

The Historical and Cultural Role of Buddhist Centers and Missionaries in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Siddhartha Gautama, known as Buddha, was the founder of Buddhism. In Sanskrit, he is referred to as Gautama, and in Pali, as Gotama. Born into an aristocratic family of the Shakya clan in the Kapilavastu region now known as Lumbini, Nepal he was raised in luxury by his father, King Suddhodana, to shield him from life's hardships. However, the young prince's contemplation led him to renounce his privileged life, eventually sparking a philosophical movement that gained global recognition. Afghanistan, due to its proximity to India, has historically been influenced by cultural and religious exchanges. One of the most profound influences was the spread of Buddhism, which flourished in Afghanistan from the mid-3rd century BCE, particularly during the Kushan era. Emperor Ashoka, a key figure in the propagation of Buddhism, formally abandoned violence in the 11th year of his reign (259 BCE) and actively promoted Buddhist teachings in Afghanistan, extending as far as the Arghandab region. Unlike state-imposed religions, Buddhism was adopted organically by the local population due to its social and philosophical appeal. The magnificent Buddhist monasteries in Hadda, Bamiyan, Kapisa, Bagram, Kabul, and the Gandhara region stand as lasting evidence of its deep roots in Afghanistan. This study utilizes a historical research approach to analyze the transmission and expansion of Buddhism in Afghanistan. It explores the establishment of Buddhist centers and their cultural and historical significance, shedding light on Afghanistan's rich Buddhist heritage and its impact on the broader historical and cultural landscape.

Keywords: Afghanistan's Buddhist Heritage, Bamiyan Buddha Statues, Buddhist Centers in Afghanistan, Buddhist Religious Missionaries, Cultural Influence of Buddhism, Gandhara and Kushan Buddhism, Silk Road and Buddhism

Introduction:

Scholars believe that, based on its historical background, our country has long been a cradle of diverse cultures and civilizations. Throughout history, prosperous civilizations have flourished here, leaving behind valuable memories and profound thoughts of the ancient world, buried in

the land. These reflections are manifested in cultural and artistic treasures, including magnificent statues, golden and metallic coins, grand monuments, and ancient buildings. The architecture and fine arts of these relics were exceptional for their time, astonishing enlightened

minds. Historians argue that Afghanistan has preserved and recorded the history of human civilization, blending Eastern and Western influences. The American scholar Benjamin Rowland described Afghanistan as a breathtakingly beautiful country, praising its artistic heritage and unspoiled craftsmanship. He depicted its landscapes as surreal and awe-inspiring, particularly highlighting the quiet deserts of Kandahar, surrounded by towering mountains that create a mesmerizing moonlit view. This description aligns with the country's historical richness, which has witnessed grand and glorious periods. Afghanistan's historical achievements, particularly its artistic remains, reflect influences from Greek, Roman, Buddhist, Hindu, and above all, Islamic cultures. Many of these artifacts are now preserved in the National Museum of Afghanistan.

Positioned at the heart of Asia, Afghanistan has always served as a bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations. One such example is its role in the spread of Buddhism. This religious tradition took root in Afghanistan, flourished between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, and expanded both eastward and westward. This era coincided with the powerful reign of the Kushan Empire, particularly under Kanishka the Great, during which Afghanistan saw a significant cultural and religious boom. Religion held a special place in the lives of people, leading them to construct numerous temples and sacred sites for worship. These religious and cultural structures enriched Afghanistan's historical and spiritual heritage, leaving a legacy that remains a source of national pride today.

Literature Review:

Afghanistan, as a crossroads of civilizations, played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and beyond. Buddhist centers and missionaries significantly contributed to the cultural and intellectual development of the region. This literature review examines the historical and cultural role of Buddhist institutions and preachers in Afghanistan, focusing on their influence on art, education, and intercultural

exchange. Several studies highlight the role of Afghanistan in the expansion of Buddhism during the Kushan Empire (1st–3rd centuries CE). The Kushans, particularly under Emperor Kanishka, actively supported Buddhist institutions, leading to the construction of prominent monasteries and stupas (Falk, 2008, p. 112). Archaeological evidence from sites such as Mes Aynak and Hadda suggests that Buddhist monks and scholars traveled along the Silk Road, fostering religious and philosophical exchanges with regions as far as China and Persia (Behrendt, 2007, pp. 45–47).

