

# LIBERATION STORY OF JE ATISHA

TEACHINGS BY 17<sup>TH</sup> GYALWANG KARMAPA, OGYEN TRINLEY DORJE



Compiled and transcribed by Adele Tomlin

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

## Contents

<b>CHAPTER ONE: Jowo Atisha’s early life, studies of tantras, secret mantra unconventional conduct with Indian mahasiddhas, ‘pride-smashing’ direct instructions from Tārā and Ḍākinīs, and upholder of Mind-Only view.</b> .....	6
Introduction.....	6
The seeds/roots of the Kagyu Monlam .....	8
Atisha’s impact on the Dagpo Kagyu and the Union of Mahamudra and Kadampa teachings .....	9
Date and Place of Birth of Atiśha: Dromtonpa’s account – End of 10th Century in Bengal.....	9
The Lion of Kings of Zahora – Royal Family Origins and related to Shantarakshita .....	11
Atisha’s youthful beauty .....	12
Atisha’s continual visions of Tārā as a child .....	12
Extremely learned in all the areas of knowledge, especially grammar and logic .....	13
Secret Mantra studies and practice with accomplished Indian yogic siddhas, Rahula-Gupta and Atisha’s secret name Jñānavajra .....	14
Madhyamaka Studies with Indian siddha, Avadhūtīpa and his Mind-Only views .....	15
Studies of Madhyamaka with Indian siddha, Shantīpa.....	16
‘In the middle of a very narrow bridge’ – Sudden teaching style of Avadhūtīpa and practising ‘unconventional conduct’ (tul-zhug).....	16
Atisha’s pride about his knowledge of the tantras crushed by ḍākinīs in a dream .....	17
Direct vision of Tārā who challenges Atisha on his knowledge of the tantras .....	17
<b>CHAPTER TWO: Atisha’s names, monastic ordination, his main teachers and historical background to his being invited to Tibet .....</b>	19
Introduction.....	19
Transcript (Day Two 2023).....	20
Reasons and signs why Atisha became a monk .....	20
Becoming a monk and Atisha’s names and their meaning .....	21
The way Atisha was given his name – by a Dharma King?.....	22
<i>Jowo Je</i> name for Atisha: meaning and purpose.....	23
Atisha’s monastic studies combined with Vajrayana/tantric practice – leaving the monks every six days.....	24
Atisha’s numerous teachers and the three main gurus .....	24
Upholder of the Mind-Only Practice of Vast Conduct and abbot of Vikramaśīla monastery.....	28
Historical background in Tibet before Atisha was invited there.....	29
Lha Lama Yeshe O’s Dharma legacies and the Guge Dynasty area of Tibet .....	31

Was Lha Lama Yeshe O captured by the King of Garlog?..... 31

**CHAPTER THREE: Lha Lama Yeshe O's Three Main Legacies, Tibetans studying in Kashmir and at Vikaramashila, the invention of the Ragdung horn, Atisha's connection to Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo and reasons for composing *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* ..... 33**

The founding of Tholing Monastery and the re-establishment of the Vinaya vows in Tibet ..... 35

Inviting Atisha to Tibet – sending Tibetans to Kashmir to study Buddhist philosophy..... 37

Nagtso Lotsāwa and study at Vikramashila and inviting Atisha to come to Tibet ..... 38

Atisha asks Tārā about his trip to Tibet and if it would be beneficial or not..... 38

Trip to Bodh Gaya and yogi's response to Atisha about Tibet ..... 39

Atisha's question about his life-span and the dakinis' response that if he went to Tibet it would be shorter ..... 39

Key-holder of many Indian monasteries: The Indians' discovery of the plan to bring Atisha to Tibet and their reluctance to let him go ..... 40

The exceptionally high regard Indians had for Atisha ..... 41

“Losing his tongue” translator in Nepal and Nagtso's encouragement to continue to Tibet with the aid of Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo ..... 41

The Tibetans' grand welcome for Atisha and the invention of the Ragdung horn ..... 42

Atisha called 'Guru Karma, Cause and Effect': Teaching the profound Dharma of Karma in Tibet..... 43

Meeting Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo and requests made to Atisha that led to the composition of *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* ..... 43

Geshe Dromtonpa's role in spreading Atisha's teachings in Tibet as 'the living commentary' on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* ..... 45

The seven questions posed to Atisha and the composition of *Lamp for the Path*..... 45

Atisha's meeting Dromtonpa, and permission from India to travel to central Tibet ..... 46

Dromtonpa's letter that left out the name of an important Tibetan teacher, Khuton ..... 47

Atisha's stay in Yarlung and not being neglected and not being given food for one week by his rich Tibetan host, Khuton..... 48

Atisha's flight from Yarlung to Nyethang with Dromtonpa..... 49

Atisha's time at Samye Monastery ..... 49

The huge influence of Atisha in Tibet and Je Tsongkhapa the Dagpo Kagyu lineage holder ..... 51

## Introduction

This e-book is a compilation of the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa's teachings on the *Life of Je Atisha* (2023 and 2025), most of which I transcribed (and occasionally translated, checking against the original Tibetan and English oral interpretation, by Khenpo David Chopel) and published online.

The teachings are groundbreaking not only in their originality, but also authenticity. The 17th Karmapa goes beyond mainstream (commonly accepted) narratives of Je Atisha, to go below the surface into the life of a man who became a yogi of secret mantra, later turned monk, to become one of the most revered and celebrated men in Indian Buddhism, but also in the history of Tibetan Buddhism for bringing many secret mantra Vajrayana teachings to Tibet, as well as writing his well-known book *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*<sup>1</sup>, that became the basis of what are now termed by the *Lam-Rim* (Stages on the Path) teachings.

After becoming a monastic, Atisha was already at a national level of pandita and was famous and influential in India before he went to Tibet. He had been appointed the abbot of the important and famous Vikramashila monastery, and Odantapuri, and also the head of several important temples in central India. Atisha had a key-ring that always had a minimum of eighteen keys on his belt of the keys to many monasteries. This is why the Indians were so reluctant to let him go to Tibet. Atisha himself also said that, those days in India there were only three or four panditas, including Shantipa, who could tell Hinduism and Buddhism apart, including Atisha himself. So, for that reason, it was also important for Indian Buddhism that Atisha stay in India.”

The 17th Karmapa also shares previously unheard of stories about Atisha's trials and tribulations as a young yogi, being scolded by Tārā and Dakinis for his pride about his knowledge and experience of the Tantras, to his becoming monastic and being invited by Tibetan Kings to visit Tibet and share and reform the corrupted teachings there. Then, the Karmapa spoke about Atisha's decision to go to Tibet, knowing it would take twenty years off his life-span after a prophecy by Tāra and dakinis. In addition, the difficulties Atisha faced when first arriving in Tibet such as going without food for a week due to the neglect of his Tibetan host (who had the wealth of a King), as well as Atisha's time in Lhasa and Samye Monastery, and his frustration at being blocked from sharing his Vinaya tradition and pith instructions of secret mantra by the layperson, Geshe Dromtonpa. Leading Je Milarepa to conclude that this was why the Kadampas never received the pith instructions on the Tantras. These stories all give new and authentic insight into Atisha's life and that period of Tibetan Buddhist history.

The 17th Karmapa concludes his 2025 teaching, explaining how influential Atisha was not only for the Dagpo Kagyu lineages, but also for Sakya, Nyingma and Gelugpa and that the whole of Tibetan Buddhism is pervaded by the Tantric and Sutra (Kadampa) teachings given by Je Atisha. The 17th Karmapa also quoted Dagpo Gampopa and Je Tsongkhapa, who both emphasised the importance of the Kadampa teachings in order to be of genuine benefit to beings.

For example, the 17th Karmapa explained that, Je Tsongkhapa said that his text Stages on the Path (Lam-Rim) were instructions from Atisha and he said that for the secret mantra, there was no better source than Marpa Lotsawa. Concluding that Je Tsongkhapa was in fact, a Dagpo Kagyu lineage holder, according to one of Tsongkhapa's own students. Thus, even though the Gelugpas (who are New Kadampas) claim Tsongkhapa as their founder, he was in fact always a Dagpo Kagyu lineage holder in essence.

in sum, along with Guru Padmasambhava and Marpa Lotsawa, Atisha is one of the most important figures for the spread of the teachings in Tibet and that is why the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa emphasised why his life-story and contribution is so important to know and study well.

In that respect this e-book compilation is my own offering towards supporting that goal and to the long-life, teachings and activities of the Gyalwang Karmapa, to the flourishing of the Buddha Dharma and benefiting beings. It is not perfect, and was written, edited and compiled by myself alone, so apologies for any errors.

Adele Tomlin, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2025.

## CHAPTER ONE: Jowo Atisha's early life, studies of tantras, secret mantra unconventional conduct with Indian mahasiddhas, 'pride-smashing' direct instructions from Tārā and Ḍākinīs, and upholder of Mind-Only view.

"In the excellent land of Za-hor [Bengal] in the east,  
Is a great city, Vikramanipura. In its center is a royal residence,  
A palace extremely vast, Called the "Golden Banner."  
Its resources, might, and fortune, Were like that of the eastern emperor of China.

—description of the birthplace of Atisha, in *Praises in Eighty Verses* by Nagtso Lotsāwa

"I had a very good-looking form, and so even gurus, free of desire, treated me nicely. So, no need to mention people who still had desire."

—Atisha on his remarkable physical beauty

"Atisha would continually see Tārā and get blessings from her. Whenever he had any doubts or questions, no matter what they were, he would arrange a painting or drawing of Tārā and in front of it make aspirations and supplicate. Then she would appear directly. Even if she did not appear directly, naturally his confusion would be resolved, and his doubts would be pacified. Atisha said that is how it happened himself. So, from an early age, he saw Tārā and was blessed by her."

"If that is how it is, then why do you think you are so well-versed in the Dharma and mantra practices? The tantras that you know are like no more than a horse-hair in the world of humans. Almost all the mantric texts are in the hands of the dakinis."

—17th Karmapa on Tārā's life-long connection with Atisha

### Introduction

Here is a transcript of a teaching given by the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, the first day of three-day teaching on the Life and Liberation of Jowo Atiśa (Atisha), for the special Kagyu Monlam 2023 (video [here](#)<sup>2</sup>).

The Karmapa first explained the 'seeds' or roots of the Kagyu Monlam and how it was started in the 1980s by the first Kalu Rinpoche and Bokar Rinpoche (see images). Then, how the Karmapa as a young man newly arrived in India in 2000, attended the Kagyu Monlam himself and changed some things about it. In fact, it made me wonder why, since the 4th Jamgon Kongtrul abandoned his role as a public teacher, the 2nd Kalu Rinpoche has not attended the Kagyu Monlam again, nor been seen publicly with the 17th Karmapa. In any case, [here is a beautiful video](#) I found of Bokar Rinpoche giving a mandala offering to a young Karmapa at the 2003 Kagyu Monlam under the Bodhi Tree, with a young, happy Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche next to them<sup>3</sup>.

The 17th Karmapa then moved onto the *Life and Liberation of Atisha*, citing two texts: one called *Praises in Thirty Verses* by Dromtonpa and another called the *Praises in Eighty Verses* (*Topa Gyechupa* བསྟོན་པ་བརྒྱད་ཅུ་པ།) by renowned translator, Nagtso Lotsawa. The Karmapa mainly focused on the early life of Atisha, his birthdate and place, his visions of Tārā and his studies of secret mantra and 'unconventional conduct (tul-zhug) with great Indian Mahasiddhas.

