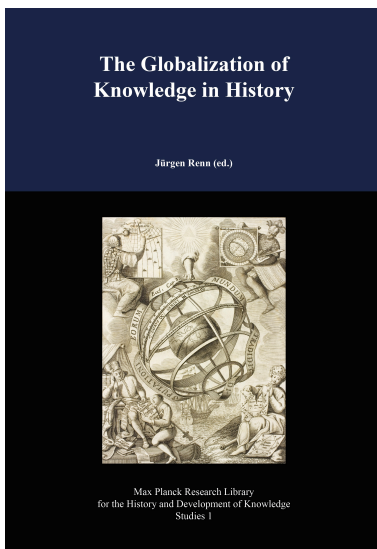


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Jens Braarvig:

The Spread of Buddhism as Globalization of Knowledge



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Chapter 10

The Spread of Buddhism as Globalization of Knowledge

Jens Braarvig

10.1 Basic Tenet of Buddhism

Buddhism, as one of the three “World Religions,”¹ a universal creed with a global following, represents to a great extent an autonomous field of knowledge, in the same way as Christianity and Islam, even though these three religious traditions are intertwined with other conceptual systems in origin and throughout their histories. Thus, the first question must be what is or constitutes such a conceptual system, and the second, which fields of knowledge does this conceptual system create in the process of historical and geographical diffusion. In addition, the second question must also address the processes of diffusion and how the modes of knowledge are communicated.

The basic tenet of Buddhism is the idea of impermanence, relativity and the philosophical premise that nothing is absolute and eternal: existence is an everlasting flux, and each entity is dependent on another. This tenet gives the tradition its identity as distinguished from other ancient traditions of India in whose context Buddhism originated. Thus, believing in an eternal self, the basis of all Brahmanical philosophy, to which the Buddhists aimed their philosophical and rhetorical skills, was according to Buddhist insights the most basic misunderstanding of all: believing in and trying to find a *self*—or *oneself*—will always keep sentient beings attached to existence. Giving up the hope that anything is permanent, however, will eventually liberate men from bondage and the circle of rebirth to which we are all doomed by the fruits of our actions “since beginningless time,” as it is expressed in Buddhist literature. There can also be no eternal god, nor any basic cause of existence: everything is created by the actions of sentient beings in various states of existence, men, gods, animals or various classes of spirits. We see that Buddhism in this way is based upon what we might term a philosophical or even a

¹ Judaism and Hinduism are now also traditionally seen as “World Religions,” but since one is born into them, and access is limited by ethnicity, they might be counted as ethnic religions in that sense. Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, on the other side, in principle are not limited by ethnicity or birth, being universal and missionary movements, though in most historical situations, the various sects and schools indeed have been closely linked with national and ethnic identities. In respect of the globalization of ideas, Judaism is very much a universal religion, being the historical basis of both Christianity and Islam; and Hinduism, historically spreading Indian culture throughout South-East Asia, and with diaspora and missionary activities in modern times, may also thus be styled a “World Religion.”

psychological tenet, rather than faith in a transcendent being or a metaphysical reality, a philosophical premise that remains as such in the various philosophical transformations of Buddhism throughout its history. The basic premise of Buddhism, then, can be seen as less a creed based upon faith than an attempt to formulate a philosophical or “rational” premise for the system of knowledge, even though much of Buddhism of course seems irrational in the modern sense. However, this semi-rationality of Buddhism makes it easier to study as a conceptual system producing fields of knowledge, and it can be studied as a fairly limited or closed conceptual system.

10.2 Geographical Spread of Buddhism

In short, the spread of Buddhism is as follows:² It originated in the mid-north of India in the fourth century BCE and spread to Sri Lanka in the late third century BCE by missionary activities. The first visit of Buddhist monks to the Imperial Court in China is dated in the seventh decade CE, during the Han dynasty, but it is only from the late second century that the activities of translating Buddhist scriptures into Chinese gained momentum. From the centers of power in China, like Xi’an or Chang’an, Buddhism spread to Korea, to Vietnam, and to Japan just after 600 CE, as introduced, according to tradition, by Prince Shōtoku, and then later to Mongolia—in this case from Tibet. The spread of Buddhism to the Far East took place both randomly by way of the cultural, commercial and popular communication along the Silk Road through Xinjiang north of Tibet, but also as a result of learned missionary activities along the same route including a long tradition (second to eleventh century) of translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Pāli into the Chinese idiom gradually created for that purpose. There was also a sea route from India to China, which is well documented. Chinese scholars took this route to India to study and bring home the sacred texts and teachings. In the seventh century, the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (CE 617–650) decided that his kingdom should adopt Buddhism, influenced, according to legend, by his Nepalese and Chinese brides. According to tradition, he had Tibetan writing established on Indian models to serve as the vehicle for introducing Bud-

²For the origin and early spread of Buddhism in India and the neighboring regions like Sri Lanka and Gandhāra, see (Lamotte 1988). On the North-Western diffusion and the origins of the writing systems, see (Salomon et al. 1999), and on the crafts that accompanied the spread of Buddhism into Central Asia, see (Cribb and Errington 1992). For the South- and Southeast-Asian diffusion, see (Bechert 1973). Another classic is (Coedès 1968), further in (Skilling 2009) and (Pande 2006). The monumental *Buddhist Conquest of China* by Eric Zürcher (1959) is still most useful; for Korea, see (Buswell 1989); and for Japan, (Bowering 2005); and in general (Heirman and Bumbacher 2007). For the Tibetan case, see (Kapstein 2000), with its ample bibliography. A comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography of Buddhism is (Sueki 2008); see also (Bingenheimer 2011). The details and dates of the introduction of Buddhism to the mentioned geographical areas sometimes build on very meager evidence, sometimes tending to the mythical rather than the strictly historical, and are thus contested by scholars. For an overview of Buddhism, see (Freiberger and Kleine 2011).

dhism to Tibet. The Tibetans at the time were a warlike people and under King Thri Songdetsen (CE 755–797) they beleaguered the Tang capital of Chang'an in 763; although they had an efficient military organization it was the king who finally fully adopted and supported Buddhism. From Buddhism as adopted by the Tibetans, the creed and the system of knowledge spread further into Central Asia. What the original Sanskrit language was to Tibetans the Tibetan language became to the Mongols: the sacred language from which they translated their Buddhist classics. Due to the increasingly frequent Muslim invasions into India from the eleventh century on, Buddhism, as a religion very much dependent on strong institutions—those of monasteries and the great Buddhist centers of learning—was uprooted from India during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and India was no longer the main source of Buddhist learning. Thus, the traditions lived on in East and Central Asia on the basis of the translated canonical scriptures, and the knowledge of the original Buddhist languages was soon lost in these areas. The southern traditions of Buddhism, however, those of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, have kept their canons in the original Pāli language, which they have continued to study throughout the centuries, unlike the “Northern Traditions” which forgot the original languages of Buddhism and expressed Buddha’s words in their own languages. An exception to this, though, is the Buddhism of Nepal, which has kept a tradition of Buddhist Sanskrit literature up until the present, even though Nepalese Buddhism with time became interwoven with Hindu traditions.

