

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE
TRANSMISSION OF INDIAN
BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES TO CHINA**

BY

VEN FENG YANGJIE (SHENG XIN)

Student No: 2007/PhD 1384

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE POSTGRADUATE INSTITUTE OF
PALI & BUDDHIST STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF KELANIYA SRI LANKA.
IN FULLFILMENT OF THE REQUIRMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTER OF PHILISOPHY**

February 2010

Abstract

The transmission of Indian Buddhist scriptures to China has been a long process covering several centuries. So, this topic of research essentially includes a historical background. In other words it is the history of spread of Buddhism from Buddha's time up to the origin of Chinese Buddhism. Therefore, my thesis is arranged on a historical basis under five chapters.

The First Chapter is devoted to explain the origin and expansion of Buddhist scriptures. It includes the general nature of Buddha's teachings, geographical expansion of Buddhism at the time of the Buddha in India and the details of councils held after passing away of the Buddha.

The Second Chapter explains the formation of scriptures in Northern Buddhist schools in Sanskrit language. It should be obvious that what the first chapter clarifies is the formation of Buddhist scriptures belonging to Southern Buddhist tradition. It is both logical and historical that the scriptures of the Northern Buddhist tradition mainly evolved out of the scriptures of the Southern Buddhist tradition which have been handed mainly in Pāli language.

After the third Buddhist Council the other Buddhist schools that were rejected by the Theravadins gathered together in Kashmir and held the fourth Buddhist Council under the patronage of King Kanishka. At this council some of the Northern Buddhist scriptures were prepared in Sanskrit medium. The commentaries called *Vibhāṣā on Sūtra, Vinaya and Abhidharma* were prepared at this council. Although we do not possess much information it is probable that a large number of scriptures similar to

The centre for transmission of scriptures to China was Central Asia. There had been trade routes from India to China through Central Asia at the time. The famous route was called Silk Road and merchants exchanged clothes and other things by this way between India and China. This was a great opportunity for Buddhist missionaries to spread Buddhism beyond the boundaries of India. Chinese emperors also were expecting a philosophical system of religion at the time and they sent even royal envoys to India in search of philosophical works. Many Buddhist monks went to Central Asian countries through this Silk Road in order to propagate Buddhism. As a result many oases in the deserts of Central Asia became Buddhist. These Central Asian oases have been the most important centers for spreading and formation of Buddhist scriptures. *Fa-hian* and other Chinese travelers have kept long and detailed records of these Central Asian oases and the Buddhist condition in them. The forerunner of transmission of Buddhist scriptures to China was Central Asia. So, the third chapter has been arranged in order to explain the Buddhist situation in Central Asia.

The translation of original Sanskrit scriptures into Chinese has been a very complex and difficult task. There were no experts in both Sanskrit and Chinese. Therefore, the translation work has been undertaken by a twin board of scholars in Sanskrit and Chinese. There had been a mediator who had a simple knowledge of both Sanskrit and Chinese. To be surer about the renderings they have analyzed the Sanskrit terms into their prefixes, roots and suffixes first and then those parts of a word had been translated into Chinese. This method has been followed in order to preserve the original meanings of the terms as they are. The fourth chapter explains this process in detail.

Although this process of translation has been done with much care and faith the influence of Chinese culture on those translations could not be prohibited. As I have discussed earlier the conceptual, environmental, religious and social aspects of Chinese culture are mostly reflected in these translations. Especially Taoism and Confucianism have played a prominent role in this regard. For instance in some scriptures the concept of Tao - the world order has been interpreted in relation to Dharma in Buddhism and Confucianist teachings of duties and ethics are compared to Buddhist ethical system explained in the suttas like *Sigālovāda*. I have selected some of the scriptures in order to clarify this matter and my contribution to the field of Buddhist studies is mainly included in this fifth chapter.

Before the impact of deferent teachings on Buddhist scriptures and vice versa can be identified in several ways:

Using Chinese terminology for Buddhist terms and their affinity with Chinese culture.

The influence of Chinese cultural concepts in translating the Buddhist concepts.

Using the symbols of Chinese culture for Buddhist symbols.

Using the Chinese names of persons and things instead of such Buddhist terms.

Introducing new Chinese texts or discourses in the style of Buddhist texts and discourses.

Making new categories of Buddhist doctrines similar to those of Taoism and Confucianism.

Transliteration of Pali and Sanskrit words in Chinese and the pronunciation of such words according to Chinese tradition.