

THE GREAT CHINESE BUDDHIST TRAVELLER

About the seventh century A.D., India and China lived an intense political, intellectual, religious and artistic life. The common bond created between them by Buddhism generated a great current of humanism which spread from Ceylon to Japan. After a thousand years of eventful development, Buddhist mysticism reached its apogee and Indian aesthetics and Philosophy received fresh inspiration from it. Silabhadra of Nalanda and his pupil, Yuan Chwang, the Master of the Law from China represent one aspect, while the outburst of Naturalism in art at Mahabalipuram may be taken to represent another. Both were borne along by a current of creative forces of enduring value. China, realizing a new unity under strong T'ang rule, was hospitable to new ideas and ready to allow its force to be softened by the gentle influence of India. Yuan Chwang and I-tsing, only two well-known pilgrims among many, have left records which recall much of this vast movement in which even Japan had a share. The temple of Horyuji, founded by Shotoku Taisha at Nara in 607 A.D., still remains the time-honoured witness of this transformation. Fa-hien, two centuries earlier, was its precursor, the earliest Chinese visitor to India to leave a record of his travels.

Fa-Hien

Fa-hien, the first of the three Chinese pilgrims, recorded his own travels. He practically walked all the way from Central China across the Gobi desert, over the Hindu Kush and right across Northern India to the seaport of Tamralipti in Bengal. There he embarked for Ceylon and returned to China by sea after an adventurous voyage marked by several hair-breadth escapes. He brought back with him what he had gone to seek in India – sacred books of Buddhism and images of Buddhist deities.

Fa-hien was distressed at the state of the Buddhist 'disciplines' in China, and made up his mind, together with several friends, to visit India and try to obtain the 'rules'. Starting from Chang-an and travelling by stages they reached Tun-haung at the end of the great wall; the governor of that place gave them all that was required to enable them to cross the Gobi desert. "In this desert", records Fa-hien, "there are great many evil spirits and also hot winds; those who encounter them perish. There are neither birds above nor beasts below. Gazing on all sides as far as eye can reach in order to mark the track, no guidance is to be obtained save from the rotting bones of dead men, which point the way."

He noticed the prevalence of Indian culture in the states he visited in Central Asia. In the country of Shan-Shan (south of Lop-Nor) there were some four thousand priests of the Theravada school and the common people practised the religion of India with certain modifications. "From this point travelling westwards, the nations that one passes through are all similar in this respect . . . At the same time, all those who have left, the family (priests and novices) study Indian books and the Indian spoken language". The pilgrim spent two months and some days in Karashahr which also had over 4,000 priests of the Theravada school.

His next important stage was Khotan, a prosperous and happy state with tens of thousands of priests, mostly of the Mahayana school. Fa-hien and his companions were lodged in the large and comfortable Gomati Vihara by the ruler of the country. Discipline in the vihara was perfect. At the sound of a gong, three thousand priests assemble to eat. When they enter the refectory, their demeanour is grave and ceremonious; they sit down in regular order; they all keep silence."

While some of his companions advanced to Kashgar, Fa-hien and others stayed behind in Khotan for three months to be able to witness the impressive procession of images in which the priests of the Gomati took the first place among the fourteen large monasteries (without counting the smaller ones) and the king and queen and the Court ladies also took part. The procession was like the Car Festival held in a large Indian temple to this day, only more gorgeous. "The cars are all different; each monastery has a day for its own procession, beginning on the first of the fourth moon and lasting until the fourteenth when the processions end and the king and queen go back to the palace."

Buddha's Spittoon

The pious and credulous Fa-hien says of Kashgar, "This country has a spittoon which belonged to the Buddha; it is made of stone and is of the same colour as his alms bowl. There is also a relic of the Buddha's teeth, for which people have raised a pagoda". Many notes on relics and miracles can be found throughout the narrative, but we must pass them by, stopping to note only the most interesting or significant among them."

