The Journey of Faxian to India

Between 399 and 414 CE, the Chinese monk Faxian (Fa-Hsien, Fa Hien) undertook a trip via Central Asia to India seeking better copies of Buddhist books than were currently available in China. Although cryptic to the extent that we cannot always be sure where he was, his account does provide interesting information on the conditions of travel and the Buddhist sites and practices he witnessed. For example, he indicates clearly the importance of the seven precious substances for Buddhist worship, the widespread practice of stupa veneration, and his acquaintance with several of the *jataka* tales about the previous lives of the Buddha Sakyamuni, tales which are illustrated in the paintings at the Dunhuang caves. The extracts below, covering the early part of his journey, are from James Legge, tr. and ed., *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon (A.D. 399-414)* in *Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline* (Oxford, 1886), pp. 9-36. I have inserted occasional explanations in brackets, rather than attempt to footnote the text.

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Fa-hien had been living in Ch'ang-gan. Deploiring the mutilated and imperfect state of the collection of the Books of Discipline....he entered into an engagement with Hwuy-king, Tao-ching, Hwuy-ying and Hwuy-wei that they should go to India and seek for the disciplinary Rules.

After starting from Ch'ang-gan, they passed through Lung [in eastern Gansu]...and reached the emporium of Chang-yih [north and west of Lanzhou, near the Great Wall]. There they found the country so much disturbed that travelling on the roads was impossible for them. Its king, however, was very attentive to them [and] kept them (in his capital)...

Here they met with Che-yen, Hwuy-keen, Sang-shao, Pao-yun, and Sang-king; and in pleasant association with them, as bound on the same journey with themselves, they passed the summer retreat (of that year [i.e., 400 CE]) together, resuming after it their traveling, and going on to T'un-hwang, (the chief town) in the frontier territory of defence extending for about 80 li from east to west, and about 40 from north to south. Their company, increased as it had been, halted there for some days more than a month, after which Fa-hien and his four friends started first in the suite of an envoy, having separated (for a time) from Pao-yun and his associates.

Le Hao, the prefect of T'un-hwang, had supplied them with the means of crossing the desert (before them), in which there are many evil demons and hot winds. (Travellers)
who encounter them perish all to a man. There is not a bird to be seen in the air above, nor an animal on the ground below. Though you look all round most earnestly to find where you can cross, you know not where to make your choice, the only mark and indication being the dry bones of the dead (left upon the sand).

After travelling for seventeen days, a distance we may calculate of about 1500 li, (the pilgrims) reached the kingdom of Shen-shen [=?Lou-lan, near Lop Nor], a country rugged and hilly, with a thin and barren soil. The clothes of the common people are coarse, and like those worn in our land of Han, some wearing felt and others coarse serge or cloth of hair;--this was the only difference seen among them. The king professed (our) Law, and there might be in the country more than four thousand monks, who were all students of the Hinayana [Theravada]. The common people of this and other kingdoms (in that region), as well as the sramans [monks], all practise the rules of India, only that the latter do so more exactly, and the former more loosely. So (the travellers) found it in all the kingdoms through which they went on their way from this to the west, only that each had its own peculiar barbarous speech. (The monks), however, who had (given up the worldly life) and quitted their families, were all students of Indian books and the Indian language. Here they stayed for about a month, and then proceeded on their journey, fifteen days walking to the north-west bringing them to the country of Woo-e [near Kucha or Karashahr on the northern edge of the Tarim?]. In this also there were more than four thousand monks, all students of the Hinayana. They were very strict in their rules, so that sramans from the territory of Ts-in [i.e., northern China] were all unprepared for their regulations. Fa-hien, through the management of Foo Kung-sun, overseer, was able to remain (with his company in the monastery where they were received) for more than two months, and here they were rejoined by Pao-yun and his friends. (At the end of that time) the people of Woo-e neglected the duties of propriety and righteousness, and treated the strangers in so niggardly a manner that Che-yen, Hwuy-keen, and Hwuy-wei went back towards Kao-ch'ang [Khocho, near Turfan], hoping to obtain there the means of continuing their journey. Fa-hien and the rest, however, through the liberality of Foo Kung-sun, managed to go straight forward in a south-west direction. They found the country uninhabited as they went along. The difficulties which they encountered in crossing the streams and on their route, and the sufferings which they endured, were unparalleled in human experience, but in the course of a month and five days they succeeded in reaching Yu-teen [Khotan].

