established in Sri Lanka during the reign of Ashoka.

In the fifth major rock edict, Ashoka declared he had appointed dharma *mahamatras*—dharma officials—to work among the Greeks and other people on the western border. The mahamatras were charged with the promotion of dharma and the welfare and happiness of all those devoted to dharma. This is significant because, after Ashoka, Buddhism would blossom on the western borders of the Mauryan Empire—today's Pakistan and Afghanistan. And much of our story will shift there.

Ashoka's words on generosity and religious tolerance and his concern for the welfare of his people are inspiring to read even today. Yet it appears there was some pushback from the Brahmins, who may have felt put out by Ashoka's call to end animal sacrifices. After Ashoka's death in 232 B.C.E., his several heirs who hadn't been ordained showed no interest in the dharma and instead spent the next forty-seven years squabbling over the throne, while such outer provinces as Gandhara, Kashmir, and the Punjab broke away. The last Mauryan ruler was assassinated by an ambitious general during a military review in 185 B.C.E.

The general, Pushyamitra Shunga, made himself emperor and is said to have persecuted Buddhists. Ancient texts written by Brahmins claim that Pushyamitra destroyed Buddhist temples and slaughtered millions of monks, although we don't know how much of that is fact and how much of it was boasting on the part of the Brahmins.[6] It *is* a fact that the status of Buddhism in the Ganges plain would wax and wane over the next several centuries, and it never overcame Brahmanism as the dominant religion there.

From the death of Ashoka to the rise of the Gupta Empire in 320 C.E., there are significant gaps in our knowledge of history in India. We know that the former Mauryan Empire broke apart. The successors of Pushyamitra Shunga ruled over a shrinking territory in northeast India and were replaced by another Brahmin dynasty in 75 B.C.E. that lasted less than a century.

However, the archeological evidence tells us that in the period after Ashoka, Buddhism continued to be practiced widely within the modern-day boundaries of India and beyond. For example, the Ajanta caves near

Maharashtra, which date from the second century B.C.E. to the fifth century C.E., are filled with exquisite Buddhist art. Buddhism also was spreading among the Tamil people in southern India. And in Sri Lanka, in the first century B.C.E., monks committed their scriptures into writing and established the Pali canon.

But now our story moves west, to Gandhara.

Gandhara

Gandhara was the name of an area west of the Punjab that included the Peshawar and Swat valleys of today's Pakistan. From ancient times it was praised for its lush orchards and scenic beauty, and it was part of Ashoka's empire. Gandhara also came to be the name of a Buddhist civilization that played a critical role in introducing Buddhism to China.

Gandhara was very much part of the ancient history and civilization of India. There were Brahmins there long before there was Buddhism. It is named in the great epic poems of India, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Its original area was within India before the 1947 partition.

Before coming under the rule of Seleucus I Nicator and Chandragupta Maurya, Gandhara was part of the Achaemenid Empire, founded by Cyrus II of Persia (Cyrus the Great, ca. 600–530 B.C.E.). From very ancient times, it was a place where Persian and Indian cultures mingled. After Alexander, Greek culture was present there as well.

Ashoka's fifth major rock edict names the people of Gandhara as among those of the western border receiving the services of his dharma mahamatras. The ruins of Buddhist temples and stupas (shrines or reliquaries), most dating to the first through fourth centuries C.E., permeate the region to this day.

After Ashoka, about the year 200 B.C.E., Gandhara was conquered by armies from Bactria, a Hellenic kingdom west of Gandhara that was spread across what is now northern Afghanistan and parts of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In the second century B.C.E., Bactria was an up-and-coming place. Trade routes were being established between China and the Hellenic world, and a major one went through Bactria. This trade intensified after armies of the Roman Republic destroyed the Greek city-state of Corinth in 146 B.C.E.,

marking the beginning of Roman domination in west Asia. In the centuries to come the trade routes would be called the Silk Road, which will play a part in our story.

Menander and His Questions

In 165 B.C.E. the rule of Gandhara fell to Menander I, who is remembered by Buddhists, if not historians, as a great patron of Buddhism. Scholars have identified Menander as the "King Milinda" of the Milindapanha, a text written no earlier than the first century B.C.E. in faraway Sri Lanka. We do not know if the text is based on an earlier one, on a story in wide circulation about Menander, or if it was made up by the unknown author. But let's take a look at it, anyway, because it's a lovely text and it gives us a glimpse of Buddhism at the end of the first millennium B.C.E.

In the Milindapanha ("questions of King Milinda"), Menander/Milinda travels to speak to a monk named Nagasena. Nagasena was a well-known monk of the Sarvastivada ("those who assert everything exists") order, which probably evolved from Sthavira and which may (although this is disputed) have been founded in Gandhara by emissaries of Ashoka. We'll be encountering other Sarvastivadins later in this history.

The king grills the monk on Buddhist doctrines, and the monk answers with metaphors and similes. For example, when the king asks how there could be rebirth without transmigration of an individual soul, Nagasena compares rebirth to lighting a candle from another candle or learning a verse from a teacher.[7]

The most famous section of the Milindapanha involves the chariot simile, which originally was expounded by a nun, Vajira, and recorded in the Suttapitaka. The original simile is expounded in a conversation between Vajira and the trickster demon Mara. The version of the chariot simile in the Milindapanha goes like this:[8]

One of the king's first questions is on the nature of the self and personal identity. Nagasena declares that his name was only a designation; no permanent individual "Nagasena" could be found.

