

LIFE ALONG THE SILK ROAD

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The Monk's Tale

Chudda, 855-870

The Kingdom of Kashmir is about 2,000 miles in circumference and is surrounded by mountains. The soil is suitable for growing grain and abounds with fruit and flowers. Here also are dragon-holes, fragrant mounds and medicinal plants. . . . The people wear leather doublets and clothes of white linen. They are light and frivolous, of a weak, pusillanimous disposition . . . handsome but given to cunning. There are both heretics and believers, the latter numbering some 5,000.

Xuanzang, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, AD 646

*selling
meds
as a pilgrim
travelling w/ a
caravan*

THE YOUNG MAN watched intently as the brown-robed foreign monk dipped his brush in ink and traced out a complex pattern on a square of rough paper. The monk waited for the ink to dry before giving the paper to the young man with careful instructions. He must make copies and burn them on a certain day each month while reciting a spell. The young man handed over a few copper coins and pushed his way out through the crowd milling around the table. He had come to the monk because his hair had started to fall out a few months before. He had already paid a local herbalist for a remedy – juice from pounded watermelon leaves that had to be rubbed into the head – and he had also tried head massage, but neither had worked. He had come to the temple fair that morning in the hope of finding a more effective cure.

It was 870 and the monk was a Kashmiri called Chudda. He had been practising medicine in the Silk Road town of Dunhuang for



*Charm for ensuring order in the house,
from a ninth-century printed almanac*

nearly fifteen years, living in the monastery next to the cliffs twelve miles outside the town. On this day he erected his stall at another monastery in the centre of the town, a small establishment with only a score of monks living in the little wooden rooms lining the perimeter walls. They had reserved the best pitches by the small wooden gateway, selling scrolls, paintings, booklets and prayer sheets offering 'protection against all conceivable misfortunes'. Townspeople and visitors wandered in and out of the monastery, stopping to light incense sticks to the two guardian warrior statues protecting the gate, and then idling along looking at the many stalls which lined the main path and spilled out into the adjoining marketplace. Other monks, local and itinerant, offered various methods of divination. One of the most popular would give those who consulted him a tube containing several long, wooden spills which they shook until one of the spills worked its way loose. Each spill was inscribed with a cryptic line of characters, only intelligible to the master at the stall who would consult his manual before pronouncing its meaning. Others offered the interpretation of dreams and strange events, of hexagrams or of physiognomy. Then there were the almanac readers. Almanacs were on sale everywhere and, though the Chinese emperor had forbidden their ownership by individuals, many people possessed one. Few, however, were sufficiently skilled or literate to decipher their cryptic messages, and they willingly paid the diviner for his interpretation.

The brown-robed monk was not the only one offering medical services: there were herbalists with small piles of dried flora and fauna laid out on a cloth in front of them, acupuncturists, palmists,

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doctors who were expert in reading the pulses, masseurs, surgeons, children's doctors, and both Buddhist and Daoist exorcism specialists. If none of these remedies worked, the afflicted could pay a scribe to copy a Buddhist scripture, a sutra, to which was added an appeal to Buddha. Alternatively they might recite a prayer designed for the purpose or pay for it to be read during a Buddhist service, or make offerings of incense and fruit.

The drugs on sale came from far and wide, for the traditional medicines of Greece, Arabia, Persia, India, Tibet and China were all on offer in Dunhuang. Indeed, an official Chinese *materia medica* of this period listed no fewer than 850 drugs, with detailed instructions on their preparation and administration. However, medicine was not confined solely to the administration of herbal remedies. There were schools of acupuncturists, pulse readers and masseurs. In India an operation for cataracts had been developed, and Greek and Persian doctors were famed for operations on the brain. There was even a handbook that advised Chinese magistrates on the conduct of post-mortems in cases of suspicious death, instructing them, for example, on how to differentiate between someone who had died before entering the water and someone who had drowned.

Spells, charms and exorcism were an essential part of most traditions. A Chinese cure for possession by demons called for pulverized cinnabar and realgar, roasted croton seed, root of hellebore and aconite, arsenphyrite, burned for half a day in the earth, and a broiled centipede, with feet removed (this must have taken some time). The resulting mixture was passed through a sieve and combined with honey to form small pills. The patient was advised to take one pill daily, with an additional dose at midnight if the symptoms were not relieved, and to avoid 'pork, cold water, and fresh bloody meat' during the treatment.

Chudda had entered his local Buddhist monastery in the Himalayan kingdom of Kashmir as a child, many years before, taking the full precepts – the vows of abstinence – to become a fully ordained monk in his twenties. By the ninth century most of north India, home to Buddhism, had been conquered by Turkic

and then Hindu dynasties, and Buddhism was in decline. The rulers of Kashmir, the Karkota dynasty, were Hindus, but were fairly tolerant of Buddhism.

Like many Buddhist monks, Chudda had only a little learning and no inclination to become a great scholar. Nor was he particularly interested in ideological or philosophical questions. Joining the monastery was not a great act of faith, but simply something one did, a way of life. Not that Chudda was without faith: he kept his vows and attended all the services. He had heard from itinerant monks who had travelled to China that there, when the mood in the chanting hall became intense, some monks mutilated themselves in the name of Buddha, searing the flesh on their arms or burning a finger until only the stump was left. Chudda was puzzled by this practice for he had been taught that Śākyamuni rejected the extreme acts of the Hindu ascetics, but there were also many stories of Buddha in his previous reincarnations mutilating his own body to help others. In one of the most famous, Buddha threw himself from a cliff in order to provide a tiger with food for her starving cubs; and a chapter of *The Lotus Sutra*, a popular text, described how a follower burned himself to death in honour of Buddha: 'Anyone who follows his example – even if he only burns a finger or toe – he shall exceed one who offers a country, a city, wife or children, or even all the lands, mountains, forests, rivers, ponds and precious objects as offerings.'

