



Exploring the Contributions of Kashmir in the Dissemination and Development of Buddhist Thought across Asia

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Abstract

Kashmir has long occupied a sacred and strategic position in the Buddhist world, serving as both a sanctum of advanced learning and a dynamic center for trans-regional transmission of doctrine, art, and literature. While modern scholarship has often focused on other celebrated sites such as Nalanda or Bodhi Gaya, this article argues that the geographical dissemination of Buddhism was significantly shaped by the intellectual and spiritual endeavours emerging from Kashmir. Through its monastic institutions, scriptural commentaries, and far-reaching missionary networks, Kashmir not only preserved key tenets of Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna traditions but also transformed them into exportable paradigms for China, Central Asia, and Tibet. This paper reconstructs the expansive role played by Kashmir from the reign of King Kaṇiṣka to the early second millennium CE, highlighting the works of master translators such as Kumārajīva, Saṅghadeva, and Śākyasribhadra. Drawing upon historical narratives, epigraphical sources, and cross-cultural testimonies from the Chinese Tripiṭaka, Tibetan annals, and Central Asian chronicles, the study demonstrates that Kashmir was not merely a transmitter but a generative source of Buddhist innovation, exegesis, and aesthetics.

Keywords : Kashmir, Mahayana, Buddhist Scriptures, Development, Dissemination

Introduction

Nestled in the majestic Himalayan landscape and layered with a rich confluence of spiritual, philosophical, and cultural traditions, Kashmir has long stood as a luminous beacon in the history of global Buddhism. Its unique historical trajectory was not merely a result of imperial endorsement, as was the case with many ancient Buddhist centres such as Nālandā or Sarnath, but rather a product of its own intellectual vitality, aesthetic achievements, and rigorous asceticism. Kashmir, known for its spiritual and intellectual history of Asia, has played a pivotal role in the dissemination and development of Buddhist thought. Since the early centuries, Kashmir emerged as a hub of Buddhist scholarship, art, and philosophy and acted as a bridge between Central and East Asia in transmission of Buddhism. Kashmiri monks, scholars, and translators were instrumental in carrying the teachings of the Buddha beyond India's frontiers. Scholars from Kashmir have contributed significantly to the transmission of Buddhist scriptures and philosophical systems to regions like Tibet, China, and Central Asia. Moreover, Kashmir's monasteries and learning centers became sanctuaries for intellectual exchange, attracting pilgrims and scholars from across Asia. Artistic and architectural expressions of Buddhism in Kashmir, especially its distinct iconography and craftsmanship, further influenced Buddhist art in the Himalayas and beyond. Thus, the contributions of Kashmir were not confined to the spiritual realm but extended into cultural, linguistic, and artistic dimensions. In tracing these multifaceted influences, one uncovers how Kashmir served as a vital conduit through which Buddhist wisdom radiated across Asia, enriching the continent's spiritual heritage.

Results and Discussion

Kashmir: A Crucible of Buddhist Transmission and Transformation

Kashmir's contribution to the Buddhist world, especially from the early centuries of the Common Era through the medieval period, was fundamental in shaping doctrines, propagating scriptures, and disseminating religious ideals throughout Central, East, and South Asia. Kashmir's Buddhist legacy finds one of its most formative moments in the convening of the 4th Buddhist Council during the reign of the Kuṣāṇa emperor Kanishka, who ruled in the first or early 2nd century CE. Though accounts vary, many Buddhist sources, particularly those aligned with the Sarvāstivāda School, credit this council as a watershed moment in the history of Buddhist scholasticism. According to the Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra, an extensive commentary believed to have been compiled in the wake of this council, the gathering brought together 500 arhats under the leadership of Vasumitra and other elder monks to resolve doctrinal issues and to codify the vast corpus of Abhidharma literature (Gethin 237). The Vibhāṣā and Mahāvibhāṣā, two monumental exegetical texts that emerged from this council, would go on to exert enormous influence over the Sarvāstivāda tradition and its transmission into Central Asia and China.

These texts offered systematic analysis and scholastic justification for doctrinal stances on time, matter, perception, and consciousness, core components of Buddhist metaphysics. The philosophical rigor of Kashmir's Buddhist tradition was particularly notable in three domains: the Abhidharma, the Yogācāra or "Consciousness-Only" school, and the esoteric dimensions of Tantric Buddhism. Each of these areas attracted not only native practitioners but also foreign monks, translators, and scholars who came to the region in pursuit of intellectual depth and spiritual refinement. The Buddhist schools in Kashmir demonstrated a tendency toward synthesis and interpretation rather than sectarian rigidity, a feature that helped them resonate across cultural and linguistic boundaries (Bechert 21). The emphasis on commentary and interpretation in Kashmir's scholastic traditions fostered a culture that prioritized analytical precision and doctrinal clarity.