Amused, the king asks, "Who is it that wears robes and takes food?"

Nagasena inquires about the King's chariot. "What is a chariot?" he

asks. Is it the wheels or the axles or the reins or the frame or the seat or the draught pole? Is it a combination of those elements? Or is it found outside those elements?

When the king answers no to each question, Nagasena concludes: *Then there is no chariot!* "Chariot" is a concept, a mere name.

Just so, Nagasena continues, "Nagasena" is a designation for something conceptual. It is a mere name. When the constituent parts are present, we call it a chariot. When the five conditions—form, senses, cognition, psychological formations, and awareness—are present, we call it a being.

Menander's thirty-year reign in Gandhara marked the high point of Bactrian rule there. For a time in the first century B.C.E., Gandhara was taken over by Indo-Scythians and then Indo-Parthians, until in the first century C.E. it came under the control of another group, the Kushans. Under Kushan rule the Buddhist civilization of Gandhara reached its peak. But before we discuss the Kushans, we must look at other developments in Buddhism that began in the first century B.C.E.

The Emergence of Mahayana Buddhism

Today, Buddhism has two primary philosophical schools, Theravada ("school of the elders") and Mahayana ("the great vehicle"). Theravada dominates most of Southeast Asia; Mahayana is the primary school of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is sometimes called out as a third school, Vajrayana ("the diamond vehicle"), because of its unique practices, but it was built upon a Mahayana foundation.

You'll remember that back in the fourth century B.C.E., Buddhism split into two major schools, Sthavira and Mahasamghika. These split into a great many subschools. Theravada evolved from one of the subschools of Sthavira, and to a large extent Mahayana probably evolved from Mahasamghika. However, much of what defines Mahayana today evolved slowly in those early centuries, and it was not until the first century B.C.E. that we begin to see Mahayana doctrines more completely developed and distinctive from Theravada.

At the same time, the first of another group of scriptures appeared that would have a decisive impact on Buddhism. The Mahayana sutras include many of the most revered scriptures of Buddhism, including the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakirti Sutra, and the Nirvana Sutra. Most of these Mahayana sutras are believed to have been composed between about 100 B.C.E. and 500 C.E. Their authorship is unknown, and they are linked to the historical Buddha only by legend. Even so, many are remarkable examples of spiritual literature that have guided generations of Buddhists, up to the present day. More critical to our story, these sutras would help define Mahayana Buddhism.

One of the earliest scriptures associated with Mahayana is the Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra, or the Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines. Composition of the Ashta, as it is known for short, probably began in southern India in the first century B.C.E. It is considered the first of several other *prajnaparamita*, or "perfection of wisdom," sutras that would be written over the next few centuries. Of the several prajnaparamita sutras that followed the Ashta, the two best known to today's Zen students are the Diamond Sutra (in Sanskrit, Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra) and the Heart Sutra (Mahaprajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra).

Very basically, the prajnaparamita sutras are an answer to those pesky earlier questions: If there is no permanent self, who is it that realizes enlightenment? Who is it that "goes out"? Who is it that is reborn? The early scriptures spoke of anatman, but without explicitly admitting it they often *assumed* an individual self that retains some kind of integrity through multiple lives and eventually enters nirvana as an individual entity. The prajnaparamita sutras exorcise that ghost of an enduring standalone self entirely.

Sunyata

Sunyata (also spelled *shunyata*), or "emptiness,"is a major theme in the prajnaparamita sutras, and it is often called the most misunderstood word in Buddhism. All phenomena are "empty," the teaching says. What they are empty of is self-essence.

To a point, this is not a radically different teaching from earlier ones. Consider the chariot simile. If we disassemble Menander's chariot piece by

piece and lay the parts in a pile one at a time, at *precisely* what point does it cease to be a chariot? If we're being honest, we must admit that this is a subjective judgment. Some might say at the point it is no longer drivable. Others might say that the eventual pile of wood and iron is still a chariot, just a disassembled one. This ought to tell us that "chariot" is a concept, not an essence that resides in the physical parts of the thing we call "chariot." Likewise, beings have no permanent essence of self that resides in their bodies. Theravada Buddhism does not disagree.

The Mahayana doctrine of emptiness, however, goes further. The Ashta, for example, makes the startling pronouncement that "as dharmic facts existence and non-existence are both not real."[9] How so?

Mahayana scholars developed their teachings on emptiness from another doctrine, called dependent origination or dependent arising (in Sanskrit, *pratityasamutpada*). This early teaching says that all phenomena are caused to come into existence by other phenomena. As described in the Pali Suttapitaka,

> When this is, that is.
> From the arising of this comes the arising of that.
> When this isn't, that isn't.
> From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.[10]

In the Pali canon, dependent origination describes how an individual creates suffering and remains stuck in the cycle of samsara. But from the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination, Mahayana developed a doctrine of the interexistence of all phenomena—*nothing exists separately and independently from everything else*. And, it was reasoned, a thing that has no independent existence cannot be said to exist in and of itself. As a phenomenon, it "exists" only as a concept that we distinguish by its relationship to other conceptual phenomena. Put another way, the identity of a thing is not inherent in that thing but instead is dependent on everything else and on its function and position within the context of the whole.

If you are completely baffled, try this thought experiment: Identify yourself as a unique individual without reference to any sort of relationship. This

is a question I heard years ago in a sociology class, and I've never heard anyone answer it. The "no relationship" criterion means you can't identify yourself by your role in your family, your profession—a relationship to the larger society—or skills or interests that require the participation of others. Even your personality (according to social psychologists) is all about how you relate to other people.