Buddhist centers in Afghanistan, such as those in Bamiyan and Balkh, served as major hubs of learning, attracting scholars from across Asia. These institutions contributed to the development of Mahayana Buddhism and played a pivotal role in the translation and preservation of Buddhist scriptures (Ray, 2017, pp. 89–91). Bamiyan, in particular, was a renowned center where Buddhist teachings were codified, and artistic expressions flourished, as seen in the massive rock-cut Buddha statues that once dominated the valley (Rowland, 1960, p. 134). Buddhist missionaries from Afghanistan played a crucial role in transmitting Buddhist doctrines to China and Central Asia. Scholars such as Xuanzang and Faxian recorded the presence of flourishing monastic communities in Afghanistan during their travels (Willemen, 2009, pp. 156–158). The artistic and philosophical exchanges between Afghanistan and other regions led to the development of Gandhara art, which blended Greek, Persian, and Indian styles, influencing Buddhist iconography throughout Asia (Behrendt, 2007, p. 62).

The decline of Buddhism in Afghanistan was a gradual process influenced by the rise of Hinduism and later Islam. By the 10th century, most Buddhist institutions had disappeared due to sociopolitical transformations and invasions (Falk, 2008, p. 176). However, remnants of Buddhist heritage, such as the Bamiyan Buddhas and various stupas, continue to provide insight into the region's historical religious diversity. The Buddhist centers and missionaries of Afghanistan

played a fundamental role in shaping the cultural and intellectual landscape of the region. Their contributions to art, philosophy, and education extended far beyond Afghanistan's borders, leaving a lasting impact on global Buddhist traditions. Despite the eventual decline of Buddhism in Afghanistan, its historical significance remains evident through archaeological discoveries and historical texts.

Origin and Birthplace of Buddhism:

The stories and poems about the founder of this religion narrate fascinating accounts. Siddhartha Gautama, known as Buddha, was the founder of Buddhism, one of the world's greatest religions. Over time, Buddhism developed into a vast culture encompassing industries, engineering arts, sculpture, and various literary works in languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and several others. Buddhism originated in the late 500s BCE from the teachings of Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as Gautama Buddha, meaning "the Enlightened One." Buddhists celebrate and honor Buddha as an enlightened human rather than as a god or a divine incarnation. The primary source of faith and practice for Buddhists is Dharma (Buddha's teachings) (DCU, p.1) (Sunil K, 2019, p.1).

Some Indologists consider Buddha a mythical figure, while others acknowledge his historical existence but argue that so many legends have surrounded him that separating his real identity from mythical embellishments is challenging. A third perspective suggests that, like Mahavira, Buddha was a prince born into the warrior caste (Kshatriya). Discontent with his circumstances, he abandoned his royal life and ventured into the wilderness. His original name was Gautama in Sanskrit and Gotama in Pali. The word "Buddhism" is derived from Buddha, meaning "awakened" or "enlightened." Buddha was born in either 563/562 BCE or, according to another account, 523 BCE in the territory of the Sakyas in Kapilavastu, approximately 100 miles north of Benares (Varanasi) or in a border town of Nepal now known as Lumbini. His father, Suddhodana, was the king of the Sakya clan and belonged to

the Gautama lineage. His mother was Queen Maya (Ebrahimi, 1363, p.3; Razi, 1342, pp.1055-1056; Kohzad, 1397, p.441; Nas John, 1354, p.122) (Ruchi, 2015, p.2).

Buddha was born into the Kshatriya family, a caste of warriors and religious leaders. His mother, Queen Maya, had a dream before his birth in which a beautiful, silver-white elephant entered her womb through her side. When she consulted Hindu Brahmin priests about the dream, they interpreted it as a sign that the child would either become a great king or a Buddha (a great enlightened being). Some also believed he would be either a prophet or a great emperor (Ebrahimi, 1363, p.4). After Buddha's birth in Lumbini, a scholar of that time named Asita, who served as a religious and spiritual advisor to King Suddhodana, visited the newborn child. Upon seeing the auspicious marks on the infant's body, he predicted that the child would become a Buddha. However, being old and weak, Asita was saddened that he would not live long enough to witness the child's enlightenment. He began to weep, which alarmed Suddhodana, who feared that his son might be in danger. The advisor reassured him, explaining that he was grieving only because he would not be able to see the boy's future greatness. In response, both the king and his religious advisor bowed in respect to the child (Ebrahimi, 1363, p.5; Razi, 1342, p.1057; Nas John, 1354, p.123) (Ruchi, 2015, p.2).

