

RENOWNED SCHOLARS OF BUDDHIST MAHAVIHARAS

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2. Remembering 'Atisha Dipankar Srijnan', the Great Saint-Philosopher-Teacher of 10-11 Century AD

"Dipankara is among the brightest luminaries of Bengal and India by virtue of his character, scholarship, erudition and spiritual eminence. Among those who had established bridge of amity and fraternity between Eastern India and Tibet, Dipankara's name deserves to be remembered as the first and foremost."

- Nihar Ranjan Roy, Historian and Scholar

BRIEF LIFE SKETCH OF ATISH DIPANKAR – A LIGHT OF ASIA – ONE OF THE GREATEST FIGURES OF CLASSICAL BUDDHISM – SERVED AS 'STUDENT AND TEACHER' OF NALANDA, ODANTAPURI AND VIKRAMSHILA AND OTHER UNIVERSITIES OF THE TIME – BECAME PRINCIPAL OF VIKRAMSHILA MAHAVIHARA – EXTENSIVELY TRAVELLED AND PREACHED BUDDHISM IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA, SRI LANKA, SOUTH INDIA, NEPAL AND TIBET – HAILED AS 'ATISHA', THE 'GREATEST ONE' FOR THE SINGULAR ROLE HE HAD PLAYED FOR THE RESURGENCE OF BUDDHISM IN TIBET

Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna (Bengali: অতীশ দীপংকর শ্রীজ্ঞান; Standard Tibetan: འཛིན་འགྲུབ་ལྷ་མོ་; Chinese: 燃燈吉祥智; pinyin: Rándēng Jíxiángzhì) (982 - 1054 CE) was a Buddhist religious leader and master.[2]

He was one of the major figures in the spread of 11th-century Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in Asia and inspired Buddhist thought from Tibet to Sumatra. He is recognised as one of the greatest figures of classical Buddhism, and Atisa's chief disciple Dromtön was the founder of the Kadam School.[3] Atisa is also considered to be a key figure in the establishment of the Sarma schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

EARLY LIFE

Bikrampur, the most probable place for Atiśa's birthplace, was the capital of the Pala Empire as it had been of the ancient kingdoms of southeast Bengal. Though the city's exact location is not certain, it presently lies in the Munshiganj District of Bangladesh, and continues to be celebrated as an early center of Buddhist cultural, academic, and political life. Similar to Gautama Buddha, Atiśa was born into royalty.[4] His father was a king known as Kalyana Shri and his mother was Shri Prabhavati. One of three royal brothers, Atiśa went by the name of Candragarbha during the first part of his life. In fact, it was not until he traveled to Guge and encountered King Jangchup Ö (Wylie: byang chub 'od, 984–1078) that he was given the name Atiśa.

INITIATION IN THE LIFE OF A MONK

At the age of 19, he was formally ordained as a monk under the preceptorship teacher of ancient Magadha and Mahasanghika Acharya of famous Odantapuri Vihara of India. During ordination, he was named Dipankar Sriñjan. When Dipankar became 30 years old, he was fully ordained and given the Bodhisattva vows by Acharya Shilarakshita with adequate training in the metaphysical aspects of Buddhism. He also attained proficiency in Tripitaka, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Tantrayana and acquired thorough knowledge in logic and philosophy. He also studied non-Buddhist schools of his time, including teachings from Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Tantric Hinduism and other practices.

In ancient time, knowledge was not compartmentalized as in the present-day age of specialization. Like Socrates, Aristotle, Plato and Ibne Sina of old days, Dipankar in the context of his own times pursued the totality of knowledge and sought to master not only all schools of its philosophical thoughts but also astronomy, logic, philosophy, literature and grammar. At 31, he is said to have acquired full mastery of three Pitakas. Yet he felt irresistible urge for further study of classical Buddhism.

JOURNEY TO SUVARNADWIPA

In 1012 AD. at the age of 32, he set out with a party of gem merchants on sea voyage to visit Suvaranadvipa, the most important center of Buddhist studies in those days, now in Java and Sumatra of Indonesia. After fourteen months of perilous journey across the tumultuous sea in a sail-driven wooden ship, Dipankar reached Suvarnadvipa and studied Buddhism for 12 years under Guru Serilingpa Dharmakirti who was considered the greatest scholar of the age in Asia. On way back home from Suvarnadvipa, he visited Tamralipi, present-day Sri Lanka.