In fact, Atisha is one of the rare examples of someone who became a monk after being an accomplished yogic tantric practitioner (there are many examples where monastics had to leave the

monasteries to be yogis etc.). The 17th Karmapa covered the following topics (none of which are mentioned in any detail in the [Treasury of Lives biography on Atisha](#) by Dr. Alexander Gardner);

- Atisha's impact on the Dagpo Kagyu and the Union of Mahamudra and Kadampa teachings
- Date and Place of Birth of Atisha and Dromtonpa's account – End of 10th Century in Bengal
- The Lion of Kings of Zahora – Royal Family Origins and related to Shantarakshita  
Atisha's youthful beauty- stunningly attractive and good-looking
- Atisha's continual visions of Tārā as a child
- Extremely learned in all the areas of knowledge, especially grammar and logic
- Secret Mantra studies and practice with accomplished Indian yogic siddhas, such as Rahula-Gupta and his secret name Jñānavajra
- Madhyamaka Studies with Indian siddha, Avadhūtīpa and his Mind-Only views
- Studies of Madhyamaka with Indian siddha, Shantīpa
- 'In the middle of a very narrow bridge' – sudden teaching style of Avadhūtīpa and practising 'unconventional conduct' (tul-zhug)
- Atisha's pride about his knowledge of the tantras crushed by dākinīs in a dream
- Direct Vision of Tārā who challenges Atisha on his knowledge of the tantras

It was wonderful to hear about Atisha's yogic conduct and how for example, Rahula Gupta got his parents to let him study with him by making them think he was crazy.

Music? For Atisha's youthful beauty, astounding knowledge and skill, [He's the Greatest Dancer](#) by Sister Sledge, for the 'unconventional conduct' [Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood](#) by The Animals, and the message of the pride-crushing women, [You're So Vain](#) by Carly Simon. 😊

Written and transcribed by Adele Tomlin, 31st January 2023.

## TRANSCRIPT (DAY ONE 2023)

“So today is the second day of the special Kagyu Monlam. We are not counting it among the other numbers, so it is called a special Kagyu Monlam. The Monlam is being held at all the Kagyu monasteries, but the main place it is being held is at the Bokar Monastery Shedra. So the sangha members have stayed there after the Kagyu Guncho and together all the rest of us are participating in the special Kagyu Monlam over the internet.

### The seeds/roots of the Kagyu Monlam

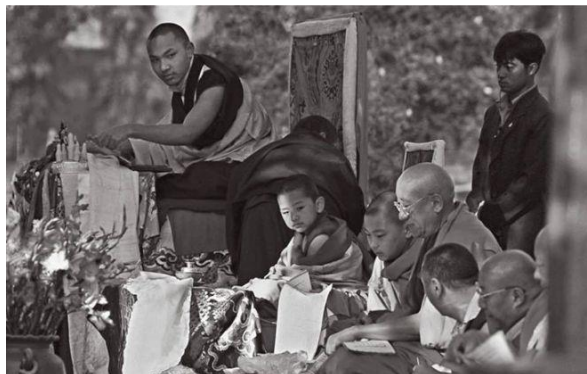
“As you all know, the seeds of the Kagyu Monlam and how it developed into what we call that, began in the 1980s with the former 1<sup>st</sup> Kalu Rinpoche in the sacred place of Bodh Gaya, where they held a small puja and recited the *Aspiration of Excellent Conduct*.

I would imagine that the previous 2<sup>nd</sup> Bokar Rinpoche and Khenpo Donyo Lodro Rinpoche were also there. So, they planted the seed of the Kagyu Monlam and then it became the seed of the Kagyu sangha Monlam. Primarily under the direction of the previous Bokar Rinpoche who led that for several years.



*1st Kalu Rinpoche and 2nd Bokar Rinpoche*

In 2000, when I arrived in India, I had the opportunity to go to the Kagyu Monlam, and in particular, in 2004, I made quite a few changes in the texts we recited at the Monlam and so on. In any case, the seeds of what we call the Kagyu Monlam was primarily started by the previous Kalu and Bokar Rinpoche who have both passed away. So, to have such an elaborate and special Kagyu Monlam at the Bokar Shedra Chime Ling with all the sangha who came to the Kagyu Guncho (Winter gathering), has an auspicious connection to our history and that is how I see it.



*17th Karmapa at the Kagyu Monlam beneath the Bodhi tree, with 4th Jamgon Kongtrul, 2nd Kalu Rinpoche, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bokar Rinpoche in 2001.*



*The former Bokar Rinpoche making a Mandala offering to the 17th Karmapa in Bodh Gaya in 2004.*

### Atisha’s impact on the Dagpo Kagyu and the Union of Mahamudra and Kadampa teachings

“Today, I want to give an introduction to the Life of Atisha. Atisha was very kind to everyone in Tibet and was also one of the founders of the Kadampa lineage and also in our Dagpo Kagyu lineage, in his youth, Gampopa studied the Kadampa teachings. Then, later he met Milarepa and he received the instructions on the six yogas of Mahamudra and Nāropa. Then, later Gampopa himself when he was caring for his students, primarily he taught them according to the stages of the path of the Kadampa teachings. That is what he taught in public. He was giving advice to the general public. Also, he would give advice to particular students dwelling in retreat in the mountains and he taught them Mahamudra and so this is a way of teaching where he unified the Kadampa instructions and Mahamudra. It became what we call a ‘Union of Kadampa and Mahamudra’.

So, for the Dagpo Kagyu also Atisha also has a particular importance. So today I will start teaching about the Life of Atisha and it will take three days. I have not had much time to prepare it, I have been very busy, so my preparations have not been the best but I think I need to give the teaching so it is not left empty.”

### Date and Place of Birth of Atisha: Dromtonpa’s account – End of 10th Century in Bengal

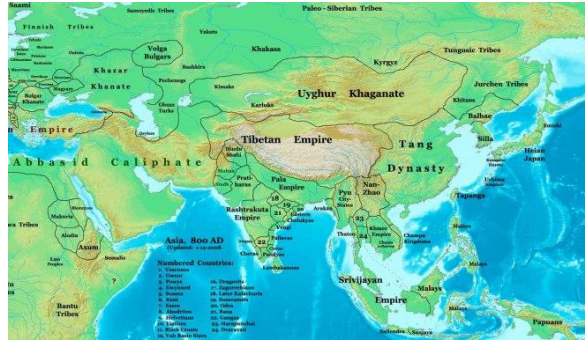


*Dromtonpa*

“Of course, it is important for us to understand when Atisha appeared. If we calculate it in the Common Era, he was probably born in 982 CE. There is a summary of his life by Dromtonpa Gyelwa Jungne (འབྲོན་ཏྟཱ་ལ་པའི་འབྲུང་གནས། 1004-1064) in which it is written that:

“The Omniscient Guru was born in the year of the female-fire Tiger.”

There are several different accounts of Atisha’s birth, the main one probably was the one by Dromtonpa. It was the most influential in terms of the year of his birth, which in the Western calculation is 982 CE.



Map of India, Tibet and Asia, c.800 CE, during the Pala dynasty. Bengal was ruled by the Pala empire when Atisha was born.

“If we wonder where Atisha was born? The place was medieval India. In medieval times, India had the four directions of east, south, west and north and there was a central region. So, it was divided into these five regions. It is often said that India was the noble land of the five regions. There is this use of the name.

These terms appear frequently in the texts of the Chinese translators, including Xuanzang’s Travels to India. However, it is not often found in the Tibetan works. These days, we say Bodh Gaya is the central area. So, everything around Bodh Gaya, geographically is central India. In terms of Dharma, it is also considered central India. The central area of Dharma means primarily where the Buddha’s teachings were taught and spread and the four sections of the sangha are all present. So that is what is meant by a ‘central land in terms of the Dharma’. So, India has the five regions: the four directions and the central region. Among these, the place where Atisha was born is Central India.

Now, in the *Praises in Eighty Verses* by Dromtonpa, it says: “The prosperous land of Bengal.” This clearly indicates that Atisha’s birthplace was in Bengal in Eastern India. However, in terms of current geography, his birthplace is no longer within the territory of India. There is the country called Bangladesh, and it is within that.

To give an example, it is similar to the situation of the Buddha. He was born in ancient Indian land and in terms of ancient land he was an Indian person. In terms of today, the birthplace of the Buddha is in Nepal. So now they say he was born in Nepal because the birthplace is now in the territory of Nepal. This is similar to the situation with the birthplace of Atisha.

So, if we ask where is it now in terms of present geography? In the text called the *Praise in Eighty Verses to Atisha (bsTod pa brgyad cu pa)*, by Dromtonpa, translated by [Nagtso Lotsawa \(Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyelwa\)](#) (nag ‘tsho tshul khrim rgyal ba, 1011-1064)<sup>4</sup>. What it says is:

“In the excellent land of Za-hora [Bengal] in the east, Is a great city, Vikramapura.”

ཤར་ཕྱོགས་ཟ་ཏོར་ཡུལ་མཚོག་ན། འཛམ་གྲུབ་ཆེན་པོ་ཡོང། བེ་ཀ་མ་ནི་ལྷ་ར་ཡིན།།

Contemporary researchers say that Atisha’s birthplace is the Munshiganj district of present-day Bangladesh. In medieval times, this area was called Vikramapura<sup>5</sup>. This is why it says in the *Praises of Eighty Verses*, Vikramapura. In terms of the history of Bangladesh, from the 10th to the 13th Century, Vikramapura was the capital of three different dynasties: the Candra, Varmapa and the Sena dynasties. It was also a great and important centre for Buddhism in middle eastern Asia. This is what contemporary researchers explain. In the 7th Century, the Chinese translator Xuanzang also went to Vikramapura and he also recorded in writing the events relating to his visit.”

## The Lion of Kings of Zahora – Royal Family Origins and related to Shantarakshita

"What sort of family was Atisha born into? It was the royal family of that area. According to the old histories, they say it was the Lion of the Pala Kings. his father was Kalyanachandra, the third king of the Chandra dynasty in East Bengal, who reigned from 975–1000 CE, and his mother was Shri Prabhavati.

His parents had three sons, who were born one after the other. The oldest was called Padmagarbha, the middle was called Chandragarbha and the youngest was Śrīgarbha. It seems that Padmagarbha ascended to the throne, Chandragarbha became Atisha and Śrīgarbha also went forth as a monk.

“[His eldest son, Punyasri,  
Is a great scholar of our time  
Known as Dha-na-shri.  
The youngest, Śrīgarbha,  
Is the monk Viryacandra.  
The middle [son], Candragarbha,  
Is our present venerable guru [Atisha].

མཉམ་གྱི་ཐུ་བོ་བསོད་ནམས་དཔལ། ། ད་ལྟོ་འདྲེ་ན་མཁས་པ་ཆེ། ། ལྷན་སྤྱི་ཞེས་བྱ་བར་གྲགས། ། རྒྱུ་བ་དཔལ་གྱི་སྟོང་པོ་ནི། ། དགེ་སློང་བུ་ཆུ་ཙན་ཡིན། ། རིང་བོ་རྒྱ་བའི་སྟོང་པོ་ནི། ། ད་ ། ལྷ་ས་མ་རྩེ་བཙུན་ཡིན། །”

It is said that later he also went to Tibet to see Atisha, after he had gone there. But he was unable to see him before he passed away.

According to the contemporary histories of Bangladesh, his father’s name was Kalyanachandra. So, in the Eastern areas of Bengal, there was the Candra (Moon) dynasty. He was the third King of this dynasty. The time he reigned was from 975-1000 CE. So, this is the time period of his reign.

So the quote says, he was the Lion of Kings of Zahora. If we ask what Zahora means, that is a complicated question. Sometimes we think of it as a place, or as a family, there are many different descriptions of it. In the *Blue Annals* by Go Lotsāwa<sup>6</sup>, it says that Zahor in Tibetan is a corruption of the Sanskrit word, *sahora*. So actually, it should say Zahora, it means ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ and several other meanings. My guess is that Zahora is the name of a particular family, maybe a royal family, a good lineage or family. This is just a guess though.



*Śāntarakṣita* (ཞི་བ་འཚོ་ zhi ba tsho,[3] 725–788)

During the time of the Tibetan King, Trisong Detsen, which was probably about 200 years before Atisha's birth, Shantarakshita (Śāntarakṣita)<sup>7</sup> went to Tibet. He also came from Bengal, Eastern India,

and it is said that both he and Atisha were from the same family line. Dromtonpa's *Praise of Atisha* says that:

"The family line in which the Bodhisattva Shantarakshita was born."

