

Restoration of Tibetan Buddhism in its Later Propagation Period

Chi-won Kim

This paper is a brief study of the restoration of Tibetan Buddhism in its latter-day expansion, and the popularity it gained at that time, for which much of the credit is owed to devoted figures of both Tibet and India, such as Ye-she-ö, Jang-chub-ö, Rin-chen-zang-po, Atiśa and Drom-ton-pa. These great adherents of moral Buddhism worked arduously to bring about the propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in the later period. Although Rin-chen-zang-po did not himself, found a formal religious tradition, he laid the foundation for all subsequent traditions. And this religious reformation which was initiated first by Rin-chen-zang-po and his patron Ye-she-ö, was successfully accomplished later by Jang-chub-ö, Atiśa and the Ka-dam-pa sect.

Key words: Atiśa, Rin-chen-zang-po, Ka-dam-pa School,
Later Propagation of Buddhism in Tibet,
Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment.

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International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture September 2008, Vol.11, pp.147-164.

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I. Situations Before the Revival of Buddhism in Tibet

Since the passing of the Buddha 2551 years ago, Buddhism has spread throughout the Asian regions and beyond, with care to maintaining its relevance and integrity throughout, and Tibet is no exception with its history of devotion to ensuring Buddhism remain a living religion for over 1,300 years. In fact, Tibetan culture and the Buddhist religion are so interwoven that it is difficult to separate them. Since the 7th century Tibetan culture has directly and indirectly supported the Buddhist religion. Tibetan Buddhism, as a feature of Tibet's religious culture, is very complicated historically and regionally, which makes it difficult for 'outsiders' to fully comprehend and appreciate the details. In fact, Tibetans see their history solely in terms of their religion, which they divide it into two periods of early and later Buddhist propagation in Tibet. The early period encompasses the age of the 'Three great religious Kings' (Song-tsen-gam-po, Tri-song-de-tsen, and Rel-pa-cen); this period has a very colourful tradition and a wealth of holy legends. The later period, ushered in after a short dark age in Tibetan history, dates from the tenth century.¹

Buddhism made significant progress in Tibet during the reigns of the three great religious kings, when the Indian masters Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava laid the foundations of the Sūtrayāna and Tantrayāna teachings. But the traditions they established almost disappeared during the rule of King Lang-dar-ma.² About seventy years after the Dark Age ended³ a

1 In fact, the massive literature of the 'Later propagation of Buddhism in Tibet' is little help to unravel the reality underlying the traditional view of the 'Early propagation of Buddhism in Tibet,' for although alongside the numerous doctrinal works and the 'Nam-thar,' which record the lives of holy men in their progress towards deliverance, there are several 'Chö-jung' describing the origin of the faith and 'Gyal-rab' containing the lineages of the kings, these works are viewed only as manifestations of their devotion to the Buddhist faith.

2 After King Lang-dar-ma ascended the throne, Tibet began to lose its splendour brought by previous religious kings. Lang-dar-ma after joining his ministers, started to persecute Buddhism, which they considered it to be mortal enemies. He brought about great destruction to Buddhism in Tibet by burning down the monasteries and Buddhist scriptures. However, he was assassinated by a monk in 842. There was no legitimate successor. Then, dissent and civil strife followed. Some noble ministers returned to their ancestral estates so that for lack of support temples and monasteries in central Tibet gradually declined. That may perhaps be seen as the formal end of the Early propagation of Buddhism in Tibet.

new impulse was given to Tibetan Buddhism, principally through the efforts of dynasties in Western Tibet.⁴ These dynasties had profited from the chaos that occurred as a result of King Lang-dar-ma's death and their rulers were succeeded in forming kingdoms that survived through their own lifetimes and several centuries on.⁵ Although Buddhism was persecuted under Lang-dar-ma's rule, after his death his descendants devoted gave new strength to its development.

