BUDDHA DĪPAṆKARA
TWENTYFOURTH PREDECESSOR
OF GAUTAMA

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Buddhism in all its forms goes back to the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha. While the austeritys practised by Buddha till he attained enlightenment appeal to the Pali or Southern school called Hinayana, his life of service and compassion for 45 years after the attainment of Enlightenment is the authority to Sanskrit or Northern school called Mahayana (S. Radhakrishnan, preface, Pali Tripiṭaka, Ed. Kashyap).

The Buddhavagga, in Khuddakankūya or "the collection of smaller pieces", gives an account of the Previous Buddhas with whom Bodhisattva Gautama had come in contact and who had made prediction that Bodhisattva Gautama would attain perfect Enlightenment. It is interesting to note that the Jaina mythology also gives a similar account of the previous Tirthankaras, it is all the more interesting that even the number of the previous Buddhas and that of Tirthankaras are not very different (Kashyap, Khud, Nik, vol. VII). Dīpaṅkara Buddha is remembered specially and held in high esteem for the reason that according to legend it was while Dīpaṅkara was the Buddha that Gautama Buddha was an ascetic named Sunecha and had made his vow to become Buddha.

Buddhavagga (edited by Morris in P.T.S 1882), contains poetical legend of the 24 Buddhas who are supposed to have preceded Gautama Buddha in the last twelve ages of the world (Kāla). After the introductory, one chapter is dedicated to each of the 24 Buddhas. It is related in case of each single Buddha, how he set the Wheel of Law in motion and how -- with but trilling differences -- the principal events in the life of Gautama Buddha were enacted in the life of each of the former Buddhas. It is Gautama Buddha himself who narrates the life story and speaking in first person, he recounts who he himself was in each of the preceding lives, how he worshipped the Buddha, and how his own Buddhahood had been foretold by the Buddha of that time. "The only part which is a little more imaginative and poetical is the second chapter" (Winternitz: A History of Indian Literature, vol. III Buddhist literature p 161), which deals with Dīpaṅkara, the first Buddha. Maurice Winternitz noted here that usually the Buddha was Sakka (skt. Sakra), the king of the Gods, another time a lion, the king of beasts; twice a king of the Nāgas, once a yakṣa and several times an ascetic.
We quote an account of Dipaśākara Buddha as briefly narrated by Winternitz.
"Gautama Buddha was at that time a rich Brahman named Sumedha, and he relates in verse (7-27) which are reminiscent of Theragahas, how one day he felt disgusted with the world, how he cast off the wretched body, as though it were ditt, and withdrew to a hermitage in the Himalayas. This was precisely his campaign of conquest throughout the world, and men and gods worshipped him. Sumedha, the hermit, comes too, and at a marshy spot loosens his plaited hair, spreads it out on the dirty ground, with his hangen-garment and his cloak of skins, and lies face downwards. This scene has often been depicted on Buddhist monuments, probably it already appeared on the stupa of Bharhut inspired with the wish that the exalted Buddha Dipaśākara, with his host of disciples, may step over him without having their feet soiled by mud. Prostrating on the ground, he resolves to become a Buddha one day and bring salvation to the world. Dipaśākara approaches and prophesies the future greatness of Sumedha. The inhabitants of the ten thousand worlds make a joyful noise and signs and miracles happen, as it always the case when future Buddha is foretold. But Sumedha determines to realise in himself all the ten perfections (Pāramīs), in order to fulfill the preliminary conditions of Buddhahood." (A History of Indian literature, vol. II pp. 160-161).

DIPAŚĀKARA LEGENDS

Buddhavarga describes the splendours of the first Tathāgata Buddha that is, Dipaśākara in magnificent terms. The verses (15, 27, 28 and 31) are reproduced at end of the article. We give in short the details thus: Dipaśākara was 80 cubit tall, shining like big tree of lamps, he was always attended by 84,000 Arhats, he lived for 100,000 years and the 500 in which his remains were enshrined was 36 yojanas high.

