



**JOWJE Palden Atisa and two disciples**

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# ATĪSA DĪPAṆKARA ŚRĪJÑĀNA

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Many scholars have written about the life and works of the most renowned Pandita Atisa Dipankara Srijnana (Tib: Jo-wo-rje dpal-ldan Atisa). Yet I undertake the task of attempting another account from Tibetan literary sources, not for merit but with the hope that it will furnish some further information for those interested.

Atisa was born in the Water-Horse year (982 A.D.) in the province called Zahor which was part of what was called Vangala. There have been different views on the part of scholars regarding the birth-place of Atisa. The Tibetan historians tend to locate the birth place at Vikramapura in the district of Dacca, now in Bangladesh. This was first stated by Bu-ston rin chen grub, and later by Sum-pa mkhan-po ye-shes dpal-byor and Taranatha. Another great scholar Tshegling yongzin yeshe gyaltsen, in his account of the Lam-rim bla-brgyud rnam-thar (the biography of lineage of the doctrine of Lam-rim, the graded path to enlightenment) has also mentioned that Atisa was actually born in a place not far from Vikramapura temple. I, too, share the same view as my own research on Atisa's life and works in Tibet substantiate the general view. Moreover, Nagtso lotsawa, who was acquainted with Atisa and spent many years with him mentioned in his text Bstod-pa brgyad-bcu-pa (Eighty slokas in praise of Atisa) that Vikramapura was the birth-place of Atisa.

Atisa was honoured both in India and Tibet for his great contribution to Buddhism. With his magnetic personality and profound knowledge of Buddhism, he converted several renowned heretics and their followers into Buddhists, with the result that Buddhism spread far and wide.

Tshegling yongzin yeshe gyaltsen in Lam-rim bla-brgyud rnam-thar (p. 154) writes that during one of Atisa's tours as a prince around the city, he came across his chief tutelary deity, the goddess Tārā, in the form of a young lady attired in white standing among the crowd of people. She addressed him personally and advised him to stay clear of the desires of the world. She told him that once he was overcome by these desires, he would find it very difficult to rid himself of them. By doing so, she said that he would be able to retain his personal morals and purity. Through his one hundred and fifty two former lives (skyes-rab/jātakas) Atisa had attained the status of Pandita with the highest form of pure and moral conduct.

Atisa underwent thirteen months of hardship on the journey across the seas in a boat in order to pay a visit to the Lama Serlingpa (Āchārya Suvarṇadvīpī), who resided on a remote island. Atisa stayed there for twelve years, during the period of which he acquired the knowledge of Bdag-gzhan mnyam-brje (ātma-para-samatā-parivarta). This doctrine was transmitted by Lord Buddha himself through Maitreya, Shantideva and other saints to Serlingpa. Moreover, he was the master of all spiritual knowledge including aspects of Tantrayāna and Sūtrayāna. At the time of returning to India from Suvarṇadvīpa, his chief Guru Āchārya Suvarṇadvīpī (gser-gling-pa) gave him a golden statue of Lord Buddha which was found in his early age and consecrated him as the master of the Doctrine.

When Atisa was at Bodh Gaya, a battle was fought between king Nayapāla (c. 1038-1055 A.D.) of Magadha and king Karana (karṇa) of the West. The battle lasted for many days. Since they could not cause any destruction to the cities, they destroyed all the temples and killed four monks and one Upāsaka. They even carried away all the properties of the temples. When the armies of king Nayapāla slaughtered the troops of king Karana, Atisa took the latter under his protection and so saved many lives. He then brought the struggle to an end. (For details vide Manjumdar's The History of Bengal).