Thus the two most influential, great Panditas in India in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, both came from Eastern India and from the same family lineage. This is an amazing coincidence. Probably it shows that there must have been some previous karmic connection."

### Atisha's youthful beauty



"To give an introduction to some of the events in Atisha's childhood. When he was young, he was known by the name Chandragarbha and was extremely intelligent. He was also very respectful of his parents and he treated them well. He was also very handsome and attractive, so whoever saw him were captivated by his physical beauty. For that reason, Atisha said:

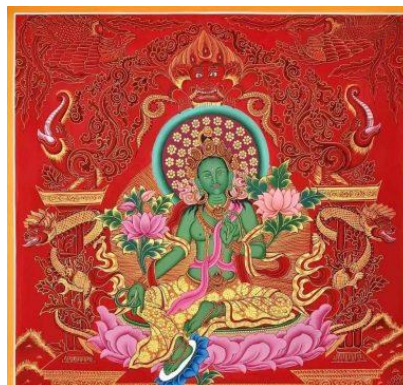
"I had a very good-looking form and so even gurus, free of desire, treated me nicely. So, no need to mention people who still had desire."

He also said:

"I was so good-looking that all the gurus were pleased by me,"

So, whoever looked at him were very captivated and enchanted by him. This is a feeling people naturally had within their minds because of the attractiveness of his form and face."

### Atisha's continual visions of Tārā as a child



"From a young age, Atisha often had visions of Tārā and was blessed by her. So his own special yidam deity was mainly Tārā. Once when he was very young, not long after he had gone to bed, at one time, he had been sleeping on a bed in the palace. Above Atisha's crib, there was a great cracking and rumbling sound, his parents wondered what it was and immediately went to where he was sleeping and they saw huge Scorpion had fallen down right in front of Atisha. When he saw this huge scorpion,

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

he did not have any fear or any trepidation at all. Eventually, the scorpion left on its own. So it is said that this was a sign that before he would see his special deity and before he could practice naturally, he would have obstacles. Later, they said that. The reason they say that is because the next day, there was a huge cracking and rumbling sound and again his parents who were very afraid and went to see what was happening where he was sleeping. His mother saw a beautiful blue Utpala<sup>8</sup> flower. Atisha said that, at that time, he saw Tārā’s face, but his mother did not see that. She saw a blue Utpala flower, that had just freshly bloomed.”



*Blue Utpala flower, which is slightly different from a blue lotus flower.*

“Atisha said later, from that point on he would always see Tārā’s face. So, Atisha would continually see Tārā and get blessings from her. Whenever he had any doubts or questions, no matter what they were, he would arrange a painting or drawing of Tārā and in front of it make aspirations and supplicate. Then she would appear directly. Even if she did not appear directly, naturally his confusion would be resolved, and his doubts would be pacified. Atisha said that is how it happened himself. So, from an early age, he saw Tārā and was blessed by her.”

### Extremely learned in all the areas of knowledge, especially grammar and logic



*Birch bark manuscript from Kashmir of the Rupavatara, a grammatical textbook based on the Sanskrit grammar of Panini. It was composed by Dharmakirti, a Buddhist monk from Ceylon. The manuscript was transcribed in 1663 Wellcome Images.*

“As Atisha got older, until he was ten years old, he studied medicine, crafts and writing and so on. Then until he was 21, he studied non-Buddhist and Buddhist grammar and logic completely. So basically he studied all the different areas of knowledge that one had to study in India. The sixty-four arts, as they are called. In particular, he was very skilled in grammar and logic.

In the *Eighty Verses of Praise to Atisha* by Nagtso Lotsāwa it says:

“At the age of twenty-one,  
You were learned  
In all sixty-four arts,

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

All the crafts,  
Sanskrit language,  
And all logic.”

If we look at what level Atisha had of grammar and logic. When he was 15, he had listened to the teachings on reasoning once. At that time, there was a non-Buddhist intellectual/scholar who was very well-known and he had a debate with Atisha who defeated this non-Buddhist scholar. Then, he became very well-known for his knowledge of that topic. This is according to the great Kadampa Geshe Drolungpa Chenpo.

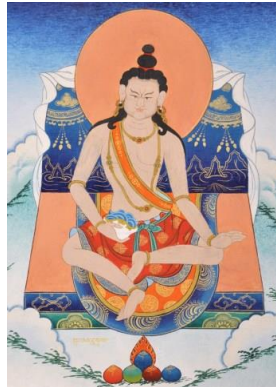
Even later, after Atisha went to Tibet he would often speak with Tibetan lamas about grammar and pronunciation. At this time, there was not even a word for grammar or pronunciation. There was an attendant of Atisha's called Bangton, who spent a lot of time with him. He was reciting the long dharani of the Great Compassionate One, Avalokiteshvara and blessing other sentient beings, who really got great blessings. What Atisha said is that:

“When you are reciting the dharani of Avalokiteshvara but your pronunciation of the dharani is incorrect, it should not bring any blessings, but because you have good intentions, the blessings are from those kind intentions. They are not the blessings of reciting the mantra correctly.”

Sometimes, it was said, that when Atisha's hand hurt, he would call this attendant, Bangton and say: “Please bless my hand. You have such a good and kind intention it will be of benefit.”

Also, when Atisha was talking about epistemology and logic, he would speak about the Tibetan lamas and told them that in Tibetan they did not even have a term for ‘validity’. At this point, there was no level of study of epistemology. So Atisha said they could never debate with non-Buddhists. Atisha was very learned in terms of grammar, logic and epistemology. He also studied the Buddhist theories of knowledge and many Sutras and Tantras.

### Secret Mantra studies and practice with accomplished Indian yogic siddhas, Rahula-Gupta and Atisha's secret name Jñānavajra



*Rāhula-gupta (sbas pa'i rnal 'byor sgra gcan 'dzin pa), 10th Century Indian yogi*

“Now, I would like to talk about how Atisha practised secret mantra. In the beginning, before he had studied the Sutras, he studied a lot of secret mantra. When he was young he primarily studied tantric teachings.

When he was 22 years old, Atisha went to Midnight-Blue Khandro mountain temple and while he was there was a guru called Rahulaguptavadra<sup>9</sup>. This was not a general type of teacher, but a lama who had

visions of Hevajra and prophecies from the dakinis. Atisha took all the empowerments on Hevajra from him and was given the secret name of Jñānavajra (Yeshe Dorje).

He also studied secret mantra with Kamalarakshita, a yogi of Yamantaka, who was really powerful and able to transform alcohol into milk and he could spread out his mat and float across the Ganges river. So, these were the kinds of powers this guru had. Atisha also did a lot of his secret mantra studies with him.



*10th/11th Century Buddhist master, Jowo Atisha, pictured with yogic teachers and students.*

### Madhyamaka Studies with Indian siddha, Avadhūtīpa and his Mind-Only views



*Avadhūtīpa, Mahasiddha (Tibetan: drup tob awa dhu ti pa)*

“Another important guru Atisha studied with when he was young was Avadhūtīpa<sup>10</sup>. There are two, an elder and a younger. The one I am talking about here is the elder/greater. Some people say that Atisha spent seven years with him, some say twelve years. So, there are differing accounts. However, Nagtso Lotsawa states it was nine years. Atisha mainly studied the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) view with him.

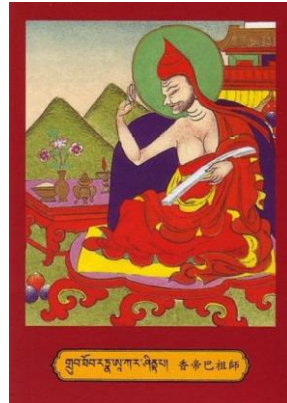
Avadhūtīpa Chenpo was from the Yogacāra Middle Way school. This seems to be the reason why Atisha upheld the views of the Yogacāra Middle Way view. Once there were some Tibetan lamas who asked him, what are the reasons why you hold the Yogacāra Middle Way view? In response, Atisha said:

"I asked exactly the same question to my guru, Avadhūtīpa ' who responded: "this is how I see the Dharma and have realised the nature. So for that reason, you should also uphold this view."

So, Atisha was an upholder of the Mahayāna, and in particular the Autonomous Yogacāra Madhyamaka. Yet, in Tibet we have a tradition and habit of saying that almost all the Indian panditas were Consequentialist Middle Way (Prasangika Madhyamaka).

### Studies of Madhyamaka with Indian siddha, Shantīpa

“However, if you think about Atisha’s life, there is another really important guru called Shantipa (Śāntipa)<sup>11</sup>. He was one of the great paṇḍitas of Nalanda and he was the one who guarded the eastern gate. He was a very well-known Mind-Only scholar, famous for his Mind-Only view. So, Atisha studied Dharma from him.



*Ratnākaraśānti (also known as Śāntipa) (c. 10th-century CE)*

Once, Shantipa was teaching the *8000 Verse Prajñāparāmita Sutra* and made negations of all of the Madhyamaka expositions. So, Shantipa would say: “the Madhyamaka says this, and this is not right.” He refuted each of the Madhyamaka expositions. Because of these refutations, instead of making Atisha doubt the Madhyamaka view, it made him have a much stronger understanding of it. His refutations of Madhyamaka were very beneficial for Atisha because it clarified exactly what the Madhyamaka view was.

Thus, it is said that Atisha himself, even though he held the Yogacāra Madhyamaka view, also had a strong faith and interest in the Consequentialist Madhyamaka of Chandrakirti’s tradition, many of the older lamas have a tradition of saying this.”

### ‘In the middle of a very narrow bridge’ – Sudden teaching style of Avadhūtīpa and practising ‘unconventional conduct’ (tul-zhug)



*Damro Bridge, Arunachal Pradesh, India. From CNTraveller*

“Anyway, Atisha spent quite a few years with the guru Avadhūtīpa, but they never had just ordinary chats about things, about what they were doing and chit-chat. They wouldn’t have any meaningless

talks or questions like that. Sometimes, Atisha would pay respect and offer a great gold mandala and he would not get any teachings. Sometimes, at busy times, when Atisha did not ask for teachings and normally one should not ask for them, all of a sudden Avadhūtipa would teach some Dharma. Yet, if he asked and made offerings, Avadhūtipa would not teach the Dharma.

One time, Atisha and this guru were walking across a very narrow bridge, extremely thin and narrow. As they were going to cross it, probably Avadhūtipa was in the front, and Atisha at the back and as they were going like that. In the middle of this very narrow bridge, he suddenly turned round and said:

‘Son, until you are free of ego-clinging, refrain from even the tiniest or tiny negative actions.’

As you can imagine, Avadhūtipa just taught this very important Dharma as they were on the middle of this tiny bridge. Avadhūtipa was really a lama who had practiced, so every single word was one that could bring exceptional realisation, this was the type of incredible lama he was.

During that time, Atisha had many different gurus at that time, and he received many different tantric teachings from many. Atisha himself practised the unconventional conduct (tul-zhug chopa) of Avadhūtipa. This yogic conduct means giving up any fear or shame and so on. If you think about this in worldly terms, it is kind of crazy actions. An ordinary person would look at them and think they were crazy, not wearing many clothes and having no fear of anything and so on. Atisha spent six years (some say three years) practising yogic conduct.

### Atisha’s pride about his knowledge of the tantras crushed by ḍākinīs in a dream

“Basically, Jowo Atisha had studied a lot of secret mantric practice but he also trained and practised in the Vajrayāna. He had such a vast practice of it that Atisha began to think to himself, that he had such a vast knowledge of secret mantra, that no-one else had better knowledge of tantras and mantra than he did. So, he got a bit proud of himself.

Due to this pride, when Atisha was travelling on his way to India, he had a dream in which ḍākinīs were showing him innumerable tantric texts and asked him: “What tantra is this? Do you know?”

