

KANISHKA – PATRON OF BUDDHISM

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Annotation: This article discusses the contribution of King Kanishka to the spread of Buddhism during his reign in the Kushan Empire. Kanishka succeeded in promoting Buddhism not only in his own territory but also as the official religion throughout Central Asia and China. His convening of the Buddhist Council, the official recognition of Mahayana Buddhism, as well as the systematization and dissemination of the teachings of Buddha, ensured Buddhism's transformation into a global religious movement. Kanishka's religious policy also had a significant impact on the development of Buddhist art and culture, particularly influencing scholarly activities in Termez and other central regions. Great authors such as Ashvagosa, who lived in his court, made substantial contributions to promoting Buddhism through literature, art, and philosophy. Under Kanishka's patronage, the global spread and formation of Buddhism enriched it with new philosophical concepts as a religion.

Keywords: Kanishka I, Kushan Empire, Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhist Council, Buddha's teachings, Ashvagosa, Ancient Termez, Eastern culture, Buddhist art, Central Asia, India, China, Buddhist literature, religious policy, Buddhist philosophy, cultural relations.

Introduction

Today, the Central Asian region is likely the only area in the world that has witnessed the rise and spread of the three largest religions throughout its history. Indeed, looking at the history of our land, it is clear that representatives of Islam, Christianity, and even Buddhism have regarded this region as their home and have lived here for centuries. This is why the people of this region are still recognized as tolerant and multi-ethnic. The spread of the Orthodox faith in the 19th century due to the Russian invasion is well known, and the widespread adoption of Islam occurred in the early Middle Ages as a result of the efforts of the Arab military leader Qutayba ibn Muslim, becoming deeply rooted in the blood of our ancestors. But what about Buddhism? Its history is intriguing, and to explore it, we must trace it back to the period of the first empire established in our territory—the Kushan Empire. The followers of Buddhism owe their gratitude to our ancestors for the extensive spread and development of the religion, especially because the Kushan kings, particularly under Kanishka's leadership, played a key role in its dissemination across Asia, reaching as far as China.

Main body

The Kushan period holds a significant place not only in the history of the peoples of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and China but also in the development of world culture. During this period, the political unification of local peoples with diverse ethnicities, languages, and religions was especially important. As a result of the integration of various cultures, a distinctive new culture emerged and developed in the region. This, in turn, laid the foundation for the development of subsequent cultures in later centuries. Furthermore, the Kushan period marked the conclusion of the previous stages of development for the peoples of Central and South Asia. From this point on, the interaction between Eastern and Western cultures entered a new historical phase.

According to the chronicles, after the Yuehchi tribes conquered Bactria, more than a century later, the ruler of the Guishuan, Kadphises, defeated the remaining four Yuehchi rulers and declared himself the Kushan ruler. Kanishka, a descendant of Kadphises, is from the first Guishuan-Kushan lineage, belonging to the Geray dynasty. Kanishka I ruled from 127 to 151 CE, during which the Kushan Empire expanded, including the conquest of northern India, and as a result, Buddhism spread to Central Asia. Kanishka not only supported Buddhism but was also the first Kushan ruler to embrace the Buddhist faith. It was following this event that the religion began to spread widely among the population, and many Buddhist temples were constructed.

During this period, Buddhism not only developed significantly in India but also in Central Asia. It spread towards China through trade routes crossing the Hindu Kush mountains. It was during this period that major Buddhist monuments, such as those in Bamiyan, Surkhetal, and Ajina-Tepe in Tajikistan, were built, which proves the considerable development of Buddhism in this era.

Research shows that in Ancient Termez, Buddhist missionaries studied near temples. They had perfected their understanding of the Buddha's teachings here. Interestingly, they were able to compete with Indian priests from the homeland of Buddhism. According to written sources, a famous priest named Dharmamitra emerged from Termez. Another missionary, Ghoshaka, participated in the Buddhist council organized by the great Kushan king Kanishka in Peshawar. The spread of one of the Buddhist sects, the Vibhajyavada, in Bactria is linked to Ghoshaka. Additionally, he was the author of a major work dedicated to Buddhism, known as the "Abhidhammapitaka". Research in Qora-Tepe and Fayoz-Tepe has provided valuable information not only about the architectural structures related to Buddhism but also about the ways Buddhism spread in Central Asia, particularly in Bactria. It has also enabled discussions on the art influenced by Buddhist ideas, the Bactrian language, and writings. It is possible that the aforementioned Termez priests, Dharmamitra and Ghoshaka, received their education at the Fayoz-Tepe monastery.