During the reign of king Mahapāla, Atisa was invited to the university of Vikramasila. Inside the temple of the university the king had the portrait of Atisa done in fresco paintings on the left wall of the temple and that of the great Nāgārjuna on the right wall. This was done to imply that Atisa was as great and learned as the renowned Buddhist Āchārya Nāgārjuna (1st half of 2nd century A.D.). This university was built by king Dharmapāla, who was a great patron of Mahāyāna Buddhism and who ruled over Bengal for twenty years. In the 12th century and later during the Turkish invasion, like the other Buddhist establishments and universities, the Vikramasila university too was destroyed. Later, he was given the charge of eighteen monasteries. Buddhism started flourishing all over the area. During those days Pandita of West, East and Central India held Atisa in great esteem and he was recognised as master of all the Tantra and Sūtra.

At one time, Naropa, the founder of the Bk'a-rgyud-pa sect visited the Vikramasila University when Atisa was there. He was given a grand reception by the scholars at

the university. Atisa escorted the saint into the university holding his right hand. Naropa then entrusted Atisa with the task of upholding the Dharma. Atisa told him that while Naropa would be compared to the sun and the moon, Atisa was only a fire fly and as such he would not be able to illuminate the earth as Naropa could. Naropa replied that he would soon leave and that he could find no one more suitable than Atisa for the task in hand. About twenty days after this Naropa passed away.

The goddess Tārā was his guide throughout his life. She protected him from all threats, and he was blessed with the divine power of clearing all his doubts with her. The Buddha, and especially the deities Tārā and Avalokiteśvara, directed him to Tibet and saw him through all the hazards that he met on the way. About a century before the arrival of Atisa in Tibet Buddhism was rapidly declining there. The renegade Tibetan king Lang darma attempted to wipe out the Buddhist faith by persecuting the monks and by destroying all the temples and statues of the Buddhist faith. As such, Buddhism deteriorated and corrupt debasing rituals prevailed over the religion in Tibet. The later kings of Tibet, Ye-shes-hod and Byang-chub-hod therefore, asked Atisa to visit Tibet and restore the pure doctrine there and so establish the true faith.

The original idea of Atisa having to go to Tibet was formed when Atisa was, in one of his previous incarnations, Vimala, the Lama Demamepa (Dri-ma med-pa). While in discussion with the prince Ratna-prajā (Dkon-mchog-hbang) in Odiyana, he told the prince that Tibet was lacking in the true faith or religion and that the people were failing to lead a happy

and contented life. He asked the prince to take birth in Tibet as a king when he would invite Vimala from India in order to carry out the reform.

In Kadam Bucho it is said that during one of the discussions between Vimala and prince Ratna Prajā a sound from heaven was suddenly heard saying "the Protectors of the World and Heaven, the Victorious Guru and the spiritual sons are now gathered in Odiyana; the future gathering will be in the Land of Snow. For millions of years to come, you two, Guru and disciple, will remain inseparable for the benefit of living beings like sandalwood and its fragrance." The prince then said to his Guru Vimala. "the melodious sound we heard as oracle from the sky prophesying about the past, present and future was divine. Today we had many auspicious omens on this gathering."

The Lama, then gave prince Ratna prajā a discourse on the Three Jewels. He added that to the east of Odiyana there was a place called Dorjedan (Vajrasana), where Buddhas of three times attained their enlightenment. And in its north there was a country called the Land of Snow- Tibet, where the religion was yet to flourish and where the demons were destroying the living beings with all their evil power. "There" the Lama said, "I will send my emanation (Padmasambhava) to control the demons and to protect people from the corrupt practices and the evil spirits, and lead them to peace and happiness. Before I send my emanation to help the people, you send your incarnation in the form of king (Songtsen Gampo) to protect its people and to invite the real emanation of Lord Buddha from China, Akṣobhya Vajra (Mikyo dorje) and from Nepal Mañjuśrī-vajra (Jampal dorje) with your different

manifestations. To protect the people from eight fearful happenings two goddesses, Māricī (Od-zer-can-ma/Gya-sa) and Bhrikuti (Khro-gnyer can-ma/Bal-sa), must be invited. Then only can the religion flourish in that country."

