

CHAPTER IX

PILGRIMAGES

Pilgrimages play an important part in oriental Buddhism, not least in China. Indeed, it can be said that this practice first reached to the heights which it now has attained, through the influence of Buddhism.

Certain mountains in China were, indeed, looked upon as especially holy, even in the most ancient times. Notable amongst these are the five famous old sacred places (wu-yü, 五嶽): (1) T'ai Shan (泰山), in Shantung province; (2) Hua Shan (華山), in Shensi; (3) Hêng Shan (恆山), in Shansi; (4) Nan-yü Shan (南嶽山), or Hêng Shan (衡山), in Hunan; and (5) Sung Shan (嵩山), in Honan.

The Buddhist monks were fortunate enough to secure a foothold in several of these places, and although they were not the sole proprietors everywhere, but had to share with the Taoist priests, it was they who drew up the rules for worship and gave the framework for those special festivals which later have worked so like a charm upon the religious masses of the East. The Taoists felt that if they were going to hold on to any part of the field, they must to some extent pattern their arrangements after those the Buddhists had adopted.

Besides the above-named mountains, the Buddhists very soon succeeded in creating certain great new centres for pilgrimages. Wonderful legends of great Buddhas and bodhisattvas began to circulate. It was

told that this one had settled down here, that one there. Powerful rays of light had manifested themselves, great miracles had taken place on this or that mountain. The religious spirit was greatly stirred and thousands determined to have a part in building monasteries and temples in honour of these Buddhas. There is scarcely a monastery that has not some such miraculous account to point back to. The number grew with the centuries, and larger and larger became the guest halls where pilgrims could be received. Certain mountain ranges were, so to speak, overcrowded with temples and monasteries, as, for example, Lü Shan (廬山) in Kiangsi and T'ien-t'ai Shan (天台山) in Chekiang. The Taiping rebellion laid waste a great many of these, but even now the many heaps of ruins witness to this golden age of Buddhism.

There were, in particular, four mountains which, in a special sense, became sacred places of Buddhism, for on these mountains the greatest bodhisattvas had revealed themselves. Volumes might be written about each of these places. We must here confine ourselves to giving a very brief description of each.

The names of these mountains, as has already been mentioned, are: (1) P'ut'o Shan (普陀山), an island on the coast near Ningpo (Chou-shan, 舟山) archipelago; (2) Chiu-hua Shan (九華山), in Anhwei province; (3) Wu-t'ai Shan (五台山) in Shansi province, and (4) O-mei Shan (峨嵋山), in Szechwan province.

As might be expected, one will see in these places some of Buddhism's most impressive manifestations, so far as material structure is concerned. There are

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colossal temple halls, provided with a magnificent equipment for worship to attract the pilgrims. There are whole towns which have sprung up round the sanctuary, and are entirely supported by the sale of objects needed in the worship. There are inns and guest halls, restaurants and fine hotels, all overcrowded during the pilgrim season. There are art treasures and historic documents of great worth, about which special books have been written by Chinese and Japanese, as well as by Western writers.

There are deeply affecting instances of the highest religious ecstasy, of penitence and longing for renewal to be seen in these places. But there are quite as often very offensive scenes where the grossest bartering of "gods" for the attainment of riches and material gain is carried on quite openly.

Here one finds a choice band of serious and religious monks, and also an unpleasantly large group of profit seekers, while out along the roads, and outside the large temples, is a horde of "wild monks," sinister creatures who use the worst methods for getting hold of the valuable possessions of the pilgrims.

Round about in caves and holes in the ground sit hermits who, in fanatical ecstasy, spend most of their days in reciting the holy writings. One can also find pious and learned monks living their quiet, retired lives in some solitary temple, situated on the holy site. Only one who is well acquainted with the conditions will be able to find his way to these "still ones in the land," in the midst of the great whirlpool, where

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everything seems to be poisoned by the cold deadly breath of commercialism.

The most beautiful and splendid sanctuary is certainly P'ut'o Shan. Access to it is comparatively easy, as there is always steamship connection with Ningpo. In the summer, extra lines with tourist boats run from Shanghai; and besides these, pilgrims come in great numbers in large and small boats from the whole coast.

The fishing population, especially from the coasts of Fukien and Kwangtung, are tireless in coming with their thank-offerings to the merciful Kuan-yin, who "blesses their trade and protects them in storm and danger on the deep waters."