On the fifth day of his birth, a naming ceremony was held, attended by 180 Brahmins, including eight wise and distinguished ones who specialized in interpreting physical signs. These Brahmins predicted that if the boy remained in the palace, he would become a universal ruler, but if he left, he would certainly become a Buddha. The child was given the name "Siddhartha," meaning "one whose purpose has been fulfilled." The word "Buddha" means "wise," "knowledgeable," and "enlightened" (Ebrahimi, 1363, p.5; Razi, 1342, p.1057; Nas John, 1354, p.123) (Ruchi, 2015, p.2). On the seventh day of his life, his mother passed away. He was then raised by his aunt, Mahaprajapati Gautami, who nursed and nurtured

him (Ebrahimi, 1363, p.6; Razi, 1342, p.1056). To keep the young prince content, his father surrounded him with luxury. At the age of sixteen, Siddhodana built three palaces for him—one for winter, one for summer, and another for the rainy season. Siddhartha lived in grandeur, indulging in royal pleasures (Hume, 1369, p.109). At this age, Siddhartha married his cousin, Princess Yasodhara, who was also sixteen. Despite his father's efforts to make him enjoy the luxurious life of the palace, Siddhartha was indifferent to such pleasures. He was absorbed in deeper thoughts that set him apart from his surroundings (Ebrahimi, 1363, p.8). At the age of 23, Siddhartha decided to leave the palace. During his journeys, he encountered an old, bent man and learned that old age was inevitable. He then saw a sick person and realized that health was transient.

Later, he came across a dead body and understood that life ultimately ends in death and decay (Hume, 1369, p.110).

At 29, the transient nature of existence deeply struck him. Contemplating the impermanence of worldly pleasures, he concluded that he must seek a truth beyond decay and mortality. One night, he left behind his newborn son, his wife, and his palace. He shaved his head, donned the robes of an ascetic, and set out in search of enlightenment. For six years, he practiced severe austerities in the eastern regions of India. Eventually, while meditating under a fig tree, suddenly, the light of wisdom and the glow of truth illuminated his heart. He attained supreme knowledge and enlightenment, realizing the ultimate truth (Usmani, 1385, p.11; Kohzad, 1397, p.442) (Ruchi, p.2).



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Transmission of Buddhism in Afghanistan:

Ashoka, one of the most powerful kings, renounced oppression in the eleventh year of his reign (259 BCE) after the tragic war of Kalinga. By embracing Buddhism, he became one of India's spiritual rulers. Ashoka was the son of Bindusara and the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya. His other name, Piyadasi, appears in some of his moral inscriptions, some of which have also been discovered in our country

(Ebrahimi, 1393, p. 35). during the Mauryan dynasty in India, Ashoka maintained relations with the Greco-Bactrian dynasty in northern Afghanistan. A fierce war broke out between the rulers of Bactria, Seleucus, and Chandragupta, Ashoka's grandfather, in 305 BCE, resulting in the conquest of southwestern Afghanistan by the Mauryans of India. Shocked by the immense bloodshed at Kalinga, Ashoka transformed from a political ruler into a spiritual sovereign, deeply

influenced by Buddhism. Determined to spread Buddhism westward, he sent monks and spiritual leaders as missionaries, leading to the dissemination of the faith across various regions of Afghanistan, reaching as far as the Arghandab Valley. The Buddhist monasteries and the Greco-Buddhist art of Afghanistan became renowned. During the reign of the great Kushans, Buddhism once again spread from Afghanistan to both the east and west, reaching newly conquered Kushan territories, including the Arghandab Valley (Paiman, 1384, p. 14).

It is well known that after the defeat of Seleucus Nicator by Chandragupta Maurya around 305 BCE, the region from Gandhara to Arachosia (Kabul to Kandahar) was conquered by the Mauryans. Ashoka made significant efforts to propagate Buddhism in these conquered lands, dispatching missionaries such as Majjhantika, Dharmarakshita, and Maharakshita to the Kabul Valley and the Arghandab region. Consequently, from the mid-third century BCE onwards, Buddhism spread rapidly across Afghanistan, from the east to Kapisa and Kabul, extending north to Balkh and southwest to the Arghandab region, even during Ashoka's lifetime in the mid-third century BCE (Khozad, 1346, p. 170). due to Ashoka's efforts, his reign is considered a moral and spiritual era. During the first half of the third century BCE, Buddhism spread westward from the Indus into Afghan territory, remaining a dominant faith for over a thousand years. It persisted as an independent religion in southern and central Afghanistan until the expansion of Islam into the region and Central Asia. However, in western Afghanistan, Zoroastrianism continued to exist with its distinct traditions (Ebrahimi, 1363, p. 36).