Yu-teen is a pleasant and prosperous kingdom, with a numerous and flourishing population. The inhabitants all profess our Law, and join together in its religious music for their enjoyment. The monks amount to several myriads, most of whom are students of the Mahayana. They all receive their food from the common store. Throughout the country the houses of the people stand apart like (separate) stars, and
each family has a small tope [stupa] reared in front of its door. The smallest of these may be twenty cubits high, or rather more. They make (in the monasteries) rooms for monks from all quarters, the use of which is given to travelling monks who may arrive, and who are provided with whatever else they require.

The lord of the country lodged Fa-hien and the others comfortably, and supplied their wants, in a monastery called Gomati, of the Mahayana school. Attached to it there are three thousand monks, who are called to their meals by the sound of a bell. When they enter the refectory, their demeanour is marked, by a reverent gravity, and they take their seats in regular order, all maintaining a perfect silence. No sound is heard from their alms-bowls and other utensils. When any of these pure men require food, they are not allowed to call out (to the attendants) for it, but only make signs with their hands.

Hwuy-king, Tao-ching, and Hwuy-tah set out in advance towards the country of K'eeh-ch'a; but Fa-hien and the others, wishing to see the procession of images, remained behind for three months. There are in this country four great monasteries, not counting the smaller ones. Beginning on the first day of the fourth month, they sweep and water the streets inside the city, making a grand display in the lanes and byways. Over the city gate they pitch a large tent, grandly adorned in all possible ways, in which the king and queen, with their ladies brilliantly arrayed, take up their residence (for the time).

The monks of the Gomati monastery, being Mahayana students, and held in greatest reverence by the king, took precedence of all the others in the procession. At a distance of three or four li from the city, they made a four-wheeled image car, more than thirty cubits, high, which looked like the great hall (of a monastery) moving along. The seven precious substances [i.e., gold, silver, lapis lazuli, rock crystal, rubies, diamonds or emeralds, and agate] were grandly displayed about it, with silken streamers and canopies harching all around. The (chief) image [presumably Sakyamuni] stood in the middle of the car, with two Bodhisattvas in attendance on it, while devas were made to follow in waiting, all brilliantly carved in gold and silver, and hanging in the air. When (the car) was a hundred paces from the gate, the king put off his crown of state, changed his dress for a fresh suit, and with bare feet, carrying in his hands flowers and incense, and with two rows of attending followers, went out at the gate to meet the image; and, with his head and face (bowed to the ground), he did homage at its feet, and then scattered the flowers and burnt the incense. When the image was entering the gate, the queen and the brilliant ladies with her in the gallery above scattered far and wide all kinds of flowers, which floated about and fell promiscuously to the ground. In this way everything was done to promote the dignity of the occasion. The carriages of the monasteries were all different, and each one had its own day for the procession. (The ceremony) began on the first day of the fourth
month, and ended on the fourteenth, after which the king and queen returned to the palace.

Seven or eight li to the west of the city there is what is called the King's New monastery, the building of which took eighty years, and extended over three reigns. It may be 250 cubits in height, rich in elegant carving and inlaid work, covered above with gold and silver, and finished throughout with a combination of all the precious substances. Behind the tope there has been built a Hall of Buddha of the utmost magalficence and beauty, the beams, pillars, venetianed doors, and windows being all overlaid with goldleaf. Besides this, the apartments for the monks are imposingly and elegantly decorated, beyond the power of words to express. Of whatever things of highest value and preciousness the kings in the six countries on the east of the (Ts'ung) range of mountains [probably this means southwestern Xinjiang] are possessed, they contribute the greater portion (to this monastery), using but a small portion of them themselves.