If we're honest about this, we start to see that we are who we are because everyone else is who they are. Likewise, all things and beings are the way they are because everything else is the way it is. We distinguish all phenomena by their relationship to other phenomena. They do not exist of themselves. However, it's also nonsensical to say phenomena *don't* exist, because, um, there they are.

The richly metaphorical Avatamsaka Sutra (the "flower ornament" or "garland of flowers" sutra) is dedicated to describing the interpenetration of all phenomena. Composition of the Avatamsaka may have begun as early as the first century B.C.E., although it wouldn't reach its current form for a few centuries. The Avatamsaka is not considered to be one of the prajnaparamita sutras, but it complements them nicely.

This sutra describes the phenomenal world as a boundless field, or all-pervading matrix, from which all phenomena arise and reflect all other phenomena. The infinite things interpenetrate each other and are neither one nor many. The entire cosmos is interdependent and arising out of itself.

The Two Truths

From this question of existence and nonexistence came the doctrine of the two truths, which says that reality is both absolute and relative. In a relative sense, there are toasters and toast, dogs and cats, people and petunias. In an absolute sense, nothing is distinguished; there is just boundlessness. All phenomena are expressions of that boundlessness.

It's important to understand that both absolute and relative are true. Dharma students sometimes fall into the habit of thinking of relative reality as being false and absolute as true. But in Zen at least, it's understood that both absolute and relative are true and indivisible. One cannot be without the other. Together, absolute and relative make up the whole of reality.

Suchness

Suchness (in Sanskrit, *tathata*), or sometimes *thusness*, is a word that appears in the Pali canon and is used by Theravadins. In both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, it is understood that the true nature of reality is ineffable, beyond description and conceptualization. *Suchness* is a deliberately vague term to keep us from conceptualizing it.

In Mahayana, suchness is identified with emptiness and with absolute and relative reality. The Lotus Sutra (composed in probably the second or third century C.E.) developed suchness further into a list of ten "suchnesses," or aspects of suchness. In brief, the suchness of a thing takes in its form, its function, and all of its causal relationships. The tenth factor contains all the aspects coalescing into a seamless whole. For example, the suchness of a single sunflower takes in the sprout, the sun, the soil, the rain, the finch feasting on its seeds. It takes in all the sunflowers that came before and all that come after and all interconnecting phenomena. It takes in the entire cosmos throughout space and time, which is present in the sunflower.

It's important to understand that suchness is not a quality a thing possesses; it's what a thing *is*. Suchness also came to be identified with the enlightened mind that experiences with clarity, free from delusions and conceptualizations.

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

The Sthaviradins and their descendants maintained that there is only one buddha per age of the world, and an age lasts an unimaginably long time. The Buddha of the current age is the former Siddhartha Gautama, our historical Buddha. But the Mahasamghika school developed a pantheon of transcendent buddhas and bodhisattvas ("awakened beings") with godlike powers. This carried over into Mahayana, although these mythic characters are not necessarily understood to be supernatural beings. They are just as often understood as iconic representations of the energies of enlightenment. Sometimes they are archetypes of our own enlightened nature.

In the Pali canon, a bodhisattva is someone who has reached a high level of spiritual attainment and is close to attaining nirvana. The word often is used in stories of the earlier lives of the historical Buddha. In the Ashta,

however, we read that bodhisattvas have the ability to postpone entering nirvana in order to help other beings. This ability would become their defining characteristic in Mahayana Buddhism; bodhisattvas are enlightened beings who vow to remain in samsara to work for the enlightenment of others.

Today, in Theravada Buddhism, the ideal of practice is the arhat, the enlightened being who will not be reborn but will enter complete nirvana at death. In Mahayana Buddhism, the ideal of practice is the bodhisattva, who vows to not enter nirvana until all beings enter nirvana. Indeed, as Mahayana understands things, "entering nirvana" cannot be otherwise.

Bodhicitta

Bodhicitta is the aspiration to realize enlightenment for the sake of all beings. *Citta* is one of the several Sanskrit words that are translated into English as "mind." In this case, it is a "mind" not in the sense of knowledge and ideas but in that of emotive awareness or subjective experience. Some commentaries say that the fundamental nature of citta is pure illumination, and a purified citta is a realization of enlightenment. Combined with *bodhi* ("awakening"), it becomes not an intention or idea to realize enlightenment but a deeply felt, all-pervading motivation to realize enlightenment to benefit others. Mahayana Buddhism teaches that bodhicitta is necessary for awakening, since a desire to awaken only for one's own sake is clinging to a self.

Although he didn't invent bodhicitta, the Indian monk Shantideva (ca. 685–763) is credited with developing bodhicitta to its highest form. His poem the *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, sometimes translated *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, is among the most beautiful texts in all of Buddhist literature and is very much worth looking up and reading.

Trikaya

The Mahayana doctrine of *trikaya* maintains that a Buddha has three bodies. One is the physical body that lives and dies, called the *nirmanakaya* body. One is the body that experiences the bliss of enlightenment, and in art and sutras this *sambhogakaya* body manifests as a celestial being. The *dharmakaya* body is a Buddha in the absolute state in which nothing is

distinguished. Dharmakaya is synonymous with perfect enlightenment and emptiness and is beyond all conceptual forms.