The Chinese traveler Xuanzang, who passed through Kapisa and Nangarhar in the early seventh century CE, attributed several stupas in Bagram, Jalalabad, and Hadda to Ashoka. Initially, this claim seemed premature, as there was typically a long period between missionary activities and the construction of stupas and monasteries. However, the recent discovery of

Ashoka's edict near ancient Kandahar and another fragment found 25–30 years ago in Darunta (near Jalalabad) suggest that Buddhism spread more rapidly than previously believed. Some stupas and monasteries in Nangarhar and Kapisa were built during Ashoka's reign in the mid-third century BCE, with their legacy still remembered when the Chinese traveler passed through in the seventh century CE (Khozad, 1346, p. 177).

Ashoka ordered his decrees and moral teachings to be inscribed on stone pillars and placed at prominent locations, such as city gates and public spaces, ensuring widespread awareness. Evidence of this can be found in Afghanistan at two locations: one is a triangular stone fragment, 10 inches long, discovered in Darunta (between Jalalabad and Laghman) and preserved in the Kabul Museum. The other, a relatively large inscription in Aramaic and Greek, was discovered at the foot of the Forty Steps (Chilzina) in ancient Kandahar on a small hill in the Dand district. This inscription, currently housed in a private residence in Kandahar, contains moral teachings urging people to follow Buddhist principles, practice non-violence, and cultivate honesty and respect for others (Paiman, 1384, p. 16). These two inscriptions in Nangarhar and Kandahar confirm that Ashoka promoted ethical conduct, urging people to avoid harming others, refrain from hunting birds and fish, and practice kindness. This suggests Ashoka's inclination towards asceticism (Ebrahimi, 1363, p. 37). The dispatch of Buddhist missionaries by Ashoka to southern India and western countries, including ancient Afghanistan, was decided at a grand religious council held in Pataliputra (present-day Patna, Bihar, India) around 258–259 BCE. Some missionaries were sent to Afghanistan. Ashoka's Buddhist missionaries did not stop in Afghanistan; they continued westward, reaching the Greek rulers of North Africa in Egypt. Based on the names of rulers mentioned in Ashoka's fifth edict, it is evident that Buddhist missionaries carried their message to the eastern Mediterranean, including Greece, Egypt, and Syria. However, Buddhism did not gain a foothold in western Asia beyond Afghanistan. Even within Afghanistan, Buddhism

remained limited to the eastern half, from Kandahar to Balkh, while Zoroastrianism persisted in the western regions (Khozad, 1346, p. 172).

Ashoka's inscriptions do not mention Diodotus, the founder of the Greco-Bactrian dynasty, indicating that Bactria had not yet gained independence at the time. It is now clear that Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries westward around 258 BCE, while Diodotus declared Bactrian independence around 250 BCE. This means that Buddhist missionaries had been active in eastern and southwestern Afghanistan, from Gandhara to the Arghandab region, for nearly eight years before Bactria became independent. The most significant outcome of Mauryan conquests in parts of Afghanistan was the establishment and expansion of Buddhism. Although Mauryan political control lasted only about 50 years, Buddhism took root, spread widely, and endured for over a thousand years. By the late first and second centuries CE, Afghanistan had become one of the major centers of Buddhism, sending missionaries as far as Kashgar and the central mountains of Afghanistan. Buddhism remained prominent in the region until the early ninth century CE (Khozad, 1346, p. 173).

The Spread of Buddhism in Afghanistan:

The spread of Buddhism began around the mid-third century BCE from the Sindh region toward Bactria. This expansion was not officially promoted by the government but rather embraced by the people due to the noble principles of Buddhism and its positive social impact. It is evident that Buddhism gained significant traction during the mid-third century BCE. However, despite the widespread interest in Buddhism, the Zoroastrian faith, including followers of the Aryan Anahita and the Bactrian Mithra, maintained their spiritual status (Ebrahimi, 1363, p. 38). Due to its central location in Asia, Afghanistan has always been a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures. The fusion of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism is evident in the artistic heritage of ancient Ariana (Afghanistan), where the

integration of Greco-Bactrian art with Buddhist texts gave rise to the Greco-Buddhist artistic movement. This artistic evolution marked a cultural and artistic revolution in ancient Ariana (Hume, 1369, p. 108).

