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From Deccan to the Land of Dragon: Bodhidharma's South Indian Roots and his Impact on Chinese Buddhist Thought

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received : 03 September 2026
Revised : 05 October 2026
Published : 23 October 2026

Keywords:

Bodhidharma; Ch'an Buddhism; Sino-Indian Buddhist Exchange; Shaolin Monastery; Indian Mahāyāna

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DOI: *10.68283/neijh.v1.i1.a06*

How to cite: *Arvind Kumar Singh. (2026) 'From Deccan to the Land of Dragon: Bodhidharma's South Indian Roots and his Impact on Chinese Buddhist Thought', Nile - Eurasian International Journal of Humanities, 1(1), pp. 62 – 76. https://doi.org/10.68283/neijh.v1.i1.a06*

ABSTRACT

The paper looks into the South Indian origin of Bodhidharma and the transmission of his meditation-related teachings to the Chinese context between the fifth and sixth centuries CE. The intellectual and religious environment during the Pallava period, particularly Kanchipuram, forms the focus of research as it seeks to understand the understanding of the Indian *Mahāyāna* concepts of meditation, direct experience, *Yogācāra*, Madhyamaka, Buddha nature and *śūnyatā* in the Chinese Buddhist context. In terms of methods, the paper employs the use of historical and comparative approaches in analyzing primary and secondary sources related to Chinese Buddhism. Such sources include Chinese Buddhist literature including the Luoyang Qielan Ji, Xu Gaoseng Zhuan, Jingde Chuandeng Lu and the Two Entrances and Four Practices as well as other modern studies on Bodhidharma, *Ch'an* Buddhism and Shaolin tradition. The study finds that the importance of Bodhidharma should be sought not in the literal transplanting of Indian Buddhism, but in its cultural and philosophical reinterpretation within the intellectual context of China. The stress that Bodhidharma placed on meditation, spiritual realization through practice, self-discipline, and mind-focused practices played an important role in the emergence of a specific *Ch'an* orientation in which Indian *Mahāyāna* notions were conveyed using Chinese philosophy and culture, including Daoism. In addition, according to the study, the connection of Bodhidharma with Shaolin kung fu should be seen not as a historical fact, but as a cultural tradition. Nonetheless, the story of Bodhidharma and Shaolin kung fu served as a culturally important context in which meditation, bodily and ethical training, as well as martial arts practices, could be integrated. According to the article, Bodhidharma is an important symbol of the Sino-Indian Buddhist interaction, in which Buddhist concepts were not simply transferred from one culture to another, but selectively reinterpreted.

1. Introduction

In spite of Bodhidharma being a central figure in many stories about the Sino-Indian exchange of Buddhism, there are still many uncertainties about the historical grounds for his South Indian background, his actual contributions to the emergence of Chinese *Ch'an* Buddhism, and the influence of later traditions upon his intellectual image. Therefore, the research question under examination in the present project involves the problem of separating historical facts from subsequent hagiography and myths in order to explore how Indian Buddhist practices connected with the name of Bodhidharma were translated into Chinese conditions. The main aim of this project lies in critical evaluation of the traditional South Indian background of Bodhidharma and his role in the development of Chinese Buddhist philosophy, especially meditation, direct enlightenment, ethics, and transformation of Indian *Mahāyāna* philosophy in China. It is also intended to assess the links established between Bodhidharma and Shaolin Monastery, yogic and martial tradition, by making a clear distinction between actual history and cultural lore. The following three research questions will therefore be considered in the present study are *What is the historical and textual basis for linking Bodhidharma with South India and Pallava-Kanchipuram?; How were the Buddhist teachings on meditation and philosophy of Bodhidharma understood and reinterpreted within the context of Ch'an Buddhism in China?;* and *To what extent have the latter connections between Bodhidharma and Shaolin Meditation, yogic, and martial traditions been historically documented, and what do they say about Sino-Indian cultural and Buddhist exchanges?* The scholarly writings concerning Bodhidharma are included in the interdisciplinary area, which includes the history of Buddhism, the history of the religious movements in China, the Sino-Indian cultural contacts studies, textual criticism, and the history of Shaolin. The current scholarship can be classified into four interconnected areas, namely: the historicity of Bodhidharma and his Indian origins; Bodhidharma and his contribution to the formation of *Ch'an* Buddhism; the relation between the practice of meditation in India and its Chinese version; and the recent link between Bodhidharma and Shaolin. The books devoted to Chinese Buddhism, written in the period of early modernity by such scholars as D. T. Suzuki, Heinrich Dumoulin, Kenneth Ch'en, and Bernard Faure, revealed the significance of Bodhidharma in the history of *Ch'an* Buddhism and the relevance of meditation, realization, and transformation of the Indian Buddhist philosophy in China. For example, the work by Suzuki about the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* makes one notice the link between Bodhidharma and mind-based and meditation-based traditions of realization (Suzuki 1956, 113-18). The same is true of Dumoulin, who views the formation of Zen as a transformation of the Indian Buddhist meditation process in the context of the Chinese intellectual and religious environment. Similarly, Faure's study serves to warn us not to take the language of "immediacy" and transmission at face value in describing early *Ch'an*. These works form the basis on which we can examine Bodhidharma not only as a person but as an agent through which cultural and religious transformations can be studied.

Another tradition of research into Bodhidharma has been more skeptical about history and texts concerning him. Among the most important works is Jeffrey Broughton's *The Bodhidharma Anthology*, which focuses on early texts related to Bodhidharma and thus makes possible the distinction between early textual traditions and subsequent developments (Broughton 2010). In addition, John McRae in his work *"Seeing Through Zen"* stresses the necessity to analyze *Ch'an* genealogies critically, not believing in their historical truth (McRae 2003). The treatment of the Bodhidharma's origins in the South of India in the article thus relies on Chinese sources like the Luoyang Qielan Ji, the Xu Gaoseng Zhuan, and the Jingde Chuandeng Lu, but keeping in mind that those works were written in different periods and involved different mechanisms of Buddhist memory formation and lineages' formation. Thus, the association of Bodhidharma with the South of India and the Pallava kingdom and even with Kanchipuram can be seen as a traditional, historically grounded identification rather than a biographical truth. This is especially important against the background of research into Buddhist sacred biography, see Schober (1997). The third set of literature focuses on the exchange between Indian Buddhism and Chinese intellectual traditions. This includes the works of Ch'en, Zürcher, Liu, Sen, Strong, and Williams, where Bodhidharma was placed against the background of the much more general transfer of Buddhism from India to China through writings, Buddhist monks, teachings, and practices. Zürcher's book about the conquest of China by Buddhism is especially useful for showing that the transmission of Buddhism was a two-way process of cultural transplanting adapted to the specific circumstances of China (Zürcher 2007). In addition, Silk Roads studies show the significance of both land and sea trade routes in terms of transferring Buddhist communities and culture (Liu 2010; Sen 2003). In this larger context, this current study focuses on the arguments regarding the meditative practice espoused by Bodhidharma that is rooted in the Indian Mahayana teachings, which comprise the thoughts related to *Yogācāra*, *Madhyamika*, *Prajñāpāramitā*, and the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* teachings, as well as how these have been reinterpreted using Chinese thinking. From the literature, the importance of Bodhidharma is not just in transmitting an already finished Indian system of thought but in how Buddhist concepts gained new meaning in China.

