

NOTES & TOPICS

ATISA THE TANTRIC INITIATE

Some scholars say that Atisa did not receive Tantric teachings and hence did not give Tantric initiations since it is forbidden for a monk to do so. They would substantiate this by quoting three ślokas from Bodhipathapradīpa. Evidently they have misinterpreted the slokas as there is much deeper mystic meaning in them.

The later revival of Buddhism began following the death of King Lang Darma in Eastern and Western Tibet in the 11th Century and after the Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo (985-1055 A.D). During this period, Pandita Āchārya Marpo also named Shes-rab gsang-ba (11th Century A.D) from Odiyana and a disciple of Kashmirian Ratna-vajra, visited Tibet (G.N. Roerich The Blue Annals pt. II p. 1049-50. The Asiatic Society, Calcutta 1953). He was a competent and well-known scholar both in India and in Tibet. But his disciple Pandita Shamthab mngon-po taught that a beginner in Tantric practices could be given Las-rgya (private Śakti) during the secret initiation. This was of great harm to the moral vow taken by the monks. Atisa, therefore, has objected to this in Bodhipathapradīpa. It however does not mean that a monk cannot receive Tantric teachings and initiations. It was clearly mentioned by Kun-mkhyen 'Jam-dbyang bshad-pa'i rdo-rje (17th Century A.D) in his work Lam-rim rnam-bshad lung-rig gter-mdzod vol. 4 (NGA), p. 424 (New Statesman Press, New Delhi 55).

Most of the Tantric texts mentioned that the best disciple to give Tantric initiation is one who has obtained the three following vows: the individual liberation vows (Prātimokṣasamvara /So-sor-thar pa'i-sdom-pa); the Bodhisattva vows: (Bodhisattvasamvara/Byangchub sems-dpa'i-sdom-pa); and the tantric vows (Mantra samvara/gsang-sngags-kyi-sdom-pa).

While looking through many Sanskrit manuscripts during the stay in Samye, Atisa was filled with pride at the thought that he was the most learned in Tantric literature. At that time in his dream a Dakini appeared and showed him many Tantric texts he had never seen before. This humbled Atisa and it has been mentioned in all Atisa's biographies written by different Tibetan scholars. This shows that Atisa had received various Tantric teachings and initiations.

- J.K. Rechung