When the processions of images in the fourth month were over, Sang-shao, by himself alone, followed a Tartar who was an earnest follower of the Law, and proceeded towards Kophene [Kabul region?], Fa-hien and the others went forward to the kingdom of Tsze-hoh [?Tashkurgan, ?Baltistan in northern Pakistan], which it took them twenty-five days to reach. Its king was a strenuous follower of our Law, and had (around him) more than a thousand monks, mostly students of the Mahayana. Here (the travellers) abode fifteen days, and then went south for four days, when they found themselves among the Ts'ung-ling mountains, and reached the country of Yu-hwuy, where they halted and kept their retreat. When this was over, they went on among the hills for twenty-five days, and got to K'eeh-ch'a [?Skardu, or a town to the east in Ladak], there rejoining Hwuy-king and his two companions.

It happened that the king of the country was then holding the pancha parishad, that is, in Chinese, the great quinquennial assembly. When this is to be held, the king requests the presence of the sramans from all quarters (of his kingdom). They come (as if) in clouds; and when they are all assembled, their place of session is grandly decorated. Silken streamers and canopies are hung out in it, and waterlilies in gold and silver are made and fixed up behind the places where (the chief of them) are to sit. When clean mats have been spread, and they are all seated, the king and his ministers present their offerings according to rule and law. (The assembly takes place) in the first, second, or third month, for the most part in the spring.

After the king has held the assembly, he further exhorts the ministers to make other and special offerings. The doing of this extends over one, two, three, five, or even seven days; and when all is finished, he takes his own riding-horse, saddles, bridles, and waits on him himself, while he makes the noblest and most important minister of
the kingdom mount him. Then, taking fine white woollen cloth, all sorts of precious things, and articles which the sramans require, he distributes them among them, uttering vows at the same time along with all his ministers; and when this distribution has taken place, he again redeems (whatever he wishes) from the monks.

The country, being among the hills and cold, does not produce the other cereals, and only the wheat gets ripe. After the monks have received their annual (portion of this), the mornings suddenly show the hoar-frost, and on this account the king always begs the monks to make the wheat ripen before they receive their portion. There is in the country a spittoon which belonged to Buddha, made of stone, and in colour like his alms-bowl. There is also a tooth of Buddha, for the people have reared a tope, connected with which there are more than a thousand monks and their disciples, all students of the Hinayana. To the east of these hills the dress of the common people is of coarse materials, as in our country of Ts-in, but here also there were among them the differences of fine woollen cloth and of serge or haircloth. The rules observed by the sramans are remarkable, and too numerous to be mentioned in detail. The country is in the midst of the Onion range.

As you go forward from these mountains, the plants, trees, and fruits are all different from those of the land of Han, excepting only the bamboo, pomegranate, and sugar-cane.

From this (the travellers) went westwards towards North India, and after being on the way for a month, they succeeded in getting across and through the range of the Onion mountains. The snow rests on them both winter and summer. There are also among them venomous dragons, which, when provoked, spit forth poisonous winds, and cause showers of snow and storms of sand and gravel. Not one in ten thousand of those who encounter these dangers escapes with his life. The people of the country call the range by the name of 'The Snow mountains.' When (the travellers) had got through them, they were in North India, and immediately on entering its borders, found themselves in a small kingdom called T'o-leih, where also there were many monks, all students of the Hinayana.

In this kingdom there was formerly an Arhat [a disciple of the Buddha who has attained nirvana], who by his supernatural power took a clever artificer up to the Tushita heaven [where bodhisattvas are reborn before appearing on earth as buddhas], to see the height, complexion, and appearance of Maitreya Bodhisattva [the "Buddha of the Future"], and then return and make an image of him in wood. First and last, this was done three times, and then the image was completed, eighty cubits in height, and eight cubits at the base from knee to knee of the crossed legs. On fast-days it emits an effulgent light. The kings of the (surrounding) countries vie with one another in presenting offerings to it. Here it is--to be seen now as of old.
The travellers went on to the south-west for fifteen days (at the foot of the mountains, and) following the course of their range. The way was difficult and rugged, (running along) a bank exceedingly precipitous which rose up there, a hill-like wall of rock, 10,000 cubits from the base. When one approached the edge of it, his eyes became unsteady; and if he wished to go forward in the same direction, there was no place on which he could place his foot; and beneath were the waters of the river called the Indus. In former times men had chiselled paths along the rocks, and distributed ladders on the face of them, to the number altogether of 700, at the bottom of which there was a suspension bridge of ropes, by which the river was crossed, its banks being there eighty paces apart. The (place and arrangements) are to be found in the Records of the Nine Interpreters, but neither Chang K'een [Chang Ch'ien, the Han emissary to the Western Regions] nor Kan Ying [sent west in 88 CE] had reached the spot.

