

## Bodhi Dharma and Oceanic Silk Road

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### *ABSTRACT:*

Which sea-route did Bodhi Dharma (the First Patriarch of Zen-Buddhism) take in order to get to China from India ? Its details are not known.

In this article, it is proposed that a possible route he took was an Oceanic Silk Road.

Before the Christian Era already, there were active trade routes across the Indian Ocean between India and China.

It is very likely that Bodhi Dharma chose this course.

There is a new project to commemorate Bodhi Dharma at an old town in India.

[KEYWORDS] Bodhi Dharma, Indian Ocean, Ocean trade

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### Historical Background

**Bodhi-Dharma** (菩提達摩) was an Indian Buddhist monk who came to China from India in the first quarter of the sixth century. He brought Mahayana Buddhism to China. Coming to China, he stayed nine years at the Shao-lin Temple (少林寺), located in He-nan Province (河南省). Bodhi-Dharma is well-known in connection to a story expressed by the phrase “Wall Contemplation Nine Years (面壁九年)”. From the philosophy and practice represented by this phrase, the Chinese Zen Buddhism originated and developed in ensuing generations. The Bodhi-Dharma is respected as the First Zu (First patriarch) of Chinese Zen Buddhism.

It is said that he was born as the third prince of a kingdom of south India. Name of the kingdom is expressed with two Chinese characters 香至. Late in his life, he left India. It was the year 520 CE (or 527 CE) when he arrived at Guang-zhou of south China by taking a sea route. It is not well known which course he took on the way. This article proposes a tentative account that the route he took was the Sea Silk-Road.

Chinese historical literature describes what took place at the time when he left India. “He met the King and told him of his wish to go to China. The King tried to persuade him to stay in his home land, but Bodhi-Dharma was determined to go. There was no longer anything for the King to do but to prepare a large boat with necessary items for a safe voyage. His hope was for the future return of Bodhi-Dharma (preferably with the same boat). On the day of departure, the King accompanied Bodhi-Dharma up to the harbor, together with the families of his relatives and vassals. At this moment, there were none who were not in tears.

After a three-year voyage, the ship of Bodhi-Dharma arrived at Guang-zhou of south

China. There, the local governor came to greet him. It was September of the year 520. It was the time of Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty (梁朝, 武帝). He was informed of this event. Knowing it, the emperor invited Bodhi-Dharma to the capital Jian-kang (now Nan-jing). During his stay at the capital, it is said that there was the following dialogue between the Emperor Wu and Bodhi-Dharma. The Emperor asked: *"I have constructed many temples for Buddhists and used to serve for transcribing a number of Buddhism sutras. What karmic merit is promised?"* Bodhi-Dharma replied: "No merit (無功德)".

The kingdom where Bodhi-Dharma was born is recorded as "香至" in Chinese literatures. At the time of Tang dynasty (618 - 907) established a hundred years later from the time of Bodhi-Dharma, it is likely that 香至 is pronounced as "*Kang-zhi*". This is close to "Kanchi" (-puram), an old capital town in the state Tamil-Nadu of south India (the part 'puram' means a town or a state in the sense of earlier times). It was a capital of Pallava Dynasty at the time when Bodhi-Dharma was living. The Pallava Dynasty is recorded as an oceanic state, trading with Mediterranean countries to the west and with China, Siam, Fiji and others to the east. It is conjectured that Bodhi-Dharma departed from Kanchipuram to the nearest port Mamallapuram and embarked from there.

On the other hand, from the time of Former Han Dynasty (前漢, established in 206BC) more than two thousands years ago, China also traded by sea with south-east Asia, India, Middle-east and Mediterranean countries by using large oceanic boats. It is said that return journey took four years or so between China and Middle-east. In China at the time of 3rd century, oceanic boats were called "Konron-chuan". "Konron (崑崙)" meant the area of south-east Asia in general. A picture shows that an early-time trading boat is equipped with wooden arms on its both sides (supposed, for stability). It is noteworthy that there are remains described as China-Pagoda in a trading harbor-town (Nakapattinam) of south India near Sri-Lanka island. This was built by the order of a Chinese king for the sake of Chinese Buddhists who came to India from China for trade or for pilgrimage (perhaps in the 8th century). Kanchipuram is famous now in India as a town of quality silk cloths. Even Indian Buddhist monks used silk goods. This is written in the travel record [2] by Yi Jing (義淨, 635 - 713). Original silks were likely imported from China, although mulberry trees (for silkworms) were planted in south India too. Some sources record that Yi Jing wrote a letter during his stay in Java (691) and sent it to the authorities of Tang Dynasty (at the time of Wu Zetian 武則天), in which he asked to construct a China Pagoda in India. This corresponds to the above record in India.