The diffusion of Buddhism during the second millennium CE was not nearly as intense as during the first when the Buddhist traditions thrived in the various “national” formats in East, South and Central Asia, as based upon translations of the canonical scriptures. However, one can argue that Buddhism became fully globalized only in the twentieth century, when to some extent it reached the Western countries. Four modes of diffusion can be mentioned in this respect, namely: romantic interest in the exotic from which ensued a fragmented and inaccurate knowledge of Buddhism (and other exotica), mostly from the eighteenth century on; systematic academic study which gained momentum from the middle of the nineteenth century; Buddhist missionary activities; and the spread of Buddhism by migration. The last two stemmed mostly from the mid-twentieth century, but were not completely absent before that. These four modes are intertwined and dependent on each other to some extent, and Buddhism is growing rapidly in some countries.

From its humble origins in the fourth century BCE with its founder Gautama Śākyamuni, Buddhism was established organizationally and politically in the third century BCE under the sponsorship of the Indian emperor Aśoka, who ruled from 273–232 BCE. Mahinda, Aśoka’s son, brought the Buddhist creed to Sri Lanka, where according to tradition the Buddhist canon was written down for the first time in the late second century BCE. In this part of the Indian subcontinent, the Buddhist tradition remains unbroken up to the present day. The Buddhist

tradition, as exported to the island of Sri Lanka, was also the basis of the traditions that developed and remained until the present day in Thailand and Burma.

10.3 The Importance of Literacy in Buddhism as Opposed to Orality in the Hindu Traditions

Writing is of great importance for the transfer of knowledge and played a crucial role in the diffusion of Buddhism. However, writing was introduced astonishingly late to the Indian subcontinent and the development of writing seems to have been closely connected with the promulgation of Buddhism. Indian tradition is first of all oral; the Vedic lore has been transmitted from teacher to pupil over centuries and millennia, and with astonishing accuracy. The Vedic tradition also held that the Sanskrit language was sacred to the extent that it was the language of the gods and of the ultimate reality itself. Thus, preservation of the knowledge of the sacred tradition was the prerogative of the higher castes; it was a secret body of knowledge not to be divulged to the lower castes or to those outside the caste system. To Buddhists, however, language was simply a conventional means of communication, and the canonical stand of Buddhism is that the *meanings* of words are more important than their form. Thus, language is not essential, but should be able to convey Buddhist truths in an appropriate way. Buddhists would fully exploit the written word as the main vehicle of their propagation of Buddhism as never before in India.

In many respects, Buddhism was in its origins and throughout its history in India in continuous opposition to Hinduism. It originated as polemics against *Brahmanical* traditions, which maintained that the universal self, being ultimately the same as the individual self, was the basis of existence as a whole, while the Buddhist, in view of his doctrine of *anātman*, “no-self,” would assert that believing in such an entity would be the greatest misunderstanding of all. This came to have a profound influence on the respective views on language, and also writing. Buddhists would assert that language is only a conventional agreement on which sounds of language referred to a particular object, while the Brahmanical-Hindu traditions would through its continuing philosophical and doctrinal discussion and disagreement with Buddhism assert that each word of the Sanskrit language corresponds to an ultimately divine entity. In this relativist-essentialist discussion, to use a modern expression, it is clear that the Buddhists saw language as a practical means of communication to convey a meaning conventionally expressed by language, and also similarly viewed writing. The Brahmanical tradition on the other hand retained the eternal sacredness and secrecy of its language without committing it to writing, since the divine language is basically *sound*, the spoken word. Thus, the mnemotechnics of archaic and classical India is surprising; even works such as the complete grammar of the Sanskrit language by Pāṇini (fifth or fourth century BCE) with all its meticulous detail and intellectual brilliance, was transmitted orally over the centuries, as was the basic “etymological” dictionary,

the *Nirukta*, in addition, of course, to all the other religious, philosophical, epic, and poetical “literatures.”

In view of this philosophical and doctrinal background, there was no hindrance to the promulgation of the Buddhist doctrine *both* orally and literally. The medium of writing was perfectly suited to the communication of the Buddhist creed as it did not nurture any notion of a divine *lingua sacra*. The teachings of Buddhism are seen by many modern readers as being styled by a psychology of liberation rather than a religious creed, with a pragmatic and rational aim rather than a religious one: it is repeated again and again that the practitioner of Buddhism must “find out for himself” rather than believe in one particular system or faith. That Buddhism is thus a “rational psychology” has been exploited by modern Western adherents of Buddhism, and as such considerably exaggerated. But in the discussion with the Hindu tradition, Buddhism indeed had a more pragmatic relation to language, not regarding it in principle as sacred. However, in practice, wherever it spread Buddhist literature also became mantras and *vo-ces magicae*, and the literature was read rather for the sound of the reading and magical effect than for understanding its content. This was a fairly limited form of transfer of knowledge, but of course a frequent phenomenon in religious history. But still, while the Vedic lore could be apprehended only in spoken Sanskrit, any language was suitable for Buddhist teaching, as long as it could convey its meaning. Thus, what are considered to be the oldest Buddhist scriptures are not written in Sanskrit, but in the Sanskrit dialect and descendant of Sanskrit, Pāli, which became the most important literary Buddhist language for the southern branches of Buddhism. Of the other important dialects of Sanskrit used by the Buddhists one finds the Gandhāra language, as employed by the North Western branches of Buddhism, and what has been styled “Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit” by modern scholarship, where the relation of the written language to spoken dialects is unclear. It is even possible that some of these languages were purely literary languages.