However, Atisha had not even heard the names of the texts, there were so many, there were just a couple he knew. So, the ḍākinīs were saying, those are just the few texts you know, but the Tantras you don’t know are infinite.”

### Direct vision of Tārā who challenges Atisha on his knowledge of the tantras



“Another time, Atisha’s special deity Tārā appeared to him and said: “Are you a Pandita who knows about mantra?” Atisha replied he was. Tārā then mentioned a couple of tantric sadhanas and said: “Do you know these sadhanas?” Atisha said that he had never seen or heard the name of the texts. So, Tārā said:

“If that is how it is, then why do you think you are so well-versed in the Dharma and mantra practices? The tantras that you know are like no more than a horse-hair in the world of humans. Almost all the mantric texts are in the hands of the dakinis.”

Then she disappeared. From that point on, Atisha said that his pride had been shattered. He had thought he knew a lot of tantra, but then realised that the amount he knew was like just a tiny portion of them and there were many more Dharma teachings and pith instructions to learn.

This is mainly discussing the early life of Atisha, how he studied a lot of secret mantra teachings. I will discuss tomorrow, how he went forth and became an ordained monk. The reason for that is because we started a little bit late today.”

## CHAPTER TWO: Atisha's names, monastic ordination, his main teachers and historical background to his being invited to Tibet

“In any case, the only lama whom Tibetans call *Jowo Je* is Atisha, there is no-one else. This shows how close Tibetans felt to Jowo Je, and how much gratitude they have for his kindness. Tibetans have a different feeling for Jowo Je than any other lama from the very depths of their hearts. So, they use this word of high praise and respect.”

“One particular feature of Atisha, is that he combined the Middle Way view and the vast practice of the Mind-Only and practised them in union. This is a special feature of Atisha, and for that reason, even in Tibetan Buddhism, he was very influential.”

“When Atisha went to Tibet, they asked him: “You have had a lot of gurus so why do you pay such respect to Serlingpa?” Atisha replied: “ I followed many gurus, I cannot say who is better or worse, or higher or lower, there is no difference, all of them had high and excellent qualities. My reason for having such devotion to Serlingpa is not because of any difference in qualities , I have faith in all of them, but Serlingpa was the kindest one to me.”

–17th Karmapa

### Introduction

Here is an introduction and transcript of the second day of the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa's remarkable and original teaching on the Life and Liberation of Atisha (see video [here](#)). In this teaching, the Karmapa considered the following topics:

- Reasons/signs why the young tantric yogi Atisha took monastic ordination and from whom
- How Atisha got his names and their meaning,
- Combining monastic life with tantric practice
- Atisha's three main gurus and the reasons for his most beloved one, Serlingpa (Suvarṇadvīpa) whom he met in Sumatra, Indonesia.
- the historical background in Tibet before Atisha was invited there.

How Atisha was invited and brought to Tibet is a topic the Karmapa discusses in more detail on the following Day Three.

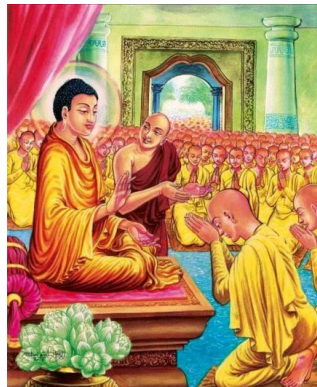
It was fascinating to learn about Atisha's attempt to combine his monastic life while continuing his tantric practice, by leaving the monastery every six days. In fact, I recently spoke about this issue at the 4th Vajrayana conference in Bhutan and Atisha's view as to whether or not monastics are allowed to practice Vajrayana, see video [here](#)<sup>12</sup>. According to Atisha (Je Tsongkhapa and the current 14th Dalai Lama), monastics are not supposed to take the second or third empowerments of a Vajrayana initiation as it would defeat their Vinaya and monastic vows. So, it is interesting that Atisha himself appeared to try and circumvent this, and combine the two sets of practice and vows. Although, clearly Atisha would be considered an extremely highly realised practitioner, unlike most monastics. However, one might debate that the rule/samaya about a Vajrayana/tantra practitioner not spending more than seven days with srameneras would seem to apply to a whole period of time, not every six days etc. It seems to defeat the very principle of that samaya/commitment, but this is how Atisha was said to have combined the two, according to this account shared by the 17th Karmapa

In any case, the 17th Karmapa's teaching yet again was full of insights into the extraordinary life of Atisha, his studies and teachers in Buddhist India, and why Tibetans hold him in such high regard and respect.

Music? For Atisha's travels to the 'Golden Island' Sumatra and his beloved teacher, Serlingpa (the Golden Island one): [Indonesian Vibes music by Java Delta](#), [Gamelan Music of Indonesia](#) and [Golden](#) by Harry Styles.

## Transcript (Day Two 2023)

### Reasons and signs why Atisha became a monk



"I will now talk about the causes and circumstances in which Atisha was ordained. At first, Atisha from a very young age was a practitioner of Vajrayana. So how did he go from being a tantric practitioner to wanting to go forth?

When Atisha was young, he practised a lot of Vajrayana and he basically mastered the topics of mantra and tantric practice and so he thought that originally, he would devote himself to tantric practice. However, there are many different signs he should go forth as a monk.

Once in a dream, Heruka came to the sky in front of Atisha and said:

"Child of noble family, if you keep doing the practice of Avadhutipa's conduct that will not be enough to get anywhere. So you need to go forth and be a monastic. If you do that, then in the future, you will be able to foster many monastic students."

That was the sign/prophecy he received that he should become a monk.

There was a more amazing dream than that. One night Atisha dreamt that he was in a big temple, inside of which was Bhagavan Shakyamuni surrounded by a large sangha of monastics and they were all eating their midday meal. Atisha himself was at the end of the row. While he was sitting there at the end of the row, the Buddha at the head of the row and he looked down towards Atisha, he probably pointed his finger at him and said "something happened to that person so that he did not go forth/become a monk." Atisha dreamt the Buddha said this, and it was another sign that he needed to go forth.

Another night, in his dream, Atisha saw Maitreya in a temple. Normally Maitreya wears the clothes and adornments of a Bodhisattva but in his dream, Maitreya was wearing monastic robes of a monk.

When he saw Maitreya dressed in monastic robes in the temple, Atisha approached him, Maitreya said:

“This is a place for monastics to come, but it is not a place for you householders to come, so you are not allowed to come here.”

As there were so many signs that he should go forth, Atisha thought to himself, “I definitely have to become a monk, if I do not, then it will not go well.”

That time, there was a householder from whom Atisha would normally rent rooms when he was in Nalanda, and this landlord knew a lot about the Dharma. So, Atisha asked him about going forth. At that time, in India, there were many different Hinayana/Shravaka Buddhist schools, so, Atisha asked him

“I would like to go forth, but which Shravaka school is good to do that in?”

The landlord replied:

“Are you going to keep doing Vajrayana practice or not? Are you going to stop it when you become a monk or continue?”

This was a very pointed question. Atisha replied: “even after going forth, I will keep doing Vajrayana practice.” So then the landlord said: “In that case, it is best for you to go forth in the Mahāsāṃghika School”. So his opinion was out of all the Shravaka schools, Atisha should enter the Mahāsāṃghika School because it is probably a bit more relaxed and less strict. So, in any case he said it was best to go forth in the Mahāsāṃghika School<sup>13</sup>.

Taking that advice, when Atisha was 29 years old, he went to Bodh Gaya. At that time, there were many different temples there. There was one called the Madhya Vihara. He went to that temple and went forth there. Some other accounts say he went forth at the Odantapuri Monastery was a prominent Buddhist Mahavihara in what is now Bihar Sharif in Bihar, India. It is believed to have been established by the Pala ruler Gopala in the 8th century.] In any case, there are different accounts of the place he went forth.

However, if you ask who was the Khenpo who gave him ordination, it was a master of the Mahāsāṃghika<sup>14</sup> lineage school, within that there are many different sub-schools of the Mahāsāṃghika and it was called the school of *Transcending the World* (Jigten le depa). The master in this was called Buddhajñāna (Sangye Yeshe). He was probably a master of Padmasambhava. So he was a very well-known master. Later, it is said that this master had achieved the level of the path of joining (jorlam) . So, the master from whom Atisha took the vows was Abbot Śīlarakṣita.

[Becoming a monk and Atisha’s names and their meaning](#)

অতীশ দীপংকর শ্রীজ্ঞান

ཨ་ཏི་ཤ་མར་མི་མཇེད་དཔལ་ཡི་ཤེས་

**Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna**

*Atiśa's name in Bengali, Tibetan and IAST script.*

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

The name Atisha was given as a monastic was *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna*. If we explain this in Tibetan, *Dīpaṃkara* means 'to do'; *Śrī* means 'glorious' and *jñāna* means 'primordial awareness wisdom'.

All the people in Buddhajñāna's lineage had the word *jñāna* at the end of their name, that was the tradition. That is why *jñāna* is at the end of Atisha's name. So among Dromtonpa's *Praises in Thirty Verses*, it says:

“He left the wealth of royalty, became a Bhikkhu of the Mahāsāṃghika School, I supplicate glorious Atisha.”

From then onwards, Atisha refrained from even the smallest offence of the Vinaya. Even the most minor and subtle offences of the Vinaya, he was very strict about them and kept his vows very carefully. For example, there were clay cups, he was given some flour/grain but he wouldn't eat it if it was put in a clay pot. The reason was because the clay pot in olden times was for alcohol. They normally made alcohol in clay pots so for that reason he also gave up any container that had had alcohol in it. In the Mahāsāṃghika school they added not drinking alcohol to the four root vows and made it as a 5th root vow. They had a very strict practice so that Atisha himself would not drink from such a pot.

[2025: However the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa said that when he looked at the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya in the Chinese translations, it seems not drinking alcohol is not in the root vows].

In any case, Jowo Atisha himself said he never committed any offence at all in the Pratimoksha vows. There had been a few minor faults in the Bodhisattva precepts but that he had not left any of them unrepaired for more than a day. If there was a fault that happened that day, he would confess and purify it immediately. He would not wait until later to confess and repair it.

Next, I want to speak about how Atisha got his name, he had many different names, and could say he was called by different names. The most common Sanskrit name for him is Atisha. If we translate the word Atisha, it means pre-eminent, or the most excellent. There are many ways one can explain the word, Atisha. Some people would say that *Ati* means excellent and *sha* means the intention if you join the two it means the 'most excellent intentions'. Some people say the word *Ati* means 'exceedingly' and *Shanti* means 'peaceful', so when one combines the two it means 'extremely peaceful'.

Another explanation is that *A* means 'great yogi', *ti* means a great pandita, referring to the *ti* in pandita, and *sha* means a great ordained monk. So, it can also mean being a great yogi pandita. I think *Sha* might also be understood as a Shramanera. This is another explanation of the name.

### The way Atisha was given his name – by a Dharma King?



*King Dharmapala of the Pala dynasty*

“In any case, how was he given this name Atisha? There are two different accounts of this.

One of them is from Panchen Sonam Dragpa’s *History of the Kadampas: Ornament of the Mind (Kadam Chojung Yigi Dzepa)*, which says that Lha Lama Jangchub O saw that Atisha had superior knowledge and compassion, different from other Indian panditas, and was superior to them. He saw that he would be able to help the precious teachings flourish more than before. So he gave him the name Atisha as a way of praising him.

Another account is from Sakyapa Kunga Sonam’s account of the *History of the Kadampa: Amazing Ocean*, it says that there was a King called Dharmapala in the Pala dynasty in India who was very well-known. At that time, Atisha was superior to all the other panditas and siddhas in India. So Dharmapāla invited him to Vikramaśīla and gave him the name, Atisha. However, this King Dharmapāla, if he was the King of the Pāla dynasty then the time period does not match because there are many different explanations about King Dharmapāla. The Indian histories are not clear. So basically we are making inferences or guesses. There are many different positions, even though he was a well-known King. Later, most Indian historians say that this King existed in the 8th Century. So if he was from the 8th Century, then it is a different time period to Atisha who was from the 10th Century.