Kashmir's strategic geographical location also played a crucial role in its emergence as a transmission hub. Positioned along the ancient Silk Routes, it served as both a receiving and transmitting

centre of Buddhist thought. From as early as the third century CE, Kashmiri monks ventured far beyond the confines of the valley. One of the most celebrated figures was Kumārajīva, whose mixed Kashmiri and Central Asian heritage enabled him to bridge Indic and Chinese cultures with exceptional fluency. Though Kumārajīva was raised in the kingdom of Kucha, his training under Kashmiri scholars deeply influenced his interpretations of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra doctrines. Upon his arrival in Chang'an, Kumārajīva led one of the most prolific periods of translation in Chinese Buddhist history, producing over 300 volumes of sūtras and śāstras that would become foundational to East Asian Buddhist thought (Ch'en 350). Other eminent Kashmiri monks such as Saṅghadeva, Buddhavarman, and Dharmagupta also contributed significantly to the formation of the Chinese Buddhist canon. Their efforts were often supported by local rulers who recognized the cultural capital and political utility of Buddhism. In this context, the translation teams, which often included Chinese collaborators like Xuanzang and Faxian, played a critical role in not just linguistic conversion but in the interpretive act of re-contextualizing Indian ideas for Chinese audiences. As Jonathan Silk notes, "the flow of texts from Kashmir and their transformation in the Chinese cultural matrix was less a matter of simple translation and more a complex process of religious negotiation and assimilation" (Silk 112).

By the 8th and 9th centuries CE, Tibet had also begun to look toward Kashmir for religious inspiration and institutional guidance. The early phase of Tibetan Buddhism, known as the "first dissemination", was characterized by extensive importation of texts, teachers, and ritual practices from the Indian subcontinent. Kashmiri scholars such as Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava played seminal roles in introducing Madhyamaka and Tantric practices into the nascent Tibetan monastic systems. The Tibetan script itself is said to have been modeled partially on Kashmiri prototypes, and many foundational Tantric commentaries in the Tibetan canon trace their lineage to Kashmir-based traditions (Kapstein 46). The Tibetan interest in Kashmiri Buddhism continued well into the eleventh century, with scholars journeying to the region to recover lost manuscripts and lineages following the so-called "dark period" of Tibetan history.

Kashmir's artistic contributions were no less significant. The region developed a distinctive style of Buddhist art that combined Gandhāran realism with Gupta elegance, often executed in bronze, stone, and stucco. These artworks served not only as ritual objects but as didactic tools, conveying complex philosophical ideas through visual symbolism. The prevalence of Avalokiteśvara images, for instance, reflects the region's Tantric orientation and its focus on compassion and transcendental wisdom. These artistic forms would later influence the iconographic traditions of Ladakh, Tibet, and even regions of Southeast Asia (Huntington and Leoshko 92). In addition to its artistic and scholastic achievements, Kashmir developed advanced forms of monastic organization. Monasteries in the region often functioned as autonomous centers of learning, endowed with land and patronage by local kings and noble families. These institutions served as crucibles for inter-sectarian debate, textual production, and ritual innovation. The integration of meditation, debate, and Tantric performance in these monasteries gave rise to a holistic vision of the Buddhist path, one that embraced the theoretical, the contemplative, and the performative.

Today, the Buddhist legacy of Kashmir is often overshadowed by the political turbulence that has gripped the region. However, academic efforts to reassert its historical significance continue through archaeology, textual studies, and comparative philosophy. Scholars increasingly recognize that Kashmir was not a peripheral zone of Buddhist culture but rather one of its intellectual and spiritual heartlands. The valley functioned as a bridge between India and the broader Buddhist acumen, fostering a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation. The contribution of Kashmir to the development and transmission of Buddhism cannot be overstated. Through its philosophical acuity, its translation

enterprises, its tantric innovations, and its deep spiritual commitment, Kashmir shaped not just Indian Buddhism but the broader contours of Buddhist civilization in Central, East, and Inner Asia. Its legacy endures in the pages of Chinese and Tibetan canons, in the art of Himalayan temples, and in the practices of monastics and laypeople across the world.

The Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir: Foundations of Buddhist Scholasticism

The Fourth Buddhist Council, held in Kashmir during the reign of the Kuṣāṇa emperor Kaniṣka (c. 127-150 CE), marks a pivotal moment in the history of Buddhist scholasticism. Unlike previous councils that were primarily concerned with preserving the Buddha's teachings in the wake of sectarian divisions, the Kashmir council was driven by a more intellectual imperative: the resolution of intricate doctrinal disputes and the consolidation of an authoritative canon, especially for the Sarvāstivāda School. This gathering reflected the emerging need for philosophical clarification as Buddhism spread across diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. Presided over by the monk Vasumitra, the Council brought together 500 arhats, monks who had attained the "four degrees of perfection", thus symbolizing the highest level of spiritual attainment and doctrinal purity. Their collective aim was to harmonize differing interpretations of the Buddha's teachings and establish a scholastic framework that could support both monastic discipline and lay instruction. The Council is reported to have produced three monumental commentarial texts: on the Sūtra, Vinaya, and most importantly, Abhidharma. These were not minor annotations but encyclopedic treatises that ran into hundreds of thousands of verses. Among these, the Mahāvibhāṣā, the "Great Commentary", emerged as the most significant, laying the foundation for the Sarvāstivāda doctrinal edifice.

The Mahāvibhāṣā presents a comprehensive and systematic account of Buddhist ontology and epistemology. It engaged deeply with the nature of dharmas (phenomenal factors), time, causality, perception, and mental processes, topics that later shaped the Yogācāra school and influenced Buddhist thought in East Asia. This text was later translated into Chinese by the great pilgrim-scholar Xuanzang in the 7th century CE, indicating its enduring influence across centuries and regions (Ch'en 172). Xuanzang's translation not only preserved the doctrinal insights of the Kashmir council but also transmitted them to China, where they became core components of the developing scholastic traditions in Luoyang, Chang'an, and beyond. Importantly, the Mahāvibhāṣā and its associated texts did not remain confined to Kashmir. They became part of the broader pan-Buddhist scholarly dialogue that extended across Central Asia, particularly in Kucha and Gandhāra. Monks trained in the Kashmiri scholastic tradition journeyed to these regions, carrying with them manuscripts and commentaries. These texts were debated, copied, and adapted to local contexts, becoming the intellectual backbone of monastic curricula along the Silk Road. Their structured approach to categorizing knowledge and resolving doctrinal ambiguities made them particularly useful for translation into Chinese and Tibetan, thereby shaping Buddhist philosophical developments in those linguistic traditions as well.

Beyond its textual output, the Fourth Council also had profound institutional consequences. Kaniṣka's symbolic and strategic act of donating the entire region of Kashmir to the Buddhist Saṅgha reflects the elevated status of the area in the Buddhist world. It essentially transformed Kashmir into a monastic republic, akin to how Magadha had been envisioned in earlier times. The move created a precedent for later Buddhist assemblies, such as the Tibetan bka' gdams councils, where rigorous scriptural exegesis was paired with institutional reforms. In these later traditions, Kashmir was remembered not just as a place of piety, but as a beacon of intellectual authority. Hence, the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir under Kaniṣka was far more than a regional ecclesiastical event, it was a foundational moment in the systematization of Buddhist doctrine. The Council's far-reaching impact, through the production and dissemination of texts like the Mahāvibhāṣā, cemented Kashmir's role as a centre of Buddhist learning. Its legacy endures in the canons of East Asian and Tibetan Buddhism, in

the philosophical depth of Abhidharma discourse, and in the very structures of Buddhist scholasticism that continue to guide monastic education and philosophical inquiry today.

Kashmir and the Shaping of Chinese Buddhism: A Trans-Himalayan Legacy

From the late third to the early eighth century CE, Kashmir emerged as a critical node in the transmission of Buddhism from India to China. Alongside Gandhāra, it played an indispensable role in translating, interpreting, and transmitting Buddhist texts across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Renowned for its Sanskrit scholarship and doctrinal rigor, Kashmir became a wellspring of Buddhist thought during China's so-called "Golden Age of Translation." Its monks and scholars helped bridge Indian and East Asian traditions, laying textual and philosophical foundations that deeply influenced the development of Chinese Buddhism. One of the most illustrious figures of this era was Kumārajīva (344-413 CE), born in Kucha to a Kashmiri father and a Kuchean princess. Trained in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna doctrines, Kumārajīva mastered Mādhyamika philosophy, particularly the teachings of Nāgārjuna. After being taken to Chang'an, China's imperial capital, he led a monumental translation effort that brought key Mahāyāna texts into Chinese. His versions of the Lotus Sūtra, Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, and MūlaMadhyamakakārikā are celebrated not only for their doctrinal fidelity but also for their stylistic elegance, which helped integrate Indian thought into Chinese philosophical and literary frameworks (Ch'en 230). Another important Kashmiri contributor was Saṅghadeva, active during the Later Qin dynasty (383–398 CE). He translated significant Āgama texts, Chinese equivalents of the Pāli Nikāyas, such as the Madhyama Āgama and Ekottarāgama. These translations helped align the emerging Chinese canon with early Indian textual traditions, ensuring doctrinal coherence and providing a reliable foundation for Buddhist study and practice in East Asia.