As the Greek historiographers testify, when they came to the East after Alexander’s conquests just before 300 BCE, the Greeks were very surprised that the Indians, who had no writing systems, were able to rule their kingdoms without written laws. However, it did not take long before writing was introduced, with inspiration from the West, in India. The Persians indeed employed writing in the administration of their great empire, of which north-western India was a part, but there is no evidence that the Indians made any use of writing (excepting the Indus script) before the great emperor Aśoka employed writing for a particular purpose, namely to promulgate his ethics and religious sentiments throughout his empire. Aśoka’s edicts, mostly carved in stone but also on other material such as iron, are still preserved and bear witness to a ruler who protected religious and ethical activities, did not engage in religious disagreement and strife, helped the weak and the sick, cared for travelers, even for animals, and did not kill animals for food more than was necessary. The edicts were written in a Māghadi

dialect, also a descendant of Sanskrit, and not in the sacred language itself. Some of the edicts found in the western parts of Aśoka's empire were even written in non-Indian languages, namely, in Aramaic and Greek, with the same messages as those of the Māghadi ones. Evidently, this was an attempt at a moral and peaceful crusade to his western neighbors, many of whom spoke and wrote Greek, as well as Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Persian Empire. While multilingualism and multiliteralism was indeed widespread in the Persian Empire, employed mainly for administrative use (the Behistun multilingual inscription has a political message, though it refers piously to Ahuramazda), Emperor Aśoka in his multilingual efforts expresses most of all a missionary zeal. There is no evidence that writing was used for administration in the Aśokan Empire, but this of course cannot be ruled out. But it is in accordance with the fact that few administrative records from Indian history before the second millennium CE are extant, though the religious literature (including the oral "literature") is enormous.

Apart from the Greek and Aramaic writing systems used for the edicts, the newly devised Indian system of writing was made on an initiative during Aśoka's reign, but we do not know anything about the details of this process. However, the system seems to have been rather autonomously devised, the so-called *Karoṣṭhī* syllabic writing has some similarities with the Aramaic, especially in a few of the syllables, and the fact that it is written from right to left, as other Semitic alphabets. But it is mainly an Indian invention, as is also the *Brāhmī* writing system, also syllabic and written from left to right and maybe devised to better fit the structure of Sanskrit phonology, as formulated by the Indian grammarians, as *Pāṇini*. The origin of writing in India, and also the concomitant literal multilingualism, seems to have originated with a religious purpose, at least this is our earliest evidence, but evidently the art of writing with its syllabic style was inspired from the West.³

Thus, writing in India is intimately connected with Buddhism, and Buddhism exploited the "new" technology fully to promulgate their religion and to build the institutions that were necessary for housing the learned and to develop the routines of copying the sacred literature, in particular from the first centuries CE on. Recent finds from Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as those from Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s have provided an insight into the old writing technologies in India. The oldest manuscript found so far is probably from the last century BCE and quite a number of extant manuscript fragments are dated from the first, second and third centuries. Extant manuscript materials after this period are fairly rich. The writing materials, as extant in the finds, are mostly palm leaf, which was used mostly in the southern areas, while in the north west birch bark became the most popular material on which to write the sacred literature, gradually supplanting

³For the Indian literacy developing under these circumstances, see (Hinüber 1990), and for the writing systems of Kharoṣṭhī and Brāhmī—the last of which was the precursor of writing systems all over South Asia, including Tibetan—see (Bright and Daniels 1996, 371ff.) and (Salomon et al. 1999). For the inscriptions and their context, see (Falk 2006).

the palm leaf. There are also some instances of writing on vellum; the ink was made of soot and water and has proven to be very durable. It has been preserved until today as it became petrified over the years.⁴

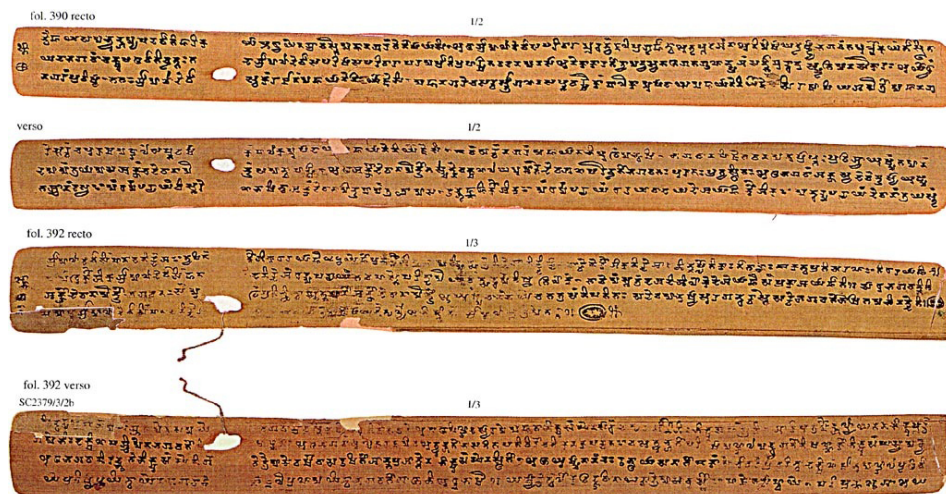


Figure 10.1: Palm leaf Mahāyāna manuscript from Bamiyan, ca. 500 CE, Schøyen Collection.

10.4 The Text, the Image of the Buddha and the Community of Monks: The Historical Continuity of Buddhism

The text gained a prominent position in all Buddhist traditions and was even portrayed as the “body” of the Buddha. Throughout most of its history, Buddhism, being thus text and knowledge based rather than cult and faith based, fostered disciplines of knowledge, and even intellectuality. In this way, the *tripiṭaka*, “the three baskets,” as the Buddhist canonical scriptures are called, contain the *dharma*, the “law,” or the Buddhist teachings in three collections:

1. Buddha’s speeches (*sūtra*)
2. the monastic rules (*vinaya*)
3. the philosophic and systematic commentaries (*abhidharma*).

