

## Faxian Fa-Hsien: A Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms (394–414 CE)

Faxian was a Chinese Buddhist who traveled through South Asia to learn more about this religion. He collected original text and returned to China, where he translated them. The following are excerpts of his travel accounts that describe some of the places he visited and people he encountered.

Going west for sixteen yojanas, Fa-hsien came to the city He-lo in the borders of the country of Nagara, where there is the flat-bone of Buddha's skull, deposited in a vihara adorned all over with gold-leaf and the seven sacred substances. The king of the country, revering and honouring the bone, and anxious lest it should be stolen away, has selected eight individuals, representing the great families in the kingdom, and committed to each a seal, with which he should seal (its shrine) and guard (the relic). At early dawn these eight men come, and after each has inspected his seal, they open the door. This done, they wash their hands with scented water and bring out the bone, which they place outside the vihara, on a loft platform, where it is supported on a round pedestal of the seven precious substances, and covered with a bell of lapis lazuli, both adorned with rows of pearls. Its colour is of a yellowish white, and it forms an imperfect circle twelve inches round, curving upwards to the centre. Every day, after it has been brought forth, the keepers of the vihara ascend a high gallery, where they beat great drums, blow conchs, and clash their copper cymbals. When the king hears them, he goes to the vihara, and makes his offerings of flowers and incense. When he has done this, he (and his attendants) in order, one after another, (raise the bone), place it (for a moment) on the top of their heads, and then depart, going out by the door on the west as they had entered by that on the east. The king every morning makes his offerings and performs his business of his government. The chiefs of the Vaisyas also make their offerings before they attend to their family affairs. Every day it is so, and there is no remissness in the observance of the custom. When all the offerings are over, they replace the bone in the vihara, where there is a vimoksha tope, of the seven precious substances, and rather more than five cubits high, sometimes open, sometimes shut, to contain it. In front of the door of the vihara, there are parties who every morning sell flowers and incense, and those who wish to make offerings buy some of all kinds. The kings of various countries are also constantly sending messengers with offerings. The vihara stands in a square of thirty paces, and though heaven should shake and earth be rent, this place would not move. From this place they travelled south-east, passing by a succession of very many monasteries, with a multitude of monks, who might be counted by myriads. After passing all these places, they came to a country named Muttra. They still followed the course of the P'oo na river, on the banks of which, left and right, there were twenty monasteries, which might contain three thousand monks; and (here) the Law of Buddha was still more flourishing. Everywhere, from the Sandy Desert, in all the countries of India, the kings

had been firm believers in that Law. When they make their offerings to a community of monks they take off their royal caps, and along with their relatives and ministers, supply them with food with their own hands. That done, (the king) has a carpet spread for himself on the ground, and sits down on it in front of the chairman; — they dare not presume to sit on couches in front of the community. The laws and ways according to which the kings presented their offerings when Buddha was in the world, have been handed down to the present day.

All south from this is named the Middle Kingdom. In it the cold and heat are finely tempered, and there is neither hoarfrost nor snow. The people are numerous and happy; they have not to register their households, or attend to any magistrates and their rules; only those who cultivate the royal land have to pay (a portion of) the gain from it. If they want to go, they go; if they want to stay on, they stay. The king governs with out decapitation or (other) corporal punishments. Criminals are simply fined, lightly or heavily, according to the circumstances (of each case). Even in the cases or repeated attempts at wicked rebellion, they only have their right hands cut off. The king's body-guards and attendants all have salaries. Throughout the whole country the people do not kill any living creature, nor drink intoxicating liquor, nor eat onions or garlic. The only exception is that of the Chandalas. That is the name for those who are (held to be) wicked men, and live apart from others. When they enter the gate of a city or a market-place, they strike a piece of wood to make themselves known, so that men know and avoid them, and do not come into contact with them. In that country they do not keep pigs and fowls, and do not sell live cattle; in the markets there are no butchers' shops and no dealers in intoxicating drink....Only the Chandalas a fishermen and hunters, and sell flesh meat.

At the places where Buddha, when he was in the world, cut his hair and nails, topes are erected and where the three Buddhas that preceded Sakyamuni Buddha and he himself sat; where they walked, and where images of their persons were made. At all these places topes were made, and are still existing. At the place where Sakra, Ruler of the Devas, and the king of the Brahmaloaka followed Buddha down (from the Trayastrimsas heaven) they have also raised a tope. At this place the monks and nuns may be a thousand, who all receive their food from the common store, and pursue their studies, some of the mahayana and some of the hinayana. Where they live, there is a white-eared dragon, which acts the part of patron to the community of these monks, causing abundant harvests in the country, and the enriching rains to come in season, without the occurrence of any calamities, so that the monks enjoy their repose and ease. In gratitude for its kindness, they have made for it a dragon-house, with a carpet for it to sit on, and appointed for it a diet of blessing, which they present for its nourishment. Every day they set apart three of their number to go to its house, and eat there. Whenever the summer retreat is ended, the dragon straightway changes its form, and appears as a small snake, with white spots at the side of its ears. As soon as thee monks recognise it, they fill a copper vessel with cream, into which they put the creature, and then carry it around from the one who has the highest seat (at their tables) to him who has the lowest, when it appears as if saluting them. When it has been taken round, immediately it disappears; and every year it thus comes forth once. The country is very productive, and the people are prosperous and happy beyond comparison. When people of other countries come to it, they are exceedingly attentive to them all, and supply them with what they need.

From Fa-Hsien, *A Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms*, trans. James Legge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886).