A particularly dangerous section of his route along the Bolor-Tagh range and the first crossing of the Indus as described by Fa-hien are worth reproducing. "Keeping to the range, the party journeyed on in a south-westerly direction for fifteen days over a difficult, precipitous, and dangerous road, the side of the

mountain being like a stone wall ten thousand feet in height. On nearing the edge, the eye becomes confused; and wishing to advance, the foot finds no resting place. Below, there is a river named Indus. The men of former times had cut away the rock to make a way down, and had placed ladders on the side of the rock. There are several hundred rock-steps in all; and when these and the ladders have been negotiated, the river is crossed by a suspension bridge of ropes. The two banks of the river are somewhat less than eighty paces apart.

And spending the next summer in retreat in Udyana, then a flourishing centre of Buddhism, Fa-hien marched south to Gandhara and Taksasila, where the Bodhisattva offered his head for a fellow creature, and records the Buddha's prophecy that Kanishka would raise a pagoda in Peshawar. This pagoda was seen and described at length by Yuan Chwang, and its foundations are believed to have been discovered by archaeologists. Fa-hien also writes: "Of all the pagodas and temples seen by the pilgrims, not one could compare with this in grandeur and dignity, and tradition says that of the highest rank".

The Shadow Of The Buddha And His Skull Bone

From Peshawar Fa-hien proceeded alone to Nagarahara (Hadda), his companions having left him. That city had a shrine containing the Buddha's skull bone. It was sealed with eight seals every night for safety, each in the custody of one of the leading men in the city. "Every morning the king makes offerings and worships the relic. Half a yojana to the south of the city the pilgrim notes the cave inside which the Buddha left his shadow. "The kings of the various countries round about", he affirms, "have sent skilful artists to sketch it, but they have not been able to do so". Fa-hien also notes the other sacred spots and relics in the neighbourhood.

In Afghanistan, which he entered after crossing the Safed Koh, there were three thousand priests belonging to both the schools; crossing the Punjab, pilgrim reached the Mathura country after passing many monasteries where there were nearly ten thousands priests. Buddhism was very popular in the Mathura region and its priests were honoured by the people and the officials of the Court who waited personally upon them at table. "At the end of the meal they spread carpets on the ground, and sit down facing the president not venturing to sit on couches in the presence of priests" – an arrangement handed down from the days of the Buddha.

Then Fa-hien reached the Middle Kingdom, the heart of the Gupta Empire. His oft-quoted description of the country is brief but to the point: "It has a temperate climate, without frost or snow; and the people are prosperous and happy, without registration or official restrictions. Only those who till the King's land have to pay so much on the profit they make. Those who want to go away may go; those who want to stop may stop. The King in his administration has no corporal punishments; criminals are merely fined according to the gravity of their offences. Even for a second attempt at rebellion the punishment is only the loss of the right hand. Fa-hien seems to apply to the whole country what he observed in the viharas; for he affirms: "Throughout the country no one kills any living thing, nor drinks wine, nor eats onions or garlic." Again, "In this country they do not keep pigs or fowls, there are no dealings in cattle, no butchers' shops or distilleries in their market place. "He takes note particularly of the untouchables who lived apart, had to announce their presence on the roads in the city or near the market by beating a piece of wood, and were the only class that went hunting and dealt in flesh. Cowries were used as a medium of exchange, and charitable endowments in favour of Buddhist priests were numerous, time-honoured and well respected. "Rooms with beds and mattresses, food and clothes are provided for resident and travelling priests without fail, and this is the same in all places".

Fa-hien then visited in succession Sankasys (Kanyakubja) (Kanauj) – 'the city of hump-back maidens'; Sha-ki, Saketa or Ayodhya; Sravasti with its shrine of the Garden of Gold, a place where many miracles were performed and are duly noticed by the pilgrim; Kapila Vastu, the city of Suddhodana, the Buddha's father – 'then just like a wilderness, except for priests and some tens of families; Vaisali (Besarh); and the country of Magadha and the city of Pataliputra where he saw the marvellous palace of Asoka. "Of all the countries of central India, this has the largest cities and towns. Its people are rich and thriving and emulate one another in practising charity of heart and duty to one's neighbour. Regularly every year, on the eighth day of the second moon, they have a procession of images". He mentions the free hospitals in the cities with much admiration. From there he went to Nalanda (Bargon), Rajagriha, and Gaya-a complete waste within its walls', but surrounded by many hallowed spots, all duly noted by Fa-hien; Banaras, including the Deer forest at Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, and lastly Kausambi with its garden of Ghositarama.