In Je Tāranātha’s *History of Indian Buddhism*, where he is describing Jowo Atisha, he says that the King of the Pala dynasty who reigned at that time was King Bayapāla, not Dharmapāla. So, this is another point that needs some investigation. However, it is more logical and likely that the King Jangchub O gave Atisha that name.

#### *Jowo Je* name for Atisha: meaning and purpose



*Jowo Shakyamuni, Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet, Yarlung Dynasty, brought to Tibet in 641(?), gilt metals with semiprecious stones, pearls, and paint and various offerings*

"One of the names most frequently used for Atisha in Tibet is *Jowo Je*. There are two *Jowo* statues in the area of Lhasa, Tibet, which are both called *Jowo*. The name *Je* is the only difference. In terms of Sanskrit, the word *Jowo* would be a translation of the word *Swami*. Basically, there are many different Indian swamis, Hindu teachers were called that.

In Tibetan, the word *Jowo* can mean the King, or the leader. Sometimes it can be understood as someone who is older than you. Like we call an older son, Ajo or Jo la. I think the word *Jowo* comes from that same root. Or it can mean like the *Jowo* statue in Lhasa, a Buddha statue in Sambhogakaya robes and ornaments. Basically, *Jowo* is not any Buddha statue but ones that are in that form.

Anyway, *Jowo* is a word of praise, someone for whom we have a lot of regard and respect for, the most important among all. It's a word indicating how much one cherishes someone. In any case, the only lama whom Tibetans call *Jowo Je* is Atisha, there is no-one else. This shows how close Tibetans felt to *Jowo Je*, and how much gratitude they have for his kindness. Tibetans have a different feeling for *Jowo*

Je than any other lama from the very depths of their hearts. So, they use this word of high praise and respect."

### Atisha's monastic studies combined with Vajrayana/tantric practice – leaving the monks every six days

"From the time Atisha went forth at the age of 29 until the age of 33, Atisha studied various Hinayana and Mahayana texts from many different gurus. The places he studied mainly at were Odantapuri and Vikramashila, which was very well-known and Nalanda was not quite as well-known that time. So he studied mainly there. And there was Odantapuri, probably around Bodh Gaya/Bihar. They were the most well-known in India at that time. Both of these places were part of the Pala dynasty at that time.

In terms of the texts he studied of the Hinayana vehicle, at that time, there were four main schools: The *Mahāsāṃghika*, the *Theravada*, the *Mahasamata* and the *Sarvāstivāda*. Sometimes they talk about the two, or the four main schools, but at the time of Atisha, when they say four main schools, it means among the 18 different schools, the most widespread of the schools, the ones that were still extant, were called the four great schools.

Each of these schools had their own sutras, Abhidharma and Vinaya texts, which were slightly different. Atisha had faith in all of them. He knew the practices of each of them clearly without confusing or mixing them. For example, he even knew how novices should give bhikshus their begging bowls at mealtimes. He also studied the *Great Exposition Treatise (Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra)*, the 800-volume text written by the Arhat Upagupta. Whether it was the same text as the *Great Exposition Treatise* as described by the Chinese, some say it had 300 volumes—it was a very long text with hundreds of volumes—and Atisha studied the entire text. It is said to be the common basis for all four schools, with guru Dharmarakṣita at Odantapuri monastery. Generally, it is said, it would take twelve years to study this text, but Atisha was so diligent that he studied its entirety in eight years.

The main guru he studied Mahayāna scriptures from was Shantipa, who was at Vikramashila. There were gates in the eight directions there. The guardian of the east gate was Shantipa, and the guardian of the North gate was Nāropa. He was called the Omniscient One in the Age of Strife in India. Many Tibetans and gurus had studied with him, and he had a great connection with Tibetans at that time. After Nāropa, Atisha was considered the best known scholar and second in importance after Nāropa.

Also, at that time in India there were many commonalities between the non-Buddhist and Buddhist practices. There were also many Buddhist masters who were unable to clearly distinguish between the two groups. Atisha said that other than him and Shantipa very few could make that distinction. [2025 teaching].

At that time, while he was studying, he would go to the master Dharmarakṣita and study for six days, and then on the seventh day, he would leave. Every day, he would leave the borders of the monastery and go outside. The reason why Atisha did this, was that in the secret mantra it is said that one should not spend more than seven days with the Shravakas. That is one of the main vows of the Vajrayana and a samaya commitment. So, Atisha only stayed for six days in the monastery.

### Atisha's numerous teachers and the three main gurus

"Likewise, at that same time, Atisha studied with many different gurus, he would go to all sorts of different places throughout India. He went to many different islands and sailed across oceans three times. He went to Sumatra and Ceylon and many different islands and underwent many hardships to study with the gurus. Those days, sailing across the ocean was very dangerous. Basically, there are different accounts of this in his various biographies. Some say he followed 157 lamas, the maximum

was this number. The minimum would have been around 30 lamas. There is no time to explain all of them.

[(2025 teaching addition) Among them all there were twelve gurus who were the most extraordinary ones, in terms of knowledge of the scriptures and clear realisations. In terms of scholars who were able to realise the actual reality, there were three:

- 1) Avadhutipa, it was probably the younger, whom he studied the Madhyamaka, particularly of the Mind-Only Autonomist school
- 2) Karmarakshita (practitioner of Yamantaka)
- 3) Nāropa's student Drompipa (there is an older and younger one)

These were the gurus Atisha studied with who had seen the truth. Karmarakshita had originally been a Mind-Only scholar, but then after he realised the reality he became a Middle Way proponent. He did not meet Drompipa in person. When he went to look for him in person, he did not find him but had supplicated him quite a bit. Because of that in a dream, he saw Drompipa was with three students, the guru and two other monks, each of them holding a skullcup and in the other hand, they were holding human flesh and eating it. When Atisha saw it, he lost a bit of faith and thought this is not good. If someone is a monastic, eating human flesh from a skullcup, is that not an offence? Then Drompipa said: "Does the Buddha have any confusion?" Atisha said no, then he gave Atisha some human flesh and as Atisha started to eat it, it was the ring finger joint down. When he woke up, from the morning until the night the following day he remained in natural samadhi enjoying the bliss and resting there. So, Atisha thought, is this the blessing of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas or the blessings of Drompipa? There was some doubt about it.

Later, there was a practitioner, who went to Drompipa, and when he met him. Drompipa said to him, "I have a student I have given blessings, his name contains Jnana, you should go to find him, you do not have any real karmic connection with me.". So then he went to see Atisha and asked him to give the Dharma teachings. So Atisha asked him who sent you to come to me, and then he told him about what Drompipa said. So when Atisha heard this, he immediately developed devotion for Drompipa and he became one of his gurus.]

Among his gurus, there were three gurus who had taught him bodhicitta, who are:

1. Dharmarakshita (practitioner of Yamantaka)
2. Matripa Yogi
3. Dharmakirti (*Suvarṇadvīpa Dharmakīrti*; in Tibetan, Serlingpa ལེའོ་ལྷོ་ལེ་པཎ་ལེ་པཎ་)

I will give a brief introduction to these three. Dharmarakshita and Maitri Yogi are like the sources of the Mind-Training (Lo-jong). All three were masters of Bodhicitta.

### 1) Dharmarakshita



*Dharmarakshita [a c. 9th century]*

It is said in the oral histories, that there was a person who had a particular illness and in order to heal that illness, he had to have human flesh and blood as medicine. So when Dharmarakshita<sup>15</sup> heard this, he cut some flesh from his body and gave it to that person for his medicine.

For ordinary people it is very difficult to cut some flesh from one's own body and give it to someone. How is this possible people might wonder? In any case, this Guru had not only trained his mind in exchanging self for others, he was actually able to give the flesh of his own body because of the high level of his practice of bodhicitta.

## **2) Maitripa Yogi**



*Maitripāda (c. 1007–1085)*

“One story about him is about someone was beating a dog with an iron rod and abusing it. When the Maitripāda<sup>16</sup> saw it, then he immediately felt great compassion for that dog and he took the dog's suffering onto his own body. He took on and away all the dog's feelings of pain and sickness but also the physical suffering itself. So on Maitri Yogi's own body, he got big welts on his body that were dripping pus, that had previously been on the dog's body. So he intentionally took the others suffering on himself. So, from that action, we can see he was not an ordinary lama, he had an extremely high level of bodhicitta and loving kindness and compassion. He was like living bodhicitta.

## **3) Suvarṇadvīpa/ Serlingpa**



*Suvarṇadvīpa Dharmakīrti; ཚོས་གྲི་གྲགས་པ་, cho ki dragpa) or Dharmapala (chos skyong) of Suvarṇadvīpa (b. 10th century). In Tibetan, Serlingpa གཞིང་གླིང་པ་.*

“The guru Atisha had the deepest connection with was Serlingpa (*Suvarṇadvīpa*), who was said to be the embodiment of bodhicitta. What does that mean? it means the guru was like living bodhicitta himself, that the guru and the bodhicitta are not separate, the Buddha himself was like the representation of the living bodhicitta himself. Because of this we can say that the level of his realisations of his loving kindness and compassion were extremely high level. Among all the different gurus that Atisha followed, the one he had the greatest and deepest faith in was Serlingpa.

The way we know this, is because for other gurus he did not have any reliquary of them. After the lama passes, the relics are put into a stupa. Atisha did not have a tradition of making reliquaries for all the gurus, but he did make one for Serlingpa, which had a silver parasol on top of it. Also, there is a tradition of making offerings for gurus on the day they passed away, but he did not do that for his other gurus, only for Serlingpa. This is basically the same as when Tibetans observe a guru’s passing away and some say this came from Atisha.

Another special thing Atisha did, is when he heard the name of his gurus, he would join his hands in prayer at his heart to show respect. When Serlingpa’s name was mentioned, he would put his palms at the crown of his head, to show he had different devotion for him than other gurus. When he heard about others, he would not shed any tears either, but when he heard about Serlingpa, the tears would flow naturally.

For that reason, when Atisha went to Tibet, they asked him: “You have had a lot of gurus, so why do you pay such respect to Serlingpa?” Atisha replied: “ I followed many gurus, I cannot say who is better or worse, or higher or lower, there is no difference, all of them had high and excellent qualities. My reason for having such devotion to Serlingpa is not because of any difference in qualities , I have faith in all of them. However, Serlingpa was the kindest and most altruistic. He was also the kindest one to me.”

They asked him “How was he so kind to you?” Atisha replied: “I cannot say I have many good qualities at all. But I can say I have a little bit of goodness; we might say this is my one quality. The reason I have a kind heart is due to Serlingpa’s kindness.”

Another thing Je Atisha said, that without Serlingpa he would not have the bodhicitta of exchanging self for others. It was only after he met Serlingpa that he was able to do that practice of exchanging self for others.”



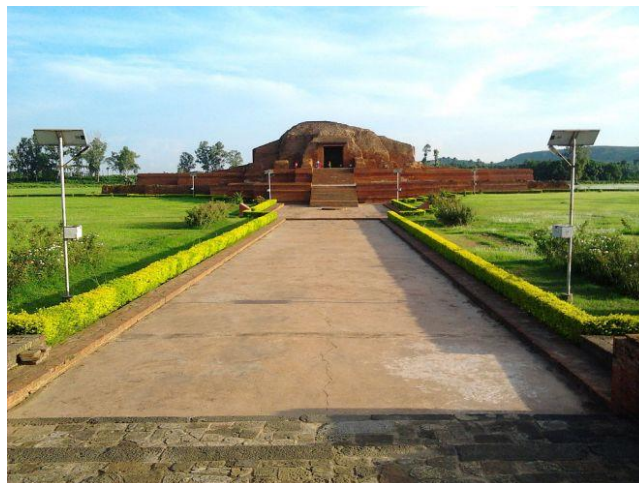
The name Serlingpa (*Suvarṇadvīpa*) means a place in present-day Indonesia. There is large island called Sumatra. It is one of the largest islands in the world, they say. Anyway, the old ancient name for it *Suvarṇadvīpa*, which means the ‘golden island’: *Suvarṇa* means gold and *dvīpa* means island. These days we do not use that word.

