

Chinese Cultural Studies: Faxian Fa-Hsien:
A Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms (394-414 CE)

Fa-hsien (also Fa-hien), which means "illustrious master of the law" was Chinese Buddhist monk. Orphaned at an early age, Fa-hsien decided to continue the religious life planned for him by his father rather than to be incorporated into the family of his uncle. Little is known of his novitiate, though one legend tells of how he shamed a band of thieves from stealing the grain of his monastery. At the age of 25 Fa-hsien began a quest to learn about Buddhist traditions in India and to discover authentic Buddhist writings. His travels, in Sumatra, Ceylon, India, and Tibet, coincided with a general curiosity of Chinese Buddhists about the practice of their religion abroad. Fa-hsien recovered a large quantity of Buddhist writings and returned to China where he devoted the rest of his life to translating them from Sanskrit. It is recorded that he died at the age of 88.

A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms (394-414CE) is an account of the journey Fa-hsien and his companions, mostly in India. They visited as many of the Buddhist sacred shrines as they could, especially those associated with the presence of the Buddha. The selections presented here show the reasons for the establishment of these shrines, the legends that surrounded them, and the ways in which they were maintained.

Buddha's alms-bowl is in this country. Formerly, a king of Yüeh-she 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 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 fourwheeled waggon to be prepared in which the bowl was put to be conveyed away. Eight elephants 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. Forthwith he built a tope 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, 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.

Going west for sixteen yojanas, Fa-hsien came to the city He-lo in the borders of the country of Nagara, where there is the flat-bone of Buddha's skull, deposited in a vihara adorned all over with gold-leaf and the seven sacred substances. The king of the country, revering and honouring the bone, and anxious lest it should be stolen away, has selected eight individuals, representing the great families in the kingdom, and committed to each a seal, with which he should seal (its shrine) and guard (the relic). At early dawn these eight men come, and after each has inspected his seal, they open the door.

This done, they wash their hands with scented water and bring out the bone, which they place outside the vihara, on a loft platform, where it is supported on a round pedestal of the seven precious substances, and covered with a bell of lapis lazuli, both adorned with rows of pearls. Its colour is of a yellowish white, and it forms an imperfect circle twelve inches round, curving upwards to the centre. Every day, after it has been brought forth, the keepers of the vihara ascend a high gallery, where they beat great drums, blow conchs, and clash their copper cymbals. When the king hears them, he goes to the vihara, and makes his offerings of flowers and incense. When he has done this, he (and his attendants) in order, one after another, (raise the bone), place it (for a moment) on the top of their heads, and then depart, going out by the door on the west as they had entered by that on the east. The king every morning makes his offerings and performs his business of his government. The chiefs of the Vaisyas also make their offerings before they attend to their family affairs. Every day it is so, and there is no remissness in the observance of the custom. When all the offerings are over, they replace the bone in the vihara, where there is a vimoksha tope, of the seven precious substances, and rather more than five cubits high, sometimes open, sometimes shut, to contain it. In front of the door of the vihara, there are parties who every morning sell flowers and incense, and those who wish to make offerings buy some of all kinds. The kings of various countries are also constantly sending messengers with offerings. The vihara stands in a square of thirty paces, and though heaven should shake and earth be rent, this place would not move.

From this place they travelled south-east, passing by a succession of very many monasteries, with a multitude of monks, who might be counted by myriads. After passing all these places, they came to a country named Muttra. They still followed the course of the P'oo na river, on the banks of which, left and right, there were twenty monasteries, which might contain three thousand monks; and (here) the Law of Buddha was still more flourishing. Everywhere, from the Sandy Desert, in all the countries of India, the kings had been firm believers in that Law. When they make their offerings to a community of monks they take off their royal caps, and along with their relatives and ministers, supply them with food with their own hands. That done, (the king) has a carpet spread for himself on the ground, and sits down on it in front of the chairman; -- they dare not presume to sit on couches in front of the community. The laws and ways according to which the kings presented their offerings when Buddha was in the world, have been handed down to the present day.

All south from this is named the Middle Kingdom. In it the cold and heat are finely tempered, and there is neither hoarfrost nor snow. The people are numerous and happy; they have not to register their households, or attend to any magistrates and their rules; only those who cultivate the royal land have to pay (a portion of) the gain from it. If they want to go, they go; if they want to stay on, they stay. The king governs with out decapitation or (other) corporal punishments. Criminals are simply fined, lightly or heavily, according to the circumstances (of each case). Even in the cases or repeated attempts at wicked rebellion, they only have their right hands cut off. The king's body-guards and attendants all have salaries. Throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of the Chandalas. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a market-place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that men know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them. In that country they do not keep pigs and fowls, and do not sell live cattle; in the markets there are no butchers' shops and no dealers in intoxicating drink....Only the Chandalas a fishermen and hunters, and sell flesh meat.