RETURNED TO INDIA – TAUGHT IN VARIOUS MAHAVIHARAS

He was about 44 years old when he returned to India. He spent about 15 years in India preaching the Dhamma and holding very important responsibilities in a number of monasteries before his departure for Tibet. During the 15 years of his stay in India, Dipankar Sriinjan devoted his energy in the dissemination of the Dhamma and knowledge in different monasteries such as Vajrasana (Bodhi Gaya), Somapura, Nalanda, Odantapuri (Biharsharif), Pandita and Vikramshila Mahaviharas which had developed as seats of learning like Universities inhabited by thousands of monks and scholars for studies and research. Dipankar's dissemination of the Dhamma and scholastic teaching in a new dimension earned him the title "Dhammapala".

BECOMING PRINCIPAL VIKRAMSHILA MAHAVIHARA

When Dipankar dominated the religious scene in the 11th Century, the Buddhist Pala Dynasty was reigning in full glory. The adjoining Magadha kingdom along with eastern India came under the magnetic spell of Buddhism. He was Principal of the Vikramshila Vihara founded by great Pala King Dharmapala in 8th Century. About 8000 students studied in this University under 108 professors who were eminent scholars under the preceptorship of Dipankar Sriinjan. The courses of studies included Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, social sciences, Veda, Vedanta, Upanishad, philosophy, Logic, medicine, science, astronomy etc. Students from all parts of India as well as from China, Tibet, Ujjaini, Turkestan and Nepal came to study in this University. At that time Nalanda was in a declining stage. The Mahayana and Tantric learning which originated in the Nalanda University subsequently developed and enriched in the Vikramshila Vihara and spread to greater parts of Asia with the missionary activities done by Buddhist scholars.

REQUEST FROM TIBET AND HIS PREPARATION

When Dipankar was the Maha Acharya of Vikramshila Mahavihara, the King of Tibet sent emissaries to invite him to visit Tibet and resurrect Buddhism, then in a decaying condition in Tibet. Dipankar was in dilemma to make his decision. Besides Vikramshila, a number of other big monasteries were

being run under his guidance. Yet Dipankar Srijnan despite his pre-occupation in India, advanced age and hazards of journey accepted the invitation to visit Tibet for three years for the cause of the Dhamma and gave this time-frame as condition of his visit so that he could return to Vikramshila Vihara. When Dipankar made his decision, Acharya Ratnakar Shanti, one of the senior Mahanayakas of Vikramshila said: "India will be plunged into darkness without Dipankar. Keys of many Buddhist institutions are lying with him. During his absence these institutions will be vacant. It seems that the shadow of darkness is around with Turkish soldiers seeking to invade India. I am feeling deeply concerned. Yet I bless Dipankar for his visit to Tibet in compassion and happiness of all beings."

On the way to Tibet, Dipankar Srijnan wanted to visit Vajrasana in Buddha Gaya and pay his homage to the Buddha. From Vikramshila he went to Buddha Gaya and other sacred places. He spent a year in Nepal on the way to Tibet. From here, he wrote his famous letter to Nayapal, King of Magadha named 'Vimala Ratna Lekhanama' which is considered a classic in his message to King for compassion to all beings, renunciation of evils in thoughts and deeds, conduct of a King in humility, kindness and love to all, cultivation of Budhiccita and renunciation of force in relations with high or low. This was in essence Buddhist message for peace and harmony within oneself and outside which is so relevant even in the present day context of the contemporary world situation. While in Nepal, he composed his work, 'Carya Samgra Pradipa'. The King of Nepal gave him rousing reception.

TRAVEL TO TIBET VIA NEPAL

His journey on foot to Tibet across the snowy mountainous terrains of the Himalayas amidst hazards makes an exciting story. His biographer gave a vivid description of the journey and entrance to Western Tibet. The main rout was from Palpa in Nepal to Manas Sarover (Manas Lake). Through a lot of Hazards including attack by dacoits, he reached Western Tibet in 1042 AD.

WARM WELCOME IN TIBET

The Prime Minister of Tibet gave him a rousing reception along with a large number of followers on his entrance to Tibet. In his welcoming words, the Prime Minister said: "You are the wisest and most meritorious savant. You have come from the Land of Acharyas in the incarnation of divinity in response to the prayers of the people of Tibet. In this age, you are the representative of Lord Buddha and paragon of Buddhism. All living beings and gods worship you for your purity."

