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Policing the Monastery

When an unbelieving yakṣa heard them he thought to himself: "Seeing that these two Buddhist *śramaṇas* are going along engaged in talk of repulsive things their vital force should be snatched away!"

—*Mūlasarvāstivāda* Vinaya account of a yakṣa
overhearing two monks

Pious Ghosts and Wayward Monks

The evidence gathered in previous chapters points to an intentional process of expansion undertaken by the Buddhist monastic community in which they sought out and converted spirit-deities in order to transform them into devotees of the Buddhist faith. This process gained the *saṃgha* a new social relevance as the public recognized them as experts in dealing with both spirit-deities and the dead. Yet in looking at this process with modern eyes one is tempted to see duplicity, to see the monks and nuns as manipulating spirit-religions in which they did not believe in order to further their own aims. At worst, the *saṃgha* may appear to be a community of conspirators bilking the masses in hopes of procuring a free meal. It therefore becomes essential to confront the issue of how to read the motivations of the *saṃgha* in this process and to determine how deeply the members of monastic community believed in the potency of the spirit-deities with whom they interacted.

Clearly no single answer is sufficient. The *saṃgha*, like any religious community, is composed of individuals and, no doubt, a vast array of motivations influenced their ordinations. Assuredly there were con-men and charlatans within the ranks, as certainly as there were saintly adherents who rigorously upheld the Law. Although it is impossible to divine the motivations that drove each member of the Buddhist community, it may be possible to discern the feelings of some by examining the texts. If we narrow the scope of our inquiry to ask simply, "How did the monks and nuns view their seemingly favored position in relation to spirit-deities?" many sources can provide us with insight.

Does the literature express a conscious awareness of playing upon the fears of the public, or is some trepidation expressed about the prospect of confronting spirit-deities and encroaching on haunted domains? We know from the accounts of Yijing and Faxian that the monks and nuns did not simply enjoy a one-sided immunity to the powers of spirit-deities, nor were they averse to appealing to local spirit-deities for help in times of need. Rites had to be performed by the Buddhist community in order to maintain a peaceful coexistence with the supernatural beings. Yijing describes the offerings made by monks to the powerful *yakṣi* Hāritī, and Faxian writes about rituals performed by the monks of Samkāśya in honor of a local *nāga*.¹ Such actions reveal that the relationship between spirit-deity and monk was somewhat ambiguous. Likewise, these rituals suggest that the *saṃgha* actively concerned themselves with appeasing the supernatural beings with whom they shared their homes, and that they, at least as much as the general public, were concerned with their relationship to such beings.

Numerous accounts exist in which monks or nuns turn to spirit-deities in times of need. Yijing describes a series of events in which the residents of a monastery appeal to a local spirit-deity named Mahākāla so that they will have enough food to offer a group of visiting monks.² Although this course of action is initially undertaken by a mother of a monastic servant, the monks clearly give their approval; it would appear that an active cult to this deity was thriving at the monastery during the time of Yijing's visit. There is little doubt that such actions were accepted and sanctioned by the leaders of the *saṃgha*, because the rituals that these Chinese pilgrims describe explicitly involve the entire community of monks.

Likewise, there are texts that encourage monks to call upon loyal spirit-deities in times of need. For example, Vessavana, king of the *yakṣas* (also called Kubera) is said to have personally given the *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta* to the Buddha in order to protect his followers from dangerous spirit-deities. The text contains a series of *parittas* or protective verses that monks can recite in order to ward off fearsome *yakṣas*. These prayers call upon the forty-one *yakṣa*-chiefs (*ma-*

hāyakkha), who will defend the petitioner from all manner of dangers, including those caused by other spirit-deities.³

In this same text, Vessavana warns that *yakṣas* generally believed in neither the Buddha nor his teachings. The *Dīgha Nikāya* goes on to claim that the reason for this disbelief was the incompatibility between the nature of *yakṣas* and a moral code that prohibits killing, stealing, intemperance, lying, and promiscuity.⁴ It seems that this tension between the *saṃgha* and their supernatural opponents could occasionally be quite dangerous. Fortunately, spirit-deities loyal to the Buddhist law inevitably come to the rescue when the righteous are in need. In the *Udāna* we learn that even the great monk Sāriputta was the target of a superhuman attack but, as is usual, a group of *yakṣas* loyal to the Buddhist Law subdued the offending spirit-deity and protected the besieged monk.⁵

The *Āṭānāṭiya Sutta* also contains a passage in which Vessavana warns monks that dangerous *yakkhas* often haunt locations that are ideal for meditation. He states that the *yakkhas* "haunt the lonely and remote recesses of the forest, where noise, where sound, hardly is, where breezes from the pastures blow, hidden from men, suitable for meditation. There do eminent Yakkhas dwell who have no faith in the word of the Exalted One."⁶ This passage serves to justify the need for the protective *parittas*, which Vessavana imparts to the Buddhist community. In so doing, it becomes clear that monks and nuns were not automatically immune to the powers marshaled by spirit-deities. For instance, the *Dhammapada Commentary* contains a tale in which the residents of a village invite some monks to dwell in a nearby grove for the duration of the rain retreat.⁷ The spirit-deities who reside in the grove's trees feel it is improper to dwell higher than the monks, so they decide to leave until the monks move on. But when they learn that the monks plan to stay there for three months, the spirit-deities begin to haunt them with eerie voices, illnesses, and visions of disembodied heads in hope that the monks will vacate the forest. Finally the Buddha gives the frightened monks a *paritta* that when recited makes all the nearby spirit-deities inclined to be helpful and refrain from their fearsome activities. Similarly, in the *Khuddakapāṭha* the Buddha gives Ananda a *paritta* that is so powerful that some of the spirit-deities literally break through the walls in order to escape his recitation of the spell.⁸

There was clearly a perceived need for these protective wards and a recognition that by simply being a member of the monastic community one was subject to supernatural challenges. It seems, however, that the Buddhist renunciators were not alone in facing this danger. In the Jain literature an interesting parallel can be found. According to the *Bṛhatkalpabhāṣya*, certain *yakṣas* took pleasure in feeding monks after dark, thereby making them break one of

their vows.⁹ And whereas monks who were tricked into forsaking their vows were rendered vulnerable, those who were true to their vows had the power to subdue spirit-deities.

