# RELIGION AND THE SILK ROAD

Over the centuries for two thousand years the Silk Road was a network of roads for the travel and dissemination of religious beliefs across Eurasia. Religious belief is often one of the most important and deeply held aspects of personal identity, and people are reluctant to go where they cannot practice their own faith. Traders who used the Silk Road regularly therefore built shrines and temples of their own faiths wherever they went, in order to maintain their own beliefs and practices of worship while they were far from home. Missionaries of many faiths accompanied caravans on the Silk Road, consciously trying to expand the reach of their own religious persuasion and make converts to their faith.  
  
Buddhism was the first of the great missionary faiths to take advantage of the mobility provided by the Silk Road to extend its reach far beyond its native ground. From its origins in northeastern India, Buddhism had already spread into the lands that are now Pakistan and Afghanistan by the 1st century BCE. Buddhist merchants from those areas built temples and shrines along the Silk Road everywhere they went; the priests and monks who staffed those religious establishments preached to local populations and passing travelers, spreading the faith rapidly. Buddhism’s essential message that earthly life is impermanent and full of suffering, but that the painful cycle of birth, death, and rebirth can be ended through Buddhist faith and practice had wide appeal, and its universalism enabled it to cross boundaries of space, language, and ethnicity with ease.

After the arrival of Buddhism in China was officially noted by the imperial court in the mid-1st century CE, Buddhist monasteries emerged near irrigated oases at Khotan, Kucha, Turfan, and Dunhuang on the northern and southern branches of the Silk Road helped by both official and private support for the building of temples and monasteries.

**Activity:** Go to <http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/buddhism/base.htm> and click on any of the 4 categories and then select Timeline and Map at the bottom. Follow the Life of Buddha story by clicking on the pulsing circles and then by moving along the timeline at the bottom to see the spread of Buddhism.

**Questions:**  
What type of Buddhism was practiced in China?   
Why do you think its influence shrinks so much in China during the 13-14th centuries?  
Why does it disappeared so suddenly during the 20th century?\*

# BUDDHISM & TRADE

The close relationship between Buddhism and trade is largely due to the reliance of the Buddhist monastic community on donations from lay supporters. Ideally, Buddhist monks and nuns were required to reject all worldly possessions and thus to depend on the lay community to supply all of their necessities, including food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. In practice, donations to Buddhist monasteries extended to a wide range of materials that were necessary to maintain resident communities of monks and nuns. Significant economic surpluses were needed to sustain large-scale Buddhist institutions, where, in return for donations, monks and nuns were available to give religious instruction. Wealthy merchants and powerful rulers were particularly encouraged to be very generous in return for practical benefits, such as refuge and protection from real and perceived dangers while traveling, and status or legitimacy by acting as patrons of religious institutions.

In Ancient India and Ancient China, Xinru Liu also proposes that Buddhist demand for the "seven jewels" (saptaratna) stimulated long-distance trade between northwestern South Asia, Central Asia and China. The seven jewels consisted of luxury commodities that were high in value but low in volume, such as gold, silver, crystal, lapis lazuli, carnelian, coral, and pearls. While such materials are intrinsically valuable and suitable for long-distance trade, ritual values associated with the establishment of Buddhism may have augmented their economic worth. Since Buddhist devotees sought these items as suitable donations, the nexus between long-distance trade and Buddhist monastic networks was strengthened. As the commodities forming the seven jewels became standardized and their religious value increased, Liu argues that "Buddhist values created and sustained the demand for certain commodities traded between India and China during the first to the fifth centuries AD." The processes of expanding lucrative long-distance trade networks and the long-distance transmission of Buddhism were mutually reinforced.

**Question:**How are Buddhism and trade mutually reinforcing? That is how does trade support the spread and maintenance of Buddhism? And, how does Buddhism uphold trade?

# DUNHUANG

Dunhuang is located in the far west of China’s Gansu province, where the two branches of

the Silk Roads that circled the Tarim Basin come together. In addition to being an important commercial town, Dunhuang was a center of Buddhism from 366 CE. It was one of the main points of entry from Central Asia into China for Buddhist missionaries and monks. The name “Dunhuang” means “blazing beacon.” This refers to the signal fires set in watchtowers by Chinese troops.

Twelve miles outside of Dunhuang is a half-mile-long cliff that, over a thousand years, became studded with caves. Many of them are decorated with Buddhist murals. They are called the Mogao (“Peerless”or “None Loftier”) Caves or “The Caves of the Thousand Buddhas.”

Legend says that a traveling monk named Le Zong came there and saw golden lights on top of a mountain. They looked like a thousand Buddhas. He recognized this as a holy place, carved out a cave in the mountain, and adorned it with murals. Later, another monk saw the cave and the murals. He carved out a second cave. Today, there are more than a thousand caves, but many have not survived because of the harsh climate. The earliest surviving one dates from 366 CE. The earliest painting and sculpture dates from about the fifth century CE and continues on for almost a thousand years. Individuals among the Buddhist faithful frequently commissioned painting and sculpture for the caves.

The townspeople of Dunhuang maintained close relations with the Buddhist monastic community. Monks provided services for the lay world: They recited sutras[[1]](#footnote-1) for the dead, practiced divination, provided medical treatment, and made use of magic spells. All of these things assisted people in coping with the uncertainties of everyday life. In return, the monks received donations of cloth or cash gifts to provide vegetarian feasts during holidays and other occasions throughout the year.

Dunhuang’s monasteries earned money from industrial enterprises as well. The renting out of flourmills set up on monastery land was an important source of income. Monasteries also ran the presses used to make oil for both cooking and for use in lamps. It is believed that such mills and oil presses provided all of Dunhuang’s flour and oil.

Economic interaction between monks and townspeople can be seen in many of the manuscripts found in the Dunhuang caves. These caves, sealed up in the eleventh century CE and discovered by accident in 1900, are one of the great archaeological finds of the twentieth century. In addition to religious texts, there are contracts, tax registers, and other secular documents.

**Activity 1:**

Find Dunhuang on Google Earth.   
  
**Questions:**

How is it strategically placed along the Silk Road?

Observe the vegetation of Dunhuang. Why might a monastic settlement have been established here?

Activity 2: (optional)

Search the Mogao Caves on Google Earth and click on embedded photos to see the caves.

Visit <http://idp.bl.uk/education/silk_road/index.a4d#3> to see some of the items found in the caves.

1. A sutra is a Buddhist aphorism (an original idea expressed concisely) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)