Kashmir's influence extended into meditative disciplines through figures like Buddhahadra, who arrived in China in the early fifth century. His translation of the Guan Fo Sanmei Hai Jing (Contemplation of the Ocean-like Samādhi of the Buddha) introduced sophisticated meditation techniques, including visualization and Buddhānusrīti. These practices significantly shaped the Pure Land and Chan (Zen) traditions, particularly in cultivating concentrated awareness and visualization of Amitābha Buddha (McRae 98). The intellectual flow was not unidirectional. Eminent Chinese pilgrims such as Faxian (337-422 CE) and Xuanzang (602–664 CE) undertook arduous journeys to Kashmir to access authentic scriptures and study under learned monks. Xuanzang, in particular, spent extended periods studying Abhidharma and praised the region's scholastic excellence, monastic discipline, and vast scriptural collections in his Da Tang Xiyu Ji (Wriggins 148). Kashmir's legacy is also reflected in Chinese religious architecture. The construction of "Five Hundred Arhat Halls" across Hangzhou, Hubei, and Sichuan honored the Fourth Buddhist Council held in Kashmir under Kaniṣka, symbolizing both reverence for and continuity with Kashmiri Buddhism. We can say that the Kashmir's contribution to Chinese Buddhism was transformative, textually, doctrinally, and spiritually. Through its scholars, scriptures, and meditative systems, it helped shape the very structure of East Asian Buddhism and fostered a pan-Asian Buddhist acumen that continues to inspire.

Kashmir and Khotan: A Nexus of Trans-Himalayan Buddhist Transmission

The spread of Buddhism across Central Asia cannot be fully understood without recognizing the crucial role played by Kashmir, a region that served not merely as a transmitter but as a creative force shaping Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and institutions. Among the many places touched by its influence, the ancient kingdom of Khotan stands out as a spiritual frontier where Kashmir left an indelible mark. Situated strategically on the southern branch of the Silk Road, Khotan became a melting pot of Indian, Chinese, Iranian, and Tibetan cultures. Yet, it was Kashmir that most deeply shaped Khotan's Buddhist identity, guiding its transformation into one of the most resilient Buddhist centers

of the region. According to the Tibetan Annals of Khotan, as studied by scholars like Thomas Watters and R. E. Emmerick, it was the Arhat Vairocana of Kashmir who first introduced Buddhism to Khotan. His mission was far more than a textual endeavor; he laid the institutional and spiritual foundations of Khotanese Buddhism by establishing the first monastic structures. Vairocana's efforts reflected the Kashmiri tradition's emphasis on lived religiosity, embodied in rituals, ethical codes, and communal practices, and not just scriptural learning (Emmerick, *The Book of Zambasta*, 45). His success anchored Khotan within the broader Buddhist world and reflected the perception of Kashmir as a legitimate custodian of Buddhist orthodoxy.

Archaeological findings further corroborate this historical link. The distinctive "inverted bowl" architecture of Khotanese stūpas, featuring bulbous domes and elaborate bases, mirrors Kashmiri design aesthetics. These forms recur in iconographic materials from Dunhuang and other Silk Road sites, demonstrating Kashmir's architectural diffusion. Persian and Central Asian literary sources even preserve legends of an Nāga king transporting a relic-stūpa from Kashmir to Khotan at Vairocana's request, a cosmological tale that speaks to the perceived sanctity of Kashmir and its centrality in Buddhist myth-making (Stein, *Ancient Khotan*, 194). Such relics, often said to belong to the Seven Tathāgatas, not only granted spiritual authority but anchored Khotan within a sacred Buddhist geography radiating from Kashmir.