II. Motive Power of Restoration

1. Transitional Phenomena—Throes

The period of the 'Later propagation of Buddhism in Tibet' is among the most fruitful and important in the history of Tibet, especially concerning the introduction of Indian doctrines into Tibet and their subsequent elaboration. But even more important for Tibet was the survival of temples and monasteries which facilitated the return of Buddhist teachings into western and central Tibet where they flamed the embers of a tradition which is said have tenuously survived underground in private residences until this later propagation period. At the commencement of the later propagation period of

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4 These dynasties governed in particular that zone called 'Three territories in Nga-ri area' that consists of Mar-yul, Guge and pu-rang. It is obvious that it is impossible to define precisely the limits of these provinces, since they must have varied from century to century according to historical circumstances, conquests and treaties. Generally, we can say that Mar-yul corresponds to the westmost territory, that is to Ladakh. Guge is the intermediary province. Today the monastery of Tho-ling is considered the center of Guge. Pu-rang comprised the lands to the east of Guge and as far south as lake Manasarovar (Tucci 1988: 15-16).

5 Concerning the comparative genealogical tables of kings in various Tibetan sources, (Tucci 1988: 17-21); for brief genealogy (BA: 37, 244; BTCJ: 200, 212-213).

Buddhism in Tibet, unlike the early period, there was far less opposition to the faith, and very soon there would be a major Buddhist revival.⁶

But even with a strong revival and great sincerity in their faith, these western Tibet Buddhists must have met strong opposition, because they were mostly ‘outlanders’ who had immigrated from Central Tibet and thus, encountered hostile forces. One might speculate that behind this intense scheme of Buddhist propagation in western Tibet—homeland of the Bon-po religion—it is probable that there were significant ulterior political motives to overthrow Bon-po, or at least to absorb it into Buddhism as the new faith in order to lead a unification of minds.

The Court religion was no doubt closely entwined with the maintenance of the royal dynasty, and it was in a political context characterized by a lack of centralized political power and continuous rivalry among local aristocratic families, that the ‘outlander’ western Tibetans sought to revive Buddhism, undoubtedly in an attempt to increase their own power base.

From a political perspective, it is hardly surprising that the royal court would favor a more moral form of Buddhism against the unruly form of Buddhism that was popular at the time, as the latter directly threatened its authority. In support of this view, King Tri-song-de-tsen’s decision, recorded in the ‘Sam-ye Debates,’ was an obvious rejection of the incumbent and less moralistic form of Buddhism, and it seems that even those in court circles who wanted an orderly and controllable religious and monastic community, only accepted the necessity for continuing inclusion of some of the more shamanic or tantric aspects as a temporary expedient. After all, the king could have greater influence and control over a population that was Buddhist.⁷

6 The *Blue Annals* of Go-lo-tsa-ba-Zhon-nu-pal (1392-1481) is one of the most important chronological records of Tibetan history. Out of seven chapters of part one, five chapters are devoted to the later spread of Buddhism in Tibet.

7 In this connection it is worth noting that the early kings appear to have controlled the translation and practice of Tantric texts quite strictly. “During the royal period, Tantras were looked upon with suspicion and their spread subjected to restriction. ... The ‘religious Council’ presided over by the abbot of Samye was a very powerful and fastidious body which certainly tried to control the spread of Tantric teachings in the country. The other main task of this body was to maintain the monastic communities on the basis of the Vinaya as pure as possible. ... In spite of the watchfulness of the ‘Religious Council,’ one would expect that certain people followed the tantric teachings all the same, ... It became the dominant faith during the period following the collapse of the monastic institution

But as is the way with many great schemes and ‘scams,’ this later stage of Buddhist propagation produced quite unexpected and contrary results from what had been anticipated. A major reason for this was that Buddhist tantras and tantra-like inclinations were, somewhat erroneously, regarded as ‘compatible’ with existing shamanic rituals and practices, so that they could be blended in such a way that they appealed to adherents of the existing shamanic religion, which was the majority of the population. This unfortunately, brought about a ‘backsliding’ into the primitive beliefs that Buddhism had sought to suppress but had not been able to completely extinguish. Hence, Buddhism at this time was under threat of degeneration, due to tantric ritual practices dragging it down into a kind of black magic and stripping its rich foundation and theoretical justification in a merging with the religion of the Bon.

But Buddhism managed to survive this critical period and surviving in two different forms, one lay and the other monastic. The lay or semi-lay had a mainly magical orientation, characterized by their subjective and literal reading of the texts, particularly Tantric scriptures, although this was not in accordance with the esoteric tradition of interpretation established in India and later transmitted to Tibet. At the same time, old ritual customs which had little or nothing to do with Buddhism were often re-circulated in Buddhist ‘wrapping.’ This brought about a growth of immoral practice that gave rise to a proliferation of ‘bandit monks’ (Tucci 1980: 19-20).