In the latter half of the 7th century, probably in 671, the Tang dynasty translator, Yijing (635–713 CE), went twice to that island, and if we combine the amount of time he spent there over the two visits, it was over two years.

Anyway, the reason he was called *Suvarṇadvīpa* (Serlingpa) is because he was also a King and a guru who lived in that country. Due to the lack of time, I cannot speak about how Atisha met and studied with him. If I have time I will talk about it later.”

[For a video clip I made of the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa (2025) talking about Atisha’s fondness for Serlingpa, see [here](#)<sup>17</sup>.]

#### Upholder of the Mind-Only Practice of Vast Conduct and abbot of Vikramaśīla monastery



*Vikramashila ( Vikramaśīlā ) was one of the three most important Buddhist monasteries in India during the Pala Empire, along with Nalanda and Odantapuri. Its location is now the site of Antichak village, Bhagalpur district in Bihar.*

“Atisha followed many gurus of the Mahayana, Middle Way and Mind-Only. Serlingpa and Shantipa were masters who upheld the Mind-Only tradition. If we look at Atisha’s life and liberation in detail, it primarily focused on the lineage of vast conduct that was passed down from Serlingpa. I think he probably paid most attention to the practice.

One particular feature of Atisha, is that he combined the Middle Way view and the vast practice of the Mind-Only and practised them in union. This is a special feature of Atisha, and for that reason, even in Tibetan Buddhism, he was very influential.

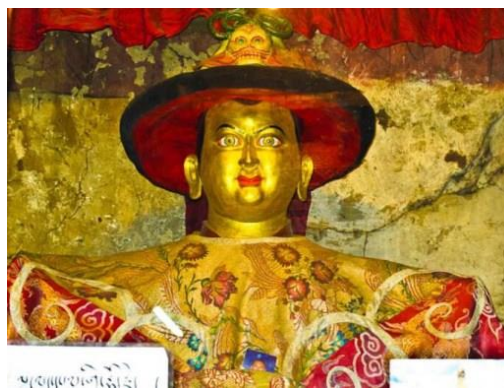
Later, after he had ordained as a monk and done a lot of study and was learned, according to Je Tāranātha's *History of Indian Buddhism*, Atisha became the abbot of Vikramaśīla monastery and also he was an abbot at Odantapuri monastery. As I said previously, Atisha also had a really good character and someone who connected nicely with everyone and treated everyone well. So he studied the Dharma of all the different schools and tried to be harmonious with all of them, and was revered as a guru of all the different schools in India at the time.

In that way, Atisha's name actively spread throughout India but we have not got time to speak about all that today."

### Historical background in Tibet before Atisha was invited there

"Next, I want to speak about how Atisha was invited to Tibet. In medieval times it was different than today, if you wanted to bring Indian panditas to Tibet, or if a Tibetan student wanted to go to India. it is extremely difficult. We cannot conceive of it. There were limitless hardships to doing that. Especially at the time of Atisha. He was one of the most famous and important gurus in India and he was extremely important and influential Buddhist guru. One could not just invite him to India and he would immediately go. So what were the causes and conditions that allowed people to bring Atisha to Tibet? Why did they invite him? First, we need to understand what the situation of Buddhism in Tibet was like.

In Tibet, at the beginning of the 7th Century, at the time of the King Songtsen Gampo [617–649 CE]<sup>18</sup>, Buddhism began to spread in Tibet. There are many differing accounts of when it started. Yet, the reliable sources say that it was from that time. It was probably during the time of King Trisong Detsen [742–798 CE] that Buddhism spread very widely. `



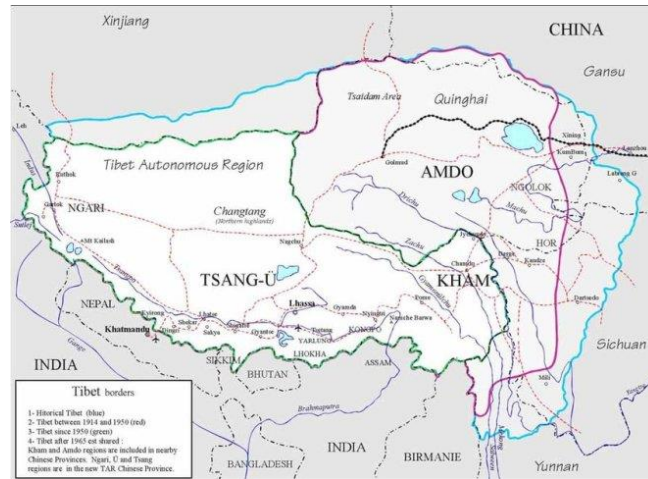
*Darma Udumtsen (དར་མ་འུ་འུ་མཚན་), better known by his nickname Langdarma*

"Four generations later, there was a King called Darma Udumtsen , we call him Langdarma<sup>19</sup>. Lang is like a nickname. He was the 4th King in line after Trisong Detsen. So in 841, it is said he persecuted and wiped out Buddhism, and prohibited the formation of monasteries. By c. 844 CE, Buddhism in Tibet had been wiped out.

Then fifty years later, in 892, there was Lachen Gongpa Rabse<sup>20</sup>. He was the one who propagated the lower Vinaya lineage and then there were many who came to get vows from him. Many who went from central Tibet to Kham to take vows. Those students then went to central Tibet. Then they began to rebuild monasteries and establish sanghas.

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

Only then that the teachings began to be revived. This is called the later spread of the teachings. So how many generations were there between Langdarma’s persecution of Buddhism and the re-establishment of it in central Tibet? There are differing accounts, probably more than one hundred years. There is a lot more to say about that, but there is not time to say it all today. In any case, because of the activity of Rabsel and other lamas the Vinaya teachings that were in Kham were able to spread into central Tibet. This is called the spread of the teachings from Lower Tibet.”



“At the same time, there was a revival of the teachings that we call in Ngari. When we speak about this in Ngari, we must speak about Lha Lama and his nephews.

The Tibetan King Langdarma had two sons, Ösung and Yumten. There was a severe conflict between the two. They disagreed over who should be king, so by the end of the ninth century, the Tibetan empire had fragmented into many smaller kingdoms.

They continued to hate each other and Yumten’s descendants would not let Osung’s nephew, De Nyima Gön stay in Central Tibet, so they had to flee to an area close to Zhangshung. This is the area that we nowadays call Ngari.

There, De Nyima Gön established a kingdom. Later he had three sons. So that there would be no conflict between his sons, he divided the region of Ngari into three parts and gave one to each, so the term “the three regions of Ngari” originated at that time. That is why we talk about the three regions of Ngari, and that term originated at that time – Ngari Khor Sum. Before that there was no discussion of it.

Another thing, a digression, sometimes when speaking about the Tibetan Dharma, there is no choice but to speak of Tibetan history. In Tibet, Tibet is divided into three parts, the upper, lower, and western part. This is mentioned as coming from the time of Ngari, but was first mentioned in Mongolia, during the Yuan dynasty [1261-1368 CE]. Some Tibetan manuscripts from that time indicate that Tibetans considered central Tibet as a single part.

## Lha Lama Yeshe O's Dharma legacies and the Guge Dynasty area of Tibet



“Anyway, Nyima Gon gave the area Purang to his second son, Tashi De Gon. Later, in that region, he established his own dynasty, which became known as the Guge dynasty. Then, King Tashi De Gon had two sons himself, the elder was called Song-ge (some say Konye) and born in 965 CE, who on reaching adulthood, became the 2nd King of the Guge dynasty. Later, Song-ge gave up the Kingship and became a monk and was given the name Lha Lama Yeshe O.



*Lha Lama Yeshe O*

The reason he was called the Lha lama was because he had formerly been a King, and then became a monk, so the word Lha means God and Lama means teacher. So he was the Divine Teacher. Before he became a monk, he was married and had two sons who also both became monks. They all had great faith and devotion in the Dharma and they offered a lot of service to the teachings.

Lha Lama Yeshe O had a significant impact on Tibetan history. First, he established the vow transmission of the Three Pālas, so the teachings could then spread from Upper Tibet; the upper transmission of the Dharma was because of him. Second, he invited Atisha to Tibet. Third, he fostered and supported many translators including the great translator Rinchen Sangpo, so that many texts of the new transmission of the secret mantra could be translated.

### Was Lha Lama Yeshe O captured by the King of Garlog?

"As for an oral history, it is said that in order to invite Atisha Lha Lama O went looking for gold, and the King of Garlog captured him and would not release him. In order to have him released, Lama Yeshe's nephew Jamphel O looked for a lump of gold and he went to Garlog and asked him to release the King but he would not. Finally, it is said that Yeshe O actually died in Garlog.

However, we need to examine this. There was a Guge Pandita, Ngawang Dragpa was probably a student of Tsongkhapa I think. He took many old manuscripts that were kept in Ngari Tholing and used these to make a history of Guge dynasty and of Lha Lama Yeshe O. What he says in there is that: “Even when

Lha Lama Yeshe was very old, he would go to Tholing, and he would circumambulate the Tholing monastery, carrying a staff.”

It also said, “At that time when he got to be old, other than one attendant, he would not want anyone else to see him, and Lha Lama Yeshe O spent three years in a very strict retreat. He passed away in his room at Tholing in the Female Earth Sheep Year.”

So if we look at the story of Lha Lama Yeshe O being captured by the King of Garlog and imprisoned, we have to examine to see if that is actually true.

Among the ancient manuscripts at the Drepung Nechu Lhakhang is a handwritten manuscript of a biography of Atisha called, *The History of the Guru and Lineage*. This is an old manuscript probably written in the twelfth century. It said that “a nephew of Khor Re” (another name for Lha Yeshe Öd)—so that would be a male relative of Lha Yeshe Öd —had a great-grandson named Udey, who was wrathful and violent by nature. Udey waged war against the Dak king in Ladakh, in an area called Balti. In the past this area was part of Tibet but now it is part of Pakistan. They probably have all converted to Islam. Within Balti, there was an area called Drusha, and they fought the war there. When Udey lost the war, he was captured by the king of Drusha, and severely punished. His younger brothers Jangchup O and Shiwa O went to ransom him with a large amount of gold. But before the gold arrived, Udey had escaped from the prison, was struck by a poisoned arrow, and died while escaping on the road. Since this is the story recounted there, we need to examine whether it is true that Lha Lama Yeshe Öd was imprisoned by the king of Garlok.

There is a contemporary Tibetan scholar called [Guge Tsering Gyalpo](#) (1961-2015)<sup>21</sup> who wrote a paper examining whether Lha Lama Yeshe O died in Garlog or not, which would be good to read. Also, there is a book by Karneu Samten called *Arrow in Power*, which is very good they say, I have not read it yet but he says that within this, the scholars have many different positions about whether Lha Lama Yeshe O was imprisoned by the King of Garlog or not, which must be examined."

#### FURTHER READING/SOURCES

- Chattopadhyaya, Alaka. *Atisha and Tibet*. Calcutta: Indian Studies Past and Present, 1967.
- Decler, Hubert. ‘Atisha’s Journey to Sumatra’, in *Buddhism in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr., Princeton University Press, 1995
- Decler, Hubert. ‘Atisha’s Journey to Tibet’, in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, edited by Donald S. Lopez Jr., Princeton University Press, 1997
- Eimer, Helmut. ‘The Development of the Biographical Tradition concerning Atisa (Dipamkarasrijnana)’ in *The Journal of the Tibet Society*, Vol. 2 (1982), pp. 41-51
- Inanidak, Elizabeth: [Muara Jambi Where Atisha Studied in Indonesia](#)
- Sherburne, Richard, trans. *The Complete Works of Atiśa Śrī Dīpaṃkara Jñāna*. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 2000.