Self-mutilation in all religions is sometimes motivated by baser desires: seeking distraction from his lust, a contemporaneous European Christian monk burned each of his fingers in turn over the flames of a candle. Chudda himself had heard of a Chinese Buddhist monk severing his penis. The monk had written that he had done so to make himself undesirable to women, rather than to curb his own desires. Buddha had easily resisted the temptations sent to distract him during his final meditation under the Bo tree, but not all monks and nuns found a celibate life easy. The castrated Chinese monk later attracted crowds of thousands to his sermons, although whether it was his eloquence or their curiosity that drew them is not recorded.

Salacious stories about illicit relations between monks and nuns circulated widely. *A Poetical Essay on Supreme Joy*, an eighth-

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century Chinese handbook on sex, contained a chapter on monasteries in which were recounted tales of homosexual monks, and nuns who slept with 'tall, dark foreign monks with enormous cocks and closely shaved heads'. Doubtless an illustrated version was also available. A few communities of monks in Central Asia disregarded the Buddhist rule forbidding sex, and lived in the town with their wives and children.

Chudda had heard many such tales of Central Asia and China. Two centuries previously the famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang had stayed in Kashmir for two years on his way to India to gather Buddhist scriptures. Xuanzang was impressed by the level of debate in Kashmir and collected texts on logic to take back to China. There were now other Chinese monks in residence in the Kashmiri monastery and Chudda had learned to speak and write a little of their strange language. He had long wanted to travel and in the spring of 855 he decided to make a pilgrimage to Wutai mountain, north-east of the Chinese capital, Chang'an.

Wutai was the home of a famous bodhisattva, one who, although on the verge of enlightenment, delays leaving this world in order to help others. The bodhisattva of Wutai mountain, Mañjuśrī, was able to appear in whatever form he chose and, because immense benefits accrued from simply seeing him, pilgrims flocked there, keen to interpret anything unusual as a sighting, be it an unusual cloud, a strange animal, a beggar encountered on a mountain path, or Buddha himself. The kingdom of Kashmir had been in conflict for several years, and Chudda had vowed to dedicate his pilgrimage to peace and the flourishing of Buddhism in his country. Once he had made his decision he was inundated with requests from fellow monks. Some wanted him to carry letters to their friends and fellow countrymen along the route; others wanted copies of certain sutras, jade rosary beads or silk cloth; still others asked for souvenirs from Wutai mountain.

It was more than 3,000 miles to the Chinese capital and several hundred more to Wutai mountain, and Chudda could not expect to be back for well over a year. His servant, a young novice from a poor local family, asked to accompany him. Chudda arranged horses for them both and two pack ponies for their luggage. They would seek food and lodgings in monasteries or in the homes of

lay believers, but they had to carry fodder for the horses, some money for incidental expenses, and extra clothes for the mountain crossing. He also packed a medicine chest of herbs and charms.

Chudda had decided against travelling through Tibet to the north-east of Kashmir, though many former pilgrims had done so in the past. The last Tibetan emperor had been assassinated in 842 and the country was still unsettled. There were four main routes out of Kashmir, all with gates and guards. The quickest route to the Silk Road was through the north gate to the Gilgit river valley, but Chudda rejected this in favour of the western gate. This would take him through the ancient kingdoms of Gandhāra and Uḍḍiyāna to the north-west of Kashmir, countries in which Buddha himself had lived in his former reincarnations.

It was late spring when Chudda and his servant left the monastery and headed west through the orchards of apricots up the Jhelum valley. The mountain slopes were covered in new grass and flowers – edelweiss, yellow gentian, martagon lilies and cyclamen – and the pilgrims could see the capital city (present-day Srinagar) spread out below them on either bank of the river. It was only one day's stage from their monastery to the swampy Wular lake, and from here the valley narrowed to a gorge, the fruit trees giving way to forests of fir and silver birch. The stone frontier gate was placed at the gorge's narrowest part. All Chudda's papers were in order and the Kashmiri guards allowed them to pass without any delay. From the gorge gate at Baramula it was five days' journey along the Jhelum river to what is now Muzaffarabad and another couple of days across the Jhelum–Indus watershed to the Punjab, the route of today's Karakorum highway.

The road led south out of the high mountains to Takṣaśilā (called Taxila by the Greeks, the name by which it is known today). The city and the land around it were then a dependency of Hindu-ruled Kashmir but had an illustrious history of their own. In the fifth century BC Takṣaśilā had been the site of a famous university offering courses in mathematics, astronomy, medicine and other subjects. The *kharoṣṭhī* script was developed here to write the Sanskrit and Gandhāri languages and, in the fourth century, Alexander the Great passed through on his way south to India, pausing to talk philosophy with the locals. But it

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was in the third century that Takṣaśilā's importance as a Buddhist site began, with the succession of Aśoka in 272 BC as king of the Mauryan dynasty whose lands included both Takṣaśilā and Kashmir. After his conversion to Buddhism following a particularly bloody battle, Aśoka had spent his reign proselytizing and had erected stone inscriptions throughout his country in the local languages, urging religious tolerance, the foundation of hospitals for both humans and animals, and the cultivation of medicinal plants. Aśoka also disinterred the ashes of Buddha who had been cremated and buried in eight stupas, or shrines, in the Ganges valley and, so tradition says, redistributed them to the main cities in his country. In Takṣaśilā the Dharamarajika stupa was built to house one portion.