Dipankar Srijnan was offered the first celestial drink which is tea and was presented with a valuable tapestry inscribed with the image of Bodhisattva Avalokiteswar.

Dipankar has since then been venerated in Tibet as Atisha (the greatest one) for the singular role he had played in Resurgence of Buddhism. Dipankar's coming to Tibet is the culmination of a series of events connected with spread of Buddhism there.

PREACHING IN TIBET

The first three years of his stay proved crucial for his reform of religion in Tibet. He devoted his time for dissemination of the true Doctrine and built up the foundation of pure Mahayana Buddhism.

With significant success achieved during three years, Atisha was keen to return to his homeland to take responsibility of Vikramshila Vihara and other Mahaviharas as he had promised to his Indian disciples. But his preoccupation with the task of dissemination of Dhamma in Tibet coupled with obstacles in journey because of serious political troubles in Nepal en route to India.

While preaching the Doctrine, he visited all parts of Tibet extensively with Brom who acted as his interpreter (Lochava). A saint, philosopher and scholar with versatility in all branches of knowledge Atisha Dipankara while establishing the pure Mahayana Buddhism succeeded in reforming the entire Tibetan society by steering them out of superstitious beliefs in ghosts and exorcism, murder, adultery and many other anti society activities. He indoctrinated them to new moral values emphasized in the teachings of the Buddha.

HIS CHARITY WORK IN TIBET

For the well-being of the people, he employed his engineering skill for construction of a dam for prevention of floods in a place named Thol. He helped in organizing irrigation system by digging canals which led to boosting of agricultural productivity. He also wrote a few treatises on medicine for the people. A new era ushered in the life and society of Tibet.

Atisha captured the heart of the masses like those saints in his homeland Bengal preaching in the wide expanse of rural areas with songs and lyrics.

ATISHA'S TEACHINGS

In the midst of his tireless preaching, he found time in immersing himself in deep meditation and also devoting himself to literary activities. His works were counted by some as 79 included in the collection of Tibetan Tanjur and as 175 by still others as their author, translator and revisor bearing eloquent testimony to his versatile genius. His original Tibetan works are divided into four groups: Tantra, Prajnaparamita, Madhayamika and cometary. Through Atisha's religious reformation and philosophical works, the Tibetans found themselves in the midst of a unique religious renaissance.

“...Among those who had established bridge of amity and fraternity between Eastern India and Tibet, Dipankara's name deserves to be remembered as the first and foremost...,” according to scholar Nihar Ranjan Roy.

WHO HIGHLIGHTED ATISHA DIPANKAR TO THE WORLD?

A German scholar named Koppen for the first time in 1859 revealed the myriad-minded greatness of Atisha Dipankara who had elevated the Tibetan people with his moral preaching as well as with songs and lyrics used as the vehicle of his philosophical thoughts.

The life, activities and contribution of Atisha Dipankar Srijnan were reconstructed mainly by scholar-explorers Sarat Chandra Das and Rahul Sankrityayan based on the studies of Tibetan sources.

BUDDHIST MONASTERIES (UNIVERSITIES) OF EASTERN INDIA

Buddhist Monasteries were built in places

1. Directly connected with the life of Gautam Buddha, or
2. Where Buddhist population were abound, or
3. Along important travel routes, near natural source of water, or

4. Near Capital, Regional Headquarters, Important Towns and Port Cities of the time,

5. Near Skandhavaras (temporary military camps) or Near Confluence of Rivers

1. There were Rajagriha (Gautam Buddha resided there in the Capital of Magadh) and Bodh Gaya (Place of Enlightenment). There were old Monasteries like (i) Tillidaka (Telhara, Travel Routes) and Nalanda Mahaviharas (Regional Headquarters). All the above places were in Magadh region.

1. Besides Odantapuri (Magadh), Vikramshila (Anga) & Sompura, Varendra region (all in important travel routes or junctions);

2. Pala rule also witnessed the construction of Jagaddala, Troikutaka, Pandita, Devikota, Pattikeraka, Sannagara, Phullahari, and Vikrampuri in the present day Bangladesh (All the places where there were majority Buddhist population, most of them were along travel routes and some were important port cities)

3. Later some of large Monasteries developed in Bengal's Midnapore districts and in Coastal Odisha along travel routes and sea ports.

