

Chapter 4: Central Asia and India's Beginnings: 4-7 Trade and the Spread of Buddhism

Book Title: World Civilizations

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4-7 Trade and the Spread of Buddhism

Early India had remarkably little cultural interchange with its Asian neighbors. The main reason for this lack of contact was that the high mountain ranges to India's north provided no easy passages to the east. There were, however, some exceptions to this lack of contact. By far the most significant one was the export of the Buddhist faith from India to Central and East Asia. In the first century C.E., Buddhist merchants, drawn by the lucrative trade that passed along the Silk Road, braved the difficult passages through the northern mountain ranges that took them to Central Asia. There, in its Mahayana form, the new doctrine won converts among the pastoralist tribes who controlled the east-west corridors. From the caravan centers, the new religion was conveyed eastward and took root in China, where it entered deeply into Chinese cultural life, blending the new ideas with traditional Confucian practice and ethics (see [Chapter 13](#)).

India's commercial and cultural preponderance in regions that made up the (appropriately named) Indian Ocean domain was even weightier than in Central and Eastern Asia. Again, it was Ashoka's conversion that helped India position itself in the center of this arena of continents. The reason lay in the fact that, although Hindu priests frowned on dealings with foreigners, Buddhists taught that trade contributed to everyone's welfare. Ashoka and his Buddhist advisors encouraged the extension of trade along sea lanes to Southeast Asia, a development aided by two other major advances. The first was the Mauryan conquest of the Ganges River port of Tamruk, which faced the Bay of Bengal. The other, more crucial development was the discovery of the prevailing directions of the Indian Ocean's monsoon winds.

From June to September, the winds blew from the southwest to the northeast; then from November to March, they shifted to the opposite direction. This realization enabled Indian merchants to complete roundtrip voyages either to eastern or western destinations in a year or less. It also allowed traders to develop routing strategies that turned the Indian Ocean into the center of a vast mercantile world that, when combined later with the Silk Road, placed the Indian Ocean at the southern end of an Asian commercial nexus that was the largest in the world before the advent of the modern era. In addition to trade goods, along the strands of this web of interconnectedness passed people and ideas that helped shape whole civilizations. Thus Indian merchants introduced Southeast Asia to Buddhism, and once there, it became as integral to its civilization as it did in China. (For more on this, see [Chapters 12 and 13](#).)

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