After this Takṣaśilā had many rulers, all of them tolerant of Buddhism, until the city was invaded and destroyed twice, in the third and fifth centuries AD, by nomads from the north. The monasteries and stupas were burned, the monks were killed or fled, and the country did not recover its former glory. Chudda had heard from travelling monks of the decline of Buddhism in the countries west of Kashmir but he was still surprised at the number of ruins in and around the city. Of the fifty monasteries and stupas that had surrounded Takṣaśilā in its heyday, only a couple were still occupied.

In the second century AD the original small stupa at Takṣaśilā holding the Buddha's ashes had been enclosed within a much larger stupa that was plastered and covered in gold. Surrounding it were numerous other votive stupas and monastery buildings, but most were in ruins. The gold leaf from the main stupa had flaked away and the decorative statues of Buddha and bodhisattvas had been decapitated and mutilated. The friezes around the stupa narrated episodes from Buddha's life, and Chudda walked round it clockwise (so as to keep his right, or clean, hand next to the stupa) in silent worship. He made an offering of fruit and incense, and draped a silk banner on the stupa itself, gestures he would repeat thousands of times at thousands of sites before his return from China.

The monk and his servant visited several other sites at Takṣaśilā before continuing their journey. The road now led

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north-westwards into the Indus valley at Hund and thence back into the mountains, passing the rock inscriptions left by Aśoka on the banks of the Makam river, and over the Malakand pass to the Swat river. This valley country was now ruled by Turkic Hindu kings from the north who had built great forts on promontories overlooking the river. Monsoon rains fed the vines and fruit trees which grew in abundance in the lower part of this valley and, in autumn, it was carpeted with purple saffron crocuses.

A large community of Buddhist monks still lived in the valley but their number was insignificant in comparison with earlier times: a seventh-century Chinese pilgrim monk had written of 1,400 monasteries and 18,000 clergy. In the eighth century Padmasambhava, a monk born in the valley, had been invited to Tibet by the emperor and had founded a new sect of Buddhism, known as the Red Hat sect because of their distinctive clothing. Padmasambhava had passed through Kashmir and some of the monks there still followed his Tantric teachings: Tantrism, a later development of Buddhism, concentrated on attaining enlightenment through ritual and meditative practices.

By the time Chudda reached Swat the active monasteries numbered hundreds rather than thousands. Chudda and his servant, therefore, did not always find lodgings in Buddhist monasteries or Buddhist households, but they had the consolation of visiting many sites related to Buddha's lives. In fact, there were so many sites that sometimes the pilgrims' whole day would be spent in circumambulation and worship. As they travelled on north through the Swat valley they made frequent deviations into the mountains to visit special sites, such as that commemorating the place where Buddha turned himself into a serpent to feed the starving populace, or where he used his skin as paper and his bone as a pen in order to write the Buddhist law. Chudda had heard of manuscripts in Chinese monastery libraries which had been written in emulation of Buddha, using a bone as a pen and with blood for ink.

As the road continued to the upper reaches of the river the forests of pine and fir gave way to barren, rocky slopes. Often the pilgrims would see carvings of Buddha, made by earlier pilgrims, on the bare rock of the mountainside far above them. It was now only a few days' journey to the confluence of the two rivers which

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combined to form the Swat. Here the mountains opened out into a small plateau, 2,000 feet above sea level and delightfully fertile and cool. Nearby lay two sites which the pilgrims were eager to visit: the rock where Buddha dried his clothes and another rock showing Buddha's footprints. They continued up the eastern river to the headwaters of the Swat, a spring-fed lake. The spring was home to the tutelary god of Uḍḍiyāna, Naga Apalala, a semi-human serpent. Before his conversion to Buddhism, the Naga would send great white waters down the river every summer to take the crops. After he accepted the true faith he only took the crops once every twelve years, leaving them to the people for the other eleven.

The story was familiar to Chudda. Kashmiri legends told of many other nagas, including one called Suśravas. The man appointed to guard the farmers' fields in Suśravas's homeland was an ascetic who had previously made a vow never to eat any of the fields' produce. This made things difficult for the Naga, as he was not allowed to take the produce until after the field watcher had himself partaken of the crop. Consequently Naga and his two beautiful daughters were reduced to eating grass seeds to avoid starvation.

One day a young nobleman went to Suśravas's pond to rest and happened upon the Naga's two daughters. The sound of their ankle bracelets alerted him to their presence, but it was their eyes which drew his attention. They were highlighted with a line of antimony which, the storytellers said, 'appeared to play the part of a stem to the ruby lotuses of their ear ornaments'. The young man was smitten. He shared his porridge with them and they invited him to meet their father. The Naga explained his problem to the young man, who promised to help. While the field watcher was diverted from his cooking, the young man clandestinely dropped fresh corn from the fields into his bowl of food. The field watcher ate it unsuspectingly. The Naga was then free to steal the crops, which he did by sending down a great hailstorm to crush them.

As a token of gratitude, the young man was offered one of the Naga's daughters in marriage. They lived in great happiness until the local king, on seeing the young woman, was overcome with passion 'like an elephant in rut'. After several failed attempts to win

her by persuasion he sent soldiers to carry her away by force. While the soldiers attacked the front of their house, the young man and his wife fled through the back door to her father's palace. The Naga was so furious at the king's behaviour that he sent down a rain of fearful thunderbolts which burned the king, his palace and most of his subjects. The Naga's sister, Ramanyā, even came out from her mountain retreat with great piles of stones to assist her brother in his destruction. Hearing of his success before she arrived she dumped her stones on the villages where she stood. The place is still called the forest of Ramanyā.