Under these three ideal collections the various canons were established by the diverse sects and branches of Buddhism resulting from doctrinal divisions, as well as by new collections created by translations throughout its history and Pan-Asian

⁴See (Salomon et al. 1999; Allon and Braarvig 2000; Berkwitz et al. 2009; Braarvig 2009); see also (Harrison and Hartmann forthcoming).

diffusion. The *credo* of Buddhism, the “Three Jewels” (*triratna*), by adherence to which the Buddhist becomes a Buddhist, is the following:

I find my refuge in the Buddha, I find my refuge in the Teaching
(*dharma*), I find my refuge in the Monastic Community (*saṃgha*).

These three, the Buddha image in its various aesthetic formulations, the canonical scriptures in its different linguistic forms, and the monastic community as the social expression of the Buddhist doctrine and always the keeper of Buddhist tradition, represent in fact very much what Buddhism historically amounts to in its origin as well in its diffusion.

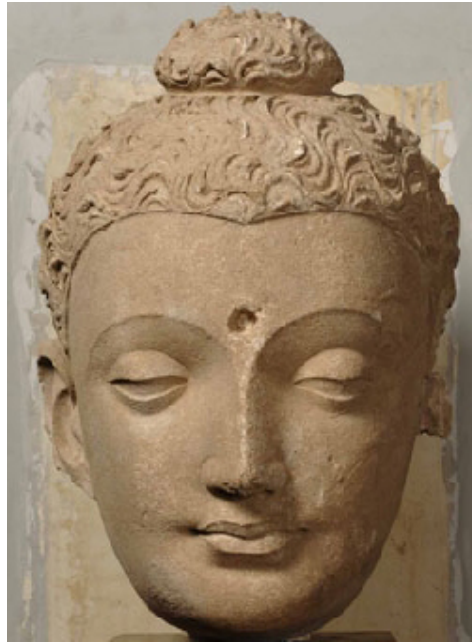


Figure 10.2: Stucco Gandhara head of the Buddha, second to third century CE.

The Buddha, as represented in images and cultic implements, has throughout Buddhist history created industries and crafts. In fact, the very beginning of Indian art history is connected with Buddhism; the Brahmanical tradition was not interested in images for the same reasons that they were not interested in writing. However, the Gandhāran art from the beginning of the first millennium CE was definitely also influenced by Greek styles of sculpture, one of the rather obvious influences of Greek culture on India. At the same time, another school of art, that of Mathura, created a style much less influenced by Greek art, a more distinct

Indian style. The historical relations between the two schools are not clear, and there are also examples of Indian art before these two main schools of Buddhist art, but these too are not older than the first century CE. The iconography arising out of this early Buddhist art created, as illustrated in Buddhist literature, the iconographic archetypes that with historical and regional variations became the formalized standards and concepts for representing the images of the Buddha and his environment throughout East-Asia, and unfolded in China and East-Asia, as well as in Tibet and Central-Asia. The aesthetic tone and the techniques of the production of images and paintings changed, but the earliest concepts as laid down by early Buddhist literature would remain the same. Because of the aesthetic differences, it is sometimes difficult to see that Japanese Buddhist art builds upon the same concepts as that, for example, of Tibet, but to a great degree this is the case. The same schemata are also very much part of Buddhist temple architecture: The old stūpas of India and Nepal, the Tibetan Chorten, the Chinese Pagoda or the Japanese Zen Garden, as well as the numerous grand Buddhist buildings spread around South-East Asia are all the microcosmoi of the general Buddhist cosmological systems, gaining its standardization some time before our era. Thus, temple architecture represents a great degree of continuity, supported by the literature and imagery of common tradition, and inspired various traditions of architecture, building techniques, painting, production of stone images as well as metallurgy and other techniques of production.⁵

We will return to the literature of Buddhism, as literature remains the focus of continuity throughout Buddhist history, regarded as such also by the Buddhist traditions themselves. But we should not fail to mention the third “Jewel” of the Buddhist *credo*, that of the monastic community, the *saṃgha*. This was established using a particular codex of monastic rules, the *vinaya*, and as such also based upon a systematic literature fairly constant both historically and geographically in the spread of Buddhism. Without the monastic community, it would seem that Buddhism would not present such an extensive historical and cultural continuity—this is also in fact in accordance with the Buddhist scriptures themselves. From the eleventh century on, wherever the efficient Muslim armies advanced in India, the great institutions of Buddhism were destroyed, and with them Buddhism itself. Without the strong monastic institutions of later Buddhism—almost a kind of university—and without the active sponsorship of the authorities, Buddhism, as a learned tradition, died out in India. It did not survive among the people in the traditional simple rural communities with their rituals and oral traditions, as did the Hindu traditions, notwithstanding the Muslim overlordship. But new Buddhist institutions were built in other places where Buddhism took root, both in the southern and northern traditions. Their loyal body of men, and to a lesser

⁵The classic for Silk Road diffusion is (Stein 1921); a further bibliography can be found in (Bopearachchi and Errington 2000). The classic documentation of Tibetan art is (Tucchi 1949); more recent works with bibliographies are (Rhie and Thurman 1991; Singer and Denwood 1997; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004; Bräutigam et al. 2006; Pande 2006; Skilling 2009). On the diffusion of architectural plans from India, see (Bunce 2002); see also (Franz 1978).

extent women, having vowed not to marry or transgress any rules, remained close to those in political power in all the places throughout East and South Asia where Buddhism became part of society. It seems that the monastic communities of Buddhism to some extent took over the institutions of eunuchs, who were also a class of persons purposely designed to be loyal to imperial power, particularly in China. We are thus able to say that the conceptual schemes of Buddhism also manifest themselves to a high degree in a social field of knowledge, and contributed rules and traditions for certain types of social organization. Though the *saṃgha* was originally conceptualized as a community for those seeking to practice the “way” of the Buddha, for individuals not engaging in politics, the monastic communities nevertheless became politically important: under Emperor Aśoka factions of the monastic community were already vying for imperial privileges and economic support. This has been a basic theme throughout the various traditions of Buddhism, and in the first or second century CE in the great split into the Mahāyāna, (the great way) and the Hīnayāna, (the small, or petty, way) as the adherents of Mahāyāna would call it, criticism of a corrupt and greedy monastic community was a central theme. In Tibet, the monastic community, with its effective organization and able candidates for office, also developed into the main political power and ruled Tibet for almost a thousand years. The *saṃgha* never developed politically in other countries of the East to the extent it did in Tibet, but it was always close to the political institutions, notwithstanding the monastic rule that monks should not engage in politics.