Despite the eclectic approach of Kanishka and his successors, who sought to harmonize various religious and philosophical currents, the great Kushan ruler was known for his benevolence towards Buddhism. His patronage of the Fourth Buddhist Council is already recorded in history. A source found in the Kharosthi script at Shah-ji-Ki-Dheri mentions the construction of a great stupa associated with Kanishka's name. Shah-ji-Ki-Dheri, one of the ancient Buddhist monuments near Peshawar, is the site of a massive stupa built by the Kushan emperor Kanishka in the second century CE. This stupa was one of the tallest buildings of its time, with ancient sources indicating its height as 400 feet (approximately 122 meters). It was here that a famous relic box was found, which had been a gift from Emperor Kanishka to the monastery in Kanishkapura. During his reign, the Buddhist Council prepared commentaries on canonical texts. One of these, the "Mahavibhasha", was jointly composed by Parshva and Vasumitra.

In 1908-1909, an excavation led by American archaeologist D.B. Spooner uncovered a unique relic known as the "Kanishka Casket" in the central part of a stupa at this site. Made of copper and covered with gold, it contained the skeletal remains of the Buddha. The casket also bore an inscription in Kharosthi script mentioning Kanishka's name, confirming that the stupa was indeed built by him.

The Fourth Buddhist Council, held during the reign of Kanishka, took place around 147-150 CE. The main goal of the council was to systematize Buddhist teachings, formalize the new Mahayana Buddhism, and transcribe the sacred texts in Sanskrit. This council marked a significant turning point for Mahayana Buddhism. In this school of thought, Buddha was increasingly seen not only as a historical figure but as a cosmic being, a Bodhisattva who could provide salvation to all beings. Supported by Kanishka, this council played a major role in spreading Buddhism beyond the borders of India. During this period, Buddhism began to spread to Central Asia, China, and other East Asian countries. Buddhist monks were sent on diplomatic missions to other nations. After this council, Buddhism was elevated to the status of a state

religion. The council also systematized the core texts of Mahayana Buddhism, initiating an important phase in the history of Buddhism. It brought Buddha's teachings to a new philosophical and cosmological level, profoundly impacting the development of Eastern civilizations.

Ashvagosa was the scholarly and literary architect of the Buddhist reforms during Kanishka's reign. He theoretically strengthened the emperor's religious policies and shaped the core ideas of Mahayana Buddhism. Kanishka patronized Ashvagosa, inviting him to the court and overseeing the work of the council. It is believed that Ashvagosa lived and served at the emperor's court, where he was Kanishka's official poet and advisor. This information was recorded by Chinese Buddhist travelers such as Faxian and Xuanzang. Kanishka supported Ashvagosa in promoting Buddhism through literature, art, and philosophy. He is thought to have written the "Buddhacharita", a work about Buddha's life, at Kanishka's court. Along with Kanishka, Ashvagosa contributed significantly to establishing and promoting Mahayana Buddhism as the official religious doctrine of the empire. This school focused on the divinity of Buddha and the idea that all beings could attain salvation. Ashvagosa's works, particularly the "Buddhacharita", were spread to China and Central Asia under Kanishka's patronage, playing a vital role in transforming Buddhism into a transnational religious movement.

Conclusion

Kanishka I not only became a powerful ruler of his time but also left an indelible mark on history as a great figure who promoted religious tolerance and the global spread of Buddhism. During his reign, Buddhism spread through Central Asia to China and even to East Asia, paving the way for it to become one of the world's major religions. Kanishka's patronage of the Buddhist Council, the construction of grand stupas, and his attention to Buddhist literature and art played a decisive role in the development of the religion. Particularly through his support of scholars like Ashvagosa, the philosophy of Buddhism was theoretically grounded and enriched in literary terms. Thus, Kanishka holds a unique place in the history of humanity not only as an emperor but also as a great patron of Buddhism.

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