Today, there are still a few extant records detailing historical accounts of the situation in Tibet at that time. In that period the teachings became divided, because people who followed Tantra turned away from Vinaya, and those in favor of Vinaya rejected Tantra. And to add to the confusion, Tantrikas writing their treatise included whatever fragments of Tantra they remembered, adding their own views and thereafter claiming it to be true Tantra. This caused serious omissions in the essentials of Buddhist Tantra teachings. Moreover, some popular Tantric teachers in the 11th century, enchanted with the beauty of Tantric vision, forgot about the strictures of

and the central authority” (Karmay 1989: 6) quoted in Samuel (1995: 454).

secrecy and pre-requisites laid out in the Tantric texts, and went about teaching the highest Tantras indiscriminately; we can only presume that with uncensored exposure to the more advanced Tantras there must have been many who were misled. Such practitioners designed new monastic robes which they wore under a vest with collar; they also shaved off their hair but left a little at the crown, and called themselves *Sthaviras arahat*. For three months during the summer retreat these so-called ‘monks’ observed four main precepts (to abstain from killing and stealing, moral purity, and false speech) but once the retreat was over they abandoned their precepts. The majority of Tantrikas only memorized texts, without investigating deeply into meaning, although earlier Buddhist intellectuals who did not favor this kind of tradition had tried to stop the practice.

2. Key Figures as the Harbinger of Reformation

A. Lha-lama-ye-she-ö and Rin-chen-zang-po

Lha-lama-ye-she-ö,⁸ who held court at Nga-ri (western Tibet), was a devout Buddhist. In his efforts to introduce a pure Buddhist monasticism into Tibet, he selected and trained seven intelligent lads, all aged around ten years. But still not satisfied with the Tibetan Buddhist teachers whose cult had become greatly debased by the admixture of tantric and Bon mysticism, he chose 21 youths between the ages of 10 and 20 from the best families in the state and sent them to Kashmir, Magadha and other places in India, so they could study the Kashmir philosophy of Ānandagarbha⁹ and the Vinaya code of

8 According to Bu-ton, King Khor-re is the identical person with Lha-lama-ye-she-ö, Translation is “After King Khor-re abdicated his throne for younger prince Song-nge, he entered the priesthood with ordained-name, Ye-she-ö” (BTCJ: 212).; Ye-she-ö was one of two brothers and all the sources agree that it was the elder of the two who became monk, but it is hard to know whether this elder brother was Khor-re or Song-nge. Some Tibetan chronicles hold that Ye-she-ö is Song-nge’s other name (Vitali 1999: 13; Tucci 1988: 17, 34).

9 Ānandagarbha is counted among the great knowledge bearers of yoga tantra in India, along with Buddhaguhya and Śākyamitra (Power 1995: 327).; As a clear evidence of John powers’ reference, all of three composed their own commentaries on Sarvatathāgata-tattvasaṃgraha-sūtra (P112) which is the root tantra of yoga tantras: Ānandagarbha’s (P3333), Śākyamitra’s (P3326), and Buddhaguhya’s (P3324); Additionally speaking, among his eighteen works listed in Peking edition of Tibetan Tripitaka, six works related with the *Tantra of Māla ritual for purifying lower realm* (*Sarva-durgatiparisodhana-tantra*, P3455, 3457, 3458, 3459, 3460, and 3463).

monastic discipline. Lha-lama-ye-she-ö instructed these students to try and meet the renowned Kashmirian paṇḍit Ratnavajra,¹⁰ Dharmapāla of eastern India, Karuṇāpaṇḍita in western India, and Prajñāvalī, and invite them to Tibet, believing they would be useful to the cause of Buddhist reformation in Tibet. It seems that of the 21 youths who travelled to India, 19 died from heat, fever, snake-bite and other causes. Rin-chen-zang-po (958-1055) and Leg-pa'i-she-rab were the only survivors.¹¹

Lha-lama-ye-she-ö also issued a decree in an effort to reform degenerate religious practices. His strong message is clear from the following:

