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# EXPEDITION **SILK ROAD**

*Journey to the West*

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**Treasures from the Hermitage**

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# CULTURAL CONTACTS ON THE SILK ROAD

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## **Buddhism**

Evgeny Kiy

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## **Other Religions on the Silk Road**

Pavel Lurje

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## **Languages, Writing and Literature**

Pavel Lurje

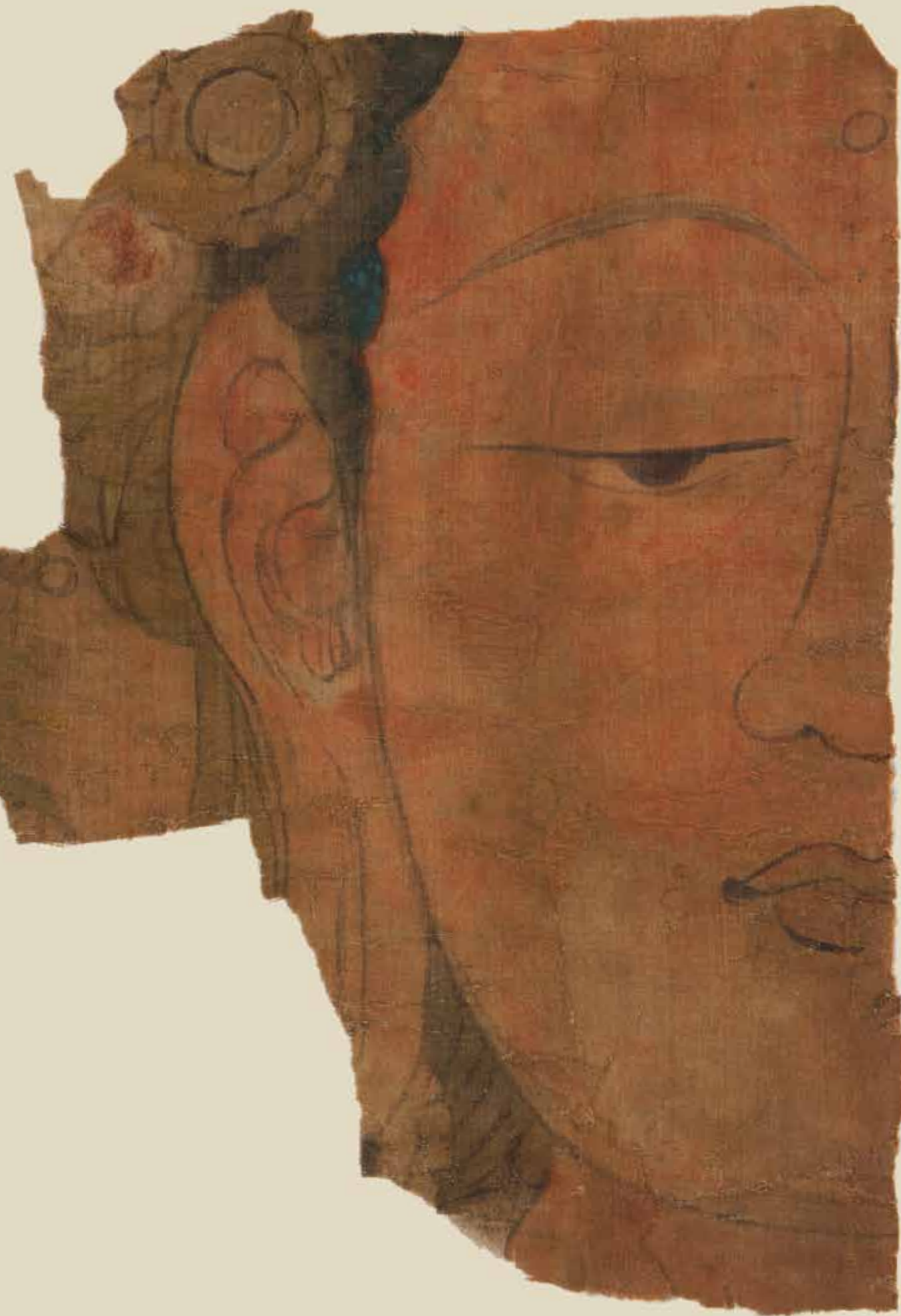
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47 Face of a Bodhisattva  
Dunhuang, 8th–9th century