Related to the dharmakaya is the Mahayana understanding of *dharmadhatu*. In the Abhidhamma teachings of Theravada, dharmadhatu refers to a quality of dharma, or something that distinguishes a dharma as a manifestation of reality. But in Mahayana it came to mean the vast nexus of reality from which all phenomena arise, manifest, and cease. Both dharmakaya and dharmadhatu can refer to absolute reality. Note that the various schools of Mahayana explain dharmakaya and dharmadhatu in different ways; sometimes they are distinctive, and sometimes they are not.

The Perfection of Wisdom

Scholars disagree whether the Diamond Sutra was one of the last of the prajnaparamita sutras to be composed or one of the first. Whichever is true, the sutra has the distinction of taking the bodhisattva's intention to save all beings to another level.

In this sutra, the Buddha tells his disciple Subhuti that a bodhisattva vows to liberate all beings, whatever their form and however they were born, into nirvana. Yet when this has been accomplished, no being at all will have been liberated into nirvana. And why not? "If, Subhuti, a bodhisattva holds on to the idea that a self, a person, a living being, or a life span exists, that person is not a true bodhisattva."[11]

As the contemporary translator Red Pine writes, "The liberation of all beings revolves around the liberation of the bodhisattva from the concept of being."[12] Thus, the ghost was exorcised.

Nagarjuna and Madhyamaka

The Mahayana doctrines of emptiness, interexistence, and the two truths would be developed more fully by the scholar Nagarjuna (ca. second century C.E.) and folded into a philosophy called Madhyamaka, which means "middle way." Madhyamaka would become a foundation of Zen.

Nagarjuna is considered the greatest patriarch of Mahayana Buddhism, and most Mahayana traditions claim him as a dharma ancestor. We know

nothing for certain of his life. Historians believe he was from southern India and possibly a Tamil. Several texts are attributed to him; his best-known work is the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, or *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, probably written about 150 C.E.

In Buddhism there are many so-called middle ways. Before he realized enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama is said to have found his spiritual path in a middle way between asceticism and indulgence. In his Pali canon sermons, the Buddha preached a middle way between believing in either an eternal self or annihilation. In Madhyamaka, the middle way means charting a course between the extremes of affirmation and negation. According to Nagarjuna, it is incorrect to say things exist and equally incorrect to say they don't.

In the *Fundamental Verses*, Nagarjuna painstakingly analyzes a range of phenomena, including the Buddha and nirvana, and presents a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that none of these things exist in an absolute sense. However, individual phenomena exist conventionally, to us, because of the identities we assign to them. For example, a table is a useful piece of furniture to us, but it might be something else entirely to another sort of creature—shelter to a dog, food to an insect. Or, according to the translator and scholar Jay L. Garfield, it might be "a brief intersection in the histories of some trees."[13] The designation "table" is purely arbitrary.

This is important, because perceiving the unreality of things is critical to letting go of them. It may be there is nothing to cling to and no one to cling to it, but until we see that for ourselves, we keep clinging.

The Kushan Empire

Who were the Kushans? In the first millennium B.C.E. the Yuezhi people were nomads who, for several generations, tended livestock on the grasslands of northwest China, east of the Tibetan plateau. In the second century B.C.E. a large number of Yuezhi moved west and made their way to Bactria. Sometime in the first century B.C.E. a tribe of Yuezhi called the Guishuang came to dominate the other Yuezhi in Bactria; from Guishuang came the name Kushan.

Sometime between 30 and 60 C.E. a Kushan named Kujula Kadphises (ca.

1–80 C.E.) seized control of Bactria, Gandhara, and much more. He established an empire that, at its peak, would spread in an arc from today's Gansu Province in China through Afghanistan. Kushan territory extended south to the port of Barbarikon on the Arabian Sea (near modern-day Karachi, Pakistan) and deeply into northern India. Although its boundaries would shift many times, the Kushans controlled much of this choice real estate for a couple of centuries, which was a huge accomplishment in the ancient world.

Thanks to the Silk Road, the Kushan Empire also became fabulously prosperous. It served as a major commercial hub between China and the Roman Empire. Further, history and geography made it an area where Greek, Persian, Indian, and other cultures mingled. It was, in short, a vital cultural and commercial crossroads of the ancient world.

Archeology tells us that Buddhism was the dominant religion of the Kushan Empire, as the wealth generated by commerce built many impressive temples, stupas, and monuments. That wealth also gave us exquisite Buddhist art. The artists of the Kushan Empire are credited with being the first to depict the Buddha in human form, and many of the conventions they invented are still used to portray the Buddha to this day—for example, elongated earlobes, hair pulled into a topknot (which would turn into a bump in East Asia), various mudras (symbolic positions of the hands).

Kushan artists were influenced by many cultures, including Persian. But especially in the oldest Kushan art of Gandhara, Roman and Greek influence is dominant. Many of the first statues of the Buddha would have looked right at home in the Forum Romanum. This is true also of the bodhisattvas. Some of the first depictions of Buddhist bodhisattvas appear to have been modeled after figures from Greek and Roman mythology. For example, one of the first transcendent bodhisattvas was named Vajrapani, after a character in the Suttapitaka. The scriptural Vajrapani is a spirit who occasionally pops out of the air to issue metaphorical threats to people who argue with the Buddha. The early scriptures offer little description of this spirit, and they certainly don't call him muscular. But the Kushans imagined Vajrapani to be something like the Buddha's bodyguard and modeled him after Hercules—muscles, beard, and all.