The Jain example succinctly reveals a crucial caveat that also applies to the relationship between the Buddhist monastic community and spirit-deities, namely, only those who are strict in adhering to their vows are safe. Lapses in obedience to monastic rules or proper decorum leave monks vulnerable to the worldly dangers embodied by spirit-deities, and at these risky moments only the intervention of trustworthy spirit-deities can prevent disaster. A tale from the *Kṣudrakavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivādin* Vinaya illustrates this point clearly:

A senior and a junior monk had set out on the road and as they went they were talking about repulsive things. When an unbelieving *yakṣa* heard them he thought to himself: "Seeing that these two Buddhist *śramaṇas* are going along engaged in talk about repulsive things their vital force should be snatched away!" So thinking he followed them. He again thought: "What is past is past. But if now they are still talking about repulsive things their vital force must most surely be snatched away!"

While he was thinking in this way and following them another *yakṣa*, one possessed of faith, came to that place. He asked the first *yakṣa*: "Friend, where are you going?" The other told him what had occurred.

The second *yakṣa* said: "Friend, since these monks are practitioners of austerities they are assuredly engaged in talk about Dharma as they go along. Besides, what have these monks done to you? Wait awhile and we can have a friendly chat with each other as we go along."

The first *yakṣa* said: "Since, friend, I will most certainly not let these two escape, come on! Let's get going!" Knowing that he could divert him for a time, the second *yakṣa* joined him and they followed those two monks.¹⁰

As the monks travel they continue to talk of "repulsive" things, but eventually they must part ways. At this moment the first *yakṣa* feels he must strike, but the *yakṣa* who was possessed of faith intervenes at the last moment and convinces the first *yakṣa* that the monks were indeed discussing the Dharma, thereby saving their lives. He does this by pointing out the last thing the monks said to each other—their farewells—contained words that expressed a deep understanding of the Buddhist Law. Despite his success, the loyal *yakṣa* is not

pleased at the behavior of the monks or at having to intervene on their behalf. He therefore seeks out the Buddha to express his concerns:

When he had arrived there and honored with his head the feet of the Blessed One, he sat down to one side. So seated the *yakṣa* said this to the Blessed One: "Reverend One, there are fierce nonhumans and *yakṣa* who do not believe in the teachings of the Blessed One constantly hanging around and present. Reverend One, those who believe are few. Although fierce nonhumans and *yakṣas* who have faith in the teaching of the Blessed One are also constantly around, the fierce *yakṣas* who have no faith in the Blessed One and are constantly around are far more numerous."¹¹

The *yakṣa* then tells the Buddha about the events that transpired on the road and urges him to instruct his monks to be mindful of their words while traveling in public. The Buddha assents to the request and states: "Monks, I have heard from a *yakṣa* that while monks were going along on the road talking about the repulsive, unbelieving *yakṣas* were trying to get at them and looking for a chance."¹² The Buddha then uses this opportunity to set forth the rules of decorum for traveling monks.

This tale reveals a fascinating dynamic at work. It implies that monks who break their vows or act without discretion are susceptible to supernatural attacks, and the threat of imminent danger works to discourage monks from inappropriate behavior, even while they are away from the disciplining gaze of the senior monks. By qualifying the circumstances under which monks can be defeated by spirit-deities, the *yakṣas* and other such beings serve to enforce adherence to the monastic codes. The spirit-deities function to police the *saṃgha*, ensuring the obedience of its members. The writer of the text makes a point of mentioning that faithful spirit-deities are outnumbered and cannot always prevent their unbelieving counterparts from assaulting those monks who make themselves vulnerable. And even if the Buddhist spirit-deities are successful in preventing physical harm, there is still the possibility that these elusive spies will report infractions of the code to the monastic elders.

In this way the disciplining aspects of spirit-deities even apply to tamed spirit-deities who adhere to the Buddhist Law and share the residential space of the monastery with the *saṃgha*. For instance, in the same Vinaya there is a passage concerning the proper way to sweep a monastery. We are told that certain monks "did their work while holding a broom in their hand and talking of repulsive things, and when the nonhuman beings and the other monks censured them the Blessed One said: 'The sweeping must be done with con-

sidered talk conforming to the Dharma or with the silence of the Noble One!' ”¹³ This passage tells us that “nonhuman beings,” a common term referring to spirit-deities, scolded monks who spoke of inappropriate things while going about their chores. It is significant that in both of the Vinaya stories quoted in this chapter, spirit-deities are mentioned in tales that deal with curtailing inappropriate speech. Elder monks cannot constantly monitor such infractions; by invoking the aid of omnipresent, invisible, and potentially dangerous spirit-deities, they ensure that wayward monks think twice before disregarding the rules.

This type of policing activity is associated with *yakṣas* in other texts, as well. For instance, in the beginning of the *Maṇimekhalai*, the city of Puhār is having a festival in honor of its guardian deity, who resides at the main crossroads. This spirit, although easily angered, uses his powers to watch the marketplace, constantly looking for crimes. When he sees them, he catches the offenders in his rope, beats them to death, and eats them. Although the Buddhist spirit-deities are commonly not as bloody or heavy-handed, they serve a similar function as supernatural deterrents of improper behavior.¹⁴

At times this close interaction between spirit-deities and monks gives rise to some rather odd situations. One such case also occurs in the Vinaya and again concerns the monastic practice of wearing robes made of cloth taken from corpses found on the cemetery grounds. It reveals a complex hierarchy that exists between spirit-deities and the monastic community.

In this tale the son of a perfumer falls ill and asks to be wrapped in his favorite blanket after death. Due to his attachment to the blanket, the unfortunate boy is reborn as a hungry ghost with goiters. Soon the monks hear of the wonderful blanket left in the cemetery, and the monk Kālananda goes out to procure the cloth:

Kālananda hurried to the cemetery and grabbed it, but that non-human who had formerly been the boy said: “Noble Kālananda, you must not take my woolen blanket!”

Since a cemetery-dwelling monk is generally one of courage, Kālananda said to him: “Hungry one, you were reborn among the hungry ghosts who have goiters because of your excessive attachment to this woolen blanket. Do you want to be reborn in hell? Let go!”

But the hungry ghost did not let go. Because of his own excessive attachment to that blanket, the monk kicked him with his foot and stripped the blanket off. Then taking it with him, he went to the Jetavana [monastery].