Another important area that can be noted is connected to Bodhidharma's involvement with the Shaolin Monastery and Chinese martial arts. Popular and early sources tend to describe Bodhidharma as the founder or practitioner of

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Shaolin physical exercises, whereas the scholarly literature tends to critically assess the historicity of this claim. Particularly valuable in this regard is Meir Shahar's *The Shaolin Monastery* as it helps differentiate the historic emergence of Shaolin martial culture and the post-historic invention of Bodhidharma as the saint ancestor of that culture (Shahar 2008). In turn, the article acknowledges the absence of any contemporary evidence of Bodhidharma teaching martial arts in the Shaolin Monastery and of Bodhidharma authorship of Yi Jin Jing and Xi Sui Jing. Ching and Feng and Chen provide relevant insights into the connection between bodily discipline, meditation, martial practice, and the Shaolin tradition (Ching 2010; Feng and Chen 2015). Other more recent works cited within the article's bibliography, such as Yan's work on Bodhidharma as a historical and cultural hero and his research on the mythology, history, and combat tradition of Shaolin (Yan 2012, 2015) and Zhao's analysis of the Sino-Indian relations concerning Bodhidharma (Zhao 2022), reinforce the need for an approach that separates historical facts from cultural memory. There is, thus, a clear interpretive conflict in the literature in terms of the fact that although there is no clear connection between Bodhidharma and Shaolin from a historical point of view, the tradition itself is significant because it shows the relationship between Indian Buddhism, Chinese religion, physical discipline, and combat tradition. Thus, the literature that currently exists establishes the importance of Bodhidharma within the field of Sino-Indian Buddhist exchanges. However, at the same time, the methodology of analysis used presents problems since the historical, lineage, hagiographic, philosophic literature and later martial tradition are all too often mixed together without due consideration being paid to the temporal dimension and evidence base involved. This study attempts to fill in the gap in the existing scholarship and unite different strands of knowledge into a comparative approach. Rather than trying to prove that either the historical Bodhidharma existed or not, the research will examine the relations between the historical evidence found in the early Chinese sources and later traditions that helped Bodhidharma become a prominent representative of Indian influence in China.

In this study, a qualitative historical-textual research design with the use of comparative and interpretive analysis will be used. Three analytical aspects are used in the design of the research are *identification of the historical and textual evidence that show the South Indian background of Bodhidharma as well as his migration to China; analysis of the interpretations and transformations of Mahāyāna meditation concepts of India into those of Ch'an tradition; and critical evaluation of the later association of Bodhidharma with Shaolin meditation, yoga and martial arts.* The design allows the study to differentiate between historically proven facts and later hagiographic and lineage constructions. In this study, a historical-textual, comparative and interpretive method will be used in order to analyze Bodhidharma's South Indian identity and his role in the development of Chinese Buddhism as well as his later association with Shaolin culture. The sources will be evaluated based on their chronology, genre, purpose, transmission history and closeness to the period. The sources have also been analyzed in relation to the Two Entrances and Four Practices in terms of meditation, realization, ethical practice, patience, and transformative experience. Since there is dispute with regard to the authenticity of the Bodhidharma-related texts, care has been taken into account which offers multiple approaches to Bodhidharma, *Ch'an* Buddhism, Sino-Indian relations, and Shaolin culture. The comparative analysis takes place through analyzing the references to biographies and doctrines in various times and linking terms like *dhyāna*/*Ch'an*, direct enlightenment, Buddha-nature, and non-attachment to Indian Mahayana and Chinese context. Special attention has been paid to different views on Bodhidharma's southern India origin and his connection to Shaolin practice of meditation, yoga, and martial arts. Hence, the historical criticism reveals the boundaries of the sources, whereas the comparative interpretation studies the transformation of Indian Buddhist concepts in Chinese culture and religion.

2. Bodhidharma: A Civilizational Bridge between India and China

The Civilization of India and China have been brilliant examples of culture, philosophy, and spiritual systems. Although these are two civilizations that are geographically distant from each other, their dialogue and interaction have been an integral part of their history, and these two civilizations have been able to produce two different world views; during these dialogues and interactions, these two civilizations have been mutually enriching each other. One of the major components that run in these two civilizations is that of Buddhism, which is a religion and philosophy at the same time, and hence is the perfect link between the two (Ch'en 1964: 33). Behind the entire process of these dialogues and interactions between these two civilizations is the figure of Bodhidharma, a South Indian monk, who when he went to China in the early part of the 6th century CE, embodied the spiritual correspondences which exist between these two civilizations (Faure 1991: 93). The transfer of the Buddhism religion from India to China actually was an historical process which spanned multiple centuries. In the footsteps of the Buddha Mahaparinirvana during the 5th century BCE, the Buddhist teachings began to spread throughout the Asian regions. During the 1st century CE, the Silk Roads and the sea routes allowed monks from India to migrate to China, carrying holy text, relics, and Buddhist schools of thought (Liu 48). Notable persons such as An Shigao, Kumarajiva, and Dharmaraksha became important key players during the translation of the Indian Buddhist text into Chinese and the integration of Buddhist ideas into the Chinese intellectual

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climate (Strong 2007: 117).

The absorption of Buddhist ideas into the thought of China began in the 5th century CE. But it was during this period of Buddhist revivalism in China that Bodhidharma made a paradigmatic appearance who came from Kanchipuram, South India of the Pallava dynasty. The establishment of *Ch'an* or Zen Buddhism in Japan is attributed to Bodhidharma. This event occurred when he arrived in China in 520 CE and drastically shaped the development of Chinese philosophy with the practice of a more "experiential and meditative" form of Buddhist philosophy over *"scholastic Buddhist speculation"* (Faure 2003: 102). The meeting between the culture of Bodhidharma and Chinese culture was far more than the transplantation of ideas; it was a real crossing of cultures. In his transmission of ideas, he integrated the yogas of meditation from India with the Taoist and Confucian sensibilities from the Chinese culture (Ch'en 1964: 165). His teachings extolled spiritual enlightenment, a concentrated mind, and self-achievement that attracted very strongly the Chinese adepts hating the rigidity of religious dogmatism. From the *Ch'an* school of Bodhidharma evolved a Chinese meditational school that later extended to the world of Confucianism in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam ¬(Faure 2003: 134).

Bodhidharma played a significant role in the evolution of Shaolin martial arts in China. Whether historical fact or not, the significance of the event as cultural symbolism is manifest (Strong 141). This union of Indian methods of meditation and Chinese physical practices at Shaolin monasteries represented, in turn, the union of body and soul, discipline and enlightenment. The life of Bodhidharma exemplifies the ingenuity of *'the Sino-Indian Buddhist Exchange, a movement that facilitated not only religious but also intellectual, artistic, and political interactions*.' Pious Buddhist believers from China traveled to India to study at the greatest centers of learning in the ancient Indian civilization, *Nālandā* and *Vikramaśīla Mahāvihāras*, to name but a couple, to acquire scriptures for the development of Buddhist teachings in China, as in the cases of Faxian and Xuanzang (Xuanzang 1996: 29). The shared communal values between India and China remain a significant reminder to all generations of the shared spirituality that has an ongoing presence between the two cultures. The imprint that Buddhist teachings have made, seen in Chan/Zen, remains vibrant because the dialogue that began over two thousand years ago has been maintained (Suzuki 1956: 41). 'The living legacy of Bodhidharma is commemorated in temples throughout China, Japan, and the area of South India' which embodies *'the synthesis which takes place in Chinese philosophy.'* Thus, the two major guiding lights of the ancient world, India and China, have illuminated the 'horizon of the spiritual and philosophical life of Asia through their interaction,' and Buddhism is 'the burning lamp that stands at the center of all this interaction.'

3. Bodhidharma's Indian Roots and Its Influence on Chinese Buddhist Thought

Bodhidharma's Indian origins form a very important, yet often overlooked, part in his personal formation and the general transmission of Indian Buddhism to China, the Land of Dragon. The influence of his royal lineage, family background, and the intellectual environment of the Pallava dynasty make for an attractive account of how Indian cultural and philosophical premises contributed to his lasting impact on Chinese Buddhist thought. Most early Chinese hagiographies agree upon the South Indian origin of Bodhidharma. According to the *Luoyang Qielan Ji* (Yang Xuanzhi in 547 CE), Bodhidharma was *"a South Indian Brahmin prince, the third son of a great king"* (Yang 1984: 281), understood to be from the Pallava dynasty that ruled from the capital of *Kānchīpuram* (Kanchipuram or Kanchī), between the 5th to the 6th century CE. The Pallavas were famous for their intolerance of no religious sect, whether Buddhist, Jain, or Śaiva, which was the home to Buddhist monasteries as well as Brahmanical ones, where it turned out to be the hotbed of all sorts of intellectual pursuits. The modern scholarship of historians like P. N. Chopra and H. Heras hypothesized that Bodhidharma belongs to the Pallava aristocracy or possibly to the royal family itself. Heras finds Bodhidharma to have been the younger brother of Simhavarman I, an important Pallava king of the late 4th or early 5th century CE (Heras 1940: 52).