Beyond doctrinal and architectural exchanges, Kashmir's engagement with Khotan extended to cultural and economic spheres. One compelling episode involves Queen Puṇḍarī, a Kashmiri princess who introduced sericulture to Khotan. As documented in Tibetan sources, this cultural transmission occurred during her exile and was intertwined with religious narratives, karmic merit, and royal patronage. Emmerick interprets this not simply as economic innovation but as an ethical act, blending Buddhist values with the sharing of life-enhancing knowledge (Tibetan Texts Concerning Khotan, 112). This narrative demonstrates how even economic practices were subsumed within a Buddhist moral framework, reflective of the Kashmiri view that material and spiritual well-being were mutually reinforcing. Another powerful example of this integration of spirituality and governance is the story of the Kashmiri monk Sanghaghoṣa. Invited to Khotan to serve as a kalyāṇamitra (spiritual friend) to the king, Sanghaghoṣa conducted atonement rituals after the monarch inadvertently caused the deaths of silkworms. His intervention not only expiated karmic guilt but also led to the founding of Po-ta-rya, a major stūpa and vihāra complex. This fusion of penance, ethical counsel, and monumental architecture exemplifies how Kashmiri monks served as both spiritual guides and ritual specialists in foreign courts, guiding statecraft through Buddhist ethics (Witkowski 206).

The movement between Kashmir and Khotan was not sporadic but continuous and institutionalized through regular pilgrimages and scholarly exchanges. During the reign of Abhimanyugupta (958-972 CE), Tibetan annals note frequent pilgrimages from Khotan to Kashmir. Motivated by the desire to study scriptures, participate in rituals, and access sites sacred to the Buddha, Khotanese pilgrims traversed detailed routes via Gilgit and Chilas into the Kashmir Valley. One such itinerary, preserved in the Dunhuang manuscript trove, testifies to the significance of Kashmir as a pilgrimage and scholastic hub (Hill 213). These journeys were ritually charged reenactments of the Buddha's own wanderings and reaffirmed Kashmir's place in the sacred Buddhist cosmopolis. Kashmiri influence also left its imprint on Khotanese visual culture and tantric practice. Artistic styles, especially those involving narrative reliefs, bodhisattva iconography, and ornate halos, echo Gandhāran-Kashmiri aesthetics. Ritual texts and tantric manuals, particularly those outlining pañcakrama (five-stage) meditation systems, traveled with pilgrims and monks, often being translated into Khotanese or Tibetan. These manuals would later shape core aspects of Tibetan Vajrayāna practice, further extending Kashmir's doctrinal reach.

The Kashmir-Khotan relationship exemplifies how Buddhism spread not by force but through dialogue, mutual respect, and shared aspirations. Khotan, as a frontier zone, absorbed, adapted, and

reinterpreted teachings from Kashmir, while Kashmir, in turn, reaffirmed its role as a source of sacred knowledge and institutional wisdom. Through stories of relics and rituals, silk and stūpas, queens and monks, we witness a deeply interconnected world where Buddhism evolved as a transregional, networked religion. Kashmir was not simply a transmitter of Buddhist ideas to Central Asia, it was a co-creator of a trans-Himalayan religious civilization. Khotan, as one of its most vibrant interlocutors, demonstrates how cultural and spiritual exchanges shaped Buddhist identities far beyond the Indian subcontinent. This enduring nexus underscores the dynamic, pluralistic, and ethically grounded nature of Buddhist transmission across Asia.

Kashmir and the Foundations of Tibetan Buddhism

The transmission of Buddhism into Tibet was not a linear diffusion but a multifaceted process marked by cultural translation, linguistic innovation, and deep scholastic engagement. Among the Indian regions contributing to this transformation, Kashmir occupies a singular place as both a transmitter and transformer of Buddhist knowledge. From the 7th to the 13th century CE, Kashmir provided Tibet with intellectual, ritualistic, and institutional frameworks that shaped the evolution of its Buddhist identity. The genesis of this relationship is traced to the reign of King Srong-tsan Gampo (618-650 CE). His minister, Thon-mi Sambhota, was sent to Kashmir to study linguistic science, where he encountered the Śāradā and Gupta scripts and grammatical traditions that inspired the Tibetan script. This new script, structurally grounded in Kashmiri models, became the cornerstone for translating the vast corpus of Indian Buddhist literature (Davidson 142). The “Later Spread of the Dharma” (phyi dar) during the 10th-12th centuries further intensified Kashmir’s impact. Rinchen Zangpo, a leading translator of this period, studied in Kashmir before returning to build over a hundred temples, including Tabo and Tholing. These sites reflect Kashmiri visual and ritualistic idioms, blending tantric symbolism with narrative mural traditions (Snellgrove and Skorupski 107).