Gautama Buddha, it is said, came down to this world from the Tusita heaven where he was the presiding god. He had reached that heavenly state by acquiring immeasurable merits in his several previous existences. There were two stories, one in the Mahāsvatūri Dipaśākaravansi and the other in the Nidāna-Kathā, about his past life, in which he was assured by Dipaśākara Buddha that he would ultimately attain Buddhahood, the Supreme knowledge. The two stories are as follows:

1. Mahāsvatūrī. Gautama Buddha was once born as a Brahman's son known as Megha Māṇava. He completed his Brahmanic education and came down to the plains of the Himalaya to procure the fee to be given to his Guru on the termination of his studies. He collected 500 coins (Puruṣas). He then went to see the capital Dipavāla and found the city in a festive mood. On enquiring he learnt from a beautiful young maiden with seven lotuses in her hand that the city had been decorated to welcome Buddha Dipaśākara. He thereupon
offered to purchase her five lotuses by paying 500 purūśas. He was told that he could have them if only he would promise to take her as his wife. After

protesting a little, he agreed to her proposal on her assurance that she would not stand in the way of his spiritual career. On seeing the glorious appearance of Buddha Dipākara, he became deeply reverential and attained the notion of non-duality (advayavādha). He became a devotee of Buddha by seeing the miraculous powers and expressed his devotion and admiration

by wiping the lotus-like feet of Buddha by his long hair, and while doing so he developed the aspiration to attain Buddhahood.

Hāpadīnakathā: Gautama Buddha was once born as Sumedha Bṛhadāśramāna at Amaravati in a very rich Brahmā family of pure lineage. He lost his parents at an early age. He learnt the Brahmānic sciences and was sick of the wealth left by his parents. He gave them away in charity and became an ascetic seeking immortality (amālīta-pratidinna) a state free from origin and decay, pleasure and pain, disease or suffering. He realised that as everything in this world had two aspects, positive and negative so as an antithesis to origin (birth) there must be something unoriginated, and he was to realise it. He went to the Himalayas and took up an abode at Dhamaka mountain living only on fruits falling from trees. He soon attained perfection in meditation and six higher powers (abhiṣekha): The six abhiṣekhas are: śāla (miraculous power), dīpāsaka-dhātu (heavenly seat), parāsītādīpā (father's thought-reading), dībbāsikāśādīpā (knowledge of previous births), dībacakkhu

(holy eyes) and Savarnākhaśādīpā (knowledge of extinction of one's own imputities) occasionally he paid visits to the villages for salt and verjus and one day came down to Rennakā, a city in a paccantadesavavasa (border country).

At that time Buddha Dipākara reached the city and stopped at Sudassana-namahavāhā. Sumedha tapasa found all the people busy in making the place neat and tidy for welcoming Dipākara Buddha, and so he also came forward to take a share in the work. He was charmed by the glory of Buddha's appearance and wanted to lay down his life for him. Lest Dipākara Buddha

should soil his feet in a muddy place he lay flat on it like a bridge made of jewels (Majjihalakasetu) in order that he and his disciples, who were all arhats (perfects) might tread on his body. While so lying, he wished that he would not merely attain his own salvation by putting an end to the impurities which he could have easily done, but he would also become a Buddha in order that he might rescue endless beings from the stream of existence. At that time, Dipākara standing just before his head, made the forecast that the great Jātaka ascetic would become a Buddha after numberless aeons, and related in detail where he would be born, how he would attain the supreme knowledge (bodhi), and who would become his chief disciple. The prediction was confirmed by many miraculous events including an earthquake, and there was no doubt left that Sumedha was a "Buddha-Dipākara".
Since his existence as Megha Mānava or Sumedha Dīñhārūpa, the Bodhisattva (i.e., one destined to be the Buddha) was born several times to acquire the ten supreme perfections (pāramīs) preparatory to Buddhahood, which he attained in his last mortal existence as prince Siddhattha. In the penultimate existence, he was born as the lord of the gods the Tusita heaven. (N. Dutt: Early Monastic Buddhism, pp. 77–79).

We find in Nārada Kathā, Lalitavistara and Mahāvastu Adbhukramane Sutta (extant in Chinese only) Buddha legends giving the story of Buddha down to the events after enlightenment, but also records of the previous lives from the oldest time cycles when at the feet of Īśāna Kumarā, the Bodhisattva first made the resolution to attain Bodhi.

Six previous Buddhas are mentioned in the Suttas. Longer lists vary, though all agree on Īśāna Kumarā as the leading previous Buddha.