The likelihood of such a genealogy is supported by a Pallava involvement in Buddhist scholasticism, as well as their openness towards philosophical diversity at their court. This would have provided Bodhidharma access to a well-educated elite, involvement in sacred texts, as well as early exposure to philosophical discourse within royal and monastic circles. A Tamil environment, characterized by syncretism within Buddhist, Jaina, and Brahmanical traditions, would have provided Bodhidharma a pluralistic early life, one that would have encouraged a rigorous intellectual program as well as spiritual exploration. The Chinese Chan texts describe Bodhidharma as the 28th patriarch in a lineage tracing back to *Mahākāśyapa* and ultimately to *Śākyamuni* Buddha. This lineage traces back to a South Indian patriarch named *Prajñātāra*, who is the 27th patriarch. (Keizan 1990: 15). The assignment of Bodhidharma's genealogy, likely an act of retrojection, aimed towards establishing Bodhidharma's status as a legitimate monastic leader within China, but also indicates a continuity within *Mahāyāna* traditions within India, specifically within *Dhyāna* (meditation) and prajñā (wisdom), traditions that Bodhidharma would have presumably known well.

Family Background and Education: In a royal family, the third son would not be a direct heir to the throne, which would give him breathing room to find a different profession, such as monastic practice. In the Southern tradition, it would not be

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surprising to see a junior prince or a member of a noble family choose a renouncer tradition, and this would be possible in a religious environment with a mix of Brahmanical, Jain, and Buddhist ideologies. The preeminence of *Kānchīpuram* in mainstream *Mahāyāna* philosophy raises a strong probability that Bodhidharma received training in Buddhist logic (*Hetuvidyā*), metaphysics, and meditation techniques from a young age. The Xu Gaoseng Zhuan, a text written by Daoxuan in the 7th century CE, lists Bodhidharma as a monastic pupil of a famous *Mahāyāna* school master named *Prajñātāra*. Bodhidharma's exceptional spiritual talent would be noted by *Prajñātāra* himself; hence, this master would impart the Dharma to him and give him the investiture of the 28th Patriarch in the spiritual lineage of the Buddha *Śākyamuni* (Daoxuan 1983: 346). This transmission, despite the likely influences of later *Ch'an* tradition-building, shows Bodhidharma's absorption of Indian *Mahāyāna* traditions focused on meditation (*Dhyāna*) and wisdom (*prajñā*), and the concept of immediate and non-conceptual truth realization. Bodhidharma's schooling would have occurred under a setting where Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures were transmitted and where the ideas of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Lankāvatāra*, and *Yogācāra* schools of thought were current. Bodhidharma's teaching on "direct pointing to the mind" and attainment of enlightenment that is independent of the scriptures was strongly flavored by the central point of the *Prajñāpāramitā* Hṛdaya that the highest truth is not amenable to conceptual understanding. In his pioneering research on the tradition of *Ch'an* (Zen) Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki cites the impact of the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, which espouses the policy of mind-only (*citta-mātra*) and immediate enlightenment, on Bodhidharma's teachings during his introduction to the tradition of *Ch'an* Buddhism (Suzuki 1956: 113-18).

India's Intellectual and Cultural Impact on Bodhidharma: India during the Pallava period was in a state of vibrant religious ferment. The decline of royal Buddhist patronage in the north was offset by regional powers in the south, where *Mahāyāna* traditions adapted and flowered. As R. S. Sharma has argued, early medieval Indian society saw a "regionalization of culture" which effected "diverse yet philosophically weighty religious movements," including those in the Tamil country (Sharma 2001: 230-35). It is within this ambience that the Pallava court in *Kānchīpuram* would become a microcosm of religious encounter, fostering institutions wherein young Bodhidharma could engage both doctrinal exegesis and intensive meditative practice. It is this South Indian matrix which explains why later Bodhidharma would emphasize bi-guan, or wall-gazing meditation, often misconstrued in China as extreme or ascetic. In fact, it was a continuation of the aranyaka (forest dwelling) contemplative tradition of Indian Buddhism, wherein the practitioner disengaged from the phenomenal world to realize the mind's original nature. John McRae states that the meditation methods of Bodhidharma were "an extension of the Indian *Mahāyāna* ethos of radical introspection and internal transformation" (McRae 2003: 57). In addition to that, the philosophical tenet of Bodhidharma that "teaching is no-teaching," or that truth goes beyond words, has strong foundations in the Indian Madhyamaka dialectics. The rejection of all conceptualizations by *Nāgārjuna*'s thought and the idea of emptiness (*ṣûnyatā*) of the *Prajñāpāramitā* School resonate in the responses of Bodhidharma to Emperor Wu of Liang, as well as in his subsequent dialogues that are preserved in the Two Entrances and Four Practices.

Bodhidharma's arrival in China, sometime between 480 and 520 CE, fell during a critical phase of Buddhist doctrinal assimilation. Indian scriptures had been translated, but Bodhidharma represented the living embodiment of Indian meditative and epistemic practice. He was wont to emphasize that enlightenment was not mere doctrinal understanding but a direct experiential breakthrough, *jianxin jianxing, "seeing the mind, realizing the nature."* Situating Bodhidharma within the Pallava court, and *Kānchīpuram*'s monastic circles, provides insight into how his education, lineage, and early philosophical training constitute the instrumentality shaping *Ch'an* thought in East Asia. Ananda Guruge aptly puts it: *"India's greatest export to China was not merely scriptures but spiritually realized masters like Bodhidharma, who brought with them the living pulse of Indian Buddhism"* (Guruge 1994: 91).

4. Bodhidharma: The Bhikṣu cum Scholar from the South India (Deccan)

In the historical records *like the Jingde Chuandeng Lu (Record of the Transmission of the Lamp)*, and the Chinese Buddhist travelers, Bodhidharma is mentioned as a South Indian prince perhaps from the Pallavas of South India (Deccan). Kanchipuram in South India is remembered for its thriving academic atmosphere with a deep presence of Buddhist scholarship. The transmission of the teachings of the Buddha, as passed down from the Buddhist hagiography of the great Chinese Buddhist monk and records of the transmission of the lamp of the order of the Chinese Buddhist monk Daoxuan, indicates Bodhidharma and his initiation into the school of the Buddhist Mahayana order of the Buddhist monk *Prajñātāra* (Dumoulin 2005: 79). Bodhidharma's Arrival in China, during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, Bodhidharma's arrival in China is circa 520 CE. This encounter is famously described in the Biographies of Eminent Monks. When questioned by the emperor regarding the merit of his generous patronage of Buddhism, the response given by Bodhidharma that 'no merit', shocked the emperor and unfolded as the radical core of his teaching: enlightenment is not a result of the outside act but rather internal realization. Unsatisfied, Bodhidharma left the court and north to the Song Mountains (McRae 2003: 28). Bodhidharma is, in Chinese known as Damo, traditionally considered a South Indian prince or a

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Brahmin-turned-monk who was born from the Pallava dynasty's stronghold around Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu. Still, Bodhidharma's arrival in China, according to historical records like Luoyang Jialan Ji and Jingde Chuandeng Lu, took place during the Liu Song or Liang dynasty around 520 CE (Shahar 2008: 45). Bodhidharma's philosophical legacies, despite being shrouded in various myths about his personal life, from stories about his longevity to his supernatural abilities, can well be tracked as highly influential. Bodhidharma prized direct insight apart from words and scripture, recommending that practitioners attain their Buddha-nature through meditation (*Dhyāna*/*Ch'an*) and self-realization, a teaching undoubtedly informed by *Mahāsāṅghika* supports from India, specifically from *Yogācāra* and *Mādhyamaka* but characterized by a privileging of internal realization as opposed to scholasticism, flowing well in accord with Daoist intuitions already present in China (Broughton 2010: 108).