Prominent Kashmiri scholars played instrumental roles in shaping Tibetan scholasticism. Jñānashrī introduced epistemological doctrines (Pramāṇa) and helped translate key Vinaya texts, forming the basis of monastic law (Kapstein 57). His associate, Narasadeva, contributed to the Vinaya-saṅgraha, reinforcing ethical standards. Subhūtiśrīśānti introduced Prajñāpāramitā philosophy and the Hevajra Tantra, anchoring Tibetan esoteric thought (Davidson 148). Somanātha, another pivotal figure, co-translated the Vimalaprabhā, the main commentary on the Kālacakra Tantra, helping establish its second transmission lineage (Newman 249). Śākyaśrībhadra (1145-1243 CE), perhaps the most influential Kashmiri master in Tibet, synthesized Madhyamaka philosophy, Vinaya, tantra, and logic. His arrival marked a turning point in Tibetan scholasticism, laying the intellectual foundation for figures like Bu-ston and Tsongkhapa (Tatz 93). While the Kālacakra Tantra is often linked to Oḍḍiyāna, its transmission relied heavily on Kashmir’s tantric infrastructure. Its geographical proximity to Central Asia and tantric expertise made it a vital conduit for integrating such esoteric systems into Tibetan Buddhism (Davidson 161). Thus, Kashmir was not merely a bridge but a wellspring of doctrinal, linguistic, and artistic vitality that helped institutionalize and indigenize Buddhism in Tibet. Its legacy is etched into the very fabric of Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice.

Kashmir’s Intellectual and Literary Contributions to Buddhist Thought

While Kashmir’s geographical importance in transmitting Buddhism to Central and East Asia is well recognized, its intellectual and literary achievements are equally noteworthy. Far from being a mere conduit, Kashmir emerged as a center of rigorous scholasticism, philosophical creativity, and literary refinement. At the core of its early contributions is the Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra, compiled under King Kaniṣka’s patronage during the Fourth Buddhist Council. Attributed to Vasumitra and a council of 500 arhats, this encyclopedic Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma text remains a monumental achievement.

It systematically explores dharma ontology, temporality, causality, karmic conditioning, and consciousness, setting a foundation for later Madhyamaka and Yogācāra argumentation in Tibet and East Asia (Willemen et al. 89).

Texts such as Vasubhadra's Tridharmakāśāstra and Katyāyanīputra's Abhidharmāśtaskandha further developed Abhidharma analysis, serving as interpretative frameworks for both experience and liberation. Vasubhadra's refined classifications of conditioned dharmas became central to Abhidharmic psychology in Tibetan and Chinese traditions (Potter 242). Similarly, Katyāyanīputra's analytical schemes of aggregates and faculties laid the groundwork for monastic curricula. Exegetes like Sanghabhūti, Dharmatrāta, and Buddhavarman enriched this tradition through the Abhidharma-vibhāṣā and related commentaries, rendering complex metaphysical ideas accessible to foreign monastics. These texts, translated in Chinese Buddhist institutions, formed the backbone of scholastic debates and doctrinal evolution in East Asia (Forte 133). Xuanzang's Great Tang Records praises Kashmiri monasteries for their intellectual precision and disciplined ethos (Beal 101).

In the Mahāyāna phase, Kashmiri thinkers deepened Buddhist ethics and literary style. Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra, a poetic synthesis of compassion, wisdom, and meditation, became foundational in Tibetan and Chinese Mahāyāna traditions by the 10th century (Crosby and Skilton 14). Similarly, the Suḥr̥llekha, attributed to Nāgārjuna and shaped by the Kashmiri literary milieu, fused Buddhist counsel with Sanskrit literary elegance, offering moral guidance to rulers and laity (Warder 278). Kashmir's visual legacy is equally profound. The murals at Alchi and Tabo, executed by Kashmiri-trained artists, exemplify an aesthetic that integrated symbolic iconography with doctrinal precision. These vivid, mandala-based compositions became the standard for Himalayan Buddhist art (Luczanits 56). Thus, Kashmir was not merely a transmitter of Buddhism but a dynamic crucible of intellectual, artistic, and literary creativity. Its scholars, poets, and artists significantly shaped the development of Buddhist traditions across Asia, blending scholastic rigor with imaginative expression.