You Tantra practitioners, who live in villages, have no connection with these Three Ways [śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha, and highest], and yet you claim to “follow the Mahāyāna.” Without observing the rules of the Mahāyāna, you say, “we are Mahāyānist.” ... The early kings who were Bodhisattvas, prohibited false religion in accordance with the Word of the Buddha. ... Now as the good Karma of living beings is exhausted and the law of the kings is impaired, false doctrine called rDzogs-Chen is flourishing in Tibet. The views of this doctrine are mistaken. Heretical Tantras, under the guise of Buddhism, are also being spread in Tibet. ... You worship the Three Jewels with flesh, blood and urine; ignorant of ‘enigmatic’ terminology you practise the rite literally, ... Those who wish to be Mahāyānist must accumulate the two kinds of merit and abandon the notion of grasping and that which is to be grasped, must practise the ten perfections, alms giving, etc., must achieve all the practices of a Bodhisattva, and must accomplish the welfare of all sentient beings through love and compassion. If you practise religion in this way, then you will be Mahāyānist! (Karmay 1998: 9-13).

The decree (Ka-shog) declared by Ye-she-ö is a criticism of the general tantric practices prevailing at that time. The tradition recalls that Ye-she-ö was

10 He was one of the six Gate-keepers of Vikramaśilā monastery in the period of king Canaka (955-983) or king Bhayapāla (983-1015) of Pāla dynasty (Dutt 2000: 361).; Tucci said that 21 youths were to study the system of Yogatantra, the commentaries to the Kālacakra, and the four tantras of Vajrāsana with Ratnavajra (Tucci 1988: 35).

11 (BTCJ: 212-213; Tucci 1988: 34-36); Concerning the issues treated in this paragraph, Dr. H.P. Gangnegi clarifies, with notably critical approach, the various of historical inconsistency found in the Tibetan chronicles (Gangnegi 1998).

very doubtful about certain religious practices, particularly those of the so-called Jor-wa (sexual rite), Drol-wa (deliverance, sacrificial rite) and tshog (offering rite). He states in his decree:

Furthermore, the hidden meaning of the secret mantra was vitiated, and it was further corrupted by the practices of the rites of ‘sexual union,’ ‘deliverance’ and the ‘tshogs offering.’ To find out whether these practices were correct at all, the lo-tsa-wa Rin-chen-zang-po was sent to Kashmir (Karmay 1998: 6).¹²

Rin-chen-zang-po was simply overshadowed by the immensely popular Atiśa, who besides being an unparalleled Indian Buddhist master in his time, was also a royal guest in Tibet. Although Rin-chen-zang-po sought instruction and initiation from Atiśa and thus technically became his disciple, he also instructed and initiated Atiśa into the lineage of the Cycle of the Great Merciful One (Mahākāruṇika) (BA: 1044).

If there are men such as you in Tibet, then there will be no need of my coming to Tibet (BA: 249).

With this remark, the greatness of Rin-chen-zang-po was acknowledged by none other than Atiśa himself, who visited Nga-ri in 1042 CE, at the urgent persuasion of royal monk Ye-she-ö and Jang-chub-ö.

Rin-chen-zang-po played a very crucial role in the reformation of a rapidly deteriorating Buddhism in the western land of the Himalayan region during 10th-11th century CE. The decline was mainly due to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of various Sutras and Tantras. In an effort to reverse this trend he dedicated his entire life to the cause of establishing numerous physical, vocal and spiritual vehicles of the Buddha, by building 108 monasteries and temples, translating more than 178 scriptures and

¹² Karmay interprets Jor-wa as Tantric practices involving sexual union, and Drol-wa as the sacrifice of animals and perhaps even of human beings. Guenther’s work on the Guhya-garbha, which relies heavily on the writings of the fourteen-century Nying-ma-pa lama Long-chen-rab-jam-pa and other later commentators, interprets Jor-wa and Drol-wa as primarily internal process of “fusion ... with the primal source” and “release” of the energy frozen within the rigidity of emotional structures (Guenther 1984: 156-175).

constructing innumerable Stūpas.

Atiśa's visit to Tibet proved very significant for Rin-chen-zang-po. When Atiśa was dwelling in royal residence at Ma-ngang, Rin-chen-zang-po reluctantly paid him a visit and invited him to his residence at Tho-ling. This was where the dialogue took place, in which Rin-chen-zang-po was humbled and initiated into a simpler method of meditation. After collaboration with Atiśa, Rin-chen-zang-po supervised the translation and revision of 29 texts. He passed away at the age of 98.¹³

After Ye-she-ö's death the campaign for reformation was carried on by his grand-nephews, Jang-chub-ö and Zhi-ba-ö.¹⁴ In connection with the campaign, Jang-chub-ö invited Atiśa, who as we shall note later, then asked him seven questions concerning the practice of Buddhism in Tibet.