Remorseful at what he had done and weary of the reproaches of the people, the Naga left the scene of his carnage at dawn the following day. For his new home, he created a lake of dazzling whiteness resembling milk on a distant mountain, and his daughter and son-in-law lived in a neighbouring lake.

Chudda and his servant had been travelling since spring and now it was almost summer. In fact, the whole journey from Kashmir to Kashgar through the northern gate into the Gilgit and Hunza valleys could be achieved in less than a month with the right weather and fit ponies, but Chudda had chosen a slower route and had made numerous excursions to holy sites. Now that they had left the Buddhist pilgrimage sites behind, Chudda was eager to cross into the Tarim basin before the onset of winter.

As the pilgrims continued to follow the river, the road became more precipitous, winding its way through lowering grey-brown peaks of jagged rock and across scree slopes. They were told by the locals that it was six days across the passes to the Yarkhun valley on the other side, and that no supplies were available on the route. The Yarkhun valley led north-east to its headwaters in the mountains between the Baroghil and the Darkhot passes, near the site of Seg Lhato's battle in the Pamirs. From here, the pilgrims intended to turn north, taking the road over the Baroghil pass to Sarhad and thence across the Oxus river and over the Pamirs to the Silk Road, thus retracing one of the routes taken by General Gao's army from China when he marched to attack the Tibetans in 747.

The pilgrims hired another horse to carry extra fodder and pro-

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visions. In places the path hung above great chasms, its surface composed only of twigs and brushwood laid on a foundation of wooden posts fixed into holes in the rock face. The bridges were also made of twigs, twisted together and slung across the narrow gorges, held by posts sunk into the rock. After a day they left the river gorge behind and began to cross the great glacier and boulder-strewn slopes that led to the pass. At 15,800 feet it was covered in snow even in summer.

Once over the pass, it was a relief to descend to the fertile Yarkhun valley where grain, vines and fruit trees grew and a patch of flat land was marked out as a polo field next to every village. But the dried fruits from the previous year's crop were small and sour compared with those in the monsoon-fed Swat, and above the green ribbon running along the valley floor were only bare, brown slopes. The villagers lived in houses dug into the ground to protect them against the bitter winter winds blowing down the valley, their only entrance a hole through the roof.

The road was busier and the pilgrims met travellers with news from the Tarim basin that Khotan was newly taken from the Tibetans by local forces offering allegiance to the Chinese emperor, and that the road into China had been reopened, although it was not always safe: the Tibetans still controlled some of the towns in the east and Uighur soldiers were abroad. The Uighurs had been driven out of their land by the Kirghiz a decade before and many had fled south, establishing communities in several of the oasis towns, most especially Kocho to the north, and Ganzhou in the east. Their relations with the Chinese had deteriorated since the Sino-Uighur war of 843 and the subsequent persecution of their countrymen in Chang'an, and recently they had attacked the Chinese envoy sent to Khotan to buy jade for the emperor, stealing his precious stone and killing many of his entourage in the process.

The pilgrims pressed on. Some parts of the Yarkhun valley were impassable during summer when the river flooded the road, and even now the upper reaches were particularly treacherous. The pilgrims and their horses suffered from the cold and altitude and in those places where the road had been flooded they were forced to negotiate the almost sheer mountainside to find an alternative

route. The gorges were dark, damp and cold, hardly penetrated by the sun. It was only fifty miles to the start of the Baroghil pass road, but it took them five days to reach it. To cross the pass itself took another two, but then they descended to Sarhad in the Oxus valley and saw the Pamirs rising ahead of them. These were the last obstacle before the descent into the Tarim basin and the desert road to China.

Even though it was now summer, the mountain landscape was desolate. The green flush that arrived with the spring and cloaked the mountain slopes had faded, and the mulberries and poplars that grew in the high valleys had not yet acquired their brilliant orange and red autumnal colours. The pale green of their leaves was lost among the unrelenting brown-grey earth of the valleys. The pilgrims' only companions on their stages over the high passes were marmots and mountain goats, but as they descended below the snow line to the summer grazing grounds, they met Turkic sheep and yak herders. The pilgrims were always treated hospitably and were invited into the herders' tents and offered sheep and yak offal, but since the monks were vegetarians they had to resort to their own provisions. Further down the valley there were terraced fields, some only a few feet wide, perched on the steep slopes, but the villages and towns on the valley floors were poor places, with little food to offer travellers.

The pilgrims had one more pass to negotiate before reaching the valley leading down into the desert. The summer grazing grounds on the southern side of the Karlik pass were called the Milky Plain because they were seldom completely free of snow. The pilgrims made their last camp here and then, as usual, set off at dawn before the sun rose and melted the top crust of ice. The ground widened up to the snow-covered, flat saddle of the pass where a jagged peak to the east cast a shadow on the snow. It took another two hours down through softening snow to reach flat ground suitable for a camp, but when they got there, still at an altitude of nearly 14,000 feet, the temperature was so low that they decided instead to press on. After three more hours they descended into a grassy valley, dotted with the tents of Turkic nomads.

After this the valley turned north and broadened out in its

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approach to Tashkurgan, the capital of the Pamir kingdom of Sarikol, on the south-west borders of the Tarim basin. The snowy peaks to either side receded slightly. It was a pleasure after so many days among the rocky defiles of the high Pamirs to be in this warm, fertile valley, its gentle slopes covered in flowers and herbs. Chudda saw several plants he did not recognize and tried to discover from the herders what they were. With no language in common, the herders managed with elaborate sign-language to explain various uses of the plants. These seemed to be medicinal and Chudda took specimens so that he could find out more about them later.