Aesthetic and Iconographic Legacy of Kashmiri Buddhism

The artistic and iconographic legacy of Kashmiri Buddhism played a vital role in complementing its philosophical depth and textual heritage, shaping Buddhist visual culture across the western Himalayas, Central Asia, and East Asia. Flourishing between the 6th and 12th centuries CE, Kashmiri Buddhist art developed as a confluence of Gandhāran realism, Gupta classical elegance, and Central Asian stylistic influences, resulting in a refined aesthetic that conveyed the nuanced cosmology and psychology of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism. This visual idiom not only adorned Kashmiri monastic sites but also spread widely through cultural exchanges and religious patronage, leaving a lasting impact in regions like Tabo, Alchi, and Tholing. The clearest material legacy of Kashmiri Buddhist art can be found in the murals and sculptures of the monasteries at Tabo (Himachal Pradesh) and Alchi (Ladakh), dating from the 10th to 12th centuries CE. These monuments, commissioned under the patronage of Rinchen Zangpo, were executed by Kashmiri artisans who translated complex Buddhist ideas into compelling visual forms. Characteristic features of these artworks include a blue-green palette, fine linework, and precise iconographic detail, especially in depictions of bodhisattvas like Avalokiteśvara, Tārā, and Mañjuśrī, which closely reflect the Kashmiri aesthetic sensibility (Luczanits 71). The didactic yet ornate narrative panels of the Jātaka Stories exemplify how visual clarity was fused with decorative richness.

Kashmiri art was not merely ornamental; it was deeply metaphysical. The aesthetic notion of prabhāva, spiritual presence or radiance, derived from Abhidharma and Yogācāra traditions, influenced both the luminous style and iconographic form of enlightened figures. This visual embodiment of prabhāsva citta (the intrinsically radiant mind) served not just to illustrate doctrine but to enable spiritual transformation through artistic encounter (Willemen et al. 106). Such philosophical

undercurrents extended to Chinese Buddhist aesthetics as well, partly through the influence of translators like Kumārajīva. His rendition of texts like the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* deeply inspired Chinese artists and literati. Kashmiri influence also reverberated in early Chinese art theory. The “Six Principles” of Xie He, particularly the idea of “Spirit Resonance” (*qiyun*), align with Buddhist ideas of inner radiance and mental vitality, likely shaped by the psychological and contemplative teachings introduced through Kashmiri Buddhism (Murck 48). This subtle integration of metaphysical ideas into aesthetic theory underscores the broader cultural influence of Kashmir.

One of the most enduring motifs influenced by Kashmir is the depiction of the 500 Arhats. This iconographic tradition, tracing its roots to the Fourth Buddhist Council held in Kashmir under King Kaniṣka, flourished in Tang and Song dynasty China. Lavish Arhat halls in places like Hangzhou and Hanyang reflected both devotional Chinese practice and Kashmir’s legacy of collective spiritual scholarship (Forte 115). Kashmir also contributed significantly to the ritual arts of Vajrayāna. Tantric masters such as Cintāmaṇi and Somanātha combined scriptural knowledge with artistic skill, creating intricate maṇḍalas, dhāraṇīs, and ritual diagrams. Many such texts, *Cintāmaṇi-dhāraṇī*, *Mahāpratisarā*, and *Mañjuśrī-mūla-kalpa*, were translated into Chinese by Kashmiri monks who also taught their visual meditation systems (Davidson 212). In essence, Kashmiri Buddhist art was a contemplative medium, integrating philosophy, ritual, and aesthetics. Its influence, evident in both sacred art and spiritual practice across Asia, attests to the region’s central role in the visual and metaphysical transmission of Buddhism.

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance of Kashmiri Buddhism

Although many of Kashmir’s Buddhist monuments have succumbed to time and conflict, the region’s intellectual and spiritual legacy remains deeply embedded in the Buddhist traditions of Asia. The influence of Kashmiri Buddhism spans from the contemplative introspection of Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen to the elaborate ritualism of Tibetan Vajrayāna and Mongolian Tantrism. This enduring legacy is rooted in Kashmir’s unique synthesis of rigorous scholasticism, aesthetic innovation, and spiritual discipline, which enabled it to act as a vital cultural and intellectual bridge between India and the wider Buddhist world, including Central Asia and China. Kashmir’s importance as a hub for trans-regional Buddhist scholarship is epitomized by the figure of Kumārajīva, whose mother was of Kashmiri descent. Kumārajīva’s masterful translations of *Mādhyamika* and *Yogācāra* texts into Chinese laid the groundwork for East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism. His clear and balanced renderings significantly shaped the development of Chan in China and Zen in Japan (Wright 64). Another prominent figure, Śākyaśrībhadra (1145-1243), further extended Kashmiri influence by introducing rigorous Vinaya, Madhyamaka logic, and Tantric practices to Tibet. His journey to Tibet with a team of ten scholars helped refine Tibetan Buddhist curricula and inspired the foundational doctrines of the Gelug School, notably influencing Tsongkhapa’s philosophical synthesis (Ruegg 78).