"To the north of Central Tibet, you should take birth in a noble family whom everyone can respect and bless your emanation to invite me to Tibet from India. Then only can we liberate sentient beings from misery of Samsara". (Kadam Bucho vol. Ka, Folio 75-76).

Once when Atisa was praying to his tutelary deity Avalokiteśvara to find out whether there were any restrictions or obstructions on his going to Tibet, Avalokiteśvara appeared in his own form and said: "O Holy one, you know what the secret teachings of the past, where you will find your tutelary deity, the Goddess Tārā (Rje-btsun sgröl-ma), who is looking after the welfare of the living beings. There you will find your disciples waiting for your guidance."

With prayers Atisa bowed in front of the image of his deity and asked whether the teachings of Buddha would flourish in Tibet or not if he went there, whether he would be able to fulfil the desire of Dharmaraja of Tibet, and thirdly, whether there was any hazards to his life there. It was the goddess Tara who said that his going to Tibet would be of great value to all the beings there, and particularly to an upāsikā. But, she said, his life would be shortened by twenty years. Atisa, however made his journey to Tibet through Nepal in 1042 A.D.

Upon Atisa's arrival in Tibet, he sent a messenger to the king Byang-chub-hod to inform him of his arrival.

The king was elated at the news and remembered his dream of the previous night. He said that he had seen a sun rising from west and a moon from the east. They both rose in the sky towards each other and upon coming in contact. The king saw the whole world illuminated, the sky clear of dust and clouds and the stars at their brightest. He thought it was a beautiful sign befitting the great occasion.

Atisa was escorted to the Tho-ling (mtho-gling)<sup>1</sup> monastery by the king. Upon seeing the paintings of the deities on the wall, Atisa composed a string of hymns on the spot, one in praise of the deities. The king and the Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo were astonished and so moved that they asked Atisa to be their Guru. It was here that Atisa wrote his well-known text Bodhipathapradīpa. The scholars of Tibet held that there was a Doctrine here which was equal to that of any holy text. This was mainly due to the fact that Bodhipathapradīpa, though not long, contained the essence of all other texts.

Atisa spent three years in Nga-ris, nine years in Nyethang<sup>2</sup> (snye-thang), and five years in other places of Central Tibet. It was under Atisa's influence that the famous Kadampa sect sprang up. The word Kadampa means the attempt of a person to take in each and every word of the Buddha's teachings in order to attain enlightenment. He also introduced a Doctrine divided into seven parts (Lha-chos bdun-Idan/Sapta-deva-dharma)<sup>3</sup> four of which concern four different Doctrines. The rest include the Tripiṭakas. This Doctrine is a very popular one among the Tibetans even today.

During Atisa's stay at Samye, he was delighted to see many Sanskrit manuscripts in Peharling and remarked that it was difficult to preserve such Sanskrit manuscripts even in India.

He then visited Lhasa at the invitation of Rngog-legs-pa'i shes-rab. On his arrival at the city, Jo-wo thug-je chen-po (avalokiteśvara) the patron deity of Tibet, appeared in white robe to receive Atisa saying "Welcome Mahāpandita, the Victorious!" On seeing and hearing the patron deity of Tibet, Atisa ran forward towards the deity in order to pay his respect, but jo-wo thug-je chen-po disappeared. The other people who had not seen the deity questioned Atisa about his strange behaviour to which he replied that he had seen a white robed apparition which he knew was jo-wo thug-je chen-po.

Later when he visited the Gtsug-lag-khang, he wondered whether there was any historical account behind the foundation of such a great temple. Meanwhile, an old beggar woman, reading Atisa's mind, asked him whether he wanted a full account of the establishment of the Gtsug-lag-khang. Atisa at once knew that this beggar woman was no ordinary beggar but some goddess in disguise. He told her that he wanted an account of the Gtsug-lag-khang. She thereupon said that there was a vase-shaped pillar in the Gtsug-lag-khang and if Atisa dug two and a half fathoms deep under it, he would find the key to the establishment of the Gtsug-lag-khang. She told him not to utter a word about it to anyone.