Often depicted as either a South Indian prince or a Brahmin-turned-monk hailing from the sphere of the Pallava dynasty, possibly Kanchipuram, his voyage is metaphorically not so much a physical journey as a metaphysical mission. Bodhidharma in Chinese Chronicles Chinese Buddhist sources provide the earliest accounts of Bodhidharma. The Luoyang Jialan Ji (Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang), composed by Yang Xuanzhi in 547 CE, and the Jingde Chuandeng Lu (Transmission of the Lamp), compiled in 1004 CE, give the basic biographical information. According to these records, Bodhidharma arrived by sea, probably from the South Indian coast, and he engaged in an important dialogue with Emperor Wu of Liang. The emperor's questions regarding merit and Bodhidharma's ascetic response, no merit, emphasize his deviation from conventional Buddhist orthodoxy. Even though draped in miraculous feats such as meditating for nine years facing a wall of a cave or crossing the Yangtze River on a single reed, these stories are symbolic.

The teaching of Bodhidharma was completely embedded within the Indian Mahayana tradition, especially the Yogacara and Madhyamaka traditions of philosophy. *Yogācāra* and Mind Only traditions were preoccupied with the prominence of mind and changing the mind through meditation. The *Madhyamika*s, on the other hand, believed in the philosophy of emptiness and the *Middle Way* (path) propounded by *Nāgārjuna*. Bodhidharma combined these schools to advocate his own teaching on enlightenment not achieved by study and ritual practice but rather by means of introspective realization of one's own Buddha nature. In a text which is attributed to him, he says: *"Those who turn away from delusions to reality, who contemplate a wall, the absence of self and other, oneness of mortal and sage, who remain in equanimity with scripture knowledge, they enter in accordance with Principle."* This heightened concern with internal practices harmonized with pre-existing Chinese ideals of Daoism, particularly with a principle of non-action and natural harmonization with the Dao. The Doctrine of Direct Transmission Perhaps the most subversive of Bodhidharma's teachings was that of direct transmission independent of scripture. This doctrine had great potency in the tradition with Bodhidharma's transmission formula: *"A special transmission outside the scriptures; not founded on words and letters; directly pointing to the human mind; seeing one's nature and becoming Buddha."* The assimilation of Bodhidharma's teaching in Chinese Buddhism came easily due to the compatibility of Bodhidharma's teaching with Daoist thought. The Daoist teaching encouraged spontaneity, naturalness, and harmony with nature, which are reflected in Bodhidharma's teaching of non-attachment through intuitive understanding. Bodhidharma's iconoclastic teaching of rejecting ritual and dogmatic strictness harmonized well with Daoist criticism of Confucian decorum.

As pointed out by scholars like John McRae and Heinrich Dumoulin, *Ch'an* realized itself as a Sinicized form of Indian Buddhist thought with Indian metaphysics taking the shape of Daoist epistemology. Bodhidharma, an Indian from the Deccan, in his Indian incarnation, became a Chinese cultural icon. After the example of Bodidharma, his school of thought was then continued by his successors, with the greatest of these being Huike (487-573 CE), who cut his own arm in display of his sincere intent. After Bodidharma, his school of thought progressed under the leadership of his successors with the *Ch'an* school of Buddhism focusing on the Zen of instant enlightenment as the meaning of life itself, which became manifest in texts such as the *"Platform Sutras of the Sixth Patriarch"* or *"Blue Cliff Records."* So, the Zen school of Japan, the Seon school of Korea, and the Thien school of Vietnam have their spiritual lineage traceable to this common root figure. Contemporary Interpretations and Cultural Remembering Bodhidharma has been remembered in contemporary society both as a spiritual master and as an iconic figure of martial excellence. While stories about his connections with the Shaolin system of martial arts are not proven as facts, they are also part of the larger cult of his disciplined image. Books, movies, and academic literature keep attempting biographical explorations of his life with equal measures of documentation and fantasy.

5. The Arrival at Shaolin and the Meditative Legacy

A connection with the Shaolin Temple is inescapable in understanding the Chinese legacy of Bodhidharma as well as the amalgamation of yogic systems from India as followed in Chinese Buddhist traditions. He is attributed to several Chinese classics like the *Yi Jin Jing* or *Muscle-Tendon Transformation Classic* and *Xi Sui Jing* or *Marrow-Cleansing Classic*, both carrying heavy influences from India despite being passed on as part of Chinese wisdom. These Chinese classics incorporate yogic notions like pranayama or breath control and asanas or physical postures for improving physical health, strength, circulation, as well as spiritual awareness,

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thus symbolizing the successful transplantation of Indian physical and spiritual wisdom to Chinese culture (Ching 2010: 110). A major and abiding part of Bodhidharma's memory in China is his association with Shaolin Monastery on Mount Song in Henan province. In Chinese historical tradition, Bodhidharma is said to have passed nine years meditating in a cave nearby, with his back "facing the wall," which is a potent image of deep internal meditation (Shahar 2008: 97). Although historians dispute Bodhidharma's historical presence at Shaolin Monastery, this legend has had a huge impact on its meditation and Chan (or Zen) Buddhist tradition alongside its martial arts. *"Two Entrances, Four Practices"* is the sum and substance of Bodhidharma's teachings, and these are all about achieving enlightenment through meditation, patience, ethics, and detachment. These concepts are nearly identical with the ascetic schools of thought that flourished in ancient India, requiring inner tranquility and morality as pre-requisites for gaining enlightenment (Broughton 2010: 116).

Although the roots of Bodhidharma's thought in ancient India are abundantly analyzed, the Shaolin legacy remains the most significant aspects of Bodhidharma's influence on Chinese Buddhist historiography as far as Chinese religiosity is concerned, as Shaolin remains as alluring as ever for meditation and martial arts practitioners alike in the modern era, symbolizing the sublime amalgam between spiritual ideals and Chinese religiosity. Bodhidharma's emphasis on meditation was not an innovation within Indian Buddhist traditions, as meditation was an essential part of its core soteriology. The tradition of dhyana, meditative absorption, was an essential element of early Theravada as well as Mahayana schools of Buddhist practice. Bodhidharma's promotion of meditation as the essential method for attaining enlightenment represented a departure within Chinese Buddhist practice. Bodhidharma's emphasis on self-discipline, solo meditation, and mind-to-mind transmission, with an emphasis on an almost monastic, India influenced "forest monks" style, represented a departure when this was institutionalized within Shaolin monasticism. The subsequent *Ch'an* School would focus more upon meditation than liturgy, master-disciple experience more than scriptural exegesis, and sudden enlightenment over gradual cultivation. Bodhidharma's subsequent *"gift"* of martial arts at Shaolin, while a legendary attribute, is a matter of debate among modern scholars. Bodhidharma's contribution to the subsequent infusion of Shaolin with a spiritual vision, however, is an historical fact. Before Bodhidharma's coming, Chinese Buddhism was dominated by piety and scholastic approaches, with a strong focus on the schools of *Tiantai* and *Huayen* Buddhism.

Bodhidharma's advocacy of silent meditation and self-realization was a departure from this tradition. His teaching of a meditation asceticism consisted of Indian notions, couched in a Chinese terminology which suited Chinese taste. The wall-gazing example, for instance, resonated with Daoist notions of inaction (*wu wei*), and was reflective of the practices of the early Chinese tradition of alchemy within. The tradition of Bodhidharma's meditation practices was continued by his own lineage holder, Huike, known to have shown the required dedication by cutting off his arm to emphasize his serious intent. Symbolic of *Ch'an*'s tradition, this act exalted dedication to personal understanding over and above book knowledge, which would be later institutionalized by the successive Patriarchs to give vent to a *Ch'an* school tradition. The Shaolin tradition of meditation established by Bodhidharma would spread to Korea *(Seon)*, Japan *(Zen)*, and Vietnam *(Thien)*.