The island is sacred to Kuan-yin, for which reason her statue, in enormous dimensions, is enthroned in the most beautiful way in the temples, nearly a hundred in all, with which the island is strewn.

The legend relates how she revealed herself for the first time in a cave which the waves have worn in the side of the island near the sea. This was the cave, afterwards so famous, called "Ch'ao-yin Tung" (潮音洞), the "Cave of the Roar of Billows." This event happened in the year 847 A.D., while an Indian monk was carrying on his worship in the cave. Immense crowds have stood and looked down into the cave of the billows from that day on. Many have stood there from ebb-tide, when the cave lay dry, until the waves came rushing in, filling the air with their deep powerful roar, and flooding the cave again in their engulfing waters. Sometimes an impelling force has seized them

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KUNA-YIN

Painted by Wu Tao-tzu

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so that they have cast themselves into the deep, and have either been killed on the stone bottom or have at once "been borne in upon Kuan-yin's billows to the 'Western Paradise.'" Others, feeling an irresistible longing to give some outward sign of their inward consecration, have cut off an ear or a finger and cast it into the sea.

The day the writer stood by the cave, the bottom was stained red with blood, in spite of the fact that the authorities have made proclamations strictly prohibiting visitors from "taking their lives or cutting off any of their members at the spot"! For greater security, a railing has now been set up round the whole cave.

The island, which has been in the possession of the Buddhists through all these centuries, has often been visited by both native and foreign pirates, who time after time have destroyed the sanctuary and driven the monks away to the mainland of China. None of the buildings which one sees there now dates from before the fourteenth century.

In 1572, a monk was sent down there from Wu-t'ai Shan, to restore the ruined buildings at the expense of the emperor. The island was originally under the authority of the legalistic party (Lü-tsung), but in the seventeenth century the Meditation School (Ch'an Tsung) secured the ascendancy.

At the landing-place there is a regular little town given up to the sale of requisites for temple worship, and a long row of vegetarian restaurants. The first temple enclosure, which is, in reality, a monastery

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enclosure also, forms the famous "Temple of Universal Mercy" (P'u-chi Ssü) (普濟寺). It is also popularly called "Ch'ien Ssü" 前寺 (the First, or Foremost Temple) in contrast to the other great enclosure which lies farther inland, on the slope below the real mountain. This latter is called "Fa-yu Ssü" (法雨寺) (the Temple of the Doctrine which Rains Down), or "Hou Ssü" (後寺) (the Back Temple). One ought to go into these temples, if one wants to see impressive masses held for great crowds of pilgrims who lie prostrated in long rows. Here, also, one finds the very finest of Buddhist art. One meets something similar, though on a smaller scale, if one goes over the lower slope, up the many stone steps to the temple "Fu-ting Shan" (佛頂山), "Buddha's Peak," from which there is an enchanting view out over the ocean.

Among other remarkable places, in addition to the "Cave of the Roar of Billows," is the famous "Fan-yin Tung" (梵音洞), where a relic of the historic Buddha is said to be.

The full name of the island, "P'ut'o-lo-ch'ieh" (普陀落伽), is an allusion to Kuan-yin's original mountain, the Indian Potaloka. A good many monks have settled down as hermits here or on the surrounding islets, in order to "lay up merit" for themselves during shorter or longer periods.

Buddhism's next greatest sanctuary is Chiu-hua Shan (九華山), in Anhwei, situated in one of the most naturally beautiful parts of the Yangtze valley. Further details are given in the chapter on "Masses for the Dead" and Ti-t'sang. We learn that the first hermit

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settled there as early as the year 401. This was an Indian whose Chinese name was Pei-t'u (悲陀).

The original name of the place was "Chiu-tzŭ Shan" (九子山), but after the great Chinese poet Li-t'ai-pai (李太白) had been there he rechristened it "Chiu-hua Shan" for "there were not merely nine ordinary mountain peaks, but nine flowering mountain peaks."

It was, however, only after the coming of Chin Ch'iao-chio (金喬覺) in A.D. 754 that the mountain acquired its great reputation for holiness, when it became known that the great and merciful bodhisattva Ti-ts'ang was re-incarnated in him.

The Taipings destroyed a number of the old buildings, but much is still standing, among other things the great monastery of "Hua-ch'eng Ssŭ" (化城寺), dating from the eighth century. Behind this stands a pavilion which contains the Chinese Tripitaka, presented to the monastery by the emperor Wan Li of the Ming dynasty.