The hungry ghost followed behind him wailing, saying "Noble Kālananda, return the woolen blanket!" Furious, he too went to the Jetavana.

Since gods and *nāgas* and *yakṣas* who were devoted to the Buddha were staying in the Jetavana, the hungry ghost, being considered of little power, was not able to enter and sat wailing at the door.¹⁵

Eventually the Buddha hears the hungry ghost wailing at the gate and discerns that if the blanket is not returned the ghost will "vomit warm blood and die," due to his attachment. Therefore, Kālananda is ordered to return the blanket to the boy's corpse in the cemetery, and the Buddha uses this event as an opportunity to set forth rules regarding the removal of cloth from funerary grounds. Kālananda eventually follows the Buddha's instructions, but not before the ghost gets his revenge and gives a swift kick to the belligerent monk.

This astounding and perplexing tale presents a series of escalating power relationships between spirit-deities and monks. The courageous cemetery-dwelling monk Kālananda cannot be intimidated by the dead boy's hungry ghost and even goes so far as to kick the unhappy spirit away from his cloth. In this instance the weak, newly "born" spirit is incapable of punishing the monk, particularly after Kālananda takes refuge in the monastery and is defended by all manner of powerful spirit-deities. However, his suffering does not escape the attention of the Buddha, who is displeased at the monk's behavior and forces him to return the blanket to the needy ghost. In fact, the text even refers to the monk's "excessive attachment" to the blanket, and his *karma* appears to come full circle as the ghost (or, more specifically, the ghost's corpse) delivers a parting kick to the reprimanded monk.

In every previous tale it was the monks who were at risk because of angering observant spirit-deities, in this very unusual case it is the spirit-deity who needs protection from a monk. In all, it is difficult to determine if the monks or the spirit-deities are ultimately more powerful. The outcomes of specific confrontations between spirit-deities and monks seem to hinge on the circumstances and on the respective accomplishments of the participants. In this instance, the pathetic "hungry ghost with goiters" is no match for a cemetery-dwelling monk, whereas in other cases the spirit-deities represent an unmistakable threat.

This ambiguity surrounding the interaction between members of the *saṅgha* and spirit-deities is perhaps nowhere as clearly expressed as in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. Within this legal text some surprising situations are presented. The first account briefly states: "At one time a certain monk who was an ex-

orcist [*bhūtavejjaka*] deprived a *yakkha* of life. He was remorseful."¹⁶ This passage makes it clear that some monks acted as exorcists and that at times their dealings with *yakkhas* resulted in the demise of the offending spirit-deity. The very next case in this same Vinaya, however, presents us with a remarkably different situation: "At one time a monk sent a certain monk to a *vihāra* inhabited by a predatory *yakkha*. The *yakkha* deprived him of life."¹⁷ This case succinctly presents a situation in which a monk is clearly no match for the *yakkha* he is forced to confront. In this instance, the surviving monk is not guilty of an offense because the death was unintentional. However, this case has a corollary in which a monk sends another monk into a *vihāra* inhabited by a predatory *yakkha* "meaning to cause his death" and, not surprisingly, in this instance a grave offense is earned.¹⁸ According to the legal codes, it would seem this is a case of murder by *yakkha*.

When taken together these cases reveal the uneven and inconsistent relationship that exists between these two groups: in one case the monk kills the *yakkha*, while in the second the opposite occurs. It is remarkable that a Buddhist legal text acknowledges both of these situations as possibilities. These cases demonstrate how real these beings were to the monks who wrote the texts and remind us that the outcome of a confrontation between a monk and a spirit-deity was never considered a foregone conclusion.

An equally ambiguous set of circumstances seems to surround the issue of monks being possessed by spirit-deities. In the first chapter I summarized a tale in which a *yakkhi* possesses a former monk, who was her son in a previous life, in order to get him to reenter the monastery. Eventually the young man does so, at least in part because "[t]hey that lead the Holy Life, With such, ogres do not sport."¹⁹ Other cases make it perfectly clear, however, that at times even monks and nuns who are still members of the monastic community are not immune from unwanted possession. For instance, the *Vinaya Piṭaka* lists possession by a *pisāca* as one of the valid reasons for breaking the rain retreat.²⁰ In a related set of circumstances from the same Vinaya, a nonhuman seizes, or possesses, a monk. Immediately afterward, a fellow monk begins to strike the possessed man in hope of driving out the spirit. Unfortunately, his overzealous actions end up killing the first monk. Despite the odd and violent nature of these circumstances, the text goes on to state that because the aggressor did not intend to bring about the death of the possessed monk, his actions are free from offense.²¹ Only had he intended to cause the other monk harm he would have been guilty of a punishable offense.

There is even some evidence to suggest that monks could at times be prevailed upon to function as exorcists for the general public. The *Dhammapada Commentary* contains a rather complicated tale in which a monk takes

up residence in a cave. His presence turns out to be unbearable for a nonbelieving *yakkhi* who had been living in the same cave, and she is compelled to leave. Although she is powerless to force the monk to vacate her former home, she eventually comes up with a plan to trick him. The goddess possesses a lay donor's son and tells the family that only water used in washing the virtuous monk's feet will have the power to help the boy. After the monk rushes to the donor's home and provides the water to cure the possessed child, the *yakkhi* appears and tells the monk to stay away from her cave—on the grounds that he is now a physician and not a monk. The monk ignores her threats and through his virtue casts her out of the cave permanently.²²

In these few examples dealing with possession and exorcism, it is hard to determine exactly which circumstances help shift the outcome in favor of the monk or the spirit-deity. The legal texts seem most concerned with protecting individuals who seek to avoid being possessed or who try to help others who are suffering such a fate, despite their dubious success in doing so. In both the tale of the possessed novice and in the tale of the cave-dwelling monk, however, virtue and adherence to the monastic life are mentioned as criteria that are helpful in overcoming confrontational spirit-deities. Proper behavior may thus be, at least in part, the key to monastic success in such hostile dealings.