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# Buddhism

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Evgeny Kiy

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**Buddhism, the most ancient of the world religions, is based on the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, the son of a chief of the Śākya clan, later known as Buddha Śākyamuni ('Awakened one of the Śākya family'). Buddha preached in India, in the north-east valley of the Ganges and if we combine traditional biographies and modern research then it is clear he must have lived some time between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE. Buddhists believe that the path he taught will lead to awakening or enlightenment (*bodhi*), to freedom from suffering and from the endless cycle of births and deaths (*saṃsāra*) and to the vision of reality as it truly is.**

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## Early Buddhism

Traditional Buddhist chronology starts with the *parinirvāṇa* of Buddha (the end of his earthly existence and 'complete nirvana') in 543 BCE, a date that has been postulated by modern scholars to be mere convention. Buddha's teachings laid the basis for the formation of a Buddhist community, but little information survives about its early period. To a great extent, the first centuries of Buddhism were a time when new schools and trends were formed, uniting followers of different interpretations of Buddha's teachings and of the rules of monastic behaviour. For centuries the founder's teachings were passed on orally and their written encapsulation in the Pāli Canon, i.e. a collection of texts in the Pāli language, the fullest surviving set of early Buddhist scriptures, dates from the 1st century BCE. The form of Buddhism now widespread in the South-East Asian region is early or Southern Buddhism, sometimes collectively and not quite correctly called by its later appellation Hīnayāna ('Lesser Vehicle'). Over time, and during the course of its subsequent reception and adaptation by different peoples, Buddhism was to change considerably.

## The Emergence of the Mahāsāṃghika Tradition

The appearance of the tradition of Mahāsāṃghika ('the great assembly') is dated to the second half of the 4th century BCE: followers sought for greater openness within the Buddhist community, involving not only those who had taken monastic vows but wider social groups. This trend spread from Magadha via Mathurā to Gandhāra and Bactria (on what is now Afghan territory), and then to Khotan (now in China). It is thought that the Mahāyāna ('Great Vehicle') tradition developed out of the Mahāsāṃghika around the start of the Current Era.

## The Spread of Buddhism: Mahāyāna

According to the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism each sentient being can attain Buddhahood. Among many other specific characteristics, one of the most remarkable features of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the altruistic concept of the bodhisattva: it is thought that a bodhisattva, guided by wisdom and compassion, acts for the benefit of all sentient beings. These teachings would not seem to have found support among the more conservative followers of Buddhism and therefore, along with other schools and trends, the Mahāyāna almost immediately moved beyond the Indian subcontinent, spreading across Central Asia (although, according to Xuanzang, at Kucha and Karashahr the population followed Hīnayāna Buddhism) and eventually reaching China. During the first millennium of the Current Era the different Indian schools and trends co-existed

harmoniously, but the growing strength of Hinduism (Brahmanism) and the Muslim conquests, among other things, led to the gradual decline and exclusion of Buddhism from Hindustan in the 11th and 12th centuries.

### **Buddhism and Cultural Exchange in Asia**

Buddhism's spread beyond the borders of the Indian subcontinent became one of the most important components in inter-cultural exchange in the history of mankind. It became known across the vast expanses of Asia, amongst different cultures and different peoples who spoke very different languages. Some of these cultures were much transformed by Buddhism, others were even shaped under its influence. Buddhism was to become the state religion in certain regions during certain periods.