The monks asked Fa-hien if it could be known when the Law of Buddha first went to the east. He replied, 'When I asked the people of those countries about it, they all said that it had been handed down by their fathers from of old that, after the setting up of the image of Maitreya Bodhisattva, there were sramans of India who crossed this river, carrying with them sutras and Books of Discipline. Now the image was set up rather more than 300 years after the nirvana of Buddha, which may be referred to the reign of king P'ing of the Chow dynasty. According to this account we may say that the diffusion of our great doctrines (in the east) began from (the setting up of) this image. If it had not been through that Maitreya, the great spiritual master (who is to be) the successor of the Sakyas, who could have caused the "Three Precious Ones" [the precious Buddha, the precious Law, and the precious Monkhood] to be proclaimed so far, and the people of those border lands to know our Law? We know of a truth that the opening of (the way for such) a mysterious propagation is not the work of man; and so the dream of the emperor Ming of Han had its proper cause. [This refers to the belief that a dream of this Han emperor in 61 CE led him to seek out Buddhism and establish it in China.]

After crossing the river, (the travellers) immediately came to the kingdom of Woo-chang [Udyana, north of the Punjab--i.e., Swat in northern Pakistan], which is indeed (a part) of North India. The people all use the language of Central India, 'Central India' being what we should call the 'Middle Kingdom.' The food and clothes of the common people are the same as in that Central Kingdom. The Law of Buddha is very (flourishing in Woo-chang). They call the places where the monks stay (for a time) or reside permanently sangharamas; and of these there are in all 500, the monks being all students of the Hinayana. When stranger bhikshus [i.e., mendicant monks] arrive at one of them, their wants are supplied for three days, after which they are told to find a resting-place for themselves.
There is a tradition that when Buddha came to North India, he came at once to this country, and that here he left a print of his foot, which is long or short according to the ideas of the beholder (on the subject). It exists, and the same thing is true about it, at the present day. Here also are still to be seen the rock on which he dried his clothes, and the place where he converted the wicked dragon. The rock is fourteen cubits high, and more than twenty broad, with one side of it smooth.

Hwuy-king, Hwuy-tah, and Tao-ching went on ahead towards (the place of) Buddha's shadow in the country of Nagara; but Fa-hien and the others remained in Woo-chang, and kept the summer retreat. That over, they descended south, and arrived in the country of Soo-ho-to.

In that country also Buddhism is flourishing. There is in it the place where Sakra [Indra], Ruler of Devas, in a former ages, tried the Bodhisattva, by producing a hawk (in pursuit of a) dove, when (the Bodhisattva) cut off a piece of his own flesh, and (with it) ransomed the dove. [This is the well-known Sibi Jataka, a jataka being a tale relating to an incident involving the Buddha in one of his previous incarnations. The Sibi Jataka is depicted on one of the petroglyphs at Shatial in the Hunza Valley and in several of the caves at Dunhuang.] After Buddha had attained to perfect wisdom, and in travelling about with his disciples (arrived at this spot), he informed them that this was the place where he ransomed the dove with a piece of his own flesh. In this way the people of the country became aware of the fact, and on the spot reared a stupa, adorned with layers of gold and silver plates.

The travellers, going downwards from this towards the east, in five days came to the country of Gandhara, the place where Dharma-vivardhana, the son of Asoka [the Mauryan emperor known as a great patron of Buddhism in the third century BCE], ruled. When Buddha was a Bodhisattva, he gave his eyes also for another man here [another jataka tale]; and at the spot they have also reared a large stupa, adorned with, layers of gold and silver plate The people of the country were mostly students of the Hinayana.