10.5 The Diffusion of Buddhist Dogmas, Rules and Conceptual Schemes by Narratives and Motifs

Another conceptual framework for maintaining the historical continuity of Buddhism was expressed in the literature of the *Jātakas*, (the life stories). These depicted the life, but most of all the previous lives of the Buddha, and featured moral stories for educating the lay communities. This class of Buddhist scriptures most of all illustrates the workings of karma: how any action done since “beginningless time,” may “mature” into any situation at a much later time. The consequence of this dogma is that what we are and what we experience is always determined by our earlier actions. Thus, the individual has complete responsibility for whatever he may encounter in life, this being the favorite “most logical” theodicy of Max Weber. The Buddha remembers all of his lives and recognizes everyone he has encountered in previous lives, so as to help him free himself and others from the burden of earlier sins and actions. Thus, any monastic rule to protect against a particular sin or any rule on how to behave as monk would be supported by such a story. In this way, a sizable and flowery collection of tales and motifs, generated from the general stock of Indian and even global motifs, formed part of the body of monastic rules, the Vinaya. However, throughout the history of Buddhism the *Jātakas* were always a great source of Buddhist poetry and storytelling: enter-

tainment as education for the lay and even the monastic communities. Beside the philosophical and learned tradition of Buddhism, creating and spreading learned communities, these collections of stories provided another strand of transfer of knowledge in Buddhism. This popularized form of the Buddhist teachings were set in a field of knowledge accessible not only to the learned, and were widely diffused by means of tales and motifs. They were, however, still based on a formalized literature which was dealt with in the monastic institutions where these edifying stories were organized, written, translated, printed, illustrated and finally propagated.⁶

This brings us to a particular mode of transfer of knowledge motifs, which are part of all traditions of Buddhism, but by no means confined to canonized literatures and monastic administration. Conceptual schemes were spread by tales and motifs, orally and often accidentally, along trade routes like the Silk Road, where Buddhism traveled, along with several other religious systems like Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity, and surely many arts and crafts belonging both to religious and to more pragmatic businesses, as well as diplomatic contact, or even by hostile contact brought about by spying and war. We find that Buddhism was spread systematically—by translators and learned teachers like the well-known historical personalities who brought Buddhism to China, Tibet and across East-Asia. But the conceptual systems of Buddhism also spread in more informal ways, by diffusion of its motifs, creating fields of knowledge that are not so easily defined historically and which are sometimes completely isolated from the context in which they arose. One example of this is the diffusion of the biography of the Buddha. This was filtered to the West by means of Manichean and Arab versions, was translated into Latin in 1047, and became a legend of the two Christian martyrs Josaphat and Barlaam, even ending up in early Norse Christian literature as a pious Christian legend (Rindal 1980).

In this case, the story can be traced historically by its gradual translation, but motifs of course also diffuse beyond such literary activities by oral means, and, certainly, the “missing links” may be difficult to find. This, however, should not prevent us from investigating processes of global diffusion as possible and probable scenarios of the globalization of knowledge. When the conditions of diffusion are there, and the similarity of conceptual regimes are present in different locations, they should certainly be objects of investigation in the perspective of globalization processes. A case of this might be the Buddhist concept of hell and infernal punishment. The Buddhist sūtras, and not the least the Jātaka stories, depict existence as endless chains of reincarnations throughout the Buddhist cosmos, consisting of human existence, beside the divine, the animal, the hellish, and the existence of wandering spirits. Hell is a place where judgments are passed on the sinners in a way very similar to the hell of Christianity. However, there are good arguments that the Buddhist hells antedate the Christian by several

⁶On a systematical treatment of the motifs in the Jātakas, see (Grey 2000). The scholarly literature on the *vinaya* is voluminous, see (Heirman and Bumbacher 2007).

hundred years, well before the beginning of our era: the Christian images of hell are only found in the third and fourth century CE, with their origin in Egypt, where also the monastic Christian institutions have their origin in about the same period. One may thus argue, though it remains difficult to prove, that Christian belief in hell may be influenced by Buddhist ideas of the same, and that even the monastic idea may have had a similar inspiration. Indeed, the monastic life that for several hundred years had been practiced in India has scarcely any antecedents in the Mediterranean world.⁷ This argument is plausible because of the extended trade between Egypt and India in the period, as evidenced on both sides. It is very difficult to prove, though, as there is no detailed and concrete evidence of this diffusion of conceptual and organizational schemes. But, it is also very difficult to disprove, as the comparative evidence is fairly strong: the possibility for communication between the two cultures is a historical fact and the phenomena are definitely earlier in India than in areas of early Christianity.

That diffusion took place between the Mediterranean world and India, and vice versa, in a long perspective of time, along the Silk Road as well as along the sea routes, is definitely the case, even though the evidence to support this communication is rather scant. During the Persian empires, however, there was a developed multilingualism that must have facilitated communication between the areas in question. Such circumstances were also prevalent after Alexander's conquests, which enabled and even facilitated cultural communication between the West and the East, as is amply exemplified in the Greek-influenced Gandhāra art. Greek kingdoms in the East influenced culture in the North East, thus Bactrian documents were written using the Greek alphabet, and ample coin evidence demonstrates the practice of homage to Greek gods as well as to Buddhist and Hindu religious figures. Motifs, however, are traceable as impressions on coins and in the form of arts and other religious artifacts. Astrology, however, is so far the only example of a complex system of knowledge that was translated from the medium of Greek to Sanskrit—the systems are fairly similar and one finds Greek loanwords in Indian astrology. The Hellenistic Seleucid king Antiochus II (286–246 BCE) is mentioned in two of Aśoka's edicts: one describes Aśoka's missionary activities, the other also communicates the spread of medicine as a pious act. The Greek envoy of Seleucus Nicator to Candragupta's and Bindusāra's courts between 302 and 291 BCE, Megasthenes, wrote a work in Greek with the name *Indica*. We know this work only from fragments, but it did not express a too profound understanding of Indian life. It seems that Megasthenes received most of his information from interpreters, though he seems to have stayed in India for a prolonged period. But, much quoted, his description had a great impact on the *perception* of India in antiquity. Antiochus I was also in contact with Bindusāra, as diplomatic correspondence between the Indian imperial court and the Greeks demonstrates, also

⁷See (Braarvig 2009); cf. (Warmington 1928).