Tashkurgan now lay only two days' march away, but first they had to ford a river. It was in spate and it proved difficult to find a place to cross; by the time the monks and their ponies reached the opposite bank they were thoroughly drenched. Tashkurgan was built on a square, rocky crag about a third of a mile in length. It contained a Chinese fort on the side nearest the river and there were soldiers at a checkpoint questioning all arrivals. Chudda showed them letters from his monastery and his official travel documents from Kashmir and was told that he would have to request permission to travel in China. The soldier directed the pilgrims to a monastery in the town where they could stay while the necessary papers were being prepared.

The town stood 10,000 feet above sea level and only grain and pulses grew in the surrounding fields. Other provisions were brought in by army suppliers and by traders. The monastery had its own small area of sheltered ground where various herbs and the few vegetables that could endure the high altitude and short summer were grown.

After several days the monks received permission to continue their journey. Their next destination, Khotan, lay to their east, but first they had to head northwards to emerge from the mountains at Yangi-hissar on the road from Kashgar to Khotan. They had followed the river for a day when the valley opened on to a great slope of gravel, several miles across. To the north-west they could see the snowy peak of the Mustagh-ata among the continuation of the Pamirs northwards. The Chinese called these the 'Onion Mountains'. But when Chudda awoke the next morning and

looked for the mountains to the south and west, they had disappeared in a haze.

From Yangi-hissar it was a two-week journey to Khotan along a well-travelled road, but once they left the oasis the first stage was through a landscape completely alien to these mountain-bred pilgrims. The sands were the same grey-yellow as the mountains they had just left, but there was an almost total absence of vegetation and no sight of the familiar snowy peaks that had accompanied them from Kashmir. Their bodies had grown acclimatized to the high mountain air and the bitter winds, but here the heat was searing, without any hint of a breeze. The sands stretched into the distance, punctuated only by great mounds of tamarisk and sarakaul. Both Chudda and his servant were silent, praying to Buddha and fingering their rosary beads beneath their robes. In the mountains the scenery had changed with each bend in the road, but on some desert stages there was nothing new to see for hour after hour.

The road seemed endless, but in the mid-afternoon they finally arrived at a small oasis. The sight of a man sitting by the side of the road in the shade of the first tree they had seen since the morning, surrounded by melons and large pots of water, was an immense relief. The next day the road to Yarkhand straggled along through similar small oases and both pilgrims felt more sanguine about their ability to survive the desert stages. But they had yet to encounter the worst.

At Yarkhand they found a caravan of Sogdian merchants on their way to Khotan to buy jade and they decided to join it. They would have to travel more slowly because the caravan's pace was dictated by its camels, but at least the merchants were familiar with the desert. The pilgrims soon settled into the desert routine, though travelling at night to avoid the summer heat of the desert meant they saw little of the road or landscape. Immediately after sunset the cameleers would don their heavy sheepskin coats as the temperature fell suddenly, 'like an icy breath stealing along the earth's surface'. However, a merchant would occasionally point out a Buddhist shrine and the pilgrims would light incense and make a small offering, and they usually found a community of monks in the hamlets where the caravan rested during the day.

The last stage to the city of Khotan was through a series of oases.

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The road was lined with willow and poplar, and though it was dark the pilgrims could see the shadows of fruit trees in the orchards to either side. Several hours from the city they crossed the Kara-kash river on a small ferry. The river was swollen with summer flood water and it took a long time to negotiate all the animals and their cargo on to the ferry and safely across. The caravan approached the city as dawn was breaking: the haze that usually hung in the air had not yet formed and the morning was clear, so that the tall brick and mud walls of Khotan were visible from a considerable distance.

Khotan was situated between two rivers, the Kara-kash and the Yurung-kash, which flowed northwards from the Kunlun mountains. Beyond it the rivers merged and their combined waters, known as the Khotan river, continued for some time into the desert sands before disappearing underground. During the spring and summer floods, when the ice melted on the Kunlun peaks, the waters briefly filled the dry river bed, but they vanished as quickly as they had come, their passage recorded only by the shrubs and low trees which grew in their wake.

Apart from irrigating a considerable area and providing water for the local paper-making industry, the two rivers washed lumps of precious jade down from the mountains: hence their names, which mean black jade (Kara-kash) and white jade (Yurung-kash). Much of the jade went to China where it was carved by highly skilled artisans into trinkets for the imperial family and the aristocracy. Jade, nephrite, is an extremely hard material, and to shape it takes hours of grinding with fine sand, water and drills made with diamond points. Intricately carved pieces, such as hair ornaments and belt buckles, were therefore particularly prized. Khotanese jade varied in colour from deep green to snowy white, the latter described as 'crystallized moonlight'. Chudda knew that jade was considered an important aid to prolonging life in Chinese medicine and was ingested to purify the inner organs. He had seen Daoist healers offer what was purported to be liquid jade for sale, but he doubted whether it was genuine.

