TWOJE PALDEN ATBA AND TWO DISCIPLES
DONTSONG KYI NAMJAY
NEK LEGPAS SHERAB
ATISA DIPAŃKARA ŠRĪṆĀNA

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Many scholars have written about the life and works of the most renowned Pandita Atisa Dīpankara Šrīnāna (Tib: jo-rje dpal-ljum 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 (882 A.D.) in the province called Zahor which was part of what was called Vanga. 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-sgon rin chen grub, and later by Sus-pa mkhan-po ye-shes dpal-ḥyur and Taranatha. Another great scholar Tshagling yongzhe yeshye gyaltshen, in his account of the Lam-rim bla-bgyud man-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, Seng-ge ngesa, who was acquainted with Atisa and spent many years with him mentioned in his text Mchod-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 yashe gyalshen 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 Tīrī, 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 (skyems-rab/bīkakas) Atisa had attained the status of Pāṇḍita 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 Lāma Serlinga (Achārya Suvarṇadhīpī), who resided on a remote island. Atisa stayed there for twelve years, during the period of which he acquired the knowledge of Bodg-gzhan mnyam-brje (āṭisa-pari-samañña-parivarta). This doctrine was transmitted by Lord Buddha himself through Maitreya, Shāntideva and other saints to Serlinga. Moreover, he was the master of all spiritual knowledge including aspects of Tantrayāna and Sūtrayāna. At the time of returning to India from Suvarṇadhīpī, his chief Guru Achārya Suvarṇadhīpī (sger-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 Nāyapāla (c. 1038-1055 A.D.) of Magadha and king Karana (kara) 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 Nāyapāla 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 Manjusardar'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 Nāgärjuna on the right wall. This was done to imply that Atisa was as great and learned as the renowned Buddhist Āchārya Nāgärjuna (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 Lasa Dorja 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-sham-phud and Ye-sham-chub-ten 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, Vināla, the Lama Domangpa (Bri-nam-mi med-pa). While in discussion with the prince Raja-po Shon (Skon-shaṅg-btsan) in Yonugr, he told the prince that Tibet was lacking in the true faith of religion and that the people were failing to lead a happy
and contested 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 radam bucho it is said that during one of the discussions between Vimala and prince Rama Prajä 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 Odiyané; 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, “One melodious sound we heard as oracles 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 Rama Prajä a discourse on the Three Jewels. He added that to the east of Odiyané there was a place called Dorjedan (Vajrasattva), where hundreds 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 (Pashasamudra) 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 kirt (Songtsen Gampo) to protect its people and to invite the real emanation of Lord Buddha from China, Auyangba Vajra (Mikyo norje) and from Nepal Mahâjñâna Vajra (Champhel Dorje) with your different
manifestations. To protect the people from eight fearful happenings
two goddesses, Mārīcī (Od-zer-can-ma/Gya-ka) and Rṣṇikuti
(Kho-kyer can-ma/Bral-ma), 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 when 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
Macho vol. Ka, Folio 75r-76).

Once when Atisa was praying to his tutelary deity Avalokite-
śvara 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 sgrol-ma), who is looking
gover 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 fulfill the desire of Dharmaraja of Tibet, and thirdly,
whether there was any hazard to his life there, it was
the goddess Tārā who said that his going to Tibet would
be of great value to all the beings there, and particularly
to an upāsīka. But, she said, his life would be shortened
by twenty years. Atisa, however, made his journey to Tibet
through Nepal in 1043 A.D.

Upon Atisa’s arrival in Tibet, he sent a messenger
to the king Byang-chub- lha 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 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 (mchog-ling) 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 *Bodhicaryavatara*. 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 *Bodhicaryavatara*, though not long, contained the essence of all other texts.

Atisa spent three years in Sga-ris, nine years in Vrthanga (snye-stang), and five years in other places of Central Tibet. It was under Atisa’s influence that the famous Kadampa sect sprung 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-chung, phyag-rdul-sbyin-gsum-phyan-dbang) four of which concern four different disciplines. The rest include the Triptipasa. This doctrine is a very popular one among the Tibetans even today.

During Atisa’s stay at Sanye, he was delighted to see many Sanskrit manuscripts in Pehurling and remarked that it was difficult to preserve such Sanskrit manuscripts even in India.
Ho then visited Lhasa at the invitation of Long-chu-legs-pa's shes-rab. On his arrival at the city, Jo-wo-thug-je chen-po (valākitiśvara) the patron deity of Tibet, appeared in white robe to receive Atisa saying "Welcome Marāṇaśandita, 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 Gtsang-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 Gtsang-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 Gtsang-lag-khang. She then said that there was a vase-shaped pillar in the Gtsang-lag-khang and if Atisa dug two and a half fathoms deep under it, he would find the key to the establishment of the Gtsang-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 'Be'-'a-chen Ka-'khol-ma', is honour of the great Atisa and has brought the greatness of the Gtsang-lag-khang in the light of many.
During his stay in Nyethang, one of his chief disciples Padma-shech-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-khah dri-ma me-l-sa.

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 (gsér-gyi-lha-khang) was founded by Rinchen-bzang-po but according to the Blue Annals and Pema Karpo's Chojung, Lha-bla-ma ye-shes-tod founded the monastery. This monastery is situated in the Sutlej river valley about 86 miles south west of Gartok (For detail see 'Dzam-gling rgyas-hshad 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-idan (skt. Saptadeva-dyarma), 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 Dundun. (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).


3. Lam-rim bla-gryn rdam-thar by Tshe-gling yongs-'dzin ye-shes rgyal-mtshan (C. 1713-1793)

4. Bstdod-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 Kripa-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-gras (1004-1066 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 zang-chen. He also learnt Prājñāpāramitā, 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. 1, 1977).

32