

*Doordarshan's*  
*Spectacular India Series*  
*Ancient Legacy of Kashmir*  
*By Benoy K Behl*



In the heart of the great Himalayas is a verdant valley, which has been described by poets and emperors as Paradise. Over the centuries, this beautiful vale has seen the blossoming of many of the most beautiful flowers of the philosophy of man.

Kashmir has always been a renowned centre of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. In ancient times, it was known as 'Sharada Peeth', or 'the seat of the deity of learning'.

It was here that the Indian philosophy of aesthetics was developed in great detail by the philosopher Abhinava Gupta in

the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is in Kashmir that Shaivism rose to its fullest heights. The manifestation of Shiva in the beauty of the world around us was worshipped as Shakti.

From the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Valley of Kashmir was one of the most important centres of Buddhist learning. Here Buddhist thought constantly interacted with Kashmir Shaivism. The Indian philosophy of aesthetics was also most highly developed in this beautiful valley. This philosophy believes that the moment in which we respond to something beautiful, is similar to Brahmananda, the bliss of salvation itself. We are transformed by our appreciation of beauty. It helps to lift the veils of the illusions of the material world, so that we can see the truth beyond.

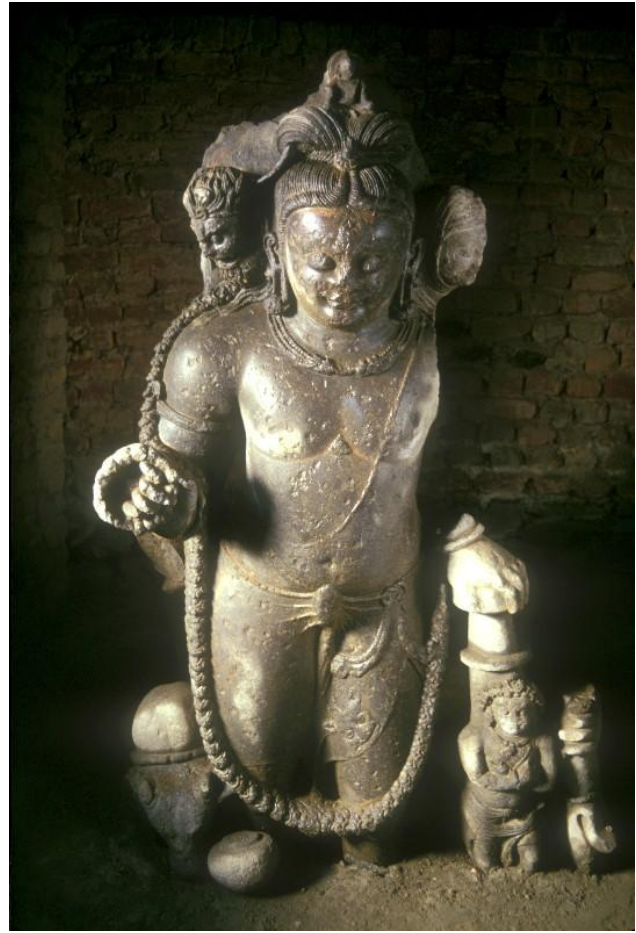
In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Hsuan Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim-traveler, visited Kashmir. He found that it was a flourishing centre of Buddhism which rivalled the

importance of Eastern India. The Chinese pilgrim found many stupas and thousands of monks here.

By this time in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism had entered its third major phase: the Vajrayana School, or the Vehicle of the Thunderbolt. The logic of this school was supposed to be as striking as a Thunderbolt and as indestructible as a diamond.

The complex rituals, chants and mudras or gestures of Vajrayana Buddhism were codified in the form of tantras. Tantra literally means to 'carry on knowledge'.

The formidable mountains that ring the Valley did not prevent Kashmiri monks from traveling constantly to Tibet, Central Asia and China. Between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries they took the teachings of Buddhism far and wide.



Kumarajiva was the son of Kumarayana from Kashmir. He is one of the greatest names in Chinese Buddhist history. Bronzes and manuscripts with paintings were also carried to distant lands by these teachers. This spread the aesthetics of Kashmiri art far and wide.

In 975 AD, King Yeshe Od of Guge in Tibet sent Rinchen Zangpo to Kashmir. This arduous journey was made to bring back scriptures with the original and pure knowledge of the faith. The mission was also to bring back artists to build, paint and sculpt new temples in Guge.

It is believed by the people of the trans-Himalayan lands that Rinchen Zangpo made 108 monasteries and temples. He had brought 32 artists to Guge from the Valley of Kashmir. They were to create the foundations of a lasting tradition of Buddhist art. The painters and sculptors from Kashmir brought with them a highly sophisticated form of art. This was deeply rooted in the ancient Indian traditions.

Inside these temples, one enters an enchanted space. It is a world of graceful forms and colour. The purpose of this art is to take us into the deep and harmonious spaces of the inner self.

Amidst the natural beauty of the Kashmir valley, the most joyous Hindu and Buddhist philosophy was born. This saw beauty as a stepping stone towards

the final truth and salvation itself. This philosophy led to the creation of art which fills us with joy and transforms us. There is a lyrical grace in the work of the Kashmiri artist. The legacy of ancient Kashmir is continued till today in the lands of Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh.

### **About the film-maker**

Benoy K Behl is a film-maker, art-historian and photographer who is known for his tireless and prolific output of work over the past 34 years. He has taken over 40,000 photographs of Asian monuments and art heritage, made a hundred documentaries on art history and his exhibitions have been warmly received in 32 countries around the world. These have been inaugurated by ministers of the governments of various countries, ambassadors, archbishops and others dignitaries. He holds the Limca Book Record for being the most travelled photographer.

His films, including 26 documentaries on 'The Paintings of India' and 26 documentaries on 'The Sculpture of India' have been nationally telecast on prime time in India, as well as repeat telecasts. These have also been screened at scores of universities and museums in several countries around the world.

He has been invited to lecture by most of the important universities and museums around the world, who have departments of Asian art. His book on 'The Ajanta Caves' is published by Thames & Hudson, London and Harry N. Abrams, New York. His book on 'The History of Indian Art: Sculpture and Mural Paintings' is expected to be released in the second half of 2013. Two more books by him are expected to be out in the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. The first on 'Northern Frontiers of Buddhism' covering Buddhist heritage in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kalmykia and Siberia in Russia, Mongolia, China and Tibet. The second book is on 'The Buddhist Heritage of Andhra Pradesh'.