6. Bodhidharma's Impact on Martial Art Practices at Shaolin

The posthumous association of Bodhidharma with the martial arts tradition of the Shaolin Monastery is a vital dimension of his lasting relevance in China, aside from his meditative teachings. Although no source from his time can confirm that Bodhidharma practiced or taught martial arts at Shaolin, Chinese and later East Asian traditions have continually associated him with the physical discipline that would eventually become synonymous with the monastery. Significantly, Bodhidharma was said to have composed two important treatises in later folklore and texts: the Muscle-Tendon Transformation Classic, or Yi Jin Jing, and the Marrow-Cleansing Classic, or Xi Sui Jing. These writings, if genuinely from Bodhidharma or not, formed the basis of Shaolin's unique blend of Buddhist practice and martial skills. Most modern scholars reject the authorship of Bodhidharma, calling these texts either apocryphal or the results of later centuries. However, their ideas and physiological concepts correspond to Indian influences, which should fit the wider flow of Indic traditions carried into China. Indeed, the Yi Jin Jing embeds sequences of physical movements similar to Indian asanas into the practices of *prāṇāyāma*. Its goal lies in leading the inner energies, hardening the body, and sharpening the mind. You can see this synthesis in the way it borrows from yoga traditions, including the *Yoga Sūtra* of *Patañjali* and *Haṭha Yoga* approaches.

More hidden about the origins of their practice, the Xi Sui Jing employs the 'cleaning the bones' process as a rejuvenation outreach to the body and spirit. These methods not only engage the body for rejuvenation but involve a meditative exercise that demands sustained focused attention, breathing regulation, and mental imaging, typical of the most refined methods of Indic practice (Tanaka 2010: 211). The application of the aforementioned yogic tradition of the *śarīra-saṃskāra*, body purification as a vehicle for fulfilling the awakening, is recognized. The quoted application of the martial books to the authority of the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma marks the acceptance of the absorption of the Indian body knowledge and the Chinese knowledge of the martial arts. The implication that the South Indian Buddhist monk was teaching the Shaolin

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Buddhist monks to develop their physical prowess to endurably carry their meditation sessions for prolonged periods of time freezes the tradition of the use of the body for the purpose of the spiritually adept. In keeping with Indian Buddhist traditions, particularly within the context of *Mahāyana* and tantric traditions, the maintenance of healthy bodily functions is seen as complementing effective mental functions. The Bodhidharma tradition has an integrated approach that includes awareness and understanding of the body, the mind, as well as an integrated lifestyle that incorporates all these elements.

"Shaolin martial arts have roots in more than defense and sport. Shaolin martial arts represent a daily living and bodily and mental discipline in whose meditative performance practices of exercise and focused breathing culminate in fixed concentration." Of course, this integration of body and mind is borrowed from yogic practices native to India, yet also reflects a transformation through a Chinese system of cosmology and ethics. *"In later Chan (Zen) lineages, everyday life and even martial training were practices for awakening."* In contemporary culture, *"The Bodhidharma-Shaolin Kung Fu tradition is a strong emblem of the integration between Indian Buddhist thought and Chinese Physical Culture. Bodhidharma is usually represented in combat poses that suggest endurance and interior tranquility in activity."* As Shahar himself says, "The Bodhidharma myth provided Shaolin with a sacral genealogy for its martial training, embedding it within Buddhist self-cultivation and Indian ascetic practice" (Shahar 2008: 121).

The Shaolin physical and spiritual tradition preserves a valuable combination of Indian yogic practices. The *āsana* (position) patterns incorporated in Shaolin kata convey the importance of upright and focused physical positioning established in traditional Indian yoga (Shahar 2008: 134). Such positions in Shaolin practice martial arts patterns as well as a means of focused mind development, utilizing breathing in order to improve awareness and circulation of life energy. The regulation of breath in Shaolin practices a similar pattern with Indian tantric/*Vajrayāna* breathing practices focused on breath management in order to provide support for mental absorption during meditation along with energy purification processes (Feng and Chen 2015: 88). The Shaolin monks conceive of energy channels and nodes, akin to Chakra concepts in India, to optimize energy and concentration. Inextricably linked with the practice itself is the moral training (*śīla*) that defines the conduct of practitioners. This virtue-based tradition aligns well with the Vinaya monastic code of India and Buddhist-yoga school's moral teaching to remind that perfection is a combination of physical proficiency and morals (Ching 2010: 98). The Shaolin's philosophical ideal of oneness of body and spirit, just like in the ideology of Yoga and *Ch'an* schools of India, is the centerpiece of Shaolin's combined practice of spiritual enlightenment and physical excellence (Broughton 2010: 214).

An essential part of Bodhidharma's Chinese influence is his link with Shaolin martial arts. In later legendries, Bodhidharma is said to have written the *"Yi Jin Jing"* or "Muscle-Tendon Transformation Classic" and the "Xi Sui *Jing"* or *"Marrow-Cleansing Classic,"* which are a compilation of Indian yogic exercises combined with martial training. Although there is doubt about their attribution to Bodhidharma, it is obvious that there are Indian influences in these scriptures:

- Yogic breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) and postures
- Mental concentration (*samādhi*) and its relation to physical conditioning
- Health, inner strength, and spiritual resilience as objectives for martial practice.

Accordingly, whether written by Bodhidharma himself or not, these texts represent the Indian knowledge of the body incorporated into the Chinese martial tradition.

7. *Ch'an* Buddhism: An Indian Flame in the Land of Dragon

The use of '*Ch'an*' comes from Sanskrit *Dhyāna* (meditative absorption), indicating the Indian origins of this school of Buddhism. The teachings of Bodhidharma stemmed from *Yogācāra* and Madhyamaka schools of philosophy with a concentration on the innate cleansing quality of the mind and the requirement for non-duality. He propounds a "direct transmission outside scriptures" and a reference to man's own mind in place of scripture dependence. It was this dramatic turn that appealed to Chinese Daoist preferences and established a distinct East Asian version of Buddhism (McRae 2003: 45). The philosophical idea of Bodhidharma is grounded in *Mahāyāna* philosophies with specific pointers to *Tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha Nature), Emptiness or *śūnyatā*, and the Bodhisattva ideal. In the Chinese *Ch'an* tradition, all of these teachings were interpreted in the framework of spontaneity, simplicity, and directness. The influence of Daoism allowed for the orientation towards intuition instead of logic, nature instead of ritual, and private enlightenment instead of authority. In short, Bodhidharma's Indian spiritual legacy not only continued in China, but it thrived through reinterpretation. "The Mahayana Buddhist basics, the potential for Buddhahood in every sentient being, the emptiness of all phenomena, and the inadequacies of conceptual knowledge," all continued, but all "were cast in the form of Chinese Daoist teachings, *Ch'an* art, and culture." Bodhidharma's greatest contribution is the creation of *Ch'an* Buddhism, known as Zen Buddhism in Japanese tradition, based on the Sanskrit word Dhyana, which means "meditation." *Ch'an* draws heavily on Indian *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, which includes the use of some of its key concepts:

- The Buddha-nature doctrine of *Tathāgatagarbha* asserts that the potentiality to attain enlightenment is inherent in

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all beings.

- *Śūnyatā* by *Nāgārjuna*'s *Madhyamaka* philosophy places great emphasis on nothingness and non-attachment, listing phenomena as illusory.
- The rejection of textual attachment, which follows from the Buddha's advice in the *Kalama Sutta* and *Nāgārjuna's* critique of scholasticism, favors direct realization of non-conceptual nature.

