3.8: Expansion of Buddhism

IV. From India Outward

Buddhism spread rapidly throughout the land of its birth. Missionaries dispatched by King Ashoka introduced the religion to southern India and to the northwest part of the subcontinent. According to inscriptions from the Ashokan period, missionaries were sent to countries along the Mediterranean, although without success.

A. Asian Expansion

King Ashoka’s son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta are credited with the conversion of Sri Lanka. From the beginning of its history there, Theravada was the state religion of Sri Lanka.

According to tradition, Theravada was carried to Myanmar from Sri Lanka during the reign of Ashoka, but no firm evidence of its presence there appears until the 5th century AD. From Myanmar, Theravada spread to the area of modern Thailand in the 6th century. It was adopted by the Thai people when they finally entered the region from southwestern China between the 12th and 14th centuries. With the rise of the Thai Kingdom, it was adopted as the state religion. Theravada was adopted by the royal house in Laos during the 14th century.

Both Mahayana and Hinduism had begun to influence Cambodia by the end of the 2nd century AD. After the 14th century, however, under Thai influence, Theravada gradually replaced the older establishment as the primary religion in Cambodia.

About the beginning of the Christian era, Buddhism was carried to Central Asia. From there it entered China along the trade routes by the early 1st century AD. Although opposed by the Confucian orthodoxy and subject to periods of
persecution in 446, 574-77, and 845, Buddhism was able to take root, influencing Chinese culture and, in turn, adapting itself to Chinese ways. The major influence of Chinese Buddhism ended with the great persecution of 845, although the meditative Zen, or Ch’an (from Sanskrit dhyana, “meditation”), sect and the devotional Pure Land sect continued to be important.

From China, Buddhism continued its spread. Confucian authorities discouraged its expansion into Vietnam, but Mahayana’s influence there was beginning to be felt as early as AD 189. According to traditional sources, Buddhism first arrived in Korea from China in AD 372. From this date Korea was gradually converted through Chinese influence over a period of centuries.

Buddhism was carried into Japan from Korea. It was known to the Japanese earlier, but the official date for its introduction is usually given as AD 552. It was proclaimed the state religion of Japan in 594 by Prince Shotoku.

Buddhism was first introduced into Tibet through the influence of foreign wives of the king, beginning in the 7th century AD. By the middle of the next century, it had become a significant force in Tibetan culture. A key figure in the development of Tibetan Buddhism was the Indian monk Padmasambhava, who arrived in Tibet in 747. His main interest was the spread of Tantric Buddhism, which became the primary form of Buddhism in Tibet. Indian and Chinese Buddhists vied for influence, and the Chinese were finally defeated and expelled from Tibet near the end of the 8th century.

Some seven centuries later Tibetan Buddhists had adopted the idea that the abbots of its great monasteries were reincarnations of famous bodhisattvas. Thereafter, the chief of these abbots became known as the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lamas ruled Tibet as a theocracy from the middle of the 17th century until the seizure of Tibet by China in 1950. See Tibetan Buddhism.

B. New Sects

Several important new sects of Buddhism developed in China and flourished there and in Japan, as well as elsewhere in East Asia. Among these, Ch’an, or Zen, and Pure Land, or Amidism, were most important.

Zen advocated the practice of meditation as the way to a sudden, intuitive realization of one’s inner Buddha nature. Founded by the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who arrived in China in 520, Zen emphasizes practice and personal enlightenment rather than doctrine or the study of scripture. See Zen.

Instead of meditation, Pure Land stresses faith and devotion to the Buddha Amitabha, or Buddha of Infinite Light, as a means to rebirth in an eternal paradise known as the Pure Land. Rebirth in this Western Paradise is thought to depend on the power and grace of Amitabha, rather than to be a reward for human piety. Devotees show their devotion to Amitabha with countless repetitions of the phrase “Homage to the Buddha Amitabha.” Nonetheless, a single sincere recitation of these words may be sufficient to guarantee entry into the Pure Land.

A distinctively Japanese sect of Mahayana is Nichiren Buddhism, which is named after its 13th-century founder. Nichiren believed that the Lotus Sutra contains the essence of Buddhist teaching. Its contents can be epitomized by the formula “Homage to the Lotus Sutra,” and simply by repeating this formula the devotee may gain enlightenment.