One of the key Buddhist centres in Central Asia was Bactria. The Greco-Bactrian ruler Demetrius supported the new religion and the first monasteries at Termez (now on the Uzbek-Afghan border) date from the 1st century CE. Buddhism flourished in Bactria under the Kushan, during which period it also came to be imported into the Tarim Basin (in China's Xinjiang region). Neither the seizure of the Kushan Kingdom by the Zoroastrian Sasanians nor its subjugation by the Hephthalites, opponents of Buddhism, destroyed the Buddhist tradition in Bactria (Tokharistan), which flourished once more during the Turkic conquest of the land: it was at this time that the gigantic statues of Buddha were erected at Bamiyan (central Afghanistan)<sup>1</sup> and the monastery built at Adzhina-tepe (Tajikistan). The practice of Buddhism in the oases of East Turkestan along both the northern and southern routes of the Silk Road from the first half of the 1st millennium CE onward played an important role in the spread of the religion to China. The Muslim conquests and the gradual conversion of the population to Islam led to the decline and cessation of the Buddhist tradition all across the territory of Middle Asia and East Turkestan.

Despite the disappearance of the religion in some parts of Asia, Mahāyāna Buddhism, sometimes called Northern Buddhism (since it was practised north of India), became a world religion. Through the efforts of numerous preachers and translators, some of them famous, some of whose names have been lost, Buddhist texts were translated into different languages and gradually the two regional traditions of Northern Buddhism that exist today took shape: first Chinese, then Tibetan. Eventually these two traditions spread among the neighbouring peoples of the Far East and Central Asia, unfolding very differently. As a result Buddhism in the Far East differs greatly from its Indian prototype, while the Tibetans sought to preserve

and continue their adopted religion as closely as possible. Despite this, the nature of the core teachings allows us to speak of Buddhist unity, of the existence of a specific and demonstrable invariable, regardless of geography.

### **Buddhist Teachings and the Unity of Buddhism**

Born and shaped within the context of Indian religiosity, Buddhism, like Jainism,<sup>2</sup> is considered to be one of the 'non-orthodox' teachings amongst the different religions of India itself, i.e. those which do not recognise many of the fundamental postulates of Brahminism (Hinduism). It differs radically from the most famous and best studied monotheistic religions: one of its key tenets, for example, is the assertion of the lack of an individual ego (the soul) or a single omnipotent god, and that belief in them is an error. Nonetheless, Buddha is seen as having reached full awakening or enlightenment and having emerged from the bounds of all theoretical concepts and religious dogma. Filled with compassion for all living beings, he preaches certain doctrines and corresponding practices and in this sense Buddha is a healer and his teachings are a medicine. The practice of his teachings represents a process of healing. But in the final analysis those teachings are not some final 'truth': they are *upāya-kauśalya* or 'skill in means', instruments to rid oneself of suffering, remedies that will no longer be required by those who have healed themselves fully.

Buddhism was never a single teaching or a single system: since different methods are required to heal different ailments, a variety of teachings must be aimed at the multitude of sentient beings that differ so greatly in the level of development of their consciousness, teachings that differ from and sometimes even contradict each other. There was thus no orthodoxy or heresy in Buddhism, no single church which might limit or exclude or, by contrast, unite. Throughout its history Buddhism has been divided into different trends and different philosophical religious schools which perceive the previous stages in the tradition simply as preparatory steps on the path to awakening, necessary to certain categories of living beings. It was perhaps this inherent pluralism that led to Buddhism being adopted by so many very different Asian peoples.

<sup>1</sup> There were West and East Grand Buddha statues at Bamiyan, 55 and 38 m high respectively. They were blown up by the Taliban in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Jainism is one of the Indian national religions, its total number of followers currently estimated at about four million. According to Jain doctrine each sentient being has an individual eternal soul. It prescribes a path of non-violence towards all living beings and postulates equality of all forms of life. The path to liberation from the endless cycle of lives and deaths lies through right vision or view, right knowledge and right conduct, which are known as the 'triple gems' or jewels of Jainism.

67 Fragment of a Wall Painting  
from the Front of the Socle  
of a Sculpture of Buddha  
Śākyamuni's Nirvana  
Bezeklik, Turfan, 9th century (?)