At the places where Buddha, when he was in the world, cut his hair and nails, topes are erected and where the three Buddhas that preceded Sakyamuni Buddha and he himself sat; where they walked, and where images of their persons were made. At all these places topes were made, and are still existing. At the place where Sakra, Ruler of the Devas, and the king of the Brahmaloaka followed Buddha down (from the Trayastrimsas heaven) they have also raised a tope. At this place the monks and nuns may be a thousand, who all receive their food from the common store, and pursue their studies, some of the mahayana and some of the hinayana. Where they live, there is a white-eared dragon, which acts the part of patron to

the community of these monks, causing abundant harvests in the country, and the enriching rains to come in season, without the occurrence of any calamities, so that the monks enjoy their repose and ease. In gratitude for its kindness, they have made for it a dragon-house, with a carpet for it to sit on, and appointed for it a diet of blessing, which they present for its nourishment. Every day they set apart three of their number to go to its house, and eat there. Whenever the summer retreat is ended, the dragon straightway changes its form, and appears as a small snake, with white spots at the side of its ears. As soon as these monks recognise it, they fill a copper vessel with cream, into which they put the creature, and then carry it around from the one who has the highest seat (at their tables) to him who has the lowest, when it appears as if saluting them. When it has been taken round, immediately it disappears; and every year it thus comes forth once. The country is very productive, and the people are prosperous and happy beyond comparison. When people of other countries come to it, they are exceedingly attentive to them all, and supply them with what they need.

When Fa-hsien and Tao-ching first arrived at the Jetavana monastery, and thought how the World honoured one had formerly resided there for twenty-five years, painful reflections arose in their minds. Born in a borderland, along with their like-minded friends, they had travelled through so many kingdoms; some of those friends had returned (to their own land), and some had (died), proving the impermanence and uncertainty of life; and today they saw the place where Buddha had lived now unoccupied by him. They were melancholy through their pain of heart, and the crowd of monks came out, and asked them from what kingdom they were come. 'We are come,' they replied, 'from the land of Han.' 'Strange,' said the monks with a sigh, 'that men of a border country should be able to come here in search of our Law!' Then they said to one another, 'During all the time that we, preceptors and monks, have succeeded to one another, we have never seen men of Han, followers of our system, arrive here.'

To each of the great residences for the monks at the Jetavana vihara there were two gates, one facing the east and the other facing the north. The park (containing the whole) was the space of ground which the (Vaisya) head Sudatta purchased by covering it with gold coins. The vihara was exactly in the centre. Here Buddha lived for a longer time than at any other place, preaching his Law and converting men. At the places where he walked and sat they also (subsequently) reared topes, each having its particular name; and here was the place where Sundari murdered a person and then falsely charged Buddha (with the crime). Outside the east gate of the Jetavana, at a distance of seventy paces to the north, on the west of the road, Buddha held a discussion with the (advocates of the) ninety-six schemes of erroneous doctrine, when the king and his great officers, the householders, and people were all assembled in crowds to hear it. Then a woman belonging to one of the erroneous systems, by name Ghanchamana, prompted by the envious

hatred in her heart, and having put on (extra) clothes in front of her person, so as to give her the appearance of being with child, falsely accused Buddha before all the assembly of having acted unlawfully (towards her). On this, Sakra, Ruler of Devas, changed himself and some devas into white mice, which bit through the strings about her waist; and when this was done, the (extra) clothes which she wore dropt down on the ground. The earth at the same time was rent, and she went (down) alive into hell.

Questions

1. Why do Fa-hsien and the monks he meets at Jetavana think of China as a borderland?
2. What is the relationship between the relic of the Buddha's skull and the community in which it is kept?
3. What form of government does Fa-hsien most admire? How is order kept?
4. What is the significance of the dragon/snake to the monks?
5. What conclusions do you draw from the accusations made against Buddha?

Source:

From Fa-Hsien, *A Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms*, trans. James Legge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), repr. in Mark A. Kishlansky, ed., *Sources of World History, Volume I*, (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995), pp. 154-58