Many centuries later, in Japan, we find Zen temples guarded by sculpted

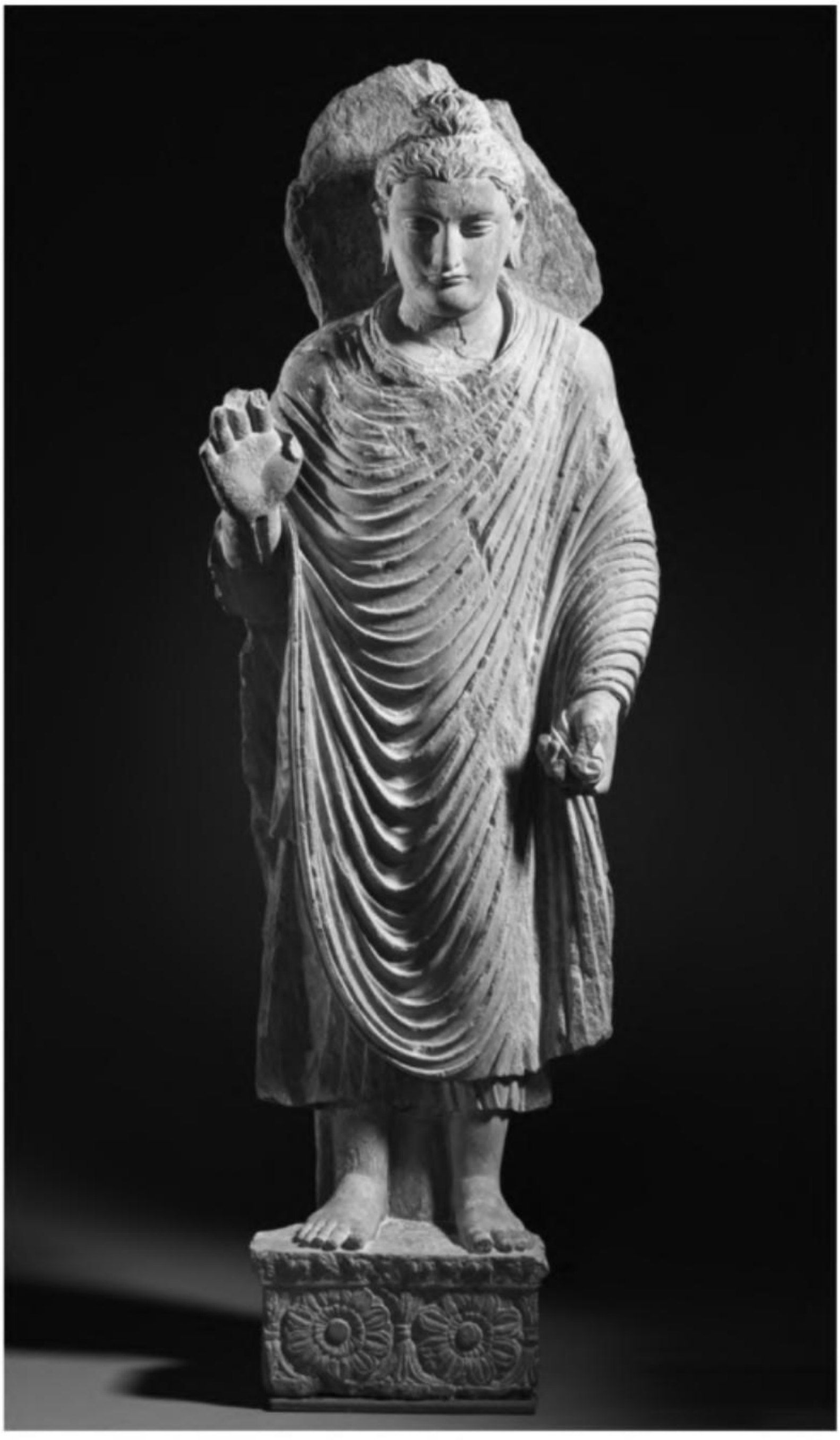

Figure 2. Buddha Shakyamuni from the Gandhara region of Pakistan, second–early third century.

Gray schist. 47 1/2 x 16 x 19 1/2 in. (120.65 x 40.64 x 49.53 cm.) Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eric Lidow in honor of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary. (M.91.90). Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

Nio figures, usually a pair of scowling, muscle-bound giants who stand on either side of gates. The Nio are said to be emanations of Vajrapani. Thus, the influence of the Kushan artists lingers.

There was another center of art further east, in Mathura, a city located in what is now Uttar Pradesh, India. For a time Mathura also was part of the Kushan Empire. The ornate detailing and sense of movement and energy portrayed in the art of Mathura make it distinctively Indian, and Mathura also would influence Buddhist art for centuries to come.

The surviving art tells us that Mahayana Buddhism dominated the Kushan Empire. This is significant for us because most of the monastics who introduced Buddhism into China, especially north China, came from the Kushan Empire. Several Mahayana sutras also came to China by way of the Kushans.

Most of the time, Chinese translations are the oldest extant versions of the Mahayana sutras; the original texts have been lost. It's often presumed the originals were written in Sanskrit. But for all we know, a few of them may have been first composed in one of the languages of the Kushan Empire, such as Gandhari, Bactrian, or even Greek.

This begs the question: Did Greece, or Persia for that matter, influence the development of Mahayana doctrines and philosophy? Or Buddhism in general? For that matter, did travelers in Hellenic central Asia take elements of the dharma back to Greece? These are not questions I am prepared to address, and what attempts I have seen so far to address them have been too flawed to recommend. But it seems a rich area to be mined by future scholars.