giving evidence to the fact that the Indians were not only interested in trade and war with their neighbors in the west, but also in Greek philosophy.⁸

Rather than a vague collection of motifs, however, Buddhism was a fairly well-defined conceptual system generated from the Sanskrit language and its dialect Pāli, as well as from other Indic dialects as mentioned above, and as such connected to the general Indian learning in the centuries before and after the beginning of the Christian era. Buddhist literature can be seen as a series of attempts to create a consistent system of thinking, reflected in the several attempts by a number of sects to create a literature to be the canon of “true” Buddhism. One of these attempts was the formalization of a voluminous literature of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which originated in the first two centuries CE. This form of Buddhism seems most of all to be a literary expression rather than a cultic movement, and the attempts to place it geographically and institutionally have so far not been very successful, though its cultural context seems to be the fairly affluent city-cultures in India of the period. However, this literature, characterized as a forgery by earlier mainstream Buddhism, still came to be the basis of Buddhism in its “northern” form. Its concepts were in several respects different from mainstream Buddhism: it represented a philosophical, religious, social and probably political reaction against earlier Buddhism by putting even more emphasis on the doctrines of relativity, emptiness, deconstruction and selflessness, and the endlessness of innumerable universes, many of them with residing Buddhas, like those of “Endless Light” and “Endless Life,” whose figures would gain great influence in the northern and eastern spread of Buddhism. Further, this literature emphasized a radical altruistic morality with arguments, or rather sophisms, like the following: “it is absurd to try to liberate oneself when there is no self.” Thus, Mahāyāna literature promoted the lay life on the model of the earlier lives of the Buddha as depicted in the Jātakas, being highly critical of what they styled the corrupt and escapist monastic life.

However, the Mahāyāna literature did not really change the vocabulary of traditional Buddhism; it rather reinterpreted the old words to suit their purposes. So, notwithstanding the change of ideology, the terminology of Buddhism retained its basic structure with a fairly stable lexicon, an important fact in our attempt to understand the continuities and discontinuities of this conceptual system as undergoing translations to other linguistic environments and its ensuing transformations.

10.6 The Silk Road and the Spread of Buddhism to China and East Asia

The Indo-Scythian, or Kuṣāna, emperor of India, Kanīṣka, who ruled in the first and/or second century CE is reported by historical sources to have called a council of Buddhist scholars to conduct a debate on what is the true teaching of the

⁸On Greek influence in India, see (Karttunen 1997; Lamotte 1988, 243ff. and 407ff.). On cultural communication between India and Greece, and the lack of such, see (Halbfass 1988).

Buddha, since he found there was such a great number of books with diverging opinions. This is exactly the period when the origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism is placed, and, being from the north-west, the areas of his dynasty played an important role in communicating Buddhism to the East, to Central Asia and to China, from the north-western areas of Gandhāra. Many of the translators of Buddhist texts, apart from several Indian scholars participating in this effort in the third and fourth centuries, are termed 月支 *Yuèzhī*, as the Chinese called the Kuṣāna, and probably also other peoples of Persian or Scythian origin, like the Tokharians. These peoples lived in highly multilingual environments and in areas with great mobility, such as along the Silk Road in its Buddhist centers of Bamiyan, Turfan, Dunhuang and so forth. Translations of Buddhist texts took place not only into Chinese, but also into Khotanese, Tokharian, Old Turkish and other languages. It was in these languages that a translation idiom for Buddhist terminology was created along with the borrowing of Indian script systems and writing styles.

The earliest Chinese translations of Buddhist texts at the end of the second century CE are still characterized by the lack of a systematic Chinese terminology for Buddhist terms; the words coined to reproduce Buddhist concepts naturally build on the classical Chinese semantic world, which was not always suited for representing the foreign system of concepts. Thus, during the second century, but especially from the translations of the very productive Indian Dharmarakṣa, who lived in China around 300 CE, a terminology was created in Chinese that was better suited for representing Buddhist ideas. One may surmise that the general Chinese reader of these texts, uninitiated into the Buddhist conceptual world, would still read with a classical Chinese conceptual background, and at times would have great difficulty grasping the actual meaning of the texts. However, with the “Buddhist Conquest of China,” as Eric Zürcher (1959) terms it, a Buddhist discourse developed that indeed gives evidence to the fact that the more sophisticated Buddhist texts were understood by the Chinese, at least by the specialists. Over the centuries, the systematic terminological work initiated by Dharmarakṣa and to some extent his predecessors, like An Shigao, 安世高, Zhi Qian, 支謙, and Lokakṣema in the second and third centuries (Nattier 2008), was continued by the famous Indian translator Kumārajīva (CE 344–409) among others, and then by the Indian scholar Paramārtha (CE 499–569), who greatly influenced Chinese Buddhist terminology. Also the legendary traveler to India, Xuánzàng, 玄奘, in the seventh century (CE 600–664), brought the art of translating from Sanskrit into Chinese to its highest perfection. Xuánzàng was also one of the travelers to India who wrote a history of Buddhism associated with the places he visited whilst collecting original manuscripts as materials for his translations. With some exceptions, the later translations into Chinese in the eleventh century amount to little more than revisions of earlier translations, including some

very inaccurate translations from the original where the Chinese style has become much more important than conveying the technical terms of Buddhist thinking.⁹

In this way, over the centuries a Chinese idiom of Buddhism was developed, an idiom that to some extent became a religious lingua franca. This style of Chinese was also employed by another religion that entered China via the Silk Road, namely Manichaeism, on which numerous texts in Chinese have been preserved. Thus, Manichaeism in its Chinese form became a mixture of the Manichean and Buddhist conceptual schemes (Lieu 1998). What is surprising, though, is that few systematic works that could have aided the translators are known to exist; there are no grammars, no dictionaries and few lists of technical terms in Chinese before the Tang Dynasty (seventh–ninth century CE), and this despite the great Chinese interest in archives, in particular, catalogues of Buddhist scriptures. Thus, there is a lack of standardization of terminology in Chinese Buddhism, even though certain terms are defined by their repetitive use by the translators, as those mentioned. The technical terms appear in the texts themselves, but not in independent systematic works: the translations of certain influential texts took on the role of terminological standards. Indian logic was a discipline that entered Chinese thinking as a corollary of Buddhist translations, but little Sanskrit grammar and lexicography had any historical influence on China, even though the religious, psychological and philosophical conceptual systems of Buddhism were continued in China independent of their country of origin. Thus, the first known lexicon 翻梵語, *Fānfànyǔ*, before 587 CE, is not so valuable for Buddhist terminology since it is almost exclusively concerned with *names*: various names of the Buddha, place names, names of various men, plants and so forth. (Chandra 2007). The most famous lexicon, however, is from the Tang Dynasty, the 一切經音義, *Yiqiejingyinyi*, (A Lexicon of Sounds and Meanings in the Tripitaka), by Hui Lin, 慧琳, 737–820 CE. This lexicon is also not very useful for Buddhist terminology as it is mostly concerned with the pronunciation of the Chinese expressions rather than their semantic content.