In some instances, however, Buddhist spirit-deities actually call upon the *saṃgha* to assist them in times of need. In one tale, also from the *Mūlasārvastivāda Vinaya*, a tree-dwelling spirit-deity whose home had been cut down in order to make a *vihāra* asks the Buddha for assistance in finding shelter for the coming cold season. The Buddha instructs one of the deities living in the monastery to share its home with the evicted spirit-deity. Although the deities are content to share a home, this incident draws criticism from other gods, who state: "Hah! These Buddhist Śramaṇas—they are completely corrupt in good practices. This is neither lovely nor in harmony with morality." As a result of these comments, the Buddha stipulates that:

If a monk who is the Superintendent of Building Operations will in seven or eight days cut down a tree, at the root of that tree he should make a circle. He should as well offer perfumes and flowers and oblations. He should also read the *Tridaṇḍaka*. He should too assign the reward, and too he should further the paths of the ten good actions and declare what is blame worthy about the paths of ten bad actions. To the deity who dwells in that tree he should say: "Seek out another dwelling! This tree will be used for the needs of the Stūpa, of the Dharma, or of the community." After that, in seven

or eight days, that tree is to be cut down. If a living thing appears it is not to be cut down. But if none appears it is to be cut. If a monk who is Superintendent of Building Operations does not insure that the rules of customary behavior are taken up and practiced as they were designated, he becomes guilty of an offense.²³

Both the Buddha and the other monks described in the previous quotes are clearly concerned with keeping the spirit-deities placated. What emerges is the image of an uneasy truce whose success hinges on conformity to established modes of behavior that are set forth in the Buddhist monastic codes. These tales are all taken from texts that dictate rules of monastic behavior, in which the spirit-deities function as a means of enforcing the law. Although they demand adherence to the rules of behavior, the supernatural residents of the monastery also serve to defend the monks from ghostly attacks. This point was demonstrated when the "hungry ghost with goiters" was prevented from entering the monastery by the "gods and *nāgas* and *yakṣas* who were devoted to the Buddha."²⁴ It would seem that Buddhist spirit-deities protected the *saṃgha* from threats originating both outside the monastery and within.

There are several tales in which the monastery acts as a safe zone for those fleeing from dangerous spirit-deities and, in most cases, it is the powerful spirit-deities that reside in the monastery that are given credit for keeping the hostile, supernatural forces at bay. In the *Dhammapada Commentary*, a young mother rushes into a monastery in order to protect her infant from an ogress that seeks to devour the child. Once she crosses the boundary into the monastic complex, the spirit-deity of the monastery gate, Sumana, prevents the ogress from following.²⁵ Similarly, the *Petavatthu* contains a story about a ghost, *peti*, who was the mother of the great monk Sāriputta in a past life. This unfortunate spirit wants to seek assistance from her former son, but the spirits of Sāriputta's home won't let her enter. It is not until she explains exactly who she is that they finally relent.²⁶

Although spirit-deities lived in the *vihāra*, it must be remembered that at no point were these nonhuman residents given the status of monks or nuns. The fact that new initiates are asked if they are "real human beings or *nāgas* in manly disguise" at their ordinations indicates that the *saṃgha* wished to maintain that distinction for humans alone.²⁷ The evidence suggests, rather, that images of spirit-deities within monasteries continued to function as objects of public devotion. The *Kathāsaritsāgara* states that certain austerities please spirit-deities. In particular, the practice of *upoṣana*, which involves speaking the truth, circumambulating an image of the deity, and only eating when the Buddhist monks do, was particularly pleasing to spirit-deities.²⁸ The pos-

sibility arises that *upoṣana* practices were performed for images of spirit-deities located within monastic complexes. That lay devotees were to circumambulate an image of a spirit-deity and only eat when the Buddhist monks did reveals that certain spirit-deities found worth in the emulation of Buddhist austerities and, more than likely, such beings would have been located within the monastic complex. This should not be surprising; given the previous references to monks' worship of spirit-deities, it seems logical that lay people would do so as well.

Even though the resident spirit-deities could not become ordained, there are several tales in which the opposite occurs, and a monk or nun is reborn among the nonhumans. The *yakkhas* Hemavata, Sātagiri, and Sūciloma were all monks in their previous existences.²⁹ Hemavata and Sātagiri were punished for wrongly adjudicating a monastic dispute, whereas Sūciloma received his *yakkha* birth due to sleeping on fine carpets in his cell. In a touch of karmic poetic justice, Sūciloma, whose name literally means "needle-hair," received his uncomfortable current form due to a desire for luxury that ran contrary to the monastic codes.

In a tale from the Vinaya texts, a monk dies and is reborn as a nonhuman. According to this tale, when the distributor-of-ropes enters the dead monk's cell saying, "I distribute the bowl and robes," the deceased monk appears full of intense anger and wielding a club. The ghost demands that only "when you perform for me the removal of the body can you proceed with the distribution of the bowl and robe." Hearing this, the distributor-of-ropes flees from the cell and tells the Buddha what transpired. The Buddha agrees with the ghost and speaks on the proper way in which to perform funeral rites for a dead monk. This same series of events occurs three times: a second time when the distributor-of-ropes neglects to perform the honoring of the body, and finally when he fails to recite the Dharma and transfer the merit to the deceased. At each instance the Buddha agrees with the ghost and uses the opportunity to expound on the rules surrounding monastic funerary rites.³⁰

A similar tale of a monk who becomes a spirit-deity is set in Śrāvastī and begins when a wealthy merchant joins the monastic community. Over time he accumulates a hoard of the requisites including robes, bedding, seats, bowls, and medicine for illnesses. Despite this abundance, he never shares with the other monks. Eventually he dies, and as a result of his greed he is reborn in his own cell as a deformed hungry ghost and still refuses to give up any of his hoard to the other monks. The text then informs us that "the Blessed One for the purpose of assisting that deceased son of a good family, for the purpose of instilling fear in the community of students, and for the purpose of making fully apparent the disadvantageous consequences of selfishness went to that

place." Once there, the Buddha shames the hungry ghost into realizing the fruitlessness of his actions and reminds him that "this hoarding of bowls and robes" is "conductive of your own destruction." For fear of being reborn in the hells the hungry ghost gives up the goods to the Buddha, who assigns him the merit of the gift. This simple donation is enough to cause the hungry ghost to die and be reborn among the "hungry ghosts of great wealth." After receiving a final lesson in the Dharma, the ex-monk departs.³¹

This wealthy hungry ghost is not the only being to have benefited from interaction with the *saṃgha*. Other spirit-deities have also profited from attentiveness to the Buddhist teachings and occasionally have gained new levels of insight. For instance, in one tale a spirit-deity who resides in Jetavana follows the Buddha about, shading him with the branch of a tree.³² The Buddha recognizes the being's devotion and gives it instructions in the Dharma. As a result of this sermon, the spirit-deity gains the status of a "stream-winner" and vows to reside at the *stūpa* in constant veneration of the Buddhist relics. Gaining the rank of "stream-winner" (*sotapanna*) means that the spirit-deity achieved the first rank of Buddhist insight and, because he has destroyed the fetters that lead to improper action, he will now no longer be born into a life of pain.