1. DHARMAKIRTI: THE GREAT PHILOSOPHER SCHOLAR OF 600-700 AD NALANDA MAHAVIHARA BY PRABUDDHA BISWAS

REMEMBERING DHARMAKITRI

1. THE GREAT PHILOSOPHER SCHOLAR OF 600-700 AD NALANDA MAHAVIHARA

2. DHARMAKIRTI MARKS THE HIGHEST WATER MARK IN 'INDIAN LOGIC' THROUGH ITS PROGRESS FROM 2ND CENTURY AD TO 15TH CENTURY

3. HIS THEORIES BECAME STANDARD IN TIBET AND ARE STUDIED TO THIS DAY AS A PART OF THE BASIC MONASTIC CURRICULUM.

4. DHARMAKIRTI'S GREATEST WORK, 'PRAMANAVARTIKA' PROVIDED THE BASIS FOR OTHER SCHOLARS TO FOLLOW HIM FOR SEVERAL CENTURIES

5. SHANKARYACHARYA'S TREATISE ON THE IDEALIST ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY WAS BUILD UP ON THE BASIS OF DHARMAKIRTI'S TREATISE OF NALANDA SCHOOL.

BRIEF LIFE SKETCH OF DHARMAKIRTI – THE GREAT PHILOSOPHER-SCHOLAR OF 600-700 A. D. NALANDA MAHAVIHARA

1. Dharmakīrti (6th or 7th Century A.D.) was a Buddhist scholar from South India.
2. He was one of the key scholars of philosophical logic in Buddhism, and is associated with its Yogacara school.
3. He was one of the primary theorists of Buddhist atomism.
4. His works particularly influenced the scholars of Mimamsa, Nyaya and Shaivism schools of Hinduism as well as scholars of Jainism, and they remain part of modern era studies in Buddhist monasteries in Tibet.

HISTORY

1. Little is known for certain about the life of Dharmakirti.
2. Tibetan hagiographies suggest he was a Brahmin born in South India,[7] studied under Isvarasena, belonged to the Mimamsa school of Hinduism, left Mimamsa and moved to Nalanda where he interacted with 6th century Dharmapala.
3. However, the accuracy of the Tibetan hagiographies is uncertain, and scholars place him in the 7th-century instead.
4. This is because of inconsistencies in different Tibetan and Chinese texts, and because it is around the middle of 7th-century, and thereafter, those Indian texts begin discussing his ideas, such as the citation of Dharmakirti verses in the works of Adi Shankara.
5. Dharmakīrti is placed by most scholars to have lived during 600–660 CE, but a few place him earlier.
6. Dharmakirti is credited with building upon the work of Dignāga, the pioneer of Buddhist logic, and Dharmakirti has ever since been influential in the Buddhist tradition.
7. His theories became normative (standard) in Tibet and are studied to this day as a part of the basic monastic curriculum.

8. Dharmakīrti worked at Nalanda as a lay Buddhist, not as an ordained monk, and his work reflects his belief that no one will understand the value of his work, his efforts soon forgotten.

9. History proved his fears wrong and Dharmakīrti's thoughts and philosophical postulations has been marked as the HIGHEST WATER MARK IN INDIAN LOGIC.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A. THE YOGACHARA (OR YOGACARA) SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY

The Yogācāra, along with the Madhyamika, is one of the two principal philosophical schools of Indian Mahayana Buddhism.

Yogachara (IAST: Yogācāra; literally "yoga practice"; "one whose practice is yoga")[1] is an influential school of Buddhist philosophy and psychology emphasizing phenomenology and ontology[2] through the interior lens of meditative and yogic practices. It was associated with Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism in about the 4th century CE, but also included non-Mahayana practitioners of the Dārṣāntika school.

Yogācāra discourse explains how our human experience is constructed by the mind.

B. MADHYAMIKA SCHOOL OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM AND ITS FOUNDER

1. Nagarjuna, (flourished 2nd century A. D.) Indian Buddhist philosopher who articulated the doctrine of emptiness (shunyata).

2. He is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Madhyamika ("Middle Way") school, an important tradition of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.

C. THE PROGRESS OF YOGACHARA SCHOOL BY-PASSING MADHYAMIKA SCHOOL OF MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

1. According to Tom Tillemans, the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti ideas constitute a nominalist philosophy and they disagree with the Madhyamaka philosophy, by asserting that some entities are real.