## CHAPTER THREE: Lha Lama Yeshe O's Three Main Legacies, Tibetans studying in Kashmir and at Vikaramashila, the invention of the Ragdung horn, Atisha's connection to Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo and reasons for composing *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*

“How did the Dharma King, Lha Lama Yeshe O invite Atisha to Tibet? First, there was a student and expert of the Dharma, called Rinchen Zangpo, the great translator who had previously gone to India to study and was very famous in Tibetan history. The King selected five, young and intelligent Tibetans and he appointed Rinchen Zangpo as their leader and sent them to Kashmir to study Buddhism.”

“Tārā told Atisha: “Your journey to the Land of Snows will be a complete success. You will benefit the Tibetans enormously and would find among them a disciple with an especially close bond to You. This great disciple of yours would be an upasaka, a man with lay vows, and he would spread the Dharma even further. However, if you go to Tibet, your life span will be reduced by 20 years. You will live till you are 72 years old. If you choose not to go to Tibet and remain in India, you will live till the age of 92. “

“Atisha told them that: “Among all the profound Dharmas, karmic cause and effect is even more profound than those miraculous teachings. Even seeing the yidam deities' face is not as important. If you have a stable conviction in karma, cause and effect that is better than seeing the face of the yidam.”

—17th Karmapa (February 2023)

“When Rinchen Zangpo was eighty-five he met Atisha at Toling monastery. At Atisha's request he listed his accomplishments and outlined his understanding. Atiśa exclaimed “If there are men like you in Tibet, then there was no need for me to come here!” But when Atisha asked him how one should practice the tantras, and Rinchen Zangpo replied that one should practice each tantra in its own way (or, more specifically, Guhyasamāja on the ground floor, Hevajra on the second floor, and Cakrasamvara on the top floor), Atisha exclaimed “Rotten translator! Indeed there was need for me to come! The tantras should all be practiced together!” Atisha then gave him instruction and told him to enter meditation retreat.”

—from *Treasury of Lives* biography of Rinchen Zangpo

### INTRODUCTION

Today, is the anniversary of the passing of the great [Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo](#) (958–1055, རིན་ཆེན་བཟང་པོ་) who not only was one of the greatest Lotsawas from Tibet during the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet, variously called the New Translation School, New Mantra School or New Tantra Tradition School. He also studied in his eighties with the great Indian Pandita, Atisha (Atiśa), known affectionately to Tibetans as Jowo Je. Thus, for this day, am happy to share a transcript of [the third and final day of the teaching on the Life and Liberation of Atisha by the 17th Karmapa](#), who mentions Rinchen Zangpo<sup>22</sup> [1] and his meeting Atisha:

“When Rinchen Zangpo was eighty-five he met Atiśa at Toling. At Atiśa's request he listed his accomplishments and outlined his understanding. Atiśa exclaimed “If there are men like you in Tibet, then there was no need for me to come here!” But when Atiśa asked him how one should practice the tantras, and Rinchen Zangpo replied that one should practice each tantra in its own way (or, more specifically, Guhyasamāja on the ground floor, Hevajra on the second

floor, and Cakrasaṃvara on the top floor), Atiśa exclaimed “Rotten translator! Indeed there was need for me to come! The tantras should all be practiced together!” Atiśa then gave him instruction and told him to enter meditation retreat.

Following his encounter with Atiśa, Rinchen Zangpo practiced for ten years. According to tradition, he wrote three inscriptions above consecutive doors to his medication cell, each corresponding to one of the three vehicles (Mahāyāna, Hīnayāna, and Vajrayāna); above outer door to his meditation cell: “Within this door, should a thought of attachment the phenomenal world arise for even a single moment, may the dharmapāla split open my head.” Over the middle door he wrote: “Should a thought of self-interest arise for even a single moment, may the dharmapāla split open my head.” Over the inner door he wrote: “Should an ordinary thought arise for even a single moment, may the dharmapāla split open my head.”

In Day Three of his teachings on the life of Atisha, the 17th Karmapa continued with the topic of how, why and by whom Atisha was invited and brought to Tibet from India. He reminded us all of how difficult it was to travel to Tibet from India, the elderly age of Atisha at that time, and how respected and renowned in India he was and the reasons why the Indians were reluctant to let Atisha go. However, after seeking his yidam deity Noble Tārā’s advice on the matter, even though it would shorten his life-span by twenty years, Atisha decided to go to Tibet.

Another fascinating anecdote the Karmapa shared was how the uniquely Tibetan Ragdung horn was actually invented due to the Tibetan King wanting to welcome Atisha in a grand and ‘loud’ way. The Karmapa joked that the people and animals in that area were probably so stunned when they first heard it, and perhaps it was even rather scary and caused the animals to bolt! For me, the Ragdung sound is something other-worldly, like the sound of an open central channel resounding AH. So, whoever, invented it was perhaps also a greatly realised practitioner too.

The 17th Karmapa then finished by explaining how the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*<sup>23</sup> was composed by Atisha, in response to seven requests made of him. In my own recent presentation on the roots of Vajrayana, I mentioned very briefly Atisha and his statement in that text that monastics (or anyone with celibacy vows) should not take the second and third empowerments of a Vajrayana practice. I relied on the work of David Gray (2020) who stated that Atisha composed the text when he was travelling to Tibet. However, Gray does not mention these requests of Atisha, and although it is not clear from the 17th Karmapa’s teaching, it seems that he was saying Atisha composed the work when he had arrived in Tibet. This needs to be further investigated.

Thus, as a teaching based on the research and scholarship of the 17th Karmapa, it is extremely valuable and worthy of preservation and study. In addition, in this oral life-story account we can see how important the oral and written translators were for the spread and preservation of the Buddha Dharma from India in Tibet. As Atisha is said to have remarked when his elderly translator, Gya Tsonдру Senge passed away on their way to Tibet, “I have lost my tongue!”

May we all be reminded of the great, kind acts of Atisha and the great Buddha Dharma translators who risked life and limb to spread the Dharma in Tibet and beyond!

Music? [Tibetan Ragdung horns](#), [Kashmir](#) by Led Zeppelin, and [Come Blow Your Horn](#) by Frank Sinatra.

Written and transcribed by Adele Tomlin, 7th February 2023.

### TRANSCRIPT (Day Three 2023)

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

“So today I will speak about how the Dharma teachings spread to Tibet and the three legacies of Lha Lama Yeshe O. The first of these was spreading the teachings from Tö, or upper Tibet

### The founding of Tholing Monastery and the re-establishment of the Vinaya vows in Tibet

Around hundred years had passed since Langdarma had persecuted the teachings, around five generations. During that time, Buddhism had weakened considerably. In particular, the region of Zhangshung (also known as Ngari) that Song-gne, later known by the name Yeshe O, ruled was where the Bön religion had originated and so the people of that time primarily had faith in Bön. The name Ngari was given later when the Tibetan Kings had gone there and established the three kingdoms of Ngari. Before that, this was the place where the Bon religion had arisen. So, even during the time of Yeshe O, most of the people had faith in the Bon religion. There was not much interest in Buddhism.

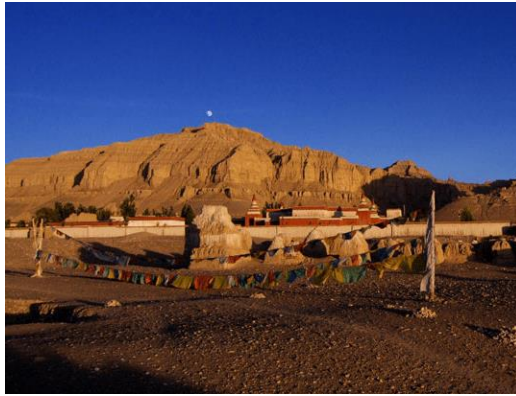
Tibetans respected people from India highly, and often offered them a lot of gold. Therefore, there were many strange panditas who came from India to give teachings. In particular, they would interpret the tantras literally and misunderstand them, so the situation became quite chaotic. Even before Song-gne became a monk, he had read the words and treatises himself and done research. He realised that a lot of these people’s behaviour was antithetical to the Dharma. He tried to correct them by making various laws and guidelines but they really did not bring much benefit. They were unable to eliminate these faults. Thus, he thought it would be very important to invite an authentic pandita from India and reform Buddhism.

Moreover, Lha Lama Yeshe O himself gave up his power and went forth as a monk. He spent most of his time trying to spread the teachings. He gave the Kingship to his younger brother, though some histories say it was his elder brother.

So one cannot just invite someone with a well-known name, they had to be someone of an appropriate age to come from India. Also, they had to be learned in both Sutras and Tantras, because at that time many people did not understand the Tantras properly. They also had to have the quality of altruism and good conduct. There were many inauthentic lamas, so they had to have a superior motive and good conduct. So in terms of all those qualities, there was no one better than Je Atisha in India at that time.

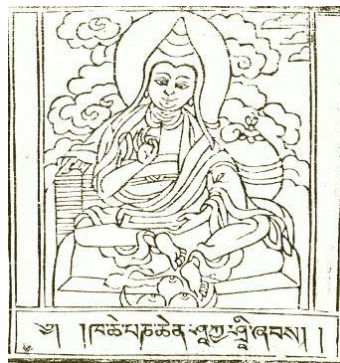
Lha Lama Yeshe O also built the Toling monastery in the Ngari region. This is the earliest historical monastery in Ngari and is still in good condition to this day. It would be very good if people can go to visit the monastery in the future. Lha Lama Yeshe O invited many panditas from India, among them the pandita Dharmapāla from eastern India. Along with him came three disciples who were also named Pāla. They spread monastic vows in Ngari and established a community of the sangha and teachings of the vinaya. This is called the Tö or the Upper Transmission of Vinaya.

Anyway, when we speak about Langdarma<sup>24</sup> destroying Buddhism, it means he singled out the monastic communities and destroyed them. It does not mean that after the persecution he completely eliminated Buddhism from Tibet. When we speak about the beginning of the later transmission of Buddhism, that primarily means when the transmissions and the vows of the monastic community were re-established in central Tibet.



*Toling Monastery, Tibet*

The other day, I spoke about the lower transmission. The upper transmission was a little bit earlier than the lower transmission from Gongpo Rabsel. In any case, the lineages and vows came from Upper and Lower Tibet. There were two transmissions of vinaya in Tibet—the Upper and Lower Transmissions. The Lower Transmission appeared before the Upper Transmission, and when both became established in Central Tibet, the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism were stably and widely restored. This is what is known as the Later Transmission of Buddhism.



*Śākyaśrībhadrā who came from Kashmir, hence why Tibetans called him Khachepa Penchen*

In addition to these upper and lower transmissions (To-Me), in the 13th Century, there was a great Pandita called [Shakyashri](#) (Śākyaśrībhadrā 1127-1225) from Kashmir. The transmission of his lineage and vows is called the Mahapandita tradition. Basically in Tibet, all the lineages and vows can basically be included in one of these three: the Upper, Lower, and Mahapandita transmissions. There is none that are not included in these three.

However, later, the transmission of the Upper Vinaya (from the three Palas) was probably broken. Here, one thing we need to pay attention to is when we talk about the lineage of the vows, we are talking about the lineage of the abbots. It seemed that not much attention was paid to the lineage held by the master of the ritual and the supplementary sangha.

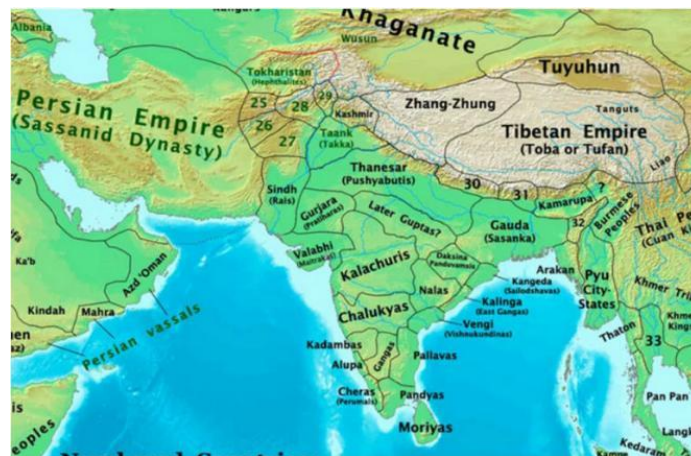
For example, when Sakya Pandita took his Bhikshu vows, the abbot was Shakyashri but I believe the master of the ritual and the master of the sangha present were probably from the lower transmission. However, if we look into the Vinaya, the Bhikshu vow is received from the sangha, not from an individual. That is very clear. So, it seems that in Tibet, we know the lineage of the abbots as the lineage of the vows. But we should really research this further.