The narratives discussed in this chapter reveal a complex interaction between spirit-deities and the *saṃgha* that operates on many levels. On one level the spirit-deities benefit from this interaction by having access to both the Buddhist teachings and the public. On another level it is the monks and nuns who benefit by having spirit-deities who are possessed of faith close at hand so that they can render assistance in times of need. Yet the spirit-deities also serve to regulate the actions of the community and ensure adherence to the monastic codes. Not only is a monk who breaks the code more susceptible to supernatural attacks but loyal spirit-deities may also report any infractions to the elders. Likewise, members of the *saṃgha* are confronted with the belief that if they are too greedy or too selfish they may find themselves listed among the ranks of the unhappy nonhumans. All of these interlocking relationships serve to reinforce proper modes of monastic behavior. After all, the Vinaya states that the Buddha confronted the hungry ghost of a former monk "for the purpose of instilling fear in the community of students, and for the purpose of making fully apparent the disadvantageous consequences of selfishness."³³ Recounting the frightening tales of what happened to those who broke the rules is an effective means of evoking correct behavior.

In all of these examples, the monks are far from being the conniving tricksters that were hypothesized at the beginning of the chapter. Rather, we see a group of people who are still very respectful and wary of the beings with

whom they share their homes. The monks and nuns, it seems, stepped carefully for fear of having to answer to an irate spirit-deity. Particularly when away from the monastery, the dangers of running across fearsome spirit-deities seem to have been amplified and, in some cases, these worst fears were realized.

In the tragic tale of the monk Saṃgharakṣita, the hero is forced to jump into the sea in order to save his lay companions from the wrath of powerful spirit-deities. In the story, Saṃgharakṣita was promised at birth to the Venerable Śāriputra but, before being turned over to the monastery, he was raised along with the other boys of merchant families in the town. Eventually Saṃgharakṣita entered the monastery, where he served his master well. One day, Saṃgharakṣita's friends came to the monastery and asked if he could accompany them on an ocean voyage so as to instruct them in the Dharma. Śāriputra gave Saṃgharakṣita permission to accompany his merchant friends on the voyage but warned, "You must endure fear and dreadful things." While at sea a group of fearsome *nāgas* began to rock the boat, and when the merchants asked, "May the god or *nāga* or *yakṣa* who lives here in the ocean tell us what he wants," a voice replied, "You must offer up the Noble Saṃgharakṣita to us!" Although the merchants were willing to die before giving up the monk, Saṃgharakṣita resolved himself to his fate and jumped overboard, thereby saving his friends.³⁴

In this heroic and tragic tale, the young monk Saṃgharakṣita demonstrates that there are limits against which most monks cannot stand. Although most Buddhist tales involve monks who successfully convert spirit-deities, stories like this one remind us that for most members of the *saṃgha* spirit-deities represented fearsome forces that were preferably appeased or avoided. These Vinaya accounts demonstrate that with the exception of a few bold monks and nuns mentioned in the narratives, most members of the Buddhist community held beliefs about spirit-deities that in no way differed from those of the public.³⁵ As we have seen, the Vinaya texts employ spirit-deities, and the threat they represent, as a deterrent to improper actions. Needless to say, these threats would be empty were there not a corresponding belief in the possibility of their being acted upon.

But what of our brave monks and nuns who seek out the haunts of spirit-deities so as to effect conversions? Clearly some members of the *saṃgha* must have started this process, and the archaeological record suggests that the Buddhists continuously sought out haunted areas over which to build their monasteries. We are therefore confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, most monks and nuns seem to have been fearful of spirit-deities, while on the other hand, there is ample evidence to suggest that the Buddhist community was

responsible for an active process of confronting and converting these beings into supporters of Buddhism. How is it that certain monks fared better than others in confronting spirit-deities?

Success in these confrontations consistently hinges on the relative power of the two adversaries. Accomplished monks fare better against spirit-deities than those who easily give in to fear. In the attack by Māra, the Buddha had to overcome both the temptation of Māra's daughters and the fear generated by the onslaught of his army. But because the Buddha was grounded in the true nature of reality, he could not be swayed by emotional states like fear or desire. It is this level of spiritual attainment that is required to overcome the worldly tricks practiced by spirit-deities.³⁶

In the narratives, monks who exhibit fear inevitably fail in their interactions with spirit-deities, whereas those who are unmoved manage to succeed. When the Buddha confronts the *yakkha* Sūciloma, the first words exchanged between them focus directly on the emotional state of the Buddha. Sūciloma says to the Buddha, "You are afraid of me, ascetic," and the Buddha responds, "I am not afraid of you, sir, nevertheless your touch is evil."³⁷ Likewise, in the conversion of the *nāga* Aravāla, the monk Majjhantika states that:

Even if the whole world including devas would come and terrify me, there is none here who would succeed in causing fear and trepidation. Great *nāga*, even if you were to raise and hurl on me the whole earth together with the oceans and mountains, you would not be able to generate fear and trepidation in me. On the other hand, O *nāga*-king, that would be your own destruction.³⁸

Once again the confrontation seems to hinge entirely on the emotional state of the monk. Even in the Vinaya tale of the cemetery-dwelling monk who takes the blanket from the hungry ghost with goiters, we are told that he succeeds because "a cemetery-dwelling monk is generally one of courage."³⁹ To remain unmoved seems to be the hallmark of an accomplished monk or nun.