2. Dharmakīrti states that the real is only the momentarily existing particular (svalakṣaṇa), and any universal (sāmānyalakṣaṇa) is unreal and fiction. The ideas of Dharmakīrti represent the Yogācāra idealism.

D. HISTORICAL PROGRESS OF YOGACHARA SCHOOL FROM 6TH CENTURY AD TO 12TH CENTURY AD

The Buddhist works such as the Bodhisattva-bhūmi and the Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra composed before the 6th century A. D., on hetuvidyā (logic, dialectics) are unsystematic, whose approach and structure are heresiological, proselytical and apologetic.[4]

1. Their aims were to defeat non-Buddhist opponents (Brahmanical Religion, Jainism, Ajivikas, others), defend the ideas of Buddhism, develop a line of arguments that monks can use to convert those who doubt Buddhism and to strengthen the faith of Buddhists who begin to develop doubts.
2. Around the middle of the 6th century, possibly to address the polemics of non-Buddhist traditions with their pramana foundations, the Buddhist scholar Dignāga shifted the emphasis from dialectics to more systematic epistemology and logic, retaining the heresiological and apologetic focus.
3. Dharmakīrti followed in Dignāga footsteps, and is credited with systematic philosophical doctrines on Buddhist epistemology, which Vincent Eltschinger states, has "a full-fledged positive/direct apologetic commitment".

E. ADVENT OF ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY OF ADI-SHANKARA FROM 700 A.D.

1. Shankara developed it's 'Idealist Advaita philosophy' by opposing and countering
 - (i) The dominant Idealist philosophical school of the time, i.e.; Yogachara School MAHAYANA BUDDHISM of Dignaga-Dharmakirti OF 600-700 AD and
 - (ii) The 'weakened (yet pursuing)' philosophy of Nagarjuna's 'Madhyamika School of Mahayana Buddhism'.
2. From 600 AD to 1200 AD, slowly, the Yogachara School got detached from the masses and they also lost the credibility with the contemporary World due to their alien 'day to day approaches' based on their philosophical postulations.
3. On the other hand, the Idealist Advaita School under Adi-Shankaracharya started its march from 700 AD.
4. But Indian philosophy was increasingly absorbed into disputes on behalf of particularistic theological positions.
5. Nevertheless, down through the 1300s at least, intellectual competition among the schools (Shaiva and Vaishnavite Bhakti cult) remains sharp as for e.g. Shakaracharya, Ramanujcharya, Madhavacharya, Nimbarkcharya among others
6. For a while the shift towards sectarianism acts as a series of shocks to the external base, stimulating philosophical creativity.
7. If we take pain to seek it out beneath the philosophical trappings, we find in this period the mature phase of Indian philosophy, its highest level of acuteness of the epistemology-metaphysics sequence.

'POSITIONING' OF DHARMAKIRTI IN THE INDIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

1. But if we ponder on the sequence of events, we will find that DHARMAKIRTI was the highest water mark of 'Indian Logic' in its progress from 2nd Century AD to 15 the Century AD.

2. The environment of University life provided the platform for the highest intellectual minds of the time and 'NALAND MAHAVIHARA' provided that opportunity to DHARMAKIRTI and other intellectuals of the time.

3. Dharmakirti's treatise 'PRAMANAVARTIKA provided the basis for other scholars to follow him for several hundred of years.

4. Adi Shankara's treatise on the 'Idealist Advaita Philosophy' was also formulated on the basis of Dharmakirt's treatise of Nalanda School

5. Shankar's treatise also found its initial opponent from the region of Bihar...only i.e. in Mithila.

WRITINGS

Dharmakirti is credited with the following major works:

1. Saṃbandhparikṣhāvṛtti (Analysis of Relations)
2. Pramāṇaviniścaya (Ascertainment of Valid Cognition)
3. Pramāṇavārttikakārika (Commentary on Dignaga's 'Compendium of Valid Cognition')
4. Nyāyabinduprakaraṇa (Drop of Reasoning)
5. Hetubindunāmaprakaraṇa (Drop of Reasons)
6. Saṃtānāntarasiddhināmaprakaraṇa (Proof of Others' Continuums)
7. Vādanyāyanāmaprakaraṇa (Reasoning for Debate)

Dharmakirti's greatest work PRAMANAVARTIKA was lost but it was recovered from Tibet by Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan. He also recovered his other books. Now books and treatise are available with the Bihar Research Society (Patna Museum Campus).

PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Dharmakirti
2. Nalanda Mahavih