## Inviting Atisha to Tibet – sending Tibetans to Kashmir to study Buddhist philosophy

The second of Lha Lama Yeshe O's legacies was inviting Atisha to Tibet. However, the person who actually brought Atisha to Tibet was Jangchub O. Yeshe O was not able to meet Atisha in person. The one who had the idea and had the plan to invite him was Yeshe O.

For that reason, most Tibetan histories say that Lha Lama Yeshe O, had to sacrifice his own life to bring Atisha to Tibet. In any case, whether he had to sacrifice his life or not, is not clear, but we can say that without Yeshe O then Atisha would have been unable to come to Tibet.

How did Yeshe O invite Atisha? First, there was a student and expert of the Dharma, called Rinchen Zangpo, the great translator who had previously gone to India to study and was very famous in Tibetan history. Then he selected five, young and intelligent Tibetans and he appointed Rinchen Zangpo as the leader of these people, and sent them to Kashmir to study.



So, Kashmir is what modern Tibetan scholars call Kachepa. These days when we say *Ka-che* in Tibetan, we understand it to mean practitioners of Islam. That is not quite the right term. The reason why we call Muslims, *Ka-che* is because when Muslims first came to Tibet, they came from Kashmir, *Ka-che*. From then on Tibetans called them *Ka-che*. Actually, Islam is Islam, Kashmir is the name of the region they came from, it is not the name of the religion. Anyway, he sent several Tibetans to Kashmir to study translation.

After they had finished their studies, then Yeshe O asked them to bring panditas who could spread the Dharma and important texts back to Tibet. The King encouraged them to do that and they did as he asked and brought some Indian panditas. However, these scholars were only learned in the texts they had specifically studied, but not at the level to reform Tibetan Buddhism fully and systematically. Even in terms of their education and learning it was not sufficient.

So, Yeshe O thought these panditas did not fulfil his wishes. Likewise, Yeshe O had heard there was a scholar called Atisha in India who was learned, venerable and good. So he got the idea that they had to absolutely invite Atisha.

Yeshe O gave the responsibility of inviting Atisha to an elder translator named Gya Tsondu Senge. However, the first attempt was unsuccessful and Gya Tsondu Senge could not bring Atisha to Tibet. After that, Yeshe O had become quite old and passed away before his wish could be fulfilled. However, before he passed away, he told his nephew, Jangchub O that he must bring Atisha to Tibet. That was his last will and testament.

## Nagtso Lotsāwa and study at Vikramashila and inviting Atisha to come to Tibet

In order to fulfil his uncle's wish Jangchub O then sent the translator called [Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyelwa](#) (1011-1064, nag 'tsho lo tsA ba tshul khriims rgyal ba) to India to bring Atisha back. So, Nagtso Lotsawa went with a few helpers and assistants and they all arrived in India and when they arrived in India, Atisha was living at Vikramashila (Vikramaśilā).

Vikramashila monastery was built in the 8th Century by a King of the Pala dynasty, by King Dharmapala (Palden Chokyon). This monastic university was the second most important university after Nālanda. In particular, it was a hub for the centre of Vajrayana Dharma, and study of the Unexcelled Highest Tantra. The best of the scholars who graduated from there were given the title Pandita by the King. For that reason, many great scholars came from that temple.

For example, Nāropa was a graduate who came from there. Also, Śantīpa the Mind-Only scholar and in fact, Nāropa and Śantīpa are among the six scholars called the six gate-keepers. These were primarily the scholars who stayed at the four gates of Vikramshila, and the two pillars, because many non-Buddhists would come to debate with them at the monastery. Atisha himself was a master at Vikramashila. Also Shakyashribhdra, who also went to Tibet, also studied there. Then in 1203, it was destroyed by the Muslim invaders. The ruins are still there if you travel down from Siliguri they are along the way.

In any case, Nagtso Lotsawa and his party arrived at Vikramashila and at that time, Gya Tsondu Senge, the monk who had been previously said to have asked Atisha to come to Tibet was there studying. So Gya Tsondu Senge was the one who had initially invited Atisha and he was intimately familiar with the reasons why but he told them not to tell anyone there the reasons they came to invite him, just pretend that they are there to study. He told them to stay there for a while and when the time comes and there is an opportunity, he would tell them how they should invite Atisha. That was the plan they had.

So Nagtso Lotsawa and his friends did as Gya Tsondu Senge suggested and told people they were there to study. They spent a year studying there. It was only a year later that they finally had the opportunity to explain to Atisha why they had come to invite him to Tibet. For an entire year, they did not have an opportunity to speak to him as they had to ask Atisha directly and they could not go through someone else as it was secret. Atisha had such vast activity that it was hard for them to get an opportunity. After Nagtso had explained the situation in detail, Atisha said:

“The way you tell the story, that Tibetan King must be a real Bodhisattva. If I were to go against a Bodhisattva's command that would not be right. So now, the Tibetans have come to all this hardship to come here, so I will try to find a way to go to Tibet.”

## Atisha asks Tārā about his trip to Tibet and if it would be beneficial or not

“So they got a promise from Atisha to come. However, Atisha also had a slight doubt arise as to whether it would be beneficial or not for him to go to Tibet. So Jowo je, as I mentioned the other day whenever he had a question or a doubt, he would ask his special deity Tāra about the issue and she would directly tell him what to do. So, Atisha asked her about going to Tibet, Tāra said that it would be really beneficial for the Buddha Dharma and beings if he went to Tibet.

In particular, she said there will be one Upāsikā (layperson) who will really benefit from it. Who was that layperson? It probably means Dromtonpa, there is no-one else. Dromtonpa became like the source of the Kadampa teachings. The main layperson Atisha taught was Dromtonpa, right?” So that was Noble Tārā's prophecy.

## Trip to Bodh Gaya and yogi's response to Atisha about Tibet

“Not only that, Atisha thought it was really important to go to Tibet, so he went to Bodh Gaya. Probably at the great Buddha statue there, he made offerings and supplications. At that time, there was a Khenpo there called Jñāna Śrī Mitra. “These are for a pale old woman with long dreadlocks; give these to her.” Atisha went to Bodhgaya and met the old woman. Before Atisha said anything, the old woman said, “Give me the cowrie shells you have brought for me.” When we were children, we would put them in bags and carry them on our backs. Anyway, he gave him a bag full of cowrie shells and said there was an old pale person with long, dreadlocked hair and told him to give the cowrie shells to her.

So, Atisha went to Bodh Gaya, when he was going to make his offerings then he met the old woman, who immediately said: “give me the cowrie shells you brought for me.” When she said that, Atisha realised this is not an ordinary person she is a dakini, so as he was a monastic, he did not actually physically prostrate, but mentally he prostrated. He asked the old woman if going to Tibet would be beneficial or not. The old woman responded that it would be good to go and would be beneficial. So, this old woman had responded in the same way as Noble Tārā has advised.

## Atisha's question about his life-span and the dakinis' response that if he went to Tibet it would be shorter



*Tārā from the Atisha tradition*

“Atisha also asked her that if he went to Tibet would there be any obstacles to his life? There were probably several reasons why Atisha asked this. The first reason was, at that time, Atisha was already in his 50s, he was already quite old. The second reason is that Tibet is a very high-altitude area and very remote place. So, of course, there is a risk and potential danger to his life if he went there.

The old woman responded that: “if you go to Tibet your life will be shorter. But if you stay in India your life will be longer.” Jowo Je then asked : “How much shorter?” She responded: “If you do not go to Tibet, you will live to 92, but if you go, you will not live longer than 73.”

In actuality, if Atisha went to Tibet, his life would be 20 years shorter. However, at that time, Atisha thought to himself, “Well if I go to Tibet, it has been already decided that it would be of great benefit. Noble Tārā has said this, as has this dakini in Bodh Gaya, so that is certain. So as it will be beneficial, it doesn't really matter whether my life is shorter or not.” So, he decided to go to Tibet.

## Key-holder of many Indian monasteries: The Indians' discovery of the plan to bring Atisha to Tibet and their reluctance to let him go

“However, if Atisha had directly said he was going to Tibet, then the Indian King and the Indian monastery authorities and sponsors would not have allowed him to go. So, Atisha had a little bit of a skillful way and said he was going on a pilgrimage. He took Nagtso Lotsawa and other people and they went here and there, trying to fool them by going to these sites.

Then at the end, they went to Nepal. To go to Tibet, they had to go via Nepal. So eventually they got to Nepal. At that time, one of the landlord/administrators who worked at Vikramashila monastery felt a bit uneasy about it. He got suspicious about it all and insisted he had to go with Atisha and so went along too.

In Nepal, this person learned of Atisha's plan to go to Tibet and so he called Nagtso Lotsawa and confronted him with his lies about coming to study in India and accused him of coming to kidnap and steal Atisha. He told him: “We know you want Atisha to go to Tibet. Actually, it is not that we don't want to let Atisha go to Tibet. However, if we lose him to Tibet, there is a danger of Buddhism being destroyed and declining in India.”

So, finally, after their speaking together about it, they agreed that Atisha would spend no more than three years in Tibet. After three years, Nagtso Lotsawa would have to bring him back to India. And he had to take an oath and promise that he would bring him back. Only then would they allow Atisha to go to Tibet.

When we think about how difficult it was for Atisha going from India to Tibet and wonder why the Indians did not want him to go there. Think about it factually. When Nagtso and his party went to bring Atisha to Tibet, he was already in his 50s. In terms of the life expectancy at the time he was already very old.



In addition, Atisha was already at a national level of pandita and was famous and influential. So, for that reason, he had been appointed the abbot of the important and famous Vikramashila monastery, and Odantapuri, and also the head of several important temples in central India. Thus, he had a keyring that always had a minimum of eighteen keys on his belt. So, he carried them on his belt and they clanked together as he walked. This is why the Indians were so reluctant to let him go.

Indians also looked at Tibet like a land of darkness, remote, backwards place. At that time, Buddhism in India had begun to decline, and the unexcelled highest tantra teachings were spreading very widely. So, the Buddhist and Hindu religions began to mix. There were many practices that you could not tell if they were Hindu or Buddhist. Many Buddhist panditas said you could not tell the difference between Hinduism and Buddhism. I don't remember the name of the person who said that.

Atisha himself also said that, those days in India there were only three or four panditas, including Shantipa who could tell Hinduism and Buddhism apart, including Atisha himself. So, for that reason, it was also important for Indian Buddhism that Atisha stay in India.”

### The exceptionally high regard Indians had for Atisha

“One example of how important Indians considered Atisha was a wall at the Vikramashila temple. On the right side, there was a painting of Nāgārjuna, and on the left was Atisha. They basically considered him equal to Nāgārjuna.

Likewise, also in Vikramashila on another mural, they had a mural of all the panditas and on the other wall they had a mural of the other Mahasiddhas. Atisha was painted in *both* the line of panditas and the siddhas who were all very important.

Also, Atisha had such a gentle character, he got along with everyone. He had a very open mind; he was familiar with all the positions and had experience of all the Buddhists schools in India of that time. For that reason, all the different schools loved him and respected him.

We can see this in the *Praises of Atisha* by Nagtso Lotsawa which says:

“At Odantapuri, there were three-hundred and fifty monastics, and at Vikramashila about one hundred. You were learned in all the schools and had no arrogance about the schools. You became the crown jewel of all the four communities, the