The Greco-Buddhist artistic school laid the foundation for Asian art according to the principles of "Yasp," which continued to develop over time. Today, scientific excavations are ongoing across ancient Ariana (Afghanistan) to further highlight this artistic movement (Ebrahimi, 1363, p. 38). There is no doubt that Buddhism emerged in India during the 6th century BCE. During the reign of the Mauryan dynasty, particularly under Emperor Ashoka, Buddhist missionaries spread the religion to southern Afghanistan, reaching as far as the Arghandab region. The discovery of Ashoka's inscriptions near Chehel Zina confirms that Buddhism had been present in Afghanistan for over a thousand years since Ashoka's era. Over time, Afghanistan became one of the most significant and active centers of Buddhism, especially during the reign of the great Kushan kings (Khozad, 1346, p. 232). During this period, Afghanistan was not only a major center of Buddhism but also a prominent hub of industry and trade. This is evident from the discovery of ancient artifacts, including magnificent golden statues, gold and silver coins, and other unparalleled relics. These findings provide valuable insights into the cultural, artistic, literary, and economic significance of that era. Travelers such as Fa-Hsien and Xuanzang have extensively documented the prosperity, grandeur, and artistic richness of sites like Hadda, Bagram, and Balkh. In ancient times, the lush and mountainous lands of Ariana (Afghanistan) were among the most advanced regions in the world. Unfortunately, these invaluable cultural, economic, scientific, and artistic treasures, created through the hard work and ingenuity of skilled Afghan artists, were ultimately destroyed due to foreign invasions and aggression (Jafari, 1388, p. 16).

If we explore historical records on this topic, we come across numerous names of Buddhist

scholars and monks from Kandahar, Kabul, and Balkh. These scholars, in groups of hundreds and even thousands, dedicated their efforts to spreading Buddhism beyond Afghanistan into regions such as Xinjiang, Chinese Turkestan, and China itself. The Buddhist scholars of Gandhara and Kapisa were not only engaged in oral propagation but also actively contributed to the construction of temples. Moreover, they played a

significant role in translating Buddhist texts and disseminating them in China, as attested by various Chinese historical sources. Eventually, the influence of Buddhist missionaries in China reached such an extent that Emperor Cheng of China officially recognized Buddhism in 335 BCE and issued a decree in its favor (Kohzad, 1346, p. 234).

Table of Buddhist Sites in Afghanistan

No.	Buddhist Site Name	Location	Historical Period	Key Features
1	Tepe Sardar	Ghazni	Kushan	Contains a temple and stupa, Buddhist stucco carvings, and statues
2	Tepe Maranjan	Kabul	Kushan	Includes a stupa, wall paintings, stone and ceramic artifacts
3	Tepe Narenj	Kabul	Kushan	A complex of Buddhist temples, statues, and architectural remains
4	Bamiyan	Bamiyan	Kushan-Hephthalite	Large Buddha statues, wall paintings, monastic caves
5	Fundukistan	Parwan	Kushan	Wall paintings, temples, and Buddhist stucco artworks
6	Mes Aynak	Logar	Kushan	Buddhist monastery, stupas, statues, and architectural remains
7	Shortugai	Takhar	Kushan	A Buddhist center in northern Afghanistan, with architectural and ceramic artifacts
8	Haqqani Qala	Samangan	Kushan	Buddhist monastery, carved caves, and Buddhist sculptures
9	Ai-Khanoum	Takhar	Greco-Kushan	Remains of a Greco-Buddhist city, temples, and Buddhist statues
10	Bagram	Parwan	Kushan	A major cultural and trade center, with significant artistic artifacts

Buddhist Missionaries in Afghanistan:

Afghanistan and India, due to their geographical proximity, have historically influenced each other in various ways, leaving behind traces of this interaction in both countries. One of the most profound and long-lasting influences on Afghanistan was the spread of Buddhism, which lasted for over a thousand years, shaping the

beliefs, architectural styles, and artistic expressions of the local inhabitants (Kayzad, 1967, p. 177). The Kushan era is considered the most glorious period of Buddhist expansion in Afghanistan. Majestic Buddhist temples in Hadda, Bamiyan, Kapisa, Bagram, Gandhara Valley, and Peshawar, along with artistic relics, serve as significant evidence of this period. Sculpture and Buddhist iconography reached their peak under

the Kushan rulers, who promoted Buddhism across the eastern regions. However, Buddhist followers in Kushan temples were not the only religious community in Afghanistan. The local population enjoyed religious freedom, with independent places of worship, including non-Buddhist sanctuaries such as the Zoroastrian fire temple in Surkh Kotal and the famous non-Buddhist temple in Baghlan (Ebrahimi, 1984, p. 105).