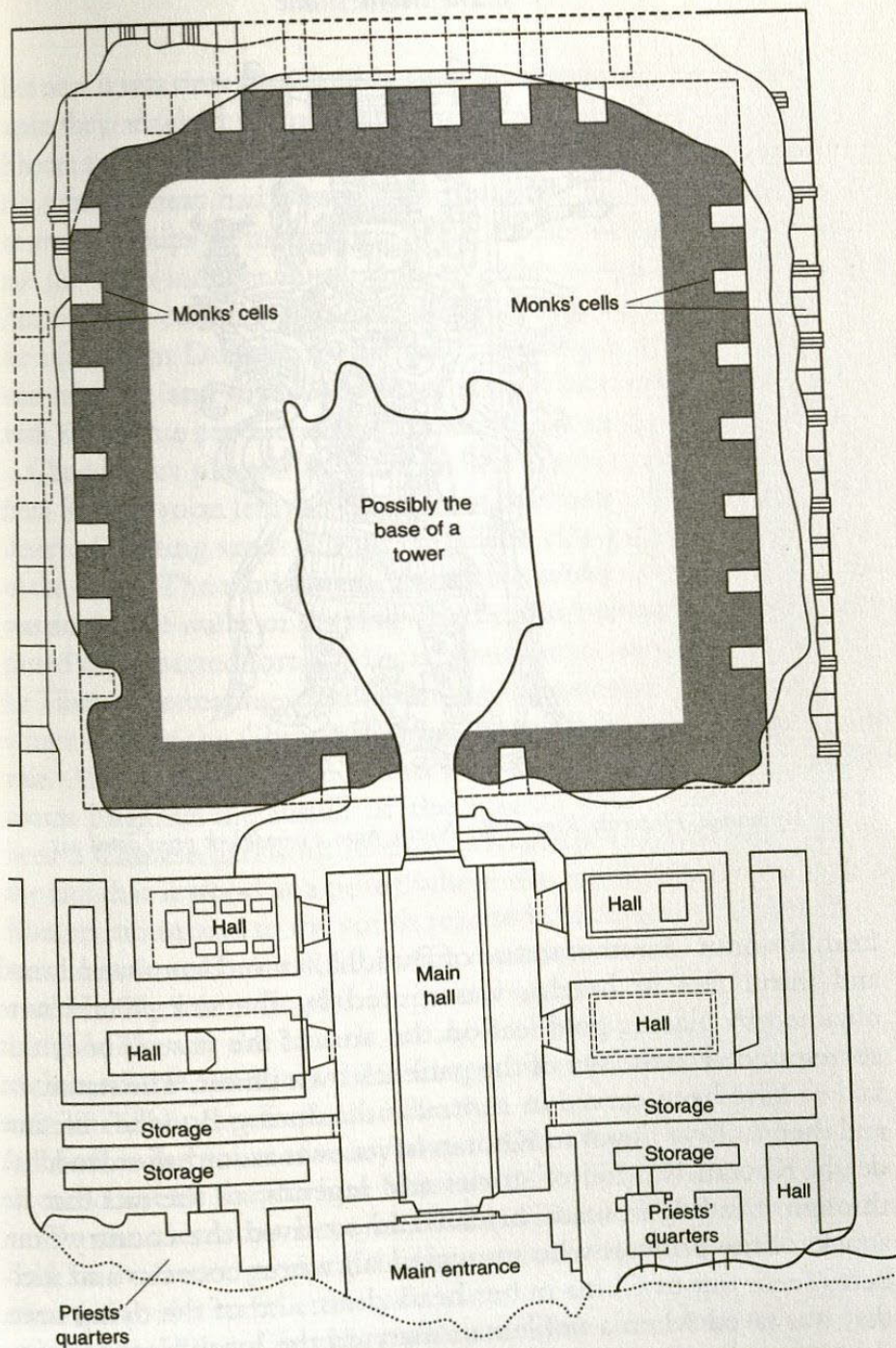
The pilgrims rested for several weeks in Khotan. The city was a lively centre of Buddhism, and it was a relief to be back among

such a large community of monks. There were numerous lectures to attend and Chudda also wanted to meet some of the local monk-physicians. The pilgrims ate well in the monastery refectory, thanks to the cereals and fruit which grew in abundance in the locality, and soon they had recovered from the privations of their long journey.

The monastery was a large, walled institution with buildings arranged symmetrically around a north-south axis. The larger buildings – the lecture hall and main hall – were built of wood, with wooden pillars supporting the deeply raked roof with its upturned, overhanging eaves. The smaller buildings and the walls were made of the ubiquitous yellow baked brick and tamped earth reinforced with tamarisk stalks. The monks' cells were all arranged against the walls, and were small, square rooms with earth floors and a window to the front. Chudda and his servant were accommodated in one of these.

There were many sites to see in Khotan. A large statue of the Heavenly King, Vaiśravaṇa, stood to the side of the main gate through the city walls. The four Heavenly Kings, one for each point of the compass, are important figures in the Buddhist pantheon who fight against the forces of evil and are distinguishable by the weapons they carry. Virūdhaka, King of the South, carries a club; Dhṛtarāṣṭra, of the East, a bow and arrow; Virūpākṣa, of the West, a sword; and Vaiśravaṇa, of the North, a lance and a stupa. The storytellers in the marketplace recounted how, many centuries before, the founder of Khotan had gone to the Vaiśravaṇa temple to pray for a son and heir. During his devotions the head of the statue opened to reveal a baby boy. The king thanked the god and took the baby back to his palace. The baby, however, refused to eat and became weak, so the king took him back to the temple to ask advice of the Heavenly King. The ground in front of the statue split open to reveal a breast from which the baby suckled milk. From this time on, the story continued, Vaiśravaṇa had been the Guardian King of Khotan. He even became popular in China after the Khotanese king had sent an emissary to the Chinese emperor in 725 to paint him an image of Vaiśravaṇa.

Many of the statues in the kingdom of Khotan were from other countries. There was even a Buddha figure with a jewelled crown



Buddhist temple in Chinese Central Asia, late ninth – early tenth century



Vaiśravaṇa, Heavenly King of the North, from a woodblock print dated 947

from Kashmir. Another statue of Buddha, carved from sandalwood and thirty feet in height, was visited by the sick. Cures were obtained by placing gold leaf on the area of the statue's body that corresponded to the site of the patient's own illness. The statue was said to have been carved in central India during Buddha's lifetime and then to have flown to Khotan of its own accord after Buddha's death. Khotan was full of stories and legends: of the rats that ate through invading nomads' bridles and so saved the country from attack; of the princess who smuggled silkworm cocoons and mulberry seeds out of China in her head-dress; and of the dying town that was saved when a nobleman married the local Naga, causing the river waters to flow again. All these stories were commemorated by monuments and paintings.