Sir Charles Eliot observing on actual historicity of some human Buddhas says "In the older books of the Pitakas six Buddha are mentioned on proceeding Gautama (Dīk, Nik. 14/ Mahāvagīnasuttas there, 499; Sam. Nik. XII 6–10) namely: vipassī, sīkhi, vinābha, kusanduka, koṇāgamana and kassapa. The last three at least may have some historical character. The Chinese pilgrim Fa-hien, who visited India from 445–451 A.D., saw their reputed birth places and says that there still existed followers of Devadatta (apparently in Kōnā) who recognised these three Buddhas but not Gotama. Asoka erected a monument in honour of Koṇāgamana in Nepal with a dedicatory inscription which has been preserved. In the Majjhima Nikāya (Maj. Nik. 50 Mūlaviyāyana), we find a story about Kusandaka and his disciples and Gotama once gave (Dīk, Nik. 16) an extended account of Vipassī whose teaching and career are represented as almost identical with his own ........................ (Hindusism and Buddhism, vol. 1, p. 342.)

The Carlyle tale in the sense of metrical narration put in the mouth of the Buddha himself giving accounts of his previous lives, taken from the Jātakas, showing how he had fulfilled the ten pāramīs for the attainment of Buddhahood.

Extension of the legend went on in other schools also in different ways. The Lalitavistara has a list of fifty-four Buddhas and Mahāvastu more than hundred, but both include Īśāna Kumarā. We conclude our account with the comments of E.J. Thomas on the topic. "In the doctrine of nature of Buddha we can see the development of new conceptions, the most important of these, are the belief in previous Buddhas, the theory of a great man (Mahāpurusa), who is to become either a universal ruler or a Buddha, the thirty-two bodily marks of such a being and theory of Bodhisattva.
It has been held that the belief in previous Buddha points to the actual existence of at least some of them, we know that Aoka enlarged this idea of Kṣitigarbha, the fifth of six preceding Buddhas, and the Chinese pilgrims visited the stūpa of the last three of them. This only proves that the legend concerning them, then existed, but it does not prove these Buddhas to be historical, and more than the foot print of Buddha on Adam’s Peak prove that he visited Ceylon" (The Life of Buddha, p. 218).


In Sanskrit sources, list of previous Buddhas differs very widely in enumeration and nomenclature. The predecessors count anything from 6 (six) to more than 100 (hundred). In all these lists, Dīpākāra features as the foremost, even though not as the first as in Buddhavamsa. The importance of Dīpākāra lies in the fact that he (Dīpākāra) had blessed the future Buddha (Gautama Śākyamuni) and prophesied Gautama’s realization of full enlightenment in a future life. The story of the meeting presented here is gathered from the accounts of Sūkhāvatīvyāhāra, Bodhisattvavāda-Kapalaśa and Kañcā-saivaśīra.

In Sūkhāvatīvyāhāra, when Lord was at Gajahāta near the town Rājagṛha, Ānanda asked the Lord for an account of the great Tathāgata, who had in former ages, acquired the most perfect Body. The Lord in reply said, one of the earliest was Dīpākāra (R.L. Mitra: The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal, p. 231).

We give below brief legendary account of Dīpākāra Dharmaruci/Tonyagila Avadāna from Bodhisattvavāda-Kapalaśa of Kṣemendra (11th century A.D.). We find the Dīpākāra legend in a somewhat different form. We extract the relevant portion of the story: In another Kalpa two Bimbhara brothers, Mali and Sumati appeared as the sacrificers of Viśaiva, king of Benzies. They obtained whatever they sought from the king. The king’s daughter, named
Sundari became enamoured of Sumati but her suit was rejected by the steed Brahmaga. Thus deeply mortified, she resigned the world, and became Brahmaga. Sundari dreamt a strange dream, for the explanation of which she, inspired by the advice of the Parvati, went to Lord Dipakara, who lived at Dipavati. There he met Sundari and asked flowers from her. When offering him the flowers Sundari prayed that he be her husband in the next existence. Sundari fell prostrate before the lord with his clothe hair scattered all over the ground, Lord Dipakara took them down, exclaiming you shall become a great Buddha, Jikyumuni by name, Mati, who was standing by, felt his Brahmargic pride scandalised by the unbrahmargic conduct of his brother but Sumati induced him to reverence the Lord. I am that Sumati. Yagodharji is Sundarit and Mati is Dhamananda." (RL, Mitra, The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal, p. 71).

In kapara-avastha, the following story said to have been told by (one of the former human Buddhas) Vipasyi, long before the Lord's advent. Here we find episode of a monkey named Dipakara and Dipakara. Dipakara promised him transformation into man and gave him instruction in the philosophy of Buddha, the monkey was born a merchant's son named Dhermasip. Dipakara granted him born, saying: For good conduct you are to become Sarinandas, the king of Dipavati (ibid, p. 98).