Chinese *Ch'an* uniquely filtered these Indian ideas through the prism of Daoist sensibilities-simplicity, spontaneity, and harmony with nature-to forge a vibrant, indigenous expression of Buddhist meditation practice. This practice-oriented focus constitutes the main difference from other forms of Chinese Buddhism that depended a lot on textual study, ritualism, or devotionalism. Bodhidharma, traditionally regarded as the first patriarch of the *Ch'an* school, rejected over-dependence on scriptures and rituals. Following the principles of the Indian school of *Mahāyāna*s, Bodhidharma proclaimed direct experiential verification of reality's nature to be the only means of attaining enlightenment. Bodhidharma's basic stance corresponds to the archaic Buddhism of the Indian sutras, but its specific *Ch'an* lineage developed within the context of Chinese philosophical thought. The first teaching of Bodhidharma that has been passed down is related to the theory of *Tathāgatagarbha*, also known as the theory of Buddha Nature. The idea of this teaching is that all beings possess the potential for enlightenment by nature. It is stated in the Indian texts of *Mahāyāna*s, such as the sutra of *Tathāgatagarbha* and Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra that the Buddha Nature is hidden by defilements and illusion, but it remains essentially pure and unchanged. Bodhidharma's teaching shares a Continue Reading gesture of this type of metaphysical optimism. The idea of enlightenment as something that is not to be obtained but only revealed harmonizes with the Indian conviction that a cloudless mind mirrors truth (Williams 2009: 104).

Another strong philosophical influence on *Ch'an* Buddhism is the *śūnyatā*, or emptiness of the Madhyamaka School, which was founded by the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. According to Madhyamaka thought, all phenomena lack inherent existence; they arise dependently and do not have permanent essence. This deconstruction of conceptual and ontological schemata forms the basis upon which the *Ch'an* School disavowed scholasticism and discursive knowledge. In the words of John McRae: *"Ch'an's emphasis on the immediate perception of reality dispensed with conceptual-philosophical analysis in favor of intuitive realization, a move that was indebted to Mādhyamika but filtered through Chinese idioms"* (McRae 2003: 67). The teachings of *Ch'an* also reflect a powerful apophatic tendency wherein the language is presented as incompetent and doctrines insufficient to describe ultimate reality. The following four-line verse, ascribed to Bodhidharma, states it clearly: A special transmission outside the scriptures; No dependence on words and letters; directly pointing to the human mind; seeing one's nature and becoming Buddha. This anti-textual stance does not reject altogether the validity of scripture but critiques clinging to language and concept, echoing both the Buddha's pragmatic epistemology in the *Kalāma* Sutta (AN 3.65) and *Nāgārjuna*'s critique of conceptual proliferation in works such as the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. For example, in some cases, the ideal of a sagely person under the *Ch'an* tradition may very well approximate the ideal of a Daoist sage: they are serene, spontaneous, un-embroiled in worldly affairs, and in tune with the universe. The Zen arts, calligraphy, poetry, gardens, and martial arts in general express these tenets in a style that emphasizes simplicity, equilibrium, and naturalness. Heinrich Dumoulin correctly comments that "The Indian method of introductive meditation has in China acquired a new voice in the rhythm of Chinese poetry, in calligraphy, in the silent figure of a *Ch'an* master" (Dumoulin 2005: 113).

The Chinese interpretation of the Buddhist concepts of India through the Daoist filter of China is also evident in the *Ch'an* School's reliance upon the dialectical method of paradoxical teaching. The interaction between masters and disciples involves dramatic gestures of rejection, silence, or enigmatic answers that are calculated to disrupt notions of duality with the goal of achieving Sudden Awakening. This dramatic technique of instruction, akin to "shock treatment," results in dislodging the obedient pupil from conceptual thought to achieve the goal of Buddhist *prajñā* or wisdom, beyond the mundane range of cognition. The early Indian Buddhist School of instruction required study of the scriptures followed by monastic austerity, in contrast to the *Ch'an* School, where the goal of enlightenment could be achieved through informal means by laypeople. The Shaolin monasteries of China were followed by the development of the Five Mountain schools that introduced meditation to work routines through martial arts exercises.

8. Indian Yogic and Meditative Techniques at Shaolin Practice

While it remains unclear whether Bodhidharma was definitively associated with martial arts, the Chinese tradition assigns him the role of teaching physical exercises for the health and concentration of Shaolin monks. "The Yi Jin Jing and the Xi Sui Jing are representative of the assimilation of yoga breathing practices (*pranayama*), physical postures (*āsanas*), and concentration practices (*dharana*) of Indians by the Chinese." Bodhidharma's physical culture provided the Shaolin martial arts with a solid base of exercises for physical power, flexibility, and mental concentration (Faure 109). The Shaolin physical culture represents a combination of:

- *Āsana* or positions, combined in forms (*kata*)

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- Breath control and visualization, as in Tantric and *Vajrayāna* traditions in India
- Moral discipline (*śīla*), a crucial concept in both Buddhist monastic rules and military morals.

Furthermore, the philosophical context of Shaolin also contains the unity of the body and mind, which is a distinct aspect of both yogic traditions and *Ch'an* Buddhism. In essence, it established a route towards enlightenment that included mastery of the body.

Bodhidharma is believed to have lived near the Shaolin Monastery, practicing meditation for nine years facing a wall in a cave. This mythical deed represents considerable meditation and practicing wall-gazing meditation (biguan). In his earliest text, *"Two Entrances, Four Practices,"* Bodhidharma presents a spiritual discipline approach through personal experience instead of scripture study. Shaolin Monastery is a world example of Shaolin Kung Fu training and meditation, an outstanding example of the harmonious development of body exercises and spiritual practices, where instead of contradicting, they supplement each other. There is a big example showing how the spiritual sciences of India have influenced body exercises in China, made a harmonious path of development, where the power of body and purity of mind are interdependent. Among the essential Shaolin practice components, there are yoga poses, which are the major element in martial arts (katas; taolu in Chinese). These poses demonstrate some similarity in seating and standing poses in yoga and meditation in ancient India, where positioning, balance, and energy flow (qi or prana) are highlighted. "The monitored movement of Shaolin katas is two-fold: for exercise as well as for reaching meditation." With respect to yoga, it has also been seen that "the movement of postures in martial arts, as followed in China, is remarkably aligned with the movement of yoga postures as defined in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, as well as hatha yoga texts, where controlling postures is necessary to attain higher meditation or '*Dhyana*.'

An important aspect of the Shaolin tradition is the control of breath and visualization. These have a very close conjunction to Indian tantric and *Vajrayāna* traditions. A very important yogic practice is *prāṇāyāma*, which is the control of the breath. It is the basic technique to control the vital energy of the body and to calm the mind. Advanced breath controls are widely employed by the Shaolin monks to increase endurance, balance the internal energy (qi), and aid meditative concentration (*samādhi*). These breath controls are often pursued through visualization exercises, which resemble Indian tantric yogic meditations to uncover the potential spirit (*eros*) that lies asleep (Feng and Chen 85). What complements the physical practices is the rooting of the discipline in moral precepts (*śīla*). In Indian Buddhist monastic practices and martial traditions, *śīla* symbolizes the foundation that preserves the honor and purity of the tradition of the path. A close conjunction with the physical practices of the Shaolin tradition are the moral principles that involve ideals of compassion, self-control, humility, and respect for all of life. This is similar to the Vinaya code prescribed for Indians and the moral principles inseparable from the Buddhist and yogic traditions (Ching 2010: 97). As Jeffrey Broughton notes, *"the Shaolin arts epitomize the thorough combination of Indian yogic embodiment and Ch'an's meditative immediacy into a path in which enlightenment can be matter-of-factly expressed as much by physical mastery as mental clarity"* (Broughton 2010: 214).

