

#### 4. Hsuan-Tsang

(Note: His name has a number of alternative spellings, such as Xuanzang)

##### Introduction

A large part of these notes reads as a travelogue. Much of his journey out of central China, before he reached India, covered the ancient Silk route that linked Europe with the Persian and Chinese empires. I recommend that you refer to the sketch map of Hsuan Tsang's travels (sent in a separate document).

Hsuan Tsang left China expressly against the wishes of the emperor and would have been severely punished, maybe executed, if he had been caught before he reached the limit of the Chinese controlled territory. His journey took about 18 years. He crossed scorching deserts, icy mountains, and vast plains. In India he sometimes travelled through tick forest. In the course of his travels he faced illness and poverty. He got lost in deserts, set upon by bandits (on five separate occasions), locked-up by local rulers and once nearly executed. Many of his travelling companions were killed by an avalanche in the "heavenly mountains" between north-west China and Kyrgystan. It was something of a miracle that he survived his travels and made it back to China.

Although other explorers over the course of history have shown bravery and determination (eg. Shakleton), Hsuan Tsang's story is especially impressive because he undertook the journey in order to serve the Dharma - to introduce more of the riches of Indian Buddhism to China. He wanted to learn from Indian sages and bring back copies of the sacred texts.

Paintings of Hsuan Tsang on his way back to China sometimes depict him in the guise of a pilgrim, with a staff in his hand, and his body bent forward.

Hsuan Tsang was also a great scholar. This helped him to discuss the Dharma and teach it, both in China and during his travels. His scholarship enabled him to participate wholeheartedly in life at Nalanda University in India, and subsequently back in China to undertake his great work of translating sacred texts from Sanskrit into Chinese.

Many points of interest emerge from his travels,

which took place before the waves of Islamic hordes invaded that part of the world and destroyed Buddhist institutions and murdered monks. At the time of Hsuan Tsang's travels:

- 1 there was a great deal of religious activity, but less so than in previous centuries
- 2 practitioners of the different forms of Buddhism sometimes lived alongside one another
- 3 the worship of relics, and the practice of philosophical debate, were well established.

##### His travels

Hsüan Tsang wrote an account of his epic journey from China to central Asia and India, which took place between 629-645 ce. This account, known as "The Western World", is in twelve volumes. [It is not to be confused with the popular Chinese fiction *Monkey King* featuring the adventures of the mythical monkey god.]

When the Emperor refused Hsüan Tsang's application to leave China Hsuan Tsang decided to go anyway, making the first part of the journey in secret. He was twenty-seven years old when he left. He worked his way to the end of the Great Wall near Dunhuang. There he took the northern branch of the Silk Route passing through Yumen Guan (Jade Gate Pass). After crossing the Gobi desert he arrived at Hami. There he was offered the position of chief priest for the country, but Hsüan Tsang declined. When it was clear that Hsuan Tsang would not stay, the ruler did what he could to help him reach India. He gave him many rolls of silk, money, letters of introduction to neighbouring rulers and an escort. (Unfortunately this generous ruler, who so helped Hsuan Tsang, was killed soon after in a coup.)

Hsuan Tsang travelled on to Kucha, an oasis city on the edge of the desert, famous for its excellent horses. The ground was rich in minerals and its soil was suitable for agriculture. It had one hundred monasteries with over five thousand monks of the Sarvastivadin form of Hinayana Buddhism. All the monasteries had highly adorned images of the Buddha, which were paraded on special occasions in a procession of carriages. After staying for two months he continued his journey. Crossing the snowy Tian Shan mountains he reached the shores of lake Issyk Kul in Kyrgyzstan. This mountain lake, 5,200 feet above sea level, is the second largest in the world.

He then proceeded north-west along the fertile valley of the Chu river passing the Kyrgyz lake-land area known as the "Thousand springs". Moving westward, he passed the Tartar town of Taras and arrived at Tashkent in Eastern Uzbekistan, which was then under the control of the Huns (ie. eastern Turks). The next stop was Samarkand, a very populous country located at the junction of the trade routes between China and India.