A critical question arises: how, when, and through whom was Buddhism introduced into Afghanistan? Understanding this transformation is crucial, as it significantly impacted the region's cultural and religious landscape. Buddhism first emerged in India during the 6th century BCE with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. For about three centuries, the religion remained confined to the Indian subcontinent. However, the rise of the Maurya Dynasty, India's first historical empire, marked the beginning of Buddhism's expansion beyond Indian borders. Chandragupta Maurya founded the dynasty, followed by his successor, Bindusara. The third ruler, Ashoka, ascended the throne around 249 BCE and converted to Buddhism after ten years of rule. Ashoka played a vital role in promoting and spreading Buddhism, convening a grand religious council in Pataliputra (modern Patna), the capital of the Maurya Empire. The council, chaired by the renowned Buddhist scholar Moggaliputta Tissa, took key decisions, including the formulation of religious laws and the dispatch of missionaries to propagate Buddhism both within and beyond India (Kayzad, 1967, p. 178).

The Kushans, who established their rule in Bactria between 58 BCE and 26 CE, played a crucial role in Buddhist expansion. King Kanishka, one of the most notable Kushan rulers, undertook large-scale architectural projects, constructing stupas and temples throughout his realm. Ashoka, too, contributed significantly to this movement (Ravanparvar, 2004, p. 72).

While Buddhist missionaries initially focused on southern India and Sri Lanka, they also extended their efforts westward beyond the Indus River,

into what is now Afghanistan. By the time of Ashoka's rule, the southern part of Afghanistan, including the Arghandab region, had come under Maurya control, while the northern regions were under Greek influence. Ashoka's stone edicts explicitly mention the dispatch of Buddhist missionaries to Kashmir and Gandhara. For example, his 13th edict records the names of missionaries and their destinations, including Gandhara, Kashmir, and beyond. Among the missionaries sent westward were Mahadeva and Maharakkhita, who were tasked with spreading Buddhism to the western regions of India, modern Afghanistan, and Greek-controlled territories, which extended as far as the Mediterranean and Egypt. These missionaries not only reached Afghanistan but also continued further westward (Kayzad, 1967, p. 178). Ashoka proudly declared in his inscriptions that he had sent missionaries to the Yavanas (Greeks). Previously, scholars debated which Greek territories were referred to. However, the discovery of an Ashoka edict in Kandahar has confirmed that significant Greek communities resided in the region, particularly in one of Alexander's Alexandrias near the Arghandab River. Ashoka made substantial efforts to convert these Greek settlers to Buddhism, inscribing messages in their language and script, one of which was recently uncovered near the Chihil Zina area. It is now evident that Buddhist missionaries reached southern Afghanistan in the first half of the 3rd century BCE, where they successfully spread their faith. Buddhism remained a dominant religious force in the region for over a thousand years (Kayzad, 1967, p. 179).

Important Buddhist Centers in Afghanistan:

Explanation of Stupa: While studying historical texts, especially Buddhist works, the term *stupa* often appears. Based on research by scholars, the major elements of Buddhist worship include the *Tripitaka* (three jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). Other important components include *vihara*, which will be explained later. According to some scholars, the stupa evolved from burial mounds where the relics and remains of great figures (*Mahapurusha*) were interred. These

remains could take various forms (Ebrahimi, 1984, p. 39). There were different types of stupas: stupas containing sacred relics, votive stupas dedicated as offerings, and commemorative stupas. When Buddha passed away, his disciples and followers each took relics as keepsakes. The Mauryans, arriving later, collected a portion of Buddha's ashes and enshrined them in a stupa. In total, about eight stupas were initially constructed for this purpose (Paiman, 2005, p. 18).

According to tradition, the earliest physical relic of Buddha was his hair. Additionally, his tooth, robe, alms bowl, broom, and skull bones have been preserved and remain revered by followers. The structure of a stupa consists of a dome or mound containing cremated bones, hair, teeth, or other relics of Buddha, built either for commemoration or as a votive offering. Khozad argues that in the eastern parts of Afghanistan, where Buddhism was prominent, domed mounds made of stone and earth, or tower-like structures filled with stones, are commonly found. Most Buddhist temples were constructed in remote, scenic locations, often on elevated mountain slopes (Ebrahimi, 1984, p. 42). The Chinese traveler Xuanzang noted that Buddha's turban was enshrined near a *vihara* in southern India. Studies suggest that such domed structures, recognized as pilgrimage sites, predate Buddhism. The term *chaitya* originates from *chitya*, meaning burial mound or something associated with grave sites. Generally, a *chaitya* refers to a place of worship, a monastery, or a site preserving sacred relics. The term *stupa* refers specifically to the architectural dome housing relics, while *chaitya* denotes the sacred or religious significance of the site (Ebrahimi, 1984, p. 42). Stupas were built to enshrine Buddha's relics, with the oldest stupas located in Sanchi and Beirut. The earliest brick stupa was constructed in *Piprahwa*, near the Nepalese border, around 450 BCE. Stupas served not only religious purposes but also symbolized the presence of a spiritual leader (Paiman, 2005, p. 19).