9. Sanskrit to Chinese and Indian Impact beyond Bodhidharma

The Indian influence on Chinese Buddhism went well beyond Bodhidharma. The translation work of monks such as *Kumārajīva, Paramārtha,* and Xuanzang preserved and dispersed core Indian philosophical texts. Vinaya, or monastic discipline, Abhidharma, or scholastic philosophy, and *Mahāyāna sūtras* like the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, and Heart Sūtra deeply influenced doctrinal development in China. Indian rituals, artistic styles, cosmologies, and methods of meditation were all slowly transformed into Chinese forms and frames (Zürcher 2007: 217). Bodhidharma clearly had an important role in *Ch'an*, though Indian elements within Chinese Buddhism can be considered in terms of several categories:

- Translation movements, in which Indian monks like *Kumārajīva* (344-413 CE) translated important scriptures like the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*, and *Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, which profoundly shaped Chinese Buddhist doctrine (Tokuno 67).
- The transmission of Vajrayana (*Esoteric Buddhism*) into China by Indian monks *Śubhakarasiṃha* and *Amoghavajra*, who introduced the tantras of meditation and ritual into the court of the Tang Dynasty (Faure 1991: 125)
- The codification of monastic rules, especially the Indian Vinaya codes that regulated monastic life in China.
- The journey of the Chinese monks Faxian and Xuanzang, whose travel accounts contributed to the understanding of Buddhism in India through Chinese Buddhism.

These Exchanges demonstrate the preeminent position of the Indian knowledge systems in shaping the religious consciousness of the Chinese.

The transmission of Buddhism itself from India to China involves more than the mere geographical transportation of ideas from one nation to another. This is because the transmission of Buddhist ideas from Indian to Chinese civilizations is a process of syncretism in its mixing and

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blending. This process involves the use of language. The transmission of Buddhist ideas from Indian to Chinese civilizations involves more than the mere replacement of words from one place to the other. This needs to be accommodated within the China world views, which may incorporate ideas of Daoism. For example:

- The *Dhyāna* rendered as *Ch'an* which not only denote meditation but also evoked notions of profound stillness and contemplation intrinsic to Daoist thought (Broughton 57).
- *Nirvāṇa* became *niepan*, a term associated with the Daoist ideal of transcendence and immortality (Faure 1991: 62).
- *Prajñā* translated as banruo reflecting on insight beyond conceptual knowledge, a notion compatible with both Madhyamaka emptiness and Daoist Wu (non-being) (Tokuno 1990: 45).
- Concepts were reinterpreted as wu-wei (non-action) aligning with non-attachment as per the Daoist philosophy.
- Artistic motifs, lotus, maṇḍalas, mudrās, migrated from Indian stūpas to Chinese temples which is the linguistic adaptation essential for making Buddhist doctrines accessible and meaningful to Chinese audiences in Confucian and Daoist frameworks.

Overall, the Chinese Buddhists and Bodhidharma himself tended towards an interpretation of Buddhist thought from an indigenous Daoist perspective. A basic concept of the Daoist philosophy, and one that has much in common with Buddhist philosophy around the notion of "nature," is the concept of "wu-wei," or "non-action." Wu-wei refers to the attitude or practice of aligning oneself with the path of nature itself, or doing nothing in the sense of following the course of nature, rather than the Buddhist goal of eliminating the ego and the concept of desire (Faure 1991: 70).

Figuring outside language and philosophy, artistic imagery followed the Silk Road and riverine trade routes, permeating Chinese religious art: architecture, iconography, ritual. Such Buddhist symbolism from India, such as the lotus-emblematic of purity undefiled from the filthy river of samsara-took a strong hold in Chinese temples and frescos (Shahar 2008: 145). Mandalas, those incredibly detailed and symbolic maps of the universe utilized for meditational and devotional purposes, were instituted into Chinese Buddhist traditions, sometimes employing Daoist character charts and symbolic cosmography (Feng and Chen 130). Mudras, which are devotional hand gestures imbued with spiritual value, took place within Chinese Buddhist rituals, adding more performative elements to worship practice. Shaolin Monastery forms a daggering example of this, a living laboratory of transcultural innovation. Flowering originally from a Buddhist tradition influenced by India, Shaolin became a place where yogic and meditation practicum combined with Indian, Chinese martial traditions, and health regimens stemming from Daoist Chinese and the *Ch'an* School's tenets (Shahar 2008: 149). This fusion produced a uniquely East Asian synthesis characterized by:

- Physical practices blending āsana-like postures with martial forms (kata),
- Breath control and visualization techniques echoing Tantric and *Vajrayāna* yogic traditions,
- A moral and ethical framework informed by Indian śīla and Chinese martial discipline,
- An integrated philosophy valuing the unity of body and mind as paths to both enlightenment and self-mastery.

The Shaolin Legacy exhibits the dynamic way that Buddhist ideologies and techniques interact with new cultures, forming novel patterns with deep roots that constantly evolve. Shaolin rapidly became a testing ground for such innovative interactions, as Sino-Indian patterns intertwined to weave an Eastern Asian fabric.

10. Bodhidharma in Art, Literature, and Popular Imagination

The figure of Bodhidharma, known in Chinese as Damo, plays a significant role in East Asian culture in general, as it is not only related to historical and religious worship but also to numerous works of art. Bodhidharma's unique image has been embedded deeply in the spiritual life of China, Japan, and other East Asian cultures in general, which confirms the profound influence of the Indian Buddhist spiritual heritage on the cultures of these countries. In the religion of East Asia, Bodhidharma always symbolized a serious, bearded, and meditative person with wide-open concentrated eyes, which represented the Buddhist's unswerving spiritual interest (Welch 1967: 112). Another very famous pictorial theme related to Bodhidharma is that of his fixed stare at a wall during his nine-year-long meditation retreat that took place close to the Shaolin Monastery (Shahar 2008: 165). Another famous theme is that of Bodhidharma cutting his own eyelids in order to remind himself not to close his eyes during a long-lasting meditation session. This specific theme is a reflection of his vigilance and ability to persevere in his quest to achieve enlightenment (Broughton 2010: 98). Another famous theme is his transmission of his teachings to his successor in a very peculiar manner.

Bodhidharma's biography and teachings are documented in the classics of Chinese Buddhism, such as The Transmission of the Lamp (*Jingde Chuandeng Lu*), a highly influential collection collated in the 10th century that indexes *Ch'an*

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biographies. His biographies are historical records interwoven with mythological motifs, in which Bodhidharma is construed as a figure who transmitted Indian meditations in China, in addition to debunking existing monastic traditions in favor of immediate experiences rather than scriptural studies (Heine & Wright 45). Modern Bodhidharma, in particular, has crossed over religious text lines, becoming a well-known cultural phenomenon in East Asia generally. His meditations in China are documented in his dialogues with Chinese emperors, in addition to his disciple biographies, in which events are portrayed as extraordinary encounters inquiring into his unbending stance on personal enlightenment through paradoxical speeches, where he mainly employed iconoclastic approaches for any individual questioning his monastic approach or scriptural interpretations through eloquent jargon responses. His role in literature, drama, and movies is that of a spiritual warrior and cultural hero, symbolizing the meeting point of Buddhist wisdom from India and the martial spirit of China. Many films in Chinese cinema are dedicated to Bodhidharma, where his legendary connection with Shaolin martial arts is particularly emphasized, as well as his unbending spirit. For instance, *"The Shaolin Temple"* series of films, beginning in 1982, casts Bodhidharma as a major role model, because his philosophy forms the foundation for the martial arts traditions of the Shaolin monastery (Shahar 2008: 178). For Korean and Japanese culture, Bodhidharma, named *"Daruma"* in Japan, is a legendary figure in many popular folklores, representing steadfastness, spiritual understanding, and cultural diffusion (Brazell 1998: 213).