The Chinese Buddhist canonical scriptures were edited many times during several imperial dynasties, and the translations were always dated according to the reign of the emperor under which they were produced. In this way, the discipline of cataloguing and dating texts and collections was well taken care of in China, whereas this was almost non-existent in India. From China, the canonical scriptures were also spread further throughout East-Asia to Korea, Japan and Vietnam, and in general also became the canonical scriptures of these areas. Indian writing systems were adopted in the Far East, but had limited influence as in general they were not used as a tool for writing, but rather for decorative purposes and incantations. This is in great contrast to the diffusion of the Indian writing

⁹For traditional Chinese views on translations, their methodologies and styles, see (Cheung 2006), which in a sense continues the pioneering work (Fuchs 1930). Fuchs is the first to describe the various roles of the scholars, interpreters, writers and so forth, involved in the process of translating.

systems to South and South-East Asian countries, which is easily explained by the fact that the Chinese had had their own system of writing for more than a thousand years. If words had a particular important meaning or authority, however, like the Buddha names or the sacred formula, then transcriptions of Indian words were sometimes employed for Chinese translations, with the Sanskrit word written with Chinese characters as syllables. Examples are 佛陀 *fótuó* for Buddha and 涅槃 *nièpán* for *nirvāṇa*, but usually all words were translated into the proper Chinese logographics, representing the concepts by Chinese traditional means.¹⁰

Even though the Buddhist texts may have appeared difficult to understand for the Chinese, it is still quite clear that their language and conceptual schemes were diffused throughout East-Asian culture and thinking: the modern Chinese, Korean and Japanese languages still abound in Buddhist words and expressions.

10.7 The Spread of Buddhism to Tibet



Figure 10.3: Samye Monastery, first Tibetan monastery, eighth century CE, built on a Buddhist maṇḍala plan.

The diffusion of the Buddhist conceptual world into Tibetan culture, however, takes place to an even greater degree than is the case with China and East Asia.

¹⁰The principles of the use of transliterations instead of translations were set down by Xuánzàng, see (Cheung 2006, 157): *dhāraṇī*, 陀羅尼, *tuóluóní* (sacred formula); *bhagavān*, 薄伽梵, *bójiāfàn* (the Lord); *jambu*, 閼僇樹, *yánfúshù* (name of India); *anubodhi*, 阿耨菩提, *ānòupútí* (Awakening), *prajñā*, 般若, *bànrúo*, meaning “wisdom” is also translated as 智慧, *zhìhuì*, but Xuánzàng says that this has “less authority.”

While the Buddhist conceptual systems met a well-developed classical culture with a very broad semantic horizon in China, the Tibetan language that was the medium for receiving the much more complex Buddhist conceptual world was, as far as we know, a simple language with no writing system for literature or for administration; it was a language spoken by nomadic people focused on military activities. When King Songtsen Gampo, as mentioned above, decided to import Buddhism into Tibet, he ordered at the same time that a system of writing be made on the basis of the Indian scripts of the day and the phonological system that pertained to it. His successor, Thri Songdetsen, adopted Buddhism in 762, and, after his conquest of the Chinese capital of Changan in 763, built the first great monastery of Tibet, Samye, in 779. After conquering the town of Dunhuang, north of Tibet, in the 780s,¹¹ King Thri Songdetsen invited the Chinese Zen-master, Moheyan, and the Indian scholar Kamalaśīla, for a debate at Samye so that the king could decide whether he should import Buddhism from India or from China. The Indian scholar is said to have won the debate, and, according to the Tibetan historical records, the king decided on India. Under his successor, Thri Desongtsen (CE 804–815), a systematic Tibetan lexicography and grammatical science was developed on the basis of the Indian Pāṇinian tradition, and by royal decree only the established standards of Sanskrit-Tibetan equivalents were to be employed in the process of translating terminology and concepts from the Sanskrit to the rather simple linguistic environment of Tibet. Many of these grammatical and lexicographical handbooks are extant, giving evidence to a remarkable intellectual effort by the Tibetan translators.¹²

Thus, the rather simple language of pre-Buddhist Tibet was molded in the form of Sanskrit Buddhist semantics, syntax and grammatical forms, a process that completely changed the language and conceptual world of Tibet, as well as for the most part its material, social and political culture. Compared to the rather unsystematic way in which Buddhism was introduced to China, mostly by individual activities and initiatives, the Tibetan case of knowledge transfer represents the systematic change of a simple culture into a completely new, and much more complex conceptual and cultural scheme, the corollary of which was the translation of many fields of knowledge, but also the creation of new fields of knowledge as the Tibetans developed the decaying Indian Buddhist culture into their own tradition and implemented it under new conditions. Thus, all the sciences connected with Buddhism—philosophy, psychology, logic, rhetoric, mnemotechnics, grammar, lexicography, writing, calligraphy, architecture, painting and medicine—were introduced to Tibet in this process of systematic cultural import, and developed further, while in India Buddhism died out. In this context, we may mention in particular the xylographic printing processes and paper making which developed in Tibet from the fourteenth century on. Despite being influenced by Chinese printing, there was widespread use of ink and handwriting in Tibet: printed Buddhist texts

¹¹This is why the oldest extant Tibetan Buddhist manuscripts were found here.