Moving south from Samarkand, Hsuan Tsang entered the mountains. After climbing the steep and precipitous road, he arrived at a mountain pass bordered on both sides by very high rocky walls with an iron colour. Here double wooden doors had been erected and many bells were fixed on them. The doors were strengthened with iron and were impregnable. The pass was called Iron Gate.

He crossed the Oxus river near Termez, and arrived at Kunduz in Afghanistan. After some spending some time there, he proceeded with a few monks to Balkh, formerly the capital of the Bactrian kingdom of Milinda. Balkh had about a hundred monasteries and three thousand monks.

After paying reverence to the sacred relics at Balkh, he made the difficult and dangerous journey across the Hindu Kush mountains to Bamiyan. Here the people worshipped the Three Jewels (ie. the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) but still maintained about a hundred tutelary deities, which the merchants sought to propitiate when business was bad. There were ten monasteries, with about a thousand monks of the Lokuttaravadin school of Hinayana Buddhism.

Hsüan Tsang saw the two colossal Buddha images, about 55 and 35 metres tall, carved out of a mountain-side in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, and mistook the smaller one to be bronze due to its gilded surface. He also saw a large reclining Buddha image and paid reverence to some tooth relics. [Note: In 2001 the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group controlling Afghanistan at the time, destroyed the ancient Buddha images, despite worldwide protest.]

Moving eastward, Hsüan Tsang entered the passes of the Hindu Kush and arrived at the country of Kapisa. It had one about hundred monasteries with six thousand Mahayana monks, and a monastery with three hundred Hinayana monks. There were also some ten Deva temples

with about a thousand Hindu ascetics of various sects, such as naked ascetics, those who covered their bodies with ashes, and those who wore chaplets of bones on their heads. Every year, the king would make a silver image of the Buddha and offer alms to the poor.

After spending the summer of 630ce in the area, Hsüan Tsang went on to Gandhara area by the Khyber Pass. [This area (in the region around the border of modern day Pakistan and Afghanistan) was once a great centre for Buddhist culture and practice. The Yogacara form of Buddhism - that Hsuan Tsang particularly admired - was founded there by Vasubhandu and Asanga. The earliest surviving Buddhist manuscripts also come from this area.]

To his great disappointment Hsuan Tsang found Gandharan the towns and villages almost deserted. There were many monasteries in ruins, overgrown with wild shrubs and empty. The stupas were mostly broken down. At the capital, Purushapura (Peshawar) there was only one monastery with fifty (Mahayana) monks. The decline was largely attributed to devastation by the "white Huns" a nomadic Turk-Mongol people of the Eurasian steppes when they passed through two centuries before. Most of the local inhabitants were no longer Buddhist.

Travelling north, he arrived at Udyana. This had been a flourishing centre of Buddhism during the time of Fa Hsien's visit (a Chinese monk traveller who had gone to India some three centuries earlier in search of monastic training). But now all of its monasteries lay waste and desolate. Formerly, there were some eighteen thousand monks, but now there were very few. He continued his journey, travelling through Kashmir, and eventually reaching ed the river Ganges.

He went to Kosambi to visit a building that the Buddha used to stay in. He also visited many other places associated with the life of the Buddha.

He was in Nalanda around 635 AD and enrolled at the famous Nalanda University; India's premier Buddhist seat of learning. Admission was based on learning. Only twenty to thirty percent of candidates passed. Hsüan Tsang already had a solid grounding of scholarship, and gained admission to the university. There he studied Yogacara philosophy under the famous

teacher Silabhadra. Studying under Silabhadra was an important aspect of Hsuan Tsang's time in India. He was deeply grateful for this opportunity. At Nalanda Hsuan Tsang also studied Hindu philosophy and mastered the Sanskrit language.

In 638ce he tried to visit Sri Lanka to study the Theravada form of Hinayana Buddhism. Continuing south through a wild forest district, he arrived at Kanchipuram (near Madras), where there were about a hundred monasteries with ten thousand Mahayanist monks. He learned that Sri Lanka was in a state of great upheaval and famine following the death of its ruler, and so gave up the idea of going to Sri Lanka.