Conversely, when the Buddha tells his fellow monks about his confrontation with the monk who had become a "nonhuman," we are told that he did so "for the purpose of instilling fear in the community of students."⁴⁰ Significantly, it is the neophytes that he is attempting to scare, not the more experienced monks, who are presumably advanced enough so as to not be easily swayed by fear or as likely to break the Vinaya codes. Ordinary monks and nuns, like the distributor-of-robos or the monks who discover the ghost of the greedy monk, are terrified by the sight of a spirit-deity and inevitably flee to enlist the aid of their superiors. Those who give in to emotion are ill-equipped to confront supernatural beings, whereas experienced monks who have

achieved advanced levels of insight consistently serve as protagonists in the tales of conversion.⁴¹

In a tale from the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, two holy men are meditating by the Ganges when the *nāga* Maṇikaṇṭha encircles the younger of the men and spreads his hoods over the ascetic's head. Eventually, the young holy man "through fear of this snake, became thin, wretched, of bad colour, yellowish, the veins showing all over his body." The elder holy man sees his friend's discomfort and suggests that he act rudely to the *nāga* so that the snake will doubt the man's holiness and no longer pay his respects. So the young man demands that the *nāga* give him his magical jewel, and this show of greed is sufficient to drive the *nāga* away. Ironically, the young ascetic soon becomes ill again, this time because he no longer gets to see the "beautiful snake."⁴² Although this sudden change of heart may seem out of place, it serves to make an important point. The young man, who is not a Buddhist monk, first falls ill due to fear and then falls equally ill due to his desire. Both of these passions, when not quieted, are dangerous and leave one vulnerable to the powers of even the most well-intentioned spirit-deities.

Even though at first glance it may appear that the tragic tale of Saṃgharakṣita does not conform to the model I have described, it must be remembered that it is only after he faces his fear and resolves to jump from the boat that the *nāgas* quiet down.⁴³ Likewise, the text also implies that Saṃgharakṣita did not die as a result of his heroic actions but was instead taken by the *nāgas* to preach in their undersea realm.

These observations open new questions. If members of the monastic community who have achieved high levels of spiritual insight are capable of achieving feats beyond the reach of most, was their special status marked physically within the space of the monastery? And by what means were these various ranks and honors attained?

Monastic Relics

Although most of the evidence explicating the qualities needed to overcome spirit-deities has been garnered from narrative accounts, the writers of these tales had specific motivations and sought to convey certain understandings to their readers and listeners. Many of the tales quoted in this chapter have been collected from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* texts that stipulate the codes of monastic behavior. The motivation driving the writers of these legal texts must have been to convince the audience to obey the rules that were so diligently recorded. This is not a format in which tales that were understood as being

fictional would serve much purpose. Only accounts of events that held the weight of veracity would be useful in reinforcing the importance of the laws. Presumably it was this same motivation that inspired the authors to record these decrees as being the words of the Buddha himself.

Furthermore, when this narrative evidence is added to the physical evidence of spirit-deity conversions and the somewhat more historical accounts of the Chinese pilgrims, it becomes probable that the attitudes toward spirit-deities expressed by monks and nuns in the literature were also true of their real-life counterparts. Although we may not accept the fanciful accounts of monks squaring off against spirit-deities as historical, it seems clear that the Buddhist community did. And for those who did believe in the truthfulness of the tales, the act of building a residence over a cemetery did indeed require a huge amount of courage and equanimity.

The textual narratives help to explain the historical processes of Buddhist expansion to their audience. They interpret the events and frame them in ways that emphasize the importance of the Buddhist teachings and the spiritual worth of the monastic community. Because the tales work to elevate the status of accomplished monks, one wonders if there are physical expressions of this same process. Are there physical remains of objects or structures that displayed the spiritual accomplishments of important monks to the public?

An interesting story is told about the *stūpa* built to hold the remains of the great monk Śāriputra. In this tale, the householder Anāthapiṇḍada desires to construct a *stūpa* for the monk's remains. So he tells the Buddha: "I would build a *stūpa* for the Noble Śāriputra in a suitably available place. There the great multitudes of men and women would be allowed to do honor as they wish." The Buddha gives his blessing to the idea, but Anāthapiṇḍada returns asking for advice on how such a *stūpa* should be built. The Buddha tells him:

"Make four terraces in succession; then make the base for the dome and the *harmikā* and the crowning pole; then having made one or two or three or four umbrellas, make up to thirteen, and place the rain receptacle on the top of the pole."

Although the Blessed One had said a *stūpa* of this sort should be made, since Anāthapiṇḍada did not know if a *stūpa* of such form was to be made for only the Noble Śāriputra or also for all Noble Ones, the monks asked the Blessed One concerning this matter, and the Blessed One said: "Householder, in regard to the *stūpa* of a Tathāgata a person should complete all parts. In regard to the *stūpa* of a solitary Buddha the rain receptacle should not be put in place; for an Arhat there are four umbrellas; for one who does not return

three; for one who returns two; for one who has entered the stream one. For ordinary good men the *stūpa* is to be made plain."⁴⁴

In this passage the Buddha stipulates that the *stūpas* used to house the remains of various monks should visually express their level of spiritual attainment. Therefore Śāriputra's *stūpa* closely resembled that of the Buddha. And, like a *stūpa* of the Buddha, Śāriputra's remains are described as being the focus of intense public worship.

The account of Śāriputra's *stūpa* reveals an ongoing practice of interring the remains of monks inside *stūpas*. However, most of the physical evidence of monastic burial at Buddhist sites is not nearly as organized as the above passage would suggest. Although many early sites like Bhāja, Mathurā, and Bedsā contain *stūpas* dedicated to the monastic dead, there is little evidence to verify whether the variations in decoration correspond to degrees of spiritual attainment achieved by the occupant. In at least one instance there is a *stūpa* that can reliably be identified with the remains of Śāriputra, and the site bears some characteristics that associate it with the passage quoted above.

At Sāñcī we find a *stūpa* that was indeed dedicated to Śāriputra. Inside the dome of *stūpa* 3 two cubical boxes were found that contain bone fragments.⁴⁵ According to Marshall and Foucher, the monastic relics from Sāñcī all date to earlier periods but were later interred within Śunga-period structures.⁴⁶ Inscriptions label the human remains in the two boxes as belonging to the important disciples of the Buddha, Mahāmoggallāna (Maudgalyāyana) and Śāriputra (Śāriputra).⁴⁷ Although the presence of these labeled relics is impressive, it is also significant that the placement of the *stūpa* seems to correspond with what is stated in the Vinaya. According to the text, when Anāthapiṇḍada asks the Buddha where *stūpas* dedicated to monks should be located, he replies:

As Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana sat when the Tathāgata was seated, just so the *stūpa* of one who has passed away into final Nirvāṇa is also to be placed. Moreover, in regard to the *stūpas* of each individual Elder, they are to be arranged according to seniority.⁴⁸

Significantly, Sāñcī *stūpa* 3 is located directly adjacent to *stūpa* 1, the Great *Stūpa*. Although there is no inscriptional evidence to verify whose relics rested inside this immense *stūpa*, its grand size and lavish decoration make it very likely that it was dedicated to Śākyamuni himself. If so, then the arrangement of the Sāñcī *stūpas* corresponds to what is stipulated in the Vinaya, with the only exception being that Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana are here sharing a single *stūpa*. Also in accordance with the Vinaya is the fact that the *stūpa* con-

taining the relics of less renowned monks is positioned farther away from the Buddha's relics than those of Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana.