### [Sea Route of Fa-Xian \(Buddhist monk, 335 -423\)](#)

A number of Buddhist monks visited India from China and vice versa. A record of most famous travel is that of Xuan-Zang (629-645), who took the land route both ways to and from India. In an earlier travel by Fa-Xian (399 - 412), he took a land (mountain) route on his way to India and returned back by a sea route. Why Fa-Xian took the sea route on his return is not written in his travel record. It is conjectured that he wanted to avoid steep and dangerous mountain routes because his age had advanced to over seventy at the time.

Beginning his way back to China, he stayed at a town at the mouth of the Ganges river and waited for two years to take a large commercial ship. During his stay, he has transcribed Buddhism texts (and possibly looked for a person or a merchant who would assist him on his return journey). By taking advantage of seasonal (monsoon) wind in the

beginning of winter, his ship arrived at the island of Simhala (now Sri-Lanka) after fourteen days. It is well known that there is a seasonal wind from the north-east along the east coast of India in the Bengal Bay. After he had stayed for two years in Sri-Lanka too, he took a large ship (possibly helped by another merchant). The number of passengers on board was more than two hundreds. They embarked for the east. In the beginning there was favorable seasonal wind, but from the third day a storm occurred. After thirteen days, they arrived at an island. It is speculated that it was one of Nicobal islands. Tending to repairs due to flooding of the ship, they resumed their journey. After nine or ten days (or ninety days by another reading) by passing through the Strait of Malacca, they arrived at a harbor in Sumatra or Java islands. Fa-Xian stayed there for five months. His trip route is shown by the thick solid curve in the figure (Reference [3]).



Route of Fa-Xian (thick solid line) and a speculated route of Bodhi Dharma (dotted line)

Helped by another merchant, he took a large ship bound for China where two hundred passengers were on board. Guessing the size of the ship, it could be one corresponding to two carriage cars of a modern electric train connected side by side and one underneath them. A relief of a big ship remains in Borobudur's Buddhist structures (below) on the Java Island, which suggests such a ship as Fa-Xian took.



Ship relief in Borobudur.

They embarked with food on board of fifty days, but they encountered a storm on the way and drifted on the East China Sea. Eighty days after their departure, they arrived at a place on the south coast of Shan-dong Peninsula of China.

This was a voyage that occurred at a time a hundred years before Bodhi Dharma. At

his time, it appears that voyages across the Indian Ocean by using the monsoon seasonal wind are well-known. It is likely that such a sea route would have been recommended to Fa-Xian. According to modern data of observation, there is Monsoon wind in the Indian Ocean from Indian side to Malay Peninsula from May to September every year.

### Sea Route of Bodhi Dharma

Bodhi Dharma's ship departed Mamallapuram, a main port closest to Kanchipuram, and headed for Sri-Lanka. This is just a conjecture. It is likely that they stayed there a couple of months waiting for favorable monsoon wind, preparing for the great journey crossing the Indian Ocean. It might take another couple of months to get to a port in Sumatra or Java island. It may have taken a half or more of a year (depending on circumstances) since he departed his home country Kanchipuram. It is likely that he may have been invited by a royal family at the place he was staying, or that he stayed at a temple for rain retreat in summer time according to the Buddhist custom, or that he spent half a year by preparing his next journey, waiting for a favorable wind, or trading. Once everything was ready, they finally embarked for Guang-Zhou, China. It may have taken two months or so to get to their destination. Two years should have been sufficient time for the whole journey. The "three years" written in the record may imply that it was the third year since he departed his home country, rather than that it took full three years.

Bodhi Dharma according to old records was born in Kanchipuram of south India., and his final place of rest was at the Bear-Ear Mountain of He-Nan Province of China, where there is a temple Kong-Xing Si to commemorate Bodhi-Dharma. However, in the ancient town Kanchipuram where Bodhi-Dharma is supposed to have grown up, there is nothing to remind us of him. It is considered that there were many Buddhist structures in Kanchipuram, but most of them were destroyed by the ravages of time and by the opponents of Buddhism. At the present time, it is a sacred town of Hinduism. Historical remains related to Buddhism found in that region are very limited in number, although one can come across a large number of Buddhist remains in the Hindu temples of this antique city.

Devotees and interested individuals from different countries may wish to be informed and experience some sense of this great person Bodhi-Dharma in Kanchipuram. Currently, a project is being planned by those who intend to build a memorial structure at the land (in Kanchipuram) owned by the Institute of Asian Studies (Chennai, India). This article is written with the hope and confidence in worldwide spiritual support for this endeavor.

### Reference

- [1] This article was written in Japanese for *Ship & Ocean Newsletter*; No.204 (February 5, 2009), published by Ocean Policy Research Foundation (Torano-mon 1-15-16, Minato-ku, Tokyo, Japan).
- [2] "Account of Buddhism sent from the South Seas", by Yi Jing (義淨), 691.
- [3] "Fa-Xian Story and Song-Yun Story" (Translation and comments by Kazutoshi Nagasawa, Toyo-Bunko No.194, published by Heibon-sha, 1971).

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By Tsutomu Kambe, January 2009,