Bodhidharma represents the passage of meditation practices and philosophical understanding from India into East Asian religions. Bodhidharma appears as an important figure in Chinese and then Japanese iconography. He is typically illustrated as an aggressive-looking Buddhist monk with a beard and compelling eyes that symbolize his steadfastness in his quest for truth. In popular mythology, Bodhidharma is said to have done impossible things such as walking across the Yangtze River using a reed as an analog to his walking across China in real life and cutting off his own eyelids so that he wouldn't fall asleep during his meditation sessions. Even though these stories have little basis in fact, they symbolize the cultural absorption of ascetic ideals in Buddhism in China imaginatively and creatively (Dumoulin 2005: 89). The regular familiarity of Bodhidharma in artwork and popular mythology in different cultures symbolizes an *"unending conversation among memory, religion, and creativity"* and acts as an influence for spiritual practitioners and artists to think about the unity of body and spirit in themselves that transcends different cultures and different eras in history. Bodhidharma's image, severe, bearded, meditative, is a staple in East Asian iconography. Popular narratives portray him as:

- A relentless meditator who stared at a wall for nine years.
- The monk who severed his eyelids to prevent sleep (symbolic of vigilance).
- A martial arts progenitor imparting wisdom and strength.

In literature and cinema, Bodhidharma appears in works like The Transmission of the Lamp and modern films across China, Korea, and Japan. He symbolizes spiritual tenacity, cultural transmission, and the Indian roots of East Asian spirituality.

11. Contemporary Relevance

However, the legacy of Bodhidharma has now reemerged as a mutual rich cultural heritage of India and China. The Indian Government under Prime Minister Modi has referred to Bodhidharma as an example of similarities based on culture that transcend only geography (Singh 2023: 2023). Similarly, Chinese officials continue to support Bodhidharma as a symbol of non-aggressive cultural exchange, underlining the significance of Buddhist cultural inheritance to their bilateral ties (Zhao 2022: 2022). These political rallies assist in scaling down Bodhidharma to a symbol of friendship, unity, and cultural diplomacy, among other initiatives to enhance cordial ties between India and China. In reality, various joint projects between Indian and Chinese institutions exist to commemorate their joint Buddhist inheritance. While the Shaolin Monastery has been traditionally traced back to Bodhidharma, it has been reaching out to major yoga centers in India, recognizing a common heritage in ancient Indian yogic and meditation systems (Feng & Chen 2015: 2015). This has been in terms of student exchanges, workshops, and other research endeavors into the commonalities between yoga in India and Chinese martial arts in terms of their collective pursuit of balancing body, lungs, and mind.

This has encouraged the restoration of the transmission line of Buddhism from India and China with an interdisciplinary method of revisiting the topic of Bodhidharma and Silk Road Buddhism. There has been an increase in the awareness of the historical and cultural foundation of this transmission of Buddhism as a result of international conferences and publications of authors related to this topic as cited in Broughton (2010). In a broader aspect, the international relations of Buddhism cover harmony worldwide, where the Buddhist concept of world peace is found in the teaching of Bodhidharma. The thought of Bodhidharma, whose life represented the link between ancient India and China, renews our efforts towards cross-cultural understanding, religious revivals, and peaceful communion. Since the past few years, there has been the emergence of the cultural similarity between India and China through the symbolism of Bodhidharma. This has happened through cultural interactions between the Shaolin Temple and Indian yoga centers, as well as research towards finding the origin of the Buddhist sect of Zen in India. Meanwhile, popular cultural expressions of the legend of Bodhidharma represent him as the martial sage, exuding

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imagery of the unity of ancient Asia (Sen 2003: 97). The influence of Bodhidharma, the enigmatic Buddhist monk from India who trekked to China, still lingers today in the cultural, political, and religious corridors of modern society. Contrary to the fact that he could have faded into the background of history, the legend of Bodhidharma has resurfaced as an apt metaphor of the perennial India-China Buddhist connection. In recent years, Bodhidharma has re-emerged as a diplomatic and cultural symbol:

- Indian Prime Ministers and Chinese leaders have referenced him in speeches as a shared cultural asset.
- Shaolin Monastery has collaborated with Indian yoga institutes, recognizing common roots.
- Academic research and Buddhist diplomacy aim to revitalize the India-China Buddhist circuit.

This revival emphasizes that Bodhidharma is not merely a historical figure but a living symbol of unity and dialogue.

12. Conclusive Remark

The dissemination of Buddhism from India to China is considered to be one of the major and most enduring cultural exchanges in the history of Asia. With regard to this general process, it should be noted that Bodhidharma is one of the crucial figures whose role should not be underestimated, especially as far as the formation of Chinese *Ch'an* Buddhism is concerned. Moreover, it is necessary to mention that the significance of Bodhidharma is not limited to transferring separate ideas or practices; he has become an important symbol of the process of transformation of Indian spiritual traditions within the Chinese religious and intellectual culture. In other words, the traditionally described transition of Bodhidharma from South India (Deccan Region) to China (Land of Dragon) should be perceived not only as a geographic transfer but also as a process of transformation.

The traditions of Bodhidharma emphasize the value of meditation, discipline, patience, lack of attachment, and immediate transformation of oneself. Although the Two Entrances and Four Practices, a scripture attributed to him, is disputed and problematic regarding the authorship and transmission of its text, the scripture gives valuable information about the teachings and meditative practice of Bodhidharma. Those qualities made him an idealized figure of intensive meditation and spiritual discipline later on. However, the well-known tradition of nine years of wall-gazing at Shaolin has little to do with the figure of Bodhidharma and is more a part of his later legend than of history. Yet, this tradition emphasizes the importance of Bodhidharma in the cultural memory of *Ch'an*. The connection between Bodhidharma and Shaolin provides another example of the complicated interplay of history, religious belief, and cultural memory. Neither *Yi Jin Jing* nor *Xi Sui Jing* can be safely ascribed to Bodhidharma and thus cannot be used as evidence of his teachings. These works, however, provide another illustration of the way Bodhidharma was associated with physical discipline, breathing exercises, meditation, martial arts, and the larger tradition of Shaolin culture. Thus, the Shaolin tradition itself provides an important instance of how the ideals of contemplation of Indian Buddhism and the practices of Chinese religion and physical activity were later presented as interconnected.

However, there are certain limitations inherent to the evidence regarding the historical life of Bodhidharma which should be considered in relation to the conclusions made. In particular, the attribution of Bodhidharma to the city of Kanchipuram and the Pallava country seems feasible but still cannot be confirmed by the extant evidence. Likewise, the extent of his impact on the emergence of *Ch'an* Buddhism and his association with Shaolin cannot be ascertained on the basis of later biographical and patriarchal texts alone. There is a large gap of time between Bodhidharma and some of the sources in question, and the development of the hagiographic and patriarchal traditions necessitates a differentiation of the historical testimonies from religious memories. This study itself has a predominantly historical and textual character and is focused more on interpretation than on an exhaustive philological analysis of Chinese and Indic manuscripts and archaeological/epigraphical examination of the Shaolin tradition.

The problems listed above suggest a number of promising fields for future scholarly investigation. Firstly, it would be valuable to carry out an in-depth philological comparison of the early Chinese texts on Bodhidharma with their Indian counterparts in order to trace the evolution of his biography and doctrine. The study of the intellectual and institutional context of South Indian Buddhism at the time of the Pallava dynasty could also help identify the routes of transfer of Buddhist teaching from India to China. Interdisciplinary studies that would combine textual research with archaeology, epigraphy, and the study of art and Shaolin institutions could shed light on the historical connection between Bodhidharma and the Shaolin monastery. Comparison of the Two Entrances and Four Practices with Indian *Mahāyāna* meditation texts could be helpful to establish the connection between Indian and *Ch'an* discourse on meditation.

Indeed, Bodhidharma needs to be viewed as both a historical personage whose life story is still partially unknown and as a cultural giant whose influence on the way Buddhist memory is shaped in China and elsewhere was tremendous. What is most important, however, is not so much what we know for sure about this historical personage, but rather the way in which he has become the symbol of the meeting between Indian Buddhism and Chinese culture. Therefore, Bodhidharma is a remarkable example of the way in which Buddhist teachings crossed linguistic, geographical, and cultural frontiers and evolved through the process of adaptation. Contemporary times allow us to look at the legacy of Bodhidharma as a valuable example of inter-cultural dialogue and spiritual practice.

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