When Atisa began digging under the vase-shaped pillar for the manuscript, the deity who was guarding the manuscript told him that he would be given only a day to complete copying the manuscript. Unfortunately, Atisa could not complete copying the manuscript and had to place it back under the pillar again. This great historical account of Tibet is called 'Bk'a-chems Ka-'Khol-ma', in honour of the great Atisa and has brought the greatness of the Gtsug-lag-khang in the light of many.

During his stay in Nyethang, one of his chief disciples Dom-ston-pa continued for days and nights discussing with Atisa the paths of the past, present and future Buddhas who went through the various stages to attain enlightenment.

In the year 1054 A.D. at Nyethang, Atisa left this world for Tushita heaven. He was reborn there as Deva, Nam-mkhah dri-ma med-pa.

It is due to Atisa that the Tibetans are such staunch Buddhists and have been so, ever since Atisa came to Tibet.

### NOTES

1. Mtho-lding (gser-gyi-lha-khang) was founded by Rinchen-bzang-po but according to the Blue Annals and Pema Karpo'i Chojung, Lha-bla-ma ye-shes-hod founded the monastery. This monastery is situated in the Sutlej river valley about 60 miles south west of Gartok (For detail see 'Dzam-gling rgyas-bshad by T.V. Wylie).
2. Nyethang is a famous place in Tibetan history in central Tibet. One of the greatest apostles of Buddhism Atisa Dipankara died in Nyethang in 1054 A.D. on his way back to India (G. Tucci, Lhasa and beyond, pp. 69-70).
3. Bk'a-gdam lha-chos bdun-ldan (skt. Sapta-deva-dharma). Atisa introduced the Four Deities: Buddha Sakyamuni, bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Tāra and Acala, and the three fold Doctrine of the Buddha, that is Sūtra, Vinaya and Abhidharma, as his own individual (personal) deities and his own individually selected Doctrine. The seven elements are collectively known as the doctrine of Kadam Lhacho Dundan. (Kadam Phacho, pt. II, SRIT, 1978).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY OF TIBETAN TEXT

1. Chos-'byung gsung-rab Rin-po-che'i-mdzod  
by Bu-ston Rin-chen-grub (c. 1290-1364 AD).
2. Dpag-bsam-ljon-bzang  
by Sum-pa mkhan-po Ye-shes dpal-'byor (1709 - 86 A.D.)
3. Lam-rim bla-rgyud rnam-thar  
by Tshe-gling yongs-'dzin ye-shes rgyal-mtshan (C. 1713-1793)
4. Bstod-pa brgyad-bcu-pa (Hymn in praise in eighty verses).  
by Nag-tsho tshul-khrim rgyal-ba. Nag-tsho was the constant companion of Atisa for nineteen years. After the teacher passed away he got a scroll prepared by the Indian artisan Kriṣṇa-pa. Nag-tsho also wrote the Hymn on the back of the painted scroll (H. Eimer). Nag-tsho was the great Tibetan Lotsawa who succeeded in bringing Atisa to Tibet (1042 AD)
5. Bk'a-gdam Bu-chos (Life and teachings of Atisa's disciple)  
by 'Brom-ston rgyal-ba'i 'byung-gnas (1004-1064 A.D.) the chief disciple. He came from Dom family of North Tibet. He studied under Gyung-chos mgon and received his Upasaka ordination from Rgyal-gyi zhang-chen. He also learnt Prajñāpāramitā, Tantra and Sūtra from Se-btsun dbang-Phyug gzhon-nu, and grammar, etymology etc from Pandita Smriti who was then resident in Tibet. When he was 41 years old he met Atisa in Purang (Western Tibet) and became one of his chief disciple. He spent 11 years with Atisa and acquired all the guru's accomplishments. After Atisa, Domton became head of Atisa's followers and founded the Reding Monastery where he stayed till he passed away at the age of 60 (Kadam Phacho, SRIT, Pt. I, 1977).