Besides these, the best-known feature is the great pagoda, about which the pilgrim bands march with slow reverend gait. On the open space in front of the pagoda is a big iron jar. The legend is that devout pilgrims, after two days of fasting, and clad in green, will, by standing in a certain position and gazing down into the depths of the jar, be able to catch a glimpse of the lost souls in hades and the "merciful Ti-ts'ang."

Among other objects worth seeing on Chiu-hua Shan are the old temples built on the rocks, "Tung-yai Ssŭ" (東崖寺) and "Pai-sui Kung" (百歲宮). In the latter place the skeleton of an old and holy abbot

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overlaid with gold-foil is found. Crossing a deep valley one climbs the T'ien-t'ai Mountain (天台山), where some picturesque temples are also to be found.

The third sanctuary is Wu-t'ai Shan (五台山), situated in the northeast part of Shansi province. This rises in five terraces to a height of three thousand six hundred feet, which has given it the name "Wu-t'ai," the "Five Platforms." The tutelary god here, as has already been mentioned, is Wên-hsu (文殊), the bodhisattva of wisdom, who in ancient times manifested himself in the form of an old, white-haired man. One of his "silver hairs" still lies under the great white pagoda which adorns the spot. This is a meeting-place for the lamas from Mongolia and Tibet, and the Chinese Buddhist monks, so one sees the prayer wheels beginning to revolve here.

Of the one hundred and fifty monasteries and temples, twenty-four are occupied by the lamas. The chief director belongs to the Lama society and is called "Chang-chia Fu" (張家佛) (the "Buddha Who Is Always Renewed"). He is a very autocratic and aristocratic gentleman. As one might expect, the monastery's rites and the whole of the inner life of the place is strongly characterized by syncretism, as the two great streams of Buddhism meet. The rather difficult access to the place is accountable for the fact that there are fewer pilgrims here than is the case at P'ut'o and Chiu-hua.

The fourth great sanctuary is O-mei Shan (峨眉山), far inland in Szechwan province. The mountain rises

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up like a huge cone from the plain, and with its picturesque slopes and remarkable mountain steps and buildings it is certainly without parallel in the whole world. From the six-thousand-foot crest one has the most marvellous view, not only of the fruitful plains of Szechwan, but also over the mountain wilderness toward Tibet. The mountain peak rises out of a plateau and reaches a height of eleven thousand feet above the sea.

That which has contributed not a little towards surrounding O-mei Shan with romance, is the fine mist which often lies over it, like a collar around the mountain top. When the sun breaks through, one sees the colours of the rainbow in its bursting brilliance, producing light effects of surpassing beauty.

It now passes for a true tradition that the great bodhisattva of mercy, P'u-hsien (普賢), has from ages past manifested himself on this mountain, riding on his white elephant. The emotional pilgrim who sees these light effects, naturally connects them with P'u-hsien, and believing that a vision has been granted to him is seized with rapture. Some have cast themselves in ecstasy from the outmost crest into the misty space and have disappeared in the depths. Whitened bones below tell the story of their last swift journey.

An enormous bronze figure of P'u-hsien on the elephant is erected in one of the largest temples. There are, in all, seventy temples and monasteries with fully two thousand monks. One of the most famous sights is the ruins of the bronze temple built by the

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emperor Wan Li about the year 1600, afterwards destroyed by lightning. Of the fifty-six pagodas, there are two made of bronze, dating from the time of the Ming dynasty.

The place, a day's journey west of Kiating, is the great meeting-place for Tibetan lamas, Buddhists from Nepal, and monks from the various provinces of China.

Besides these great pilgrim centres, there is an enormous number of holy places and famous monasteries throughout China which attract pilgrims by the thousand; for example, Wei Shan in Hunan, now destroyed; Ku Shan (孤山) in Fukien; and above all, the many beautiful monasteries and temples round Hsi Hu (西湖, West Lake), at Hangchow. We cannot describe them all, for it would require an extra volume, but we shall give a general description of the pilgrim processions such as are found throughout the whole land.