The Kushan civilization appears to have reached its peak in the second century under the leadership of Kanishka I, who ruled from about 127 to 150 C.E. He was a devout Buddhist whose spiritual guide was none other than Ashvaghosa, author of the *Buddhacarita*. Kanishka is remembered as a great patron of Buddhism, second only to Ashoka, and he encouraged and possibly sponsored Kushan missionaries to go into China.

After 225 C.E. the Kushan Empire split in half, and then it eroded further, and it was gone entirely by the mid-fifth century. But the Buddhist civilization established in the region lingered quite a bit longer, even after the Kushan

Empire had crumbled into many smaller kingdoms. It may have been present in the Swat valley until as late as the eleventh century. But eventually the Buddhist civilization of Gandhara faded away. Exactly when the last Buddhist nun or monk offered the final stick of incense there is not recorded.

The Journey from West to East

Beginning in the first century C.E., possibly even before the Kushan Empire was founded, Buddhist monastics from Bactria and Gandhara began taking the Silk Road into China. The southern route of the Silk Road went from the Mediterranean to Bamyan, in Bactria, where two giant buddhas would be carved into a cliff to keep silent watch. From Bamyan the road went northwest through the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram Mountains. Eventually it reached the oasis at Dunhuang, in northwest China—the place where, centuries later, a collection of scrolls would be sealed into a cave and not discovered for nine hundred years. From Dunhuang the road moved east to the great Chinese cities of Chang'an and Luoyang.

In the 1970s some highway builders discovered remnants of another ancient road—which appears to have been a shortcut from Taxila, then and now a city in the Punjab—that was more likely used by monks than by merchants. This was a narrower and more perilous road that went north from Taxila, around mountains, through valleys, and over glaciers to the Khunjerab Pass, which today connects Pakistan and China. The way is marked by ancient stupas and inscriptions, some dating to the time of Kanishka I.

Missionaries from central and southern India also took the dharma to China in the early centuries of the first millennium C.E. Those missionaries usually took ships that sailed from India's eastern coast, crossed the Bay of Bengal, and then passed between Malaysia and Indonesia to the South China Sea. The most frequent destination was a port city on the Pearl River called Guangzhou.

Tathagatagarbha, *or Buddha-Nature*

Even as Buddhism was being introduced to China, Mahayana continued to develop. One significant development was *tathagatagarbha*, which is not

the name of a specific doctrine but more like a proposal that appeared in a number of Mahayana sutras composed in about the third century C.E. The tathagatagarbha teachings are believed to have been inspired by a passage in the Suttapitaka that describes a "luminous mind" that is always present whether we are aware of it or not.[14] The word *tathagatagarbha* could be roughly translated as "womb of the buddhas," but the proposal is more commonly known to English-speaking Mahayana Buddhists as buddha-nature.

The most basic idea behind tathagatagarbha is that all sentient beings have the potential to become buddhas. Beyond that, buddha-nature is understood in different ways. For example, some schools of Mahayana consider buddha-nature to be something like a seed or potentiality that needs to be cultivated and developed. Others say that buddhahood, or enlightenment, is already fully present and needs only to be realized.

Theravada Buddhists have accused Mahayana of using tathagatagarbha to sneak a self—and the old atman/Brahman dynamic of the Upanishads—back into Buddhism by another name. The Theravadins have a point, because *sometimes* that's exactly how it is understood: as both an individual nature and the nature of the absolute buddha that individuals possess. But there are deeper levels to tathagatagarbha that are worth exploring. In Zen, buddha-nature would become synonymous with absolute reality and the dharmakaya.

Tathagatagarbha would at times become a contentious issue in Chinese Buddhism as scholars struggled to explain how it functions and why it isn't a self. As we'll see in later chapters, some of the great Zen masters of history would address these questions also.

Yogacara

In the fourth century C.E., there lived two half brothers from Gandhara named Asanga and Vasubandhu. The younger brother, Vasubandhu, was ordained in the Sarvastivada school, where he gained a reputation as a great scholar for his commentaries on the Abhidhamma. The older brother, Asanga, also was a monk of Sarvastivada or possibly another Sthavira school.

At some point, however, the brothers converted to Mahayana and founded

a major philosophical school called Yogacara, "practice of yoga," which eventually would have a profound impact on Zen. Like Nagarjuna before him, Vasubandhu is taken to be part of the ancestral lineage of Zen teachers.

Mind Only?

Yogacara is sometimes called the Mind Only school, but this is a title that Westerners trip over. People sometimes interpret "mind only" to mean "everything is mind," which isn't exactly right. Asanga and Vasubandhu did not propose that everything consists of mind but that all we can know is mind. And even here Westerners can continue to trip, because the way we in the modern West conceptualize "mind" is alien to how Asanga and Vasubandhu understood "mind."

A Sanskrit word frequently used in Yogacara is *vijnana*, which is variously translated as "mind," "awareness," and "consciousness." Like many Sanskrit words, it can be used to designate different things, depending on context, but in one context vijnana is the faculty that connects a sensory organ and an object to create an experience. For example, vijnana intersects the eye and a visible object to create the experience of seeing. It intersects the ear and sound waves to create the experience of hearing. Note that vijnana is *not* the faculty that recognizes and identifies the things it connects, which is a different mental function called *samjna*. In this sense, it is an awareness separate from cognition.

The important point here is that our experience of the physical world we think is "out there" is vijnana. Put another way, vijnana, *experience itself*, is the only reality we can know.