B. Lha-lama-Jang-chub-ö and Atiśa

Already many and a diverse range of Buddhist texts had been translated by Tibetans and Indians since the time of Tri-song-de-tsen and Rel-pa-cen, but they had not yet been able to organize them in a systematic manner. Rin-chen-zang-po revised and corrected the translated Buddhist texts, with the help of his Tibetan disciples and Indian masters.

It is said that Rin-chen-zang-po inaugurated the 'New Translation of the Tantras (Sang-ngag-sar-ma).' Key figures of the 'Later propagation of

13 Bu-ton-rin-chen-dub (1290-1364), one of the earliest Tibetan historians, without citing the source, narrates the whole accounts as related the King Khor-re's abdication, the despatch of 21 young men, the survival of Rin-chen-zang-po and Legs-pa'i-shes-rab, the discussion between Rin-chen-zang-po and Atiśa on religious questions, etc. (BTCJ: 212-214).

14 Zhi-ba-ö who is a younger brother of Jang-chub-ö had the hostile view against Tantra too. He states: "None of these [tantras] provides any perfect means. They therefore will not bring about the attainment of Buddhahood. These must not be taken as an object of veneration or used as a path by anyone. Monks must observe their vows and those who have entered Mantrayana and practise Kriyā, Upayā, Yoga and the Guhyasamāja, etc., must also make efforts to preserve the tantric vows without contradicting the vows of the monastic discipline. Although the 'Mother tantras' are excellent, they nevertheless cause many monks to break their monastic vows as a result of not knowing the implications of certain terms. There will not be any contradiction even if they are not practised at all. Moreover, as for the view of the doctrine of rDzogs-chen, it is mixed with that of the heretics. If practised, it will lead people into evil births. Under no circumstances should anyone practise it, (if he does) his attaining Enlightenment will meet obstacles. ... As there are also too many sādhanas produced by the Tibetans, one can hardly accept them. They may be the path leading into evil births, hence saṃsāra. Those who follow the religious tradition known as bka-gdams-pa must not practise these false doctrine" (Karmay 1980: 17).

Buddhism' in Tibet, like Ye-she-ö, Rin-chen-zang-po and others, considered the 'Old Translation of the Tantras (Sang-ngag-nying-ma)' by the Nying-ma-pa¹⁵ to be coarse. It was through Rin-chen-zang-po's translations, or those made at his request, that a great part of the Buddhist tantric literature, especially the "Outer Yoga Tantra and Inner Yoga Tantra" (the Yoga tantra and the Anuttara Yoga Tantra) reached Tibet.¹⁶ But to really understand tantras without risking error was not an easy matter, as there was very little literacy in Tibet at the time. So Tibetan Buddhist intellectuals who wanted to learn the innermost spirit of Buddhist doctrine under the guidance of Indian Buddhist masters, and to relive the mystical experience that the Buddhist tantric literature had revealed, literally transplanted the eminent Buddhist schools of India to the land of snow.

So it was precisely Rin-chen-zang-po and his royal patrons who inspired and stimulated the numerous bands of Tibetan and Indian Buddhist missionaries, who subsequently infused new life into the Buddhist doctrines; and it was they who were attributed with forging more direct and close ties with India while bringing the most eminent masters of the time to Tibet, to instruct and inspire.

In the later period of propagation of Buddhism in Tibet, the same Buddhist schools that existed in India were transferred to Tibet. But these schools, even though they had once been rivals in doctrinal debate, were no longer disparate. The late interpretations of Yogacāra and Madhyamaka views were almost converged in the same view. Moreover, there was a growing attitude suggesting that the sūtras and tantras were in contradiction, like hot

15 Concerning the Nying-ma-pa, Bu-ton stated, "Regarding the ancient translation of the Nying-ma Tantras, the lo-tsa-ba Rin-chen-zang-po, Ye-she-ö, and others were of the opinion that the Nying-ma Tantras did not represent pure Tantra" (BA: 102, n.1).