Located down the hill from *stūpas* 1 and 3 is Sāñcī *stūpa* 2. This *stūpa*, like *stūpa* 3, is unusual in that this single mound contained the relics of several monks. The relics of at least ten important monks were found in four reliquaries, which were, in turn, contained within a larger stone box.⁴⁹ Each of the reliquaries, which Marshall and Foucher refer to as relic caskets, bears inscriptions identifying the monks whose ashes and bones are contained within. Casket one bears the names Kāsapagota, Majhima, and Hāriputa; casket two mentions only Vāchi-Suvijayita; Mahavanāya, Āpagira, and Koḍiniputa are mentioned on casket three; and Kosikiputa, Gotiputa, and Mogaliputa are contained in casket four. All these names are preceded in the inscriptions by the term *sapurisa*, which Marshall and Foucher translate as "saint," and on the relic box the monks Kāsapagota and Vāchi-Suvijayita are referred to as *ara* or *arhat*.⁵⁰ If they are correct that the same title, *arhat*, can be used for all the monks, it may be that all of the men interred here shared a similar level of spiritual attainment.⁵¹ Unfortunately it seems likely that this translation is in fact incorrect and that nowhere do early inscriptions on burial sites make reference to classical terms for spiritual attainment.⁵²

Scholars have argued convincingly that the term *ara* is not the spiritual title *arhat* but may in fact simply be the term *ārya* or "noble."⁵³ Because *sapurisa* translates literally as "a good or worthy man," this explanation clarifies why the two terms (*ara* and *sapurisa*) are used interchangeably on the Sāñcī inscriptions. The presence of titles on these monastic *stūpas* does not, therefore, seem to correspond to levels of spiritual insight as expressed in the Vinayas. And even if the rationale behind the placement of these various relics in a single *stūpa* were linked to a variant system of monastic ranking, in the absence of further evidence there is no way to prove it definitively.

It is also difficult to discern any significance in the way the monks' remains have been placed into the four caskets. Marshall and Foucher refer to the possibility that the monks Kāsapagota and Majhima were colleagues on a mission to the Himalayas and that the monk Mogaliputra was the pupil of Gotiputra.⁵⁴ So it can tentatively be suggested that the monks whose remains are interred together in a single casket were associates in life. Beyond these two brief correlations little else is known about these monks and their accomplishments.

Relics from some of these same monks can be found at the nearby sites of Andher and Sonārī, suggesting that they had an importance within the entire region. Gotiputra, Majhima, Kāsapagota, and Kosikiputa are named on caskets from Sonārī, whereas Gotiputra, Hāriputa, and Mogaliputa are named on in-

dividual caskets from Andher.⁵⁵ Others of the monks listed at Sāñcī may also have relics at these neighboring sites but, if so, their names have been given slightly variant spellings. Nevertheless, it would seem that according to whatever standard by which they were measured, these monks were considered important throughout the region. And although the exact criteria for interment in a *stūpa* remain elusive, there can be no doubt that some monks earned this honor, while many others did not.

At Bhājā a series of fourteen moderately sized *stūpas* are carved entirely from the face of the cliff. These *stūpas* vary in diameter from 6 feet 3 inches to 4 feet 8 inches. Based on the epigraphy and artistic style of these monuments, Vidya Dehijia has dated them to between 70 and 50 BCE.⁵⁶ Although the inscriptions on these *stūpas* have been badly eroded, James Fergusson and James Burgess have determined that they are the names of various monks.⁵⁷

These monuments to the monastic dead of Bhājā vary in their decoration and elaboration. All these *stūpas* are decorated with the rail pattern around the upper portions of their drums, but some have simple, square carved *harmikās* on their domes, whereas others are capped by elaborate stone crowns. The three most elaborately decorated *stūpas* have stone umbrellas (*chattras*) carved into the roof of the cave itself (figure 6.1). Only one of these *stūpas* is connected

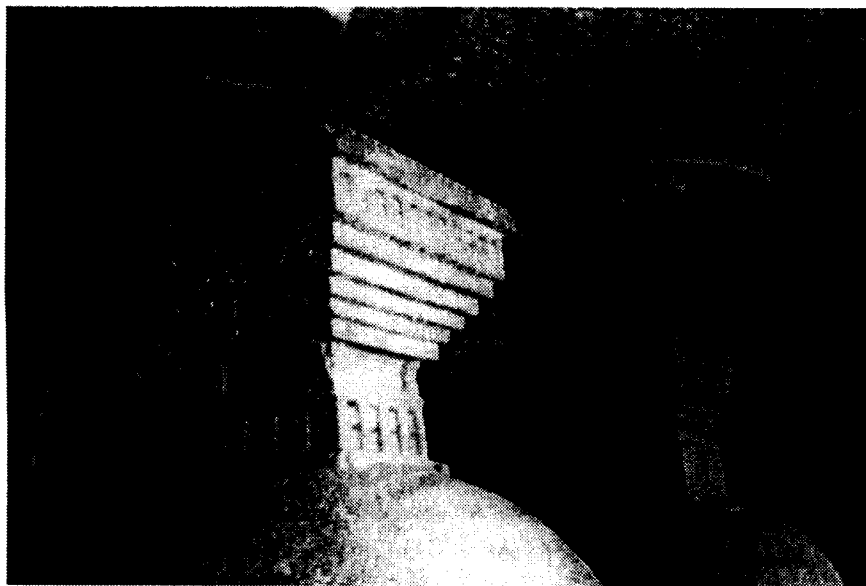


FIGURE 6.1. Monastic *Stūpas* and Rock-Cut Umbrellas. Bhājā. Ca. 100–70 BCE. Photo by Robert DeCaroli.

to its carved umbrella with a stone shaft, however, so it is assumed that the other two at one time held wooden shafts connecting their domes to the roof. Two of the *stūpas* actually contain small holes with lipped depressions around the edges that, at one time, may have been fitted with lids and used for holding relics. Also, on four of these *stūpas* (the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth by Burgess's counting) inscriptions have been located.⁵⁸ As was previously mentioned, these inscriptions are badly weathered, but the only titles attributed to these monks are the terms *thera* or "elder" and *bhadanta* or "reverend," and these titles have no correlation to the complexity of the *stūpa* on which they are found.