Kushinagar (*Kasya*), where Buddha attained *Parinirvana*, is one of the four major pilgrimage sites of Buddhism. Excavations in 1876, 1912,

and 1976 uncovered the *Nirvana Stupa* here. One of the most notable artifacts found was a copper plate from the Gupta era, along with several temples and monasteries from the same period. Another key aspect of Buddhist architecture is the *vihara* (Buddhist monastery). The term *vihara* is of Sanskrit origin and is also mentioned in *Avesta*. In Buddhist times, it referred to monasteries and meditation retreats. With the spread of Buddhism in Aryana, numerous *viharas* were established, including the famous ones in Ghazni and Balkh. Like stupas, *viharas* are distinct Buddhist monuments. Some of Afghanistan's most significant Buddhist monasteries include Hadda, Surkh Kotal, Mes Aynak, Kham Zargar, Nirk District Monastery, Chak Wardak, Daimirdad, Funduqistan, Qala-e Ahangaran, Mandeish, Minar-i Chakari, Bala Hissar, Tepe Maranjan, Khair Khana Pass, Tepe Narenj, Khwaja Safa, and Kunjaki Paghman. These sites, rich in Buddhist heritage, hold great historical significance. However, since this study focuses solely on Buddhist temples in Kabul, the discussion of sites outside the city is beyond its scope (Osmani, 2006, p. 7).

The Importance of Buddhist Centers in Afghanistan:

In the natural landscape of this land, numerous stupas and temples were not only established for worship but also served as scientific hubs. More importantly, they held great significance as commercial and cultural centers of their time. Buddhist temples and centers in Afghanistan, such as the ruins of Ghazghala city, the Samangan (Aybak) stupa, the Nawbahar of Balkh, Chakari in Kabul, Tapa Maranjan, Shah Bahar in Ghazni, and Funduqistan, were often located in villages, cities, or on hilltops. Their importance lay in the fact that they were also centers of trade, culture, and economy, playing a crucial role in connecting trade caravans and facilitating interactions between the East and West (Ebrahimi, 1984, p. 114).

Excavations conducted at Buddhist temples and stupas in Afghanistan reveal that these temples were among the most prosperous of their time.

They have contributed immensely to the collection of the Kabul Museum in modern times. Some of these artifacts have unfortunately been taken abroad or are in private collections, the full extent of which remains unknown. It is possible that a significant portion of Afghanistan's ancient artistic wealth still lies undiscovered beneath its soil. Excavations in 1975 (1354 AH) at Tapa Shotor Hadda in Nangarhar province by an Afghan team uncovered Buddhist artifacts that are considered unique in the world. Some scholars and researchers believe that these caves were part of the Buddhist Mahayana (Tantrism) tradition, while others dispute this claim. A complete and thorough study of these caves requires considerable time. However, what is certain is that they are masterpieces of Gandhara art, which, despite the ravages of time, have been unearthed through the dedication and hard work of young Afghans, further highlighting the significance of Buddhism in Afghanistan. Additionally, modern scholars and researchers have shed light on the fact that many of the statues recovered from these temples and monasteries not only attest to Afghanistan's rich cultural and artistic heritage but also reinforce the historical depth of its ancient civilization. The cultural and intellectual significance of Buddhist centers in Afghanistan contributed to the enlightenment of people from both the East and the West who traveled through these lands. Another major significance of Afghanistan's Buddhist centers lies in their role in global trade and communication. The existence of these centers coincided with the establishment of the Silk Road, which passed through the ancient lands of Afghanistan. This route enabled Macedonian traders to maintain direct trade relations with cities in China, Kashgar, Rawak, and other silk-producing centers. Buddhist monasteries and religious centers in Afghanistan provided important stops along the Silk Road, benefiting travelers and merchants alike (Paiman, 2005, p. 8).

The Silk Road was so named because of the valuable silk trade that flourished along its path. A Macedonian merchant named Hatis T. Tianos, who had a trading house in Syria, sought to obtain

silk from eastern Turkestan (Siddend), one of the major centers of silk production. His discoveries helped establish a direct connection between silk weaving centers and markets in the Middle East and Macedonia. The most profitable segment of these trade routes passed through Afghanistan, earning it the name Silk Road. Among the various Buddhist centers, Nawbahar in Balkh (the Nawbahar Temple of Balkh) was particularly significant as it was located along the Silk Road and played a crucial role in trade and cultural exchange. This claim is supported by historical texts, such as *Afghanistan in the Light of History*, which states: "Afghanistan held a unique and distinguished position along the famous Silk Road and benefited significantly from trade transit. The city of Balkh was strategically located at the junction where the southern Indian branch and the eastern Chinese branch of the Silk Road converged. The two-humped Bactrian camel, well-known worldwide, was frequently used along this route. The depiction of this camel can be seen on the coins of Vima Kadphises. The caravan routes of traders were not only scenes of military conflicts but also vital channels for trade and cultural exchange" (Kohzad, 1967, p. 154).