16 According to Tibetan historian, while Rin-chen-zang-po had translated for the most part the 'Father class' of the Anuttara yoga tantra, including the Tattvasaṃgraha, Guhyasamāja and other texts, however, the tantras belonging to the 'Yoginī class (Mother class)' such as the Saṃvara, Hevajra and others were translated by La-chen-dog-mi (BA: 205, 351).; When Dog-mi was sent to India in around 1010 A.D., Tibetan teachers instructed him: "Listen to the exposition of the Vinaya for it is the basic of the doctrine. Listen to the Prajñāpāramit, for it is the essence of the doctrine. Listen to the mantrayāna, for it is the spirit of the doctrine." Later, for 13 years he resided in India and Nepal, and returned to Tibet. Dog-mi then translated Hevajra-tantrarāja and many mantrayāna texts, chiefly that of the 'Mother class' of the tantras (BA: 206-207).

and cold. And because the meaning of the tantras was misconstrued, the monastic Vinaya code of moral discipline was also endangered.

Thus, the need for an authentic teacher became essential. Tibetan Buddhist history is in agreement that the most important event of this later propagation period was the arrival in Tibet of the Indian master Atiśa (982-1054)¹⁷ in 1042. As soon as he arrived the royal monk Jang-chub-ö explained the religious situation and requested Atiśa to compose a synthetic summary in order to resolve the problems they were facing. This is how it came about that Atiśa composed his famous short work, *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* (Sanskrit title: *Bodhipathapradīpa*; Tibetan: *Jang-chub-lam-gyi-dön-ma*),¹⁸ which is a compendious poem of sixty-eight quatrains consisting of condensed references of the corpus of orthodox teachings embodied in the literature of the Madhyamika, Yogācāra, and Mantrayāna traditions of Buddhism, and delineates the path of sequence of practice. As has been said by Atiśa:

He [Jang-chub-ö], again and again, told and begged to me as follows, “In Tibet, those who have wrong views on Mahāyāna path of the Buddha’s teaching quarrel with each other about their misunderstood theory, analyzing deep and wide meaning [i.e., Madhyamaka and Yogācāra philosophies] of teachings without synthetic understanding. I beseech, therefore, for clearing of these doubts.” Thus, Atiśa, myself, will write the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* in accordance with Sūtras and so on (KD: 22, 5ff; LDNS: fol.8A).

Atiśa later spent three years in Nga-ri, nine of these between Yer-pa and Nye-tang, and then another five in various places in central Tibet. Although he had originally intended to remain in Tibet for only three years he

¹⁷ “The other name of the great master Dīpaṅkaraśrījñāna is widely called as the glorious Atiśa” (LDNS: fol.2B).

¹⁸ The root texts of the *Lamp for the path to Enlightenment* was composed, according to its colophon, at the monastery of Tho-ling in Zhang-zhung. The date of writing may be placed sometime between 1042 and 1044, because it is known that Atiśa remained there for only two years before proceeding to Central Tibet. That the Auto-Commentary was written at the same time and place as the Lamp cannot be verified from its colophon, which states only that it was composed, translated, and corrected by Atiśa together with lo-tsa-wa Nag-tsho.

never returned to India; while making preparations to depart, he met and was impressed by Drom-ton-pa, who very likely convinced him of the need to extend his teaching activities to central Tibet and to meet hundreds of monks in monasteries of Lhasa and other places.¹⁹

Although Atiśa was the author of *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* and *Auto-Commentary*,²⁰ a 125-folio in the Peking edition of the Tibetan Tripitaka, a word-by-word prose explanation of the 68 quatrains of root text, nevertheless, he does not rank with such great Indian Mahāyāna heroes or forerunners as Nāgārjuna, Aśaṅga, or Śāntideva; yet, there is no disputing his fame and importance in the spread of Buddhism in Tibet and Central Asia. Buddhist history in Tibet would be incomplete without a chapter devoted to his writings and activities, especially considering the tremendous influence he exerted on Buddhism in counties like Tibet and Mongolia. Atiśa is a most influential figure for the traditional Buddhist monk-scholars in this region.

3. Seven Questions and Five Excellent Means in the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*

As we know, it was at the request of Jang-chub-ö that Atiśa composed his famous short work, *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. However, some points may have been unclear to Jang-chub-ö, especially concerning the root text. It is in this context that Atiśa reveals:

When Jang-chub-ö, was giving seven questions to me, he always said, “The meanings are not clear in their roots.” Hence I will write [*Auto-Commentary*] in response to his request (KD : 22, 1, 7 ff).