This is not easy for most of us to wrap our heads around; we normally don't separate the reality of experience itself from the reality of what we are experiencing, but modern neuroscience makes a similar argument. Take color, for example. As I understand it, our senses receive stimuli based on light and pigment, and then our neurological systems somehow create a world of color for us from those stimuli. The pink in a rose is in our heads, not in the rose. The world you experience through your senses, which you presume to be all "out there," in truth is a kind of collaboration between the phenomenal world and your nervous system.

And if a tree falls in the forest but no creature with an auditory system is nearby to hear it, is there a sound? Yogacara would say no, because sound is not just sound waves but an experience of hearing.

We mistakenly believe that we—the subject, or the experiencer—exist separately from everything else; we mistakenly believe that phenomena we observe "out there" exist independently of us and that we exist separately from what's "out there." Yogacara teaches that this is the fundamental ignorance that causes dukkha and keeps us tied to samsaric existence. Ultimately there is no "in here" or "out there"—only *this*.

Eight Consciousnesses

Asanga and Vasubandhu also are credited with creating the theory of eight consciousnesses (*ashta-vijnana-kaya*). Early Buddhism assumed there were six sense organs—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body (or, in modern terms, nerve endings that enable touch), and *manas* (another Sanskrit word that is translated as "mind" or also "heart"). And there are six corresponding objects—visible objects, sound, odor, something to be tasted, something to be touched, and thoughts. It may seem odd to consider the thinking part of our brain as just another sense organ, like a nose, but there it is. Those are the first six "consciousnesses."

Yogacara added two more. The seventh is *klistamanas*, "afflicted manas," sometimes also referred to as *klistamanovijnana*. This awareness mistakenly perceives a permanent, individual self. The eighth is *alayavijnana*, the "storehouse consciousness," which is a foundational consciousness that stores the "seeds" or impressions of past experience. There is some similarity—and some difference—between alayavijnana and what Freud called the unconscious mind.

We'll run into alayavijnana again later in this book. The most important point to understand is that it is not a self, any more than your nose is a self. This storehouse consciousness also is the repository of karma, a word I try to avoid because it causes some people who don't understand what it is to run shrieking to the exits. People often ask how karma can affect anyone if there is no self to be affected, which is a great question. The answer provided by Yogacara is that the seeds of karma reside in this deep eighth

consciousness, and they *will* ripen and jerk us around until we do something about them.

As with Madhyamaka, through the centuries Yogacara would be expanded upon and refined by many great scholars. What I have written of these philosophical schools doesn't qualify as a proper introduction; doing them justice requires much more time and study. Suffice it to say that with their development and with the introduction of tathagatagarbha, or buddha-nature, the philosophical foundations upon which Zen and most other schools of Mahayana Buddhism would be built were nearly complete. But Zen is not a school of philosophy but a school of practice, and its unique approach to Buddhist teaching would be forged in the culture and traditions of China.

Prajnatara

About 450 C.E. or thereafter, nomadic warriors called the White Huns, or Hephthalites, swept eastward across the Hindu Kush, crossing Gandhara into Kashmir. The upheaval they created is said to have caused a sage named Prajnatara to flee for the safety of southern India.

Prajnatara is an elusive figure lingering more in myth than in records. Although appearing as a man in Chinese chronicles, there is reason to believe Prajnatara, mythical or not, originally was a woman.[15] Some accounts say she was a leader of the Sarvastivadins, but since she is believed to have been a master of Yogacara, it would make more sense to our story if she had studied with the dharma heirs of Vasubandhu in Kashmir.

The Pallava dynasty king of southern India, Simhavarman, invited Prajnatara to teach in his capital. King Simhavarman's youngest son, Bodhitara, became her student and was ordained a monk with the name Bodhidharma.

Prajnatara foresaw that someday the dharma would leave India, and she advised Bodhidharma to go to China after she died. And so sometime after his teacher's death, he did.

2

THE SIX (OR SO) PATRIARCHS

A SCROLL found in the Dunhuang cave library tells us that in about 475 C.E. a monk from southern India got off a boat in Guangzhou, China, a city once known in the West as Canton. Then as now it was a busy port on the Pearl River, which flows into the South China Sea.

The city was used to foreigners and also to Buddhist monks. As he walked through narrow streets filled with noisy vendors and the smells of crowds and cooking, the stranger probably attracted little attention. Yet this inauspicious moment would be commemorated in a famous koan: *Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?*

The traditional story of the birth of Zen begins with the arrival of Bodhidharma, who became known as the First Patriarch, in China, and continues through the lives of five more patriarchs. Each of these revered sages, the story goes, chose his best student to succeed him as patriarch of the lineage—a rite of passage marked by passing on the robe and bowl of Bodhidharma. This tradition ended with the sixth and last patriarch, Dajian Huineng, who died in 713.

As we'll see in this chapter, this clear-cut tale of creation and succession is not the whole story of how Zen began. Many of the elements of practice and doctrine associated with Zen today made their way to China before Bodhidharma. Many other elements didn't develop until long after the time of the patriarchs. And the exact moment Zen emerged as a distinctive school becomes more elusive the more you try to pin it down.

Madhyamaka teaches us that all phenomena are the result of ever-changing causes and conditions, without self-essence, and we identify them as particular things with particular names simply out of expedience. It's good to keep in mind that the phenomenon called Zen Buddhism is no different.

Further, much of the tale of the Six Patriarchs, robe and bowl included, appears to be a post hoc invention of the seventh century that was superimposed over a much more complicated history. Framing early Zen history as simply about six particular men is a very artificial way to tell the story.