From Banaras Fa-hien returned to Pataliputra. What he records of his efforts to gain written texts of Buddhism is interesting. Usually they were transmitted orally from generation to generation, and only at the shrine of the Garden of Gold in Sravasti in a monastery he 'obtained a copy according to the text accepted at the

First Great Assembly and practised by priests generally which the Buddha was still alive' – a declaration that modern scholars will not be ready to accept. Fa-hien spent three years 'learning to write and speak Sanskrit (or Pali) and copying out the Disciplines.' He then moved on to Tamuk by way of Campa and stayed two years there 'copying out sutras and drawing pictures of images' before embarking for Ceylon on his way back to China.

Fa-Hien In Ceylon

Sailing in a big merchant vessel with the first favourable monsoon wind, Fa-hien reached Ceylon in fourteen days and spent two years there collecting and copying Sanskrit texts unknown in China. Early in his stay on the island, Fa-hien felt homesick. "He had now been away from his own land of Han for many years.....moreover, those who had travelled with him had left him – some remaining behind in these countries, others being dead. Now, beholding only his own shadow, he was constantly sad at heart; and when suddenly, by the side of this jade image (of the Buddha of Abhayagiri Vihara of Anuradhapura), he saw a merchant make offering of a white silk fan from China, his feelings overcame him and his eyes filled with tears." Fa-hien describes the viharas, the Tooth festival, and Mihintale, and gives an attractive account of Sinhalese Buddhism as a whole.

He has vividly described the splendor and magnificence of Anuradhapura, and of the national religion and the prosperity of the Island. He describes Lanka as a land of peace and plenty; the Sinhalese as a most virtuous and industrious race; the land as always cultivated the prices of produce as never high; slavery as unknown; and the king as compassionate and advised by a Council of Elders, chosen by the people.

In his records of travel in India and Ceylon, Fa-hien describes the conditions existing at Anuradhapura. He says: "The country is temperate; the vicissitude of winter and summer is unknown. The grass and trees are ever verdant. The sowing of the fields is at the pleasure of the people, there is no fixed time for that.....Amongst the precious things to be seen there is an image of blue jasper, two chang high, its entire body is formed by the seven precious things. It sparkles with splendours, and is more majestic than can be described.....the houses are beautiful and the public edifices well adorned. The streets and roads are level and straight. In all the crossways there are halls built for preaching. On the 8th, 14th and 15th of the moon they erect a lofty pulpit, and a great multitude of the four casts assemble to listen to the Law. The natives of the country assert that they may have amongst them altogether from 50 to 60,000 monks who all eat in common."

Home-ward Journey

From Ceylon Fa-hien sailed in another big merchant vessel carrying two hundred souls or more; there was a smaller vessel also in tow. After sailing for two days the ship encountered a violent storm which lasted for thirteen days; Fa-hien spent his time in prayer fixing his thoughts upon Kuan Yin, the Hearer of Prayers. He was also afraid that the merchants might throw his books and images overboard. But nothing happened; a leak in the vessel was discovered near an island and stopped, and Java was reached after another storm tossed voyage of over ninety days. Fa-hien stayed in Java for five months or so; there he found Brahmanism flourishing 'while the Faith of the Buddha was in a very unsatisfactory condition'. Another big merchant vessel and an equally troublesome and protracted voyage brought him to the prefecture of Ch'ing-chou in China where he spent a winter and a summer before going south to the capital, Nanking, where he handed over to the ecclesiastics the sutras and the Disciplines he had collected.

The conclusion of his account is very touching, he says: "Fa-hien spent six years in travelling from Ch'ang-an to central India; he stayed there for six years, and it took him three more to reach Ch'ing-chou. The countries he passed through amounted to rather fewer than thirty. From the sandy desert westwards all the way to India the dignified deportment of the priesthood and the good influence of the Faith, were beyond all expression in detail. As, however, the ecclesiastics at home had no means of hearing about these things, Fa-hien had given no thought to his own unimportant life, but came home across the seas, encountering still more difficulties and dangers. Happily, he was accorded protection by the divine Majesty of the Precious Trinity, and was thus preserved in the hour of danger. Therefore, he wrote down on bamboo tablets and silk an account of what he had been through, desiring that the gentle reader should share this information."