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But now it was time for Chudda and his servant to move on. Once again they attached themselves to a caravan for the journey from Khotan to Dunhuang, this time travelling by day as the worst of the summer heat had passed. The caravan was large, composed of several groups of merchants, and Chudda and his servant were not the only independent travellers who sought its protection. Among their companions were a Khotanese dance troop headed for a festival in Dunhuang, families travelling only a few stages to visit relatives, and several other monks. The camels were loaded with Khotanese products: rugs, fine felt, silk and, of course, jade.

Chudda was pleased to be with the caravan, for the road east from Khotan soon left the comfort of the oasis and entered a great desert of drifting sands whose landscape changed with every turn of the wind. The road was rarely visible under the sand, and there was no sign of water or grazing. Two stages beyond Charklick they passed the deserted fort at Miran, abandoned only a decade before by Tibetans retreating south from their desert bases as locally raised armies loyal to the Chinese regime successfully challenged Tibetan rule. Already the scouring sand had all but obliterated the small rooms hugging the inside of the eastern wall. Miran had never been a Chinese garrison: its only advantage over Charklick lay in the fact that it stood at a point where the road from Tibet over the Kunlun mountains to the south reached the desert. There were still some monks and a small farming community in the town but they could barely maintain the irrigation system now that the soldiers had left. Already the branch canals were choked and the desert had reclaimed the fields on their fringes, underlining the precariousness of life in such places. Further to the east Chudda would encounter the ruins of many abandoned villages in the Lop desert. It could not be long before Miran was reduced to the same state.

On the third day beyond Miran the camels suddenly stopped and knelt down, pressing their noses into the sand. The cameleer shouted to the travellers to take cover and not to move: a hot wind was approaching. Chudda and his servant were a little way behind the rest of the party, having stopped to pray at a small shrine, so they did not hear the cameleer's cries and were unaware of the wind until it was upon them. They had encountered hot desert winds before, but never such a ferocious one. They knew that they

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should cover their faces and mouths and stay where they were until the wind blew over, but there was no shelter and they were isolated and frightened. They both panicked and tried to gallop ahead to join the others, but they could see nothing in the whirling sand: it was like a scene from hell depicted on their temple wall. At last they were forced to stop and bury themselves behind their horses, hardly able to breathe for the sand clogging their noses and throats.

After several hours the swirling hot wind disappeared as quickly as it had arisen. It took them some time to regain their senses and then they realized that in their panic they had let go of their pack horses and these were now nowhere to be seen. The caravan had disappeared and the landscape had changed. They took it in turns to search but night was falling. The great dunes of sand, several hundred feet high, took an age to climb and from the top all they could see were more dunes. Eventually they found one of their horses, but by then it was dark and they could only set up camp and stay where they were. Luckily, they both still had their water containers and some provisions.

The next day and for several days after, they had little choice but to follow the sun to the east. Struggling across range upon range of dunes, without sign of water or life, they came across plenty of reminders of their own mortality in the form of bleached bones littering the sand. Chudda could not tell whether the bones were one or one hundred years old, or from man or beast, but he tried not to think about them. He felt responsible for their own predicament and he calmed the fears of his servant with prayers. After three days they ran out of water and then their horse became too weak to continue and they had to leave it to die. The servant became delirious and kept trying to run off in response to calls from the desert spirits. Chudda had been warned about these and their baleful influence, and he held the man back, until both of them were so weak that there was no need. Chudda called constantly upon Avalokiteśvara – the bodhisattva who hears the cries of the world – to save them. Finally, they could go no further. The servant collapsed into a fitful sleep. From his remaining possessions Chudda set up a small shrine with a statue of Buddha and a prayer sheet. For two days he prayed, fingering his rosary and falling in and out of consciousness.

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When he saw figures approaching he thought they must be mirages, but then they spoke and offered him water. He pointed to his servant, but it was too late: the man had died. Chudda was helped on to a new horse, the body of his servant and what remained of their belongings were loaded on to a camel, and the caravan continued. He did not remember much of the next few days but when he was fully conscious again, the caravaneers told him that he had been barely two hundred feet from the main path, but hidden in the lee of a sand dune. They had come across him by chance when one of the party spotted the remains of a bundle of incense he had left on top of a dune.

Chudda was extremely relieved to reach the city of Dunhuang. He had lost almost everything, but he was most distraught about the death of his servant, for the young man had been his responsibility and in travelling together for several months they had become very close. Now, before continuing his journey, he wanted to spend his time in prayer. He arranged a cremation and gave what little money he had left to the abbot for prayers to be said for the dead man and for the horse that had died in his charge. He also decided to have a sutra copied to dedicate to him and was fortunate enough to meet a scribe who was suffering from stomach pains and agreed to do the work in exchange for a charm. The sutra was dedicated not only to his dead friend but to all sentient beings in the universe. Finally he wrote a letter explaining his servant's death and gave it to a monk travelling to Khotan. Monks regularly communicated by sending letters with pilgrims, and Chudda had little doubt that his missive would be passed from pilgrim to pilgrim until eventually it reached the monastery in Kashmir.