Nevertheless, the Six Patriarchs are so embedded in how Zen understands itself that it's difficult to put that story aside. So it is a story I will tell. And, as is traditional, we'll begin with Bodhidharma. To better understand the story of Bodhidharma, however, we need to begin by exploring the status of Buddhism in China at the beginning of the sixth century.

Early Chinese Buddhism

It's believed Buddhism arrived in China in the first century C.E., during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), a time of relative political stability. By the time Bodhidharma stepped onto a dock in Guangzhou, Buddhism had been in China for more than four centuries.

According to legend, one night the Emperor Ming of Han (28–75 C.E.) dreamed of a shining, flying god, and this somehow inspired him to invite two Buddhist monks to the Han court. It's more likely that the first Buddhists in China were monks from Gandhara and Bactria who followed merchants on the Silk Road.

By the beginning of the second century, a few Buddhist communities had been established in China. It's believed the first of these was in the Han capital of Luoyang, in present-day Henan Province. We will be returning to Luoyang frequently as we trace the story of early Zen.

By the end of the second century, Buddhism was popular enough that an official in central Jiangsu, near modern-day Shanghai, made a name for himself by erecting a Buddhist temple and sponsoring elaborate ritual bathings of a gilded Buddha. These acts of piety—plus the free food and drink


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began the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420), which, though nominally a monarchy, functioned more as an oligarchy of squabbling aristocratic families.

About this time, a shift was taking place in the relationship between Buddhism and the Chinese people. At first, the religion was associated with the many merchants coming from the western regions, as well as with missionaries from India. Although some Chinese had taken an interest in Buddhism and had even joined the monastic sangha, educated and aristocratic Chinese people primarily remained Confucian.

But as the Han intelligentsia of China congregated in the south, this attitude changed. Educated people finally came into contact with Buddhist monks and scholars who were not "barbarians," meaning they were either ethnic Han Chinese or thoroughly Sinicized. Chinese scholars learned of a rich philosophical tradition as sophisticated as their own. A "gentry Buddhism" that stressed learning, philosophy, and debate developed among the southern Han aristocrats.

The situation in the north was messier but in some ways more fertile for the dharma.

At the time Luoyang fell in 316, north China had already been fracturing into small, short-lived states. The period from 304 to 439 saw sixteen such states wink into and out of existence there.

The nomadic tribes that had conquered the north were not a genteel crew; many of their leaders maintained power through brutality and terrorism. One such leader was Shi Hu, head of the Later Zhao polity (319–351), who sometimes slaughtered the entire populations of villages he captured. He also executed officers who disagreed with him and murdered at least two of his wives. Once Shi Hu grew angry with his own heir and had him killed, along with the heir's consorts, their twenty-six children, and over two hundred retainers.

Yet even amid this chaotic violence, Buddhism was embraced in the north. A missionary named Fotudeng (232–348) came from Kucha, a small central Asian kingdom, and managed to impress the terrible Shi Hu and other northern warlords. He did this, ancient sources say, through magic tricks, such as conjuring a lotus from a bowl of clear water. Fotudeng also had a reputation as a seer, and he became Shi Hu's personal oracle and spiritual adviser.

Improbably, Shi Hu, who could be "charitably described as a psychopath,"[1] became a patron of Buddhism. It was said he built nine hundred monasteries and temples. And although Fotudeng comes across in history books as an opportunistic hustler, many of his disciples are remembered as outstanding scholars and practitioners who held their teacher in high regard.

There may have been more to Fotudeng than magic tricks. One can imagine him playing a dangerous game of doing whatever he had to do to placate the monstrous Shi Hu and allow Buddhism to flourish. In time Fotudeng's many disciples traveled and taught throughout north China and possibly as far south as Guangzhou, where we've left Bodhidharma by the dock.

The Translators

The spread of Buddhism into China was aided by improved translations of Buddhist sacred texts. Among the many translators who brought the dharma to China, two stand out.

Dharmaraksha (ca. 230–307) was the son of a Kushan merchant living in Dunhuang. He received a Chinese education and was also prolific in Indian and central Asian languages. A sixth-century catalog of Chinese Buddhist texts attributed 154 translations to him, including the Pancavimsatisahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra (better known in English as the Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-Five Thousand Lines) and the Lotus Sutra.

But Dharmaraksha didn't just passively sit in a temple translating texts. He traveled west to Gandhara to collect sacred texts not yet available in China. He also traveled to other cities in north China, spreading knowledge of these scriptures as he went.

And then there was Kumarajiva (344–413), the most renowned of all the early translators. Like Fotudeng, Kumarajiva was from Kucha in central Asia. In his youth he studied with the Sarvastivadins in Kashmir, but he later converted to Mahayana. His reputation as a scholar of the dharma grew.

And then his life got interesting. In 379 Fu Jian (337–85), leader of the Former Qin dynasty of north China (351–94), heard of the great scholar Kumarajiva and desired to bring him to his court. Fu Jian ordered his general, Lu Guang, to take a delegation to Kucha and escort the scholar to his capital at Chang'an.


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Figure 3. An eighteenth-century hanging scroll portrait of Daruma (Bodhidharma) by Hakuin Ekaku.

Image: 44 1/2 x 19 3/4 in. (113.03 x 50.17 cm.); Mount: 77 3/4 x 25 in. (197.49 x 63.5 cm.)

Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Murray Smith. (M.91.220)

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