Sites such as Sāñcī and at Bhājā provide us the earliest examples of monastic burials within *stūpas*. This architectural form was previously used by the Buddhists only to contain the relics of buddhas. It was presumably the spiritual power and authority of the Buddha that was being engendered at these sites, so that adherents could reap the spiritual and karmic benefits generated through acts of devotion performed there. In the first century BCE, a parallel trend can be identified in which the relics of important monks were enshrined, and presumably venerated, granting them an authority whose expression in architectural media, at least, rivals that of the Buddha. Yet despite the importance of this process, we are still uncertain of the criteria by which a monk was deemed worthy of this honor.

This does not mean that there was *no* system of monastic ranking at work. Perhaps in an alternate system the titles *ara* and *thera* held particular significance, or perhaps the qualities that entitled one to burial in a *stūpa* were not designated through titles at all. Ultimately, all we can say about monastic ranking and burial practices is that not every monk had the honor of being interred in a *stūpa*. Giuseppe De Marco has pointed out that only rarely were people buried in ancient India, and only those who were in some way remarkable or different were given this special form of burial.⁵⁹ This form of funerary practice demarcated the resting-place of important (or feared) individuals, including *yogins* and kings. The pre-Buddhist history of this form of burial makes the simple act of placing monastic remains in *stūpas* a noteworthy action.

Funerary sites are not the only locations in which evidence of monastic ranking can be found, however. Monastic hierarchy is also evident in the remains of certain Buddhist monastic structures. Cave 12 in Ellora, the Tin Thal, has three levels that can only be accessed from a single staircase. At each level the stairwell has a small room set off from it, which may imply that a monk was stationed here to regulate access to the upper levels. This configuration of the cave has led some to speculate that the plan of the cave may be "related to Buddhist practices in which three stages might be identified: an initiation or

introductory phase, a more advanced practice, and finally, the stage for the true *ācāryas*, or highly developed spiritual masters. Such use of levels in architecture is found in Nepali Buddhism, and it is probable that the Nepali practice was based on an Indic precedent such as this."⁶⁰ Likewise, in the *Mahāvamsa* a description of a monastic building is given in which in each level of the structure is assigned to monks of a certain rank. The text states:

When the Lohapāsāda [an *uposatha*-house] was completed, the king assembled the Sangha. . . . The bhikkhus who were yet worldlings, stood on the first storey; and masters of the Tipiṭaka on the second. Those starting with Stream-winners—each on a storey—stood on the third storey and so forth. The Arahants stood on the highest four storeys.⁶¹

The titles used in this text provide evidence that distinctions were at times made between monks of varying degrees of spiritual attainment. Xuanzang describes a similar type of differentiation between monks in his account of the northern monastery of Nālandā. He writes that "those who cannot discuss questions out of the Tripiṭaka are little esteemed," and that "If men of other quarters desire to enter and partake of the discussions, the keeper of the gate proposes some hard questions; many are unable to answer, and retire."⁶² When all of this evidence is taken together, it seems certain that the *saṃgha* did indeed have ranks that were not based solely on seniority but rather on levels of knowledge or insight.

So far we have examined two ways in which certain members of the *saṃgha* were given special distinction, that is, in terms of burial practices and of access. Yet there is no way to link such forms of monastic hierarchy to success in dealing with spirit-deities. It is true that many of the monks and nuns who confront spirit-deities in the texts are referred to as "accomplished," but we have no way of knowing how that accomplishment was measured or marked. In fact, there is only one reference I know of in which specific spiritual practices of the monk are associated with his success in taming a spirit-deity. In the Vinaya tale in which the cemetery-dwelling monk takes the blanket from the hungry ghost, we are told that "a cemetery-dwelling monk is generally one of courage," which implies that this practice of the *dhutangas*, which includes taking up residence in a cemetery, hardens monks against fearful apparitions.⁶³

The evidence does suggest, however, that monastic hierarchies did matter. Only certain members of the *saṃgha* were honored with special distinctions. And even though we do not know how the achievement of a rank was measured, it seems clear that these levels were well understood at the time. This prevalence for establishing hierarchies in various aspects of monastic life and

the frequency with which low-ranking monks run to their superiors when faced with a spirit-deity suggests that only certain members of the community were recognized as being “accomplished” enough to confront spirit-deities. This would help explain the somewhat bipolar relationship the *saṃgha* had with supernatural beings. On the one hand, the *saṃgha* actively confronted and converted spirit-deities for the benefit of the larger community; on the other hand, these same beings were used to scare members of the monastic community into obeying the Vinaya laws. By recognizing that only certain monks and nuns were skilled enough to brave the danger presented by such beings, both circumstances can be satisfactorily explained. The presence of spirit-deities as guardians at the periphery of a *stūpa* or monastic complex could have served as a potent marker of the spiritual authority held by the person or relics contained within.

We remain, therefore, uncertain as to which qualities made one monk or nun more capable of confronting supernatural beings than any other. Although it is clear that qualities like equanimity, patience, and courage characterize members of the *saṃgha* who defeat spirit-deities, it is yet unclear if these are personal traits or qualities that are indicative of a certain level of spiritual attainment. Clearly more than simple age or seniority is at work, because in some texts even mere novices have the ability to overcome spirit-deities. However, such initiates are often described as being extraordinary in their skill or gifted with supernatural assistance.⁶⁴

Fortunately, the uncertainty lies in regard to what qualities a monk or nun needed to defeat a spirit-deity, not in whether or not they did. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that monks and nuns were believed to have converted spirit-deities and actively incorporated these beings into the Buddhist fold. And they seem to have done so with an intense fervor. As Buddhism traveled from the north of the subcontinent to the south, the same techniques were employed as local and regional deities were absorbed into the Buddhist belief system. Yet this methodology for expansion did not stop at the borders of modern India. Similar processes can be identified everywhere Buddhism spread.