A few months later Chudda set out to complete his pilgrimage. He had had doubts about the wisdom of continuing. The monks at Dunhuang had told him of the terrible persecution of Buddhism in China a decade before, when in 845 hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life, and thousands of Buddhist establishments were closed. The persecution was as much for economic as for ideological reasons: the Chinese exchequer

needed money and Buddhist monasteries were tax-exempt. The return to lay life of large numbers of clergy greatly increased subsequent tax revenues, and many thousands of copper Buddhist statues were melted down and minted into coins. However, the persecution was also part of a turning inward of the Chinese state, a process which had been developing since the rebellion of Rokhsan a century before. Fortunately the emperor responsible for the desecration died in the following year and his successor proved more tolerant. Some of the monks and nuns had now returned to their monasteries, but many more monasteries remained deserted and were falling into disrepair.

Chudda's renewed enthusiasm for his pilgrimage had been kindled by the sight of paintings of Wutai mountain in the cave temples outside Dunhuang. Before setting out he dedicated the visit to his servant and offered prayers on his behalf, his original vow to pray for his country's peace forgotten.

He noticed little of the landscape on his journey into China, but took care to stay with the main party at all times as they passed through the narrow strip of land between the mountains and desert, and thence across the low pass into the great plain of central China. Reaching the great city of Chang'an, Chudda stayed only as long as it took to get permission to visit Wutai mountain and then joined a party of pilgrims. They left by the city's north-western gate, the same through which Princess Taihe had passed on her journey north fifty years before, and by which she had returned just before the Buddhist persecution. His fellow pilgrims were Chinese monks, several of whom were not very strict in their observances, regularly eating after midday and being none too fussy about what they ate either. Chudda had met many monks and nuns in Dunhuang who lived in the town with their families and still worked in the fields. Moreover, the monks at the monastery where he had stayed did not eat together, nor did the monastery provide their food, except for special feasts.

Chudda did not enjoy his travels through China: there was a mood of depression in the countryside, engendered by the increasing tax burden imposed by a weak government. Chudda and his fellow pilgrims often found it difficult to find lodgings on their journey north. They were even turned away from monasteries

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whose rooms were already all occupied by rent-paying merchants and military men. At once place the monks ran inside at their approach and no amount of knocking would get them to open the gate. At another they were chased away with brooms. Often they had to rely on the hospitality of local lay believers, and even this was not always forthcoming. At one village, after trying twenty houses, Chudda finally had to force his way in and even then the host refused to feed him.

The land through which he now travelled was of loess, heavily eroded by rain and river water, and divided by great chasms. The towns and villages along the way were poor, and he heard many complaints about the double tax levied to pay for the soldiers sent to quell the frequent rebellions in the south. When they reached Taiyuan, the nearest large town to Wutai mountain, Chudda realized that Buddhism had not been the only faith to suffer under the previous emperor. The Manichean temple was in ruins, and the few remaining Uighurs in the town spoke of the terrible persecution of their countrymen in the Chinese capital. Two years after the Uighurs had been driven from their lands, their remaining armies were massacred in a battle against the Chinese at the border north-east of Taiyuan. The Chinese chief minister had then ordered the round up of Manichean clergy in Chang'an. The monks and nuns were forced to dress in dark Buddhist robes and had their heads shaved as a sign of humiliation: Manichean clergy traditionally dressed in white and did not cut their hair. Rumours told of more than seventy nuns being killed and of the rest of the monks and nuns being sent into exile; and Manichean texts were burned on the streets. The persecution against Buddhists started only two years later.

When the emperor died, a rebuilding programme had been started, but the new emperor insisted that the monasteries be renamed to symbolize his secular authority. Even now, a decade later, Buddhism had still not regained the confidence of former years.

Wutai, or Five Terraces, mountain is so called because of its five flattened peaks that lie some 9,000 feet above sea level. Monastery complexes had been built on the peaks and in the surrounding depressions since at least the third century AD and by the fifth

century there were over two hundred establishments. In the seventh and eighth centuries the monasteries flourished, attracting considerable state support and tens of thousands of pilgrims. Monks from India, Korea and Japan were regular visitors, some staying for several years to study and leaving behind inscriptions recording their presence. In 824 the Tibetan emperor had successfully requested a plan of Wutai mountain from the Chinese emperor and Tibetan monks now also started to make pilgrimages. The Tibetan ruling family had officially adopted Buddhism in the previous century and, although Buddhist belief was not to become widespread in Tibet until later, the emperor initiated a monastery building programme at the time that the Swat valley monk, Padmasambhava, was resident there. The main central temple of bSam yas monastery (Samye) in the Zangpo river valley in southern Tibet was built as a symbolic world mountain, flanked by temples of the sun and moon and enclosed by a circular wall symbolizing the Iron mountains which surround the universe. Many Tibetan ideas for this and subsequent Buddhist buildings were based on existing temples in China, including those at Wutai mountain.

Chudda stayed at Wutai mountain for several months, visiting all the different temples, shrines and other sites, including a famous hexagonal revolving bookcase. There were always sutra lectures to attend and he was often invited to vegetarian feasts, arranged by patrons for the monks or in commemoration of special events. He also saw an ordination ceremony where young novices took the full set of vows. Neither had he forgotten his own vow. He 'moistened the brush' of several local artists and scribes, and the resultant paintings and sutras were all dedicated to his lost companion. It was deep winter when he left. The monastery buildings were covered with snow and the countryside around seemed to reflect the desolation that filled Chudda's heart.

His pilgrimage over, Chudda applied in Chang'an for papers to return home. In Dunhuang he halted for a while intending to commission more works, including copies of some of the wall paintings. While he was there, news arrived of the fall of the ruling

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Karkota dynasty in Kashmir. Though the new king was well spoken of, Chudda decided to wait for further reports before continuing.

Over a decade had now passed. Chudda sat at his stall outside the monastery awaiting his next patient. His skills as a doctor had been in great demand in Dunhuang and, like many before and after him, he had been seduced by the Silk Road into staying.