Seven days journey from this to the east brought the travellers to the kingdom of Taxila, which means 'the severed head ' in the language of China. Here, when Buddha was a Bodhisattva, he gave away his head to a man [another jataka tale], and from this circumstance the kingdom got its name.

Going on further for two days to the east, they came to the place where the Bodhisattva threw down his body to feed a starving tigress [the Mahasattva Jataka]. In these two places also large stupas have been built, both adorned with layers of all the precious substances. The kings, ministers, and people. of the kingdoms around vie with one another in making offerings a them. The trains of those who come to scatter
flowers and light lamps at them never cease. The nations of those quarters call those (and the other two mentioned before) 'the four great stupas.'

Going southwards from Gandhara, (the travellers) in four days arrived at the kingdom of Purushapura [Peshawar]. Formerly, when Buddha was travelling in this country with his disciples, he said to Ananda, 'After my pari-nirvana, there will be a king named Kanishka [the famous Kushan emperor], who shall on this spot build a stupa. This Kanishka was afterwards born into the world; and (once), when he had gone forth to look about him, S,akra, Ruler of Devas, wishing to excite the idea in his mind, assumed the appearance of a little herd-boy, and was making a stupa right in the way (of the king), who asked what sort of a thing he was making. The boy said, 'I am making a stupa for Buddha. The king said, 'Very good;' and immediately, right over the boy's stupa, he (proceeded to) rear another, which was more than four hundred cubits high, and adorned with layers of all the precious substances. Of all the stupas and temples which (the travellers) saw in their journeyings, there was not one comparable to this in solemn beauty and majestic grandeur. There is a current saying, that this 'is the finest stupa in Jambudvipa'. When the king's stupa was completed, the little stupa (of the boy) came out from its side on the south, rather more than three cubits in height.

Buddha's alms-bowl is in this country. Formerly, a king of Yüeh-shih raised a large force and invaded this country, wishing to carry the bowl away. Having subdued the kingdom, as he and his captains were sincere believers in the Law of Buddha, and wished to carry off the bowl, they proceeded to present their offerings on a great scale. When they had done so to the Three Precious Ones, he made a large elephant be grandly caparisoned, and placed the bowl upon it. But the elephant knelt down on the ground, and was unable, to go forward. Again he caused a four-wheeled waggon to be prepared in which the bowl was put to be conveyed away. Eight elephantd were then yoked to it, and dragged it with their united strength' but neither were they able to go forward. The king knew that the time for an association between himself and the bowl had not yet arrived, and was sad and deeply ashamed of himself. Fortwith he built a stupa at the place and a monastery, and left a guard to watch (the bowl), making all sorts of contributions.

There may be there more than seven hundred monks. When it is near midday, they bring out the bowl, and, along with the common people, make their various offerings to it, after which they take their midday meal. In the evening, at the time of incense, they bring the bowl out again. It may contain rather more than two pecks, and is of various colours, black predominating, with the seams that show its fourfold composition distinctly marked. Its thickness is about the fifth of an inch, and it has a bright and glossy lustre. When poor people throw into it a few flowers, it becomes immediately full, while some very rich people, wishing to make offering of many
flowers, might not stop till they had thrown in hundreds, thousands, and myriads of bushels, and yet would not be able to fill it.

Pao-yun and Sang-king here merely made their offerings to the alms-bowl, and (then resolved to) go back. Hwuy-king, Hwuy-‘tah, and Tao-ching had gone on before, the rest to Nagarā, to make their offerings at (the places of) Buddha's shadow, tooth, and the flat-bone of his skull. (There) Hwuy-king fell ill, and Tao-ching remained to look after him while Hwuy-‘tah came alone to Purushapura, and saw the others, and (then) he with Pao-yun and Sang-king took their way back to the land of Ts'in. Hwuy-king came to his end in the monastery of Buddha's alms-bowl, and on this Fa-hien went forward alone toward the place of the flat-bone of Buddha's skull.

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