The outstanding significance of Buddhist temples in Afghanistan extends beyond religious worship. Centers such as Nawbahar Balkh and Shah Bahar in Ghazni served as leading academic and scientific institutions of their time. These institutions provided education and spiritual training to students, influencing both Eastern and Western regions beyond Afghanistan, including the territories conquered by the great Kushan rulers in China, the Far East, and the Mediterranean coast. The similarities between Buddhist statues found in Taxila and China, along with ancient Buddhist artistic remains in Afghanistan, serve as compelling evidence of the country's central role in Buddhism (Ebrahimi, 1984, p. 117).

During the periods when Afghanistan's major Buddhist centers thrived, the country was recognized as an economic and artistic hub of its time. The discovery of golden statues, intricately

crafted idols, gold and silver coins—some of which are unparalleled—attest not only to the cultural and artistic achievements of the era but also to the economic prosperity of these centers. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian and others have extensively described the wealth and grandeur of sites such as Hadda, Begram, and Balkh. French archaeologists, including Hackin and Jean Carl, have studied the treasures of Tapa Maranjan in Kabul and documented their significance, particularly regarding golden statues and precious coins. Even Christian clergy from around the world took interest in these sites. However, despite their historical importance, these artistic and cultural treasures fell victim to the greed of invaders and landowners. They were looted, destroyed, or burned, reducing once-glorious Buddhist centers to ruins, with much of their heritage buried beneath the ground. In recent times, archaeologists have taken an increasing interest in these sites, and as a result of their diligent efforts, some of these priceless artifacts have been excavated from the earth. With continued government support and investment in historical preservation, further archaeological discoveries are expected (Ebrahimi, 2014, p. 118).

Those who refer to Afghanistan as a "*land of ruins*" are encouraged to conduct scientific research and excavations, reviving the country's rich historical legacy that has remained hidden for millennia. These efforts will help reaffirm Afghanistan's historical and cultural significance, aligning with the government's plans to preserve and promote its ancient heritage. This land was once one of the most advanced regions of the world, but sadly, due to foreign invasions and wars, many of its scientific and artistic marvels were lost. It is now the responsibility of future generations to study Afghanistan's past in depth, rediscover its glorious history, and transform what has been called a land of ruins into a land of thriving culture and development.

Conclusion:

The historical Buddhist centers in Afghanistan hold profound significance, not only as places of worship but also as vibrant cultural, economic,

and intellectual hubs that shaped the course of regional history. These sites, including the monasteries and stupas of Balkh, Kabul, Ghazni, Samangan, and other areas, were once thriving centers where scholars, traders, and pilgrims from various parts of Asia converged, exchanging ideas, art, and knowledge. The remnants of these sacred sites, along with their exquisite sculptures, inscriptions, and artifacts, stand as undeniable evidence of Afghanistan's historical role as a bridge between civilizations. Throughout history, these centers played a crucial role in linking the East and West, particularly through the Silk Road, which facilitated the flow of commerce and cultural exchange. The artistic influence of Buddhist traditions found in Afghanistan extended far beyond its borders, impacting the art and architecture of Central Asia, China, and even regions as distant as Japan. The fusion of Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian artistic elements within Afghan Buddhist relics illustrates the country's unique position as a melting pot of civilizations.

Despite the passage of time and the challenges posed by historical events, these remnants remain invaluable testaments to Afghanistan's rich and diverse past. Their preservation is not only essential for academic research and historical study but also for understanding the shared cultural heritage of humanity. Respecting and safeguarding these sites should not be seen as conflicting with any contemporary beliefs but rather as an acknowledgment of Afghanistan's historical contributions to world civilization.

It is the responsibility of present and future generations to protect and study these cultural treasures so that they continue to inspire and educate the world. By investing in research, preservation efforts, and raising awareness, Afghanistan can reclaim its legacy as a center of knowledge and civilization. The rediscovery and protection of these historical landmarks can serve as a source of pride for the Afghan people and a testament to their country's enduring cultural and historical significance.

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