There are, as a rule, special circumstances that send men on pilgrimages. Often it is sickness, often unfortunate business conditions or poor harvests, or such like, which lie behind these undertakings. Particular sins, and the calamities consequent upon them, are often to be expiated by such a pilgrimage. Occasionally, it is real religious need, the need of deeper spiritual experience and religious certainty, which drives them forth. The person concerned, who may be the son of the house, the father, or the brother (in many cases also a mother, a daughter, a widow, or a cast-off wife), goes first to the nearest temple

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(preferably one dedicated to a certain Buddha or bodhisattva). There a vow is taken (fa-yüan, hsü-yüan, 發願, 許願) that the person concerned will go to a holy place, if help can be received. If help comes quickly, the pilgrimage is then an act of thanksgiving, and the promise is redeemed (huan-yüan, 還願). Often, however, it is a journey to seek help (ch'iu-ên, 求恩). Often the vow is a pledge of annual pilgrimages for so many years.

There are a great many points to be observed about the journey itself. The day of departure (usually in early summer or in the autumn) is decided, after consultation with a soothsayer (a chooser of days). A special costume is prepared, usually a yellow or a red waistcoat, upon which is sewn the Chinese character for the particular "mountain god." The red costume is generally worn by those who are going to expiate some especially grievous sins. These carry with them also a bowl in which stand sticks of incense, which must never die out. At every third step, these pilgrims cast themselves down on the ground and repeat their prayer for mercy.

When a band of pilgrims sets out, there is no demonstration; they depart in silence. There is no talking, and the eyes are not turned to left or right, as in groups of from ten to fifty they pace forward. The mind must not be distracted, neither must they let themselves be tempted to any sin, for then everything is in vain. The silence is broken only when the leader in high falsetto tones calls out a prayer formula. The rest join in on the second line.

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The pilgrims eat only vegetarian food. Some take only a little rice porridge and water. After a few days' time, therefore, many of them present a very worn appearance. Mile after mile, day after day, the procession goes on in this manner. Often their feet become swollen, while exhaustion and sickness urge them to stop. But this is a bad sign, for it shows that their thoughts have not been held in check!

The inns along the way, during the pilgrim season, make special preparations for getting good patronage. Ornamental paper lanterns with grandiloquent inscriptions are hung out. An altar is made ready and prayer mats are laid out, for after the evening meal the pilgrims must conduct their worship. The pilgrims who travel by boat naturally carry their altar with them. A special mark on the sail, or a special pennant, signifies the fact that there are pilgrims, "hsiang-k'o" (香客), on board.

When they have arrived at their destination, they first go into an inn and wash, or preferably bathe themselves, and rinse their mouths. After that they proceed to the main temple and conduct their worship in a solemn manner. The large choir of Buddhist priests help the individuals with this. The great evening masses, in particular, with their large number of burning candles and extravagant amount of incense, have quite an overwhelming effect.

The pilgrims, by the hundred, lie upon the stone pavement in prayer while the priests stand before the altar and chant. Occasionally the pilgrims also break in with their verses of prayer.

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The opportunity is taken at this time to enquire about the future. Dice are cast (tá kua, 打掛), lots are drawn (ch'iu-ch'ien, 求籤), slips of paper telling fortunes, are issued at a long table. In brief, the whole oracle machinery is set going, and money flows into the treasury of the monasteries and temples.

A heterogeneous mass of deities connected with the darkest animism come in for their share of worship. Social gods, and gods from other religions have their altars set up near the sanctuary of Buddhism, and they all receive homage also.

Then the pilgrims betake themselves home again and the same asceticism, the same worship, the same rules, are observed until they stand in their own door-yards once more. Death may have reaped his harvest there at home; perhaps the threads of misfortune have drawn themselves even tighter. Or it may be there is improvement to be seen. Expectation has stimulated the sick ones—and an answer to prayer is recorded. In such a case it is common to have, written or printed, slips of paper expressing gratitude, which are pasted up on walls and trees, expressions of thanks and homage to the mighty spirit, the gracious bodhisattva, who has so evidently answered prayer. Such news spreads and the "god's" fame is sung far and wide.

Perhaps this act is done in a still more solemn manner. The words of gratitude may be engraved upon beautifully painted and carved tablets of wood, and these "p'ien" (匾) are hung up in the temple concerned. Some temples are full to overflowing with such trophies!

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As we have seen before, the monks themselves often go on long pilgrimages. A special book, a travellers' guide, has been prepared for them. The name of the book is "Chao Ssü Ta Ming-shan Lu-yin" (朝四大名山路引), "Guide for Travellers to the Four Famous Mountains."