Despite the decline of physical heritage, Kashmir’s textual and ritual traditions persist. Vinaya commentaries, monastic codes, and tantric manuals authored or translated by Kashmiri monks remain integral to Buddhist learning in both Tibetan monasteries and East Asian institutions. The *Mahāvibhāṣā*, traditionally associated with Kashmir, continues to underpin Abhidharma studies in Chinese academia (Willemen et al. 21). Beyond the religious sphere, Kashmir’s Buddhist tradition offers enduring insights into contemporary civilizational values. The Kashmiri model, marked by scholarly asceticism, intercultural humility, and commitment to textual fidelity, provides a timeless framework for cultural diplomacy and spiritual dialogue. It demonstrates that rooted cultural identity can coexist with openness to global traditions, as seen in the way Kashmiri Buddhism harmonized Indian, Central Asian, and East Asian elements.

Contemporary scholarship is beginning to re-engage with this once-neglected tradition.

The Dunhuang manuscripts, which frequently reference Kashmir as a center of learning, are being reevaluated for their doctrinal and geopolitical implications (Whitfield 156). Scholars have also renewed interest in figures like Rinchen Zangpo, whose translation work and architectural patronage left a lasting legacy in the western Himalayas. Digitized manuscripts from Tabo and Tholing reveal that Kashmiri artisans infused sacred geometry with metaphysical insight, demonstrating a uniquely holistic spiritual ecology (Luczanits 43). Kashmiri Buddhism integrated ethical discipline, meditative practice, and aesthetic expression, an approach that is particularly relevant in today's fragmented and consumer-driven world. Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, which many scholars associate with Kashmiri origins, promotes bodhicitta, or altruistic awakening, offering a moral compass in an era of inequality and ecological crisis (Crosby and Skilton 12). Kashmiri Buddhism's blend of intellectual, ethical, and artistic traditions continues to inspire a global audience. Reclaiming this legacy not only enriches our understanding of Buddhist history but also provides spiritual and cultural resources for navigating contemporary challenges.

Conclusion

Kashmir holds a foundational place in Buddhist history, not as a marginal region but as a dynamic and influential center of doctrinal development, artistic expression, and trans-regional dissemination. From the time of the Fourth Buddhist Council under Emperor Kaṇiṣka, Kashmir emerged as a critical hub for the codification of Sarvāstivāda teachings, producing some of the most detailed and philosophically rigorous Abhidharma texts such as the *Mahāvibhāṣā*. These scholastic contributions laid the groundwork for key developments in both Indian and East Asian Buddhist thought. Equally important was Kashmir's role in the translation and transmission of Buddhist texts across Asia. Kashmiri monks and scholars were instrumental in shaping Buddhist traditions in Tibet, China, and Central Asia. Their engagement in massive translation efforts in places like Luoyang and Tholing ensured the faithful transmission of complex doctrines such as Madhyamaka philosophy, Yogācāra metaphysics, and Vajrayāna tantra. Figures like Rinchen Zangpo exemplify this legacy, bringing together textual scholarship, temple construction, and artistic innovation to foster a rich Himalayan Buddhist culture. Kashmir's influence extended beyond philosophy and ritual into the realms of language and aesthetics. The creation of the Tibetan script by Thon-mi Sambhota was deeply informed by Kashmiri grammatical traditions. Similarly, Kashmiri artistic styles, marked by detailed murals, symmetrical mandalas, and refined sculptural forms, spread to regions such as Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, and Tibet, shaping the visual language of monastic life. These aesthetics were not merely decorative; they embodied deep metaphysical principles and were used as tools for spiritual contemplation.

Through its role as a bridge between India and greater Asia, Kashmir became a civilizational fulcrum. The legacy of its monastic disciplines, philosophical treatises, and artistic idioms can be traced in diverse Buddhist traditions, including Chinese Chan, Tibetan Gelug, Japanese Zen, and Mongolian Vajrayāna. Even in contemporary times, as scholars revisit neglected sources, such as Dunhuang manuscripts and the works of Śākyasrībhaddra, Kashmir's enduring relevance to Buddhist studies becomes increasingly evident. Today, though much of Kashmir's physical Buddhist heritage lies in ruins, its intellectual and spiritual legacy continues to resonate. It offers a powerful example of how clarity of thought, aesthetic depth, and intercultural dialogue can form the basis of both religious tradition and civilizational renewal. By reengaging with this legacy, scholars and practitioners alike can rediscover the values of contemplation, compassion, and textual integrity that Kashmir once so vibrantly upheld.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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