¹²See (Simonsson 1957; Ishikawa 1990; Verhagen 1994); in general (Kapstein 2000).

were never found in areas where the Indian style of text production prevailed.¹³ However, xylographic printing existed for a long time alongside ordinary handwritten manuscripts: the first Tibetan manuscripts we know of, from Dunhuang, were indeed handwritten. For the copying of the large-scale canonical scriptures of the Kanjur and Tanjur (Buddha's word and their commentaries), however, the technique of carving mirrored text into wooden printing plates and smearing them with ink, so as to imprint the wooden block on the paper, was developed into a sizable industry in Tibet along with the preparation of paper. A number of editions of important texts were made, and, notwithstanding the more efficient technique of copying by way of the xylographic preparation of whole plates, the resources used for book production were enormous. But given the great respect for religious values, and even for knowledge, the means for this activity was raised most often from the aristocracy, royalty and rich monasteries. For the production of a particular edition of the Tibetan sacred texts support was even given by the Manchu emperor Qianlong, 乾隆帝, ruler of the Qing dynasty 1735–1775.

The fields of knowledge of Buddhism were rather the *trivium* of the Western Middle Ages, that is grammar, logic and rhetoric. These were much more important than the *quadrivium*, that is, mathematics, music, grammar and astronomy, in much the same way as in the Middle Ages themselves. So, even though Buddhism may have been part of the thinking connected to the origin of the mathematical idea of *nihil*, or zero, we find nothing of mathematical interest in the Buddhist canonical literature, notwithstanding the interest in endlessness and huge numbers, which was rather employed in a metaphorical, and not in an exact way. However, logic became an important discipline as a corollary of Buddhist philosophy, especially that of the Mahāyāna, which attempts to reduce all final intellectual truth and doctrine *ad absurdum*. Rhetoric also finds its place in this picture, and, as mentioned before, in grammar. The philosophy and psychology of universal flux, intellectual deconstruction and emptiness was the main concern of Buddhism, and not how to manipulate matter—thus old Tibet had no more sophisticated machinery than the water wheel. And the historical Chinese attempts at natural science were never influenced by Buddhism, even though there are good arguments that historically Chinese logic is a Buddhist discipline.¹⁴

There is another important aspect of Indian knowledge transfer by Buddhism worth mentioning, namely *āyurvedic* medicine.¹⁵ This medical tradition spread throughout South Asia over the centuries as part of the general Indianization and

¹³On the first known printed text in China, CE 868, the Buddhist text *Vajracchedikā*, also found in Dunhuang, see (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004). On writing in Tibet, see (Schaeffer 2009).

¹⁴In its origin Buddhist logic is mainly connected to discussions with the Brahmanical traditions, and as such in many cases is more aptly described as rhetoric or even “anti-logic,” very much in line with modern “deconstructionism.” In Tibet and China, it continued to treat problems of disagreement within the tradition of Buddhism itself. For India, see (Potter 1977); Tibet: (Kapstein 2000, 85ff.); China: (Needham and Harbsmeier 1998).

¹⁵See now, on Indian medicine in general, (Meulenbeld 2002), on Vāgbhaṭa, see vol. IA, 597ff. The dating of Vāgbhaṭa's work is much discussed, but the main opinions place him in the late sixth or the early seventh century.

it is not always easy to say whether it spread particularly as part of “Buddhist culture.” A Chinese traveler to India, 義淨, Yijing, probably refers in his chronicles to the *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃhitā* (The Heart of the Eight Limbs of Medicine), an authoritative work on the various medicinal disciplines of the *āyurvedic* tradition composed by the celebrated figure Vāgbhaṭa, who seems at least to have had sympathies for Buddhism. Though the *āyurvedic* tradition may not have had much influence in China, its influence is very clear in the case of the spread of Buddhism to Tibet and subsequently to Mongolia, where several works on Indian medicine, among them the mentioned *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasaṃhitā* as well as the *Aṣṭāṅgasamgraha*, were translated into Tibetan in the early eleventh century, along with Indian commentaries, and became the one of the foundations for the development of the rich Tibetan medical tradition. Other medical works from the same Indian tradition formed part of the enormous Tibetan translation effort of Buddhist literature and culture.¹⁶

10.8 Conclusions

What is said above merely scratches at the surface of the conceptual world of Buddhism and its application in some fields of knowledge. For the purpose of understanding how such knowledge is globalized, we have touched upon some modes of its diffusion as well.

We see that Buddhism is spread most of all through its literature, on which great emphasis is placed. In Tibet, this literature was translated in a highly systematical way, but in China to a lesser degree. Still, the Buddhist canonical scriptures as established on the basis of these translations became enormously influential throughout East-Asia for very long periods of time. We must presume that these texts were mostly interpreted in a “correct” way by their translators, who recreated the conceptual systems underlying the Sanskrit languages in the new linguistic media of Chinese, Tibetan, and so on, since these concepts are well recognizable in the receiving languages. It is unclear, however, whether a concept transferred to a completely different cultural background retains its original content; a basic problem that is connected with all kinds of translations. And indeed, many of the translations of Buddhist texts, especially into Chinese, may be characterized as rather inaccurate and have often lost some of the conceptual subtleties present in their Sanskrit form. However, if one analyses the Tibetan translations of Buddhist terms, these are found to be considerably more accurate than the Chinese translations. This is probably explained by the fact that the Tibetan written language was created to translate exactly these Buddhist texts and to express exactly this conceptual system of Buddhism; the Tibetan language

¹⁶See (Meulenbeld 2002, vol. 1A, 656) for references to the discussion on the classical text on Tibetan medicine, the *rGyud bñi* and Vāgbhaṭa’s works. Tibetan medicine is also influenced by other traditions, but its early history remains unclear.

was prepared with grammatical structures that could accommodate the Buddhist Sanskrit language and its semantic contents.

Buddhism, as described above, was also spread by the social system of its monastic community as well as by the crafts employed in the propagation of the Buddhist faith: those connected to the writing of sacred texts and to the art depicting the Buddhist motifs, arts and crafts that were developed further during contact with counterparts in the receiving cultures. However, there are also examples where Buddhist motifs have been communicated without being recognized as such in the receiving cultures, as in the legend of Josaphat and Barlaam. Another possible example of diffusion of Buddhism, which is difficult to prove, though, is that of monastic life and the idea of hell. This last example pinpoints the difficulty one may encounter in the description of the globalization of knowledge, since similarities in fields of knowledge may be found, but whether these are a result of diffusion or independent ideas, is often hard to decide. Buddhism, though, as a conceptual and cultural system exemplifies a number of types of diffusion, spanning from historically well-documented examples to those that can only with hesitation be proposed as diffusion of knowledge.

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