Back at Nalanda university Hsuan Tsang continued his study of the Mahayana teachings and participated in philosophical debates. After acquiring an encyclopaedic learning, he felt the time had come to start the difficult and dangerous return trip to China. On the return trip he had many scripture and statues, which meant he needed a sizeable party and horses to accompany him.

Before he started his return journey the powerful king Harsha insisted that Hsuan Tsang visit him at his capital at Kanauj. When the king heard that Hsuan Tsang had arrived in the early evening, he eagerly went to greet him. He proceeded with several thousand soldiers who carried candles and marched to the beat of two hundred drums. When the king met Hsuan Tsang he bent down and touched his feet.

King Harsha arranged a great debate, at which the "master from China" would speak first, followed by any Brahmin priests and Theravada monks who might wish to challenge him. The great debate, which was to take place on the banks of the Ganges, was opened with a royal procession. There were kings of twenty vassal states, Buddhist monks and Brahmans. During the procession most dignitaries were on elephants. There were chanting monks and musicians beating drums. A thousand monks came from Nalanda university.

Hsuan Tsang was ready for the challenge. He was asked to speak first, and for five days he discoursed on Mahayana Buddhism. Interruption was forbidden, but when he finished he expected to be questioned and challenged. Not a single opponent dared to come forward.

Hsuan Tsang's mastery of the various forms of Buddhism, as well as Brahmanism, and his very presence had deeply impressed everybody. King Harsha declared him the winner and invited Hsuan Tsang to ride around the city on a large highly decorated elephant announcing his victory. Hsuan Tsang declined to do this - not being one to get infatuated by praise and adulation.

On the last day of the "great debate", the Brahmans tried to sabotage the assembly by setting fire to a tall tower that carried a life size golden image of the Buddha, and attempting to assassinate the king in the resulting confusion. But the attempt on Harsha's life was foiled.

Soon after Hsuan Tsang started his return journey to China. To ensure his safe passage to the border, king Harsha provided him with a military escort. He returned to China by an alternative route, and arrived in the capital, Chang'an, having heard that the Emperor had forgiven him for his unlawful departure and was enthusiastic to meet him.

#### **Back in China**

On twenty-two horses, Hsuan Tsang had brought back with him:

1. One hundred and fifteen grains of Buddha relics.
2. Six statues of the Buddha.
3. One hundred and twenty-four Mahayana works or sutras.
4. Six hundred and fifty-seven other scriptures.

On his return to China he was received with great honour by officials and monks, and appeared before Emperor Taizong a few days later. He eventually persuaded the Emperor to provide a team of people to translate and check the texts that he had brought back from India. People were also required to transcribe them, as printing was still 200 years in the future.

Over time Hsuan Tsang became a frequent companion of the Emperor (and the Emperors who followed him). Hsuan Tsang persuaded them to support Buddhism throughout the empire. This became the golden age for Buddhism in China (late Tang). It flourished in a way that it never did before or after. It was also a period of extraordinary cultural achievement in Chinese history.

Over the remaining 19 years of Hsuan Tsang's

life he translated the Sanskrit works he had brought back, aided by a team of translators. He also taught the Dharma. He died in 664 AD at the age of sixty-two.

**Epilogue: Fame in contemporary India**

Hsuan Tsang is not just a well known figure in Chinese Buddhism. He is also well known in modern day India, especially among historians. Over the centuries all the well known Buddhist sites had been covered-over, and their significance completely forgotten. Indian people were only vaguely aware of the Buddhist aspect of their history. In the nineteenth century the British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham used the account of Hsuan Tsang's travels, *The Western World*, along with the account Fa Xiang's travels three centuries earlier (*Record of Buddhist Countries*) to identify and uncover the famous sites associated with India's Buddhist past. This included Nalanda University and the places associated with the Buddha's life. Hsuan Tsang's and Fa Xian's travel writings were meticulous and detailed. By contrast, Indian people have generally not record historical information in a factual way (except perhaps in modern times). In this way Hsuan Tsang indirectly helped to revive a sense of India's Buddhist history.