Lob-zang-chö-kyi-gyal-tshen, in his *Commentary on the Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, elaborates on these seven questions in the following story:

19 For more information about the duration of his stay in Tibet (Chattopadhyaya 1996: 23, 383; BA: 326; Cutler 2000: 41, 380, n.42).

20 The actual Sanskrit word for this kinds of commentary is the ‘Pañjikā’ which means the almost word by word, or verse by verse explanation wherever difficult points occur in the its root text.

When Atiśa went to Central Tibet, six persons including Khu and Ngog put to him the following five questions: (1) Is it possible to attain Buddhahood by cultivating exclusively either the means and wisdom? (2) Is it necessary for the recipient of the Bodhisattva vows to rely upon the Prātimokṣa vows? (3) Is it permissible to preach Tantra to those who have not yet received the Vajra-teacher initiation? (4) Is it permissible for those who observe the practice of celibacy to receive the two superior kinds of initiation? (5) Is it permissible for those who have not received initiation to practice Mantrayāna? Atiśa answered, “Your mental capacity is not broad enough. Lha-tsun-pa [i.e., Jang-chub-ō] has put forth more questions than you, and I’ve explained all of them in my *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*” (LDNS : fol. 8A-8B).

Lob-zang-chö-kyi-gyal-tshen then cites the seven questions from Nag-tsho’s work which is now no longer in existence:

According to the *Ornament of Explanation on the Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* ascribed to Nag-tsho, the seven questions are, (1) Who is qualified to be the recipient of Mahāyāna path? (2) Can the Bodhicitta be generated from the ordinary person? (3) Is it clear whether or not the Prātimokṣa vows are prerequisite for the recipient of Bodhisattva vows. (4) When the Prātimokṣa vow holder proceeds to receive the Bodhisattva vows, is it a transformation of the former into the latter, or is it simply the co-existence of both? (5) Is the combination of wisdom and means necessary for the collection of the two accumulations—merit and wisdom? (6) Of the two views of the Mādhyamika and the Yogācāra, which is the ultimate one? (7) How should the Mahāyānists proceed upon entering the door of the Mantrayāna? (LDNS : fol.8B)

Atiśa states that he will comment on the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* under five Means:

For ‘the Excellent Means,’ they are the means of : (1) Taking refuge in the Three Jewels, (2) the two kinds of Bodhicitta, (3) generating the altruistic prescient power so as to benefit others, (4) amassing the two accumulations of uniting ‘Means’ and ‘Wisdom,’

and (5) amassing the two unique accumulations through the system of secret mantra, the great of Mahāyāna, which quickly fulfills the good of self and others (KD: 22, 4, 3 ff).

Amidst the confusion in Tibet at the time, with a toxic mixture of both genuine and spurious teachings circulating and poorly understood, the first necessary rule was to insist that the Buddha's teachings have no internal contradiction when properly interpreted. Therefore, Five Excellent Means framed by Atiśa, is his own road map to show the path to enlightenment, and his own way of interpretation of the whole Buddha dharma without discrepancy.

III. Successor of Reformation: Ka-dam-pa Sect

From the time when Sam-ye monastery in Lhasa was founded at the end of the eight century, until the founding of Re-ting monastery in 1056 by Atiśa's immediate disciple Drom-ton-pa-gal-wai-jung-ne (1005-1064), up until the mid-eleventh century, there was no distinctive religious sect in Tibet. Indeed, only Drom-ton-pa's foundation on the basis of Atiśa's teaching fathered as a new religious sect, that of the Ka-dam-pa.

The system of Ka-dam-pa doctrine was initiated by Atiśa, expanded by Drom-ton-pa, and widely spread by the three spiritual brothers of the Ka-dam-pa tradition (phu-chung-wa, po-to-wa and tshul-trim-bar). Later Ka-dam-pa successors made it even more extensive.

Atiśa was the main figure of reform in Tibetan Buddhism, and Drom-ton-pa was constantly with him. All other schools of Tibetan Buddhism that developed later based their monastic discipline on the codes formed by Atiśa and Drom-ton-pa. The founders and later followers of those schools received teachings from Atiśa and Ka-dam-pa lamas. For example, Sakya Paṇḍita, who is the most influential teacher of the Sakyapa tradition, received the Ka-dam-pa teachings from Ka-dam-pa lama Ci-bo-lhe-pa, a student of Neu-zur-wa. Sakya Paṇḍita's works were mainly on the Ka-dam-pa system,

and later Sakyapa followers also practice in this same way. The Kagyupa tradition follows the same example. Mar-pa lo-tsa-wa who laid the foundation for the Kagyupa tradition, received the teachings from Atiśa when he went to India for the second time. Moreover, the famous Kagyupa lama Gam-po-pa received the teachings of the Ka-dam-pa from Gya-yon-dag, a student of Atiśa's personal disciple Nal-jor-wa-chen-pa. Later, Gam-po-pa combined both Ka-dam-pa teachings and the Mahāmudra which was transmitted by Milarepa; in consequence, he composed the *Lam-rim-thar-gyen (The Excellent Doctrine, the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel, the Ornament for Precious Liberation)*. Thus Gam-po-pa succeeded in combining the tantric teachings transmitted by Marpa and Milarepa with already established monastic traditions of Ka-dam-pa. Without the latter there would be no Kagyupa religious sect as such, as there would have been no organized community life.

Tsong-kha-pa and his disciples follow the traditional Ka-dam-pa approach of gradualism, with its emphasis on assuring firm footing at each step before attempting the next. The Gelugpa method is essentially a way of critical examination and rigorous logic.

After Tsong-kha-pa's death in 1419, his followers gradually formed an organized sect, regarding themselves as successors of Atiśa's Ka-dam-pa and becoming known as Gan-den-pa or Gelugpa.

Since all monastic foundations in Tibet, whatever variations existed in their transmitted teaching traditions, were inevitably based upon the Ka-dam-pa model, so far as adherence to any monastic rule was concerned, Drom-ton-pa might well be hailed as the father of Tibetan monasticism.

After Atiśa's death, Drom-ton-pa withdrew to Re-ting, together with a group of faithful disciples, where in 1056 he founded the monastery that was to remain the center of his religious circle until it was absorbed by the Gelugpas.

IV. Conclusion

From a survey of Buddhist doctrine and practice, several distinctive elements of Tibetan Buddhism become apparent. In fact, Tibetan Buddhism is the last major national Buddhism to develop, having access to a much larger corpus of Indian Buddhist literature than reached China or Japan, for example. This literature included the Sutras and the Tantras, such that Tibetan Buddhism is generally characterized as Sutra-based in its doctrine and Tantra-based in its practice. It is important to note, however, that there are certain central elements of practice, such as monastic regulations and techniques for the Bodhisattva's compassionate aspiration to Buddhahood, which are delineated in Sutras. Furthermore, Tibetan Buddhist circles accepted and developed sophisticated scholastic traditions of tantric exegesis.

The revival of Buddhism during the eleventh century, known to Tibetan historiography as the "Later propagation of Buddhism in Tibet," was motivated to a large extent, by revulsion against the general breakdown of religious practice, discipline, and conduct which had prevailed during the preceding centuries.

Consequently, in order to re-establish the faith on a firmer foundation, the reformist undertook, as one of its more important missions, presentation of the fundamentals of Buddhism in a manner easily accessible to both monastics and laity. One of the means by which this was accomplished was the development of succinct and useful guides to the essentials of Buddhist practice.

In order to achieve this goal, the Tibetans sustained contact with major figures of the late Indian Buddhist tradition for over a century, and the legacies of these figures, such as Atiṣa, remain powerful elements of the tradition.

In the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, Atiṣa brought together the major streams of Buddhism—Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Mantrayāna—all of which he viewed as complementary aspects of the Buddhist path. His text integrates tantric techniques into the Mahāyāna path, and it seems he did not

see any discrepancy between the various Buddhist systems and practices. Such that his vision of the path provided a model for the development of monastic orders of different lineages.

Abbreviations

- BA *The Blue Annals*, Trans. by George N. Roerich. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995.
- BTCJ *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet*, E. Obermiller. Delhi: Sri satguru publication, 1986.
- KD *The Auto-Commentary on the Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. Atiśa. *The Tibetan Tripitaka* P5344, vol.103.
- LDNS *The Feast of Explanation on the Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. Lob-zang-chö-kyi-gyal-tshen. Source material from Asia Classics Input Project ref. S5941, fol.1A-54A.
- P *The Tibetan Tripitaka* (Otani University reprint of the Peking edition of the Tibetan Tripitakas), Ed. by D.T. Suzuki, et al. Kyoto: Tibetan Tripitaka Research Institute, 1957.

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