

## **India to Russia: A Remarkable Journey of Buddha Dhamma**

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The journey of Buddhism from India to Russia is a remarkable saga of spiritual transmission across centuries and civilizations. While it did not travel in a straight line, the diffusion of Buddha Dhamma from India to Russia moved gradually through Central Asia, Tibet, and Mongolia before reaching the Russian steppes and Siberia. This transmission was shaped by trade, diplomacy, cultural exchange, and the openness of nomadic societies across Eurasia. The Silk Road played a key role in facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and Buddhism. In the process, Buddhism adapted to new environments while retaining its core principles of compassion, mindfulness, and wisdom.

The 3rd International Buddhist Forum in Elista, Kalmykia (September 25–28, 2025), in this context, provides a timely opportunity to revisit this journey. Plans for an exposition of Buddha's sacred relics and the installation of a Shakyamuni statue from India to Kalmykia underscore the living continuity of Indo-Russian Buddhist ties. This paper traces that historical journey—beginning in India, flourishing in Central Asia, evolving in Tibet and Mongolia, and taking root in Russia—while also reflecting on its present-day relevance.

By examining the journey of Buddha Dhamma from India to Russia via Central Asia, the paper highlights how Buddhism adapted to diverse cultures while retaining its core principles of compassion, mindfulness, and wisdom. In today's world, marked by cultural polarization and identity-based conflicts, this journey is a compelling reminder that spiritual traditions can transcend borders, bridge communities, and foster unity in diversity.

### **The Movement of Buddha Dhamma – From India to Central Asia**

The transmission of Buddhist teachings from India to Central Asia began during and after the campaigns of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. Historical records suggest that Buddhist monks encountered by Alexander's forces in Punjab laid the groundwork for Buddhism's spread westward and northward. Subsequent Hellenistic rulers such as Seleucus and Antiochus I promoted Buddhist contacts, strengthening early cultural exchanges.

By the 2nd century BCE, Buddhism had reached Bactria and Sogdiana, both vital nodes of the Silk Road. Cities like Samarkand, Merv, and Balkh became flourishing centres where Indian spiritual traditions merged with local cultures. The Kushan Empire (1st–4th centuries CE), under rulers like Kanishka I, provided the most significant patronage, convening the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir and fostering Mahayana Buddhism. Kushan art and architecture in places such as Termez, Bamiyan, and Taxila show Buddhism's dynamism in Central Asia.

Even as the Kushan Empire declined, Buddhism persisted in Tokharistan and the Merv oasis until the 7th century, with Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang documenting its resilience. By this time, Buddhism had extended eastward through the Fergana Valley, Semirechye, and Khotan, laying the foundations for its entry into Tibet and Mongolia. Although its influence waned in western Central Asia by the 9th century, Buddhism's cultural seeds continued to shape the spiritual landscape further east.

### **Buddhist passage - Central Asia, Mongolia, and then Russia**

Buddhism's journey from Central Asia to Mongolia and eventually into Russia reflects its extraordinary ability to adapt across cultures while preserving its Indian philosophical essence. The transmission began with the Turkic Khaganates, powerful nomadic empires founded by Turkic peoples in the 6th century, who controlled vast stretches of the Silk Road and facilitated early Buddhist influence among their elites. The Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking people originally from East Turkestan, played a pivotal role after the fall of their khaganate in 840 CE, migrating to regions like Beshbaliq and Turfan, where they absorbed Tocharian and Sogdian Buddhist traditions. Their translation of Sanskrit and Tibetan texts into their own languages made Buddhist teachings accessible to Mongolian-speaking communities. By the 13th century, Mongol tribes such as the Oirats embraced the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, which emphasized monastic discipline and aligned well with emerging Mongol political structures. This spiritual-political fusion laid the groundwork for Buddhism's spread into Russian territories.

The spread of Buddhism from Mongolia into the Russian territories occurred in three broad waves. The first wave arrived via the Bohai kingdom in the Russian Far East during the 7th–8th centuries, leaving behind temple sites (such as Kopytinsky and Abrikosovsky temples) near modern Ussuriysk. A second wave that came in the 15th century blended Chinese and Tibetan traditions, but it was the Oirat migrants, better known as Kalmyks, in the 16th–17th centuries—who firmly established Buddhism in southern Siberia and the Volga region, forming the Kalmyk Khanate under leaders appointed by the Dalai Lama. Their interactions with Indian merchants in Astrakhan and reverence for sacred symbols like the Sandalwood Buddha, which journeyed from Bodh Gaya to Transbaikalia, deepened the Indo-Russian spiritual connection and anchored Buddhism within Russia's religious landscape.

### **Buddhism in Siberia and the Russian Far East**

The spread of Buddhism into Siberia highlights the religion's adaptability across ethnic and cultural boundaries. In the 17th century, the Buryats of Transbaikalia embraced Tibetan Buddhism, integrating it into their communal life. Over the next two centuries, the Gelug school expanded across Buryatia and Pribaikalia, where monasteries became centers of learning, ritual, and cultural identity. Buryat Buddhism not only preserved Tibetan traditions but also incorporated local shamanic elements, creating a distinct regional practice.

The Tuvinians and Altaians, Turkic peoples of southern Siberia, also adopted Buddhism. Though evidence of Buddhist temples in Tuva dates back to the 13th–14th centuries, large-scale adoption occurred later under the influence of the Dzungarian Khanate. These communities demonstrate that Buddhism was not confined to Mongolic groups but was embraced across diverse cultural landscapes, reinforcing its universal appeal.

In the Russian Far East, earlier waves of Buddhism left archaeological traces. Sites at Kopytinsky, Abrikosovsky, Kraskinsky, and Obryvisty Cape reveal Buddhist temples and figurines dating from the 7th to 13th centuries, showing that Chinese and Jurchen Buddhist traditions had reached these lands. Though many of these early Buddhist communities eventually disappeared, their remains underscore the deep historical roots of Buddhism in Russia.

Altogether, Siberia and the Far East became crucial bridges, where Buddhism evolved into unique regional expressions while retaining its Indian origins. These communities ensured that Buddhism was not only transplanted into Russia but took root as a living tradition.

### **Contemporary Resonance**

Today, Buddhism in Russia thrives as both a traditional and modern faith. Around one million people identify as Buddhists, with the largest concentrations in Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva. These regions host vibrant monasteries, festivals, and cultural practices that sustain Buddhist heritage. In Kalmykia, Buddhism is central to cultural identity, while in Buryatia it serves as a foundation of spiritual and social life. In Tuva, Buddhist rituals coexist with indigenous shamanic practices, reflecting centuries of adaptation.

Despite suppression during the Soviet era, when monasteries were destroyed and monks persecuted, Buddhism revived with the collapse of the USSR. Since the 1990s, temples have been rebuilt, monastic communities restored, and new generations trained in Buddhist philosophy. Interest has also grown among ethnic Russians, many of whom are drawn to meditation, philosophy, and Buddhist ethics.

Internationally, Buddhist ties between Russia and India are being reinvigorated. Academic cooperation, pilgrimages, and cultural diplomacy have brought the two countries closer. The proposed installation of a Shakyamuni statue in Elista and discussions about the transfer of sacred relics underscore the continuity of a centuries-old bond. The revival of Buddhism in Russia today is therefore not only a religious phenomenon but also a bridge of dialogue, peace, and cultural exchange between Russia and India.

## **Conclusion**

The journey of Buddha Dhamma from India to Russia is remarkable not because it was linear, but because it traversed diverse civilizations, endured transformations, and yet preserved its essence.

From the Kushans to the Kalmyks, from Gandhara to Astrakhan, Buddhism adapted to new cultural contexts while carrying its universal message of compassion and wisdom. Today, as Russia prepares to host the International Buddhist Forum, this journey comes full circle—showing that ancient spiritual ties continue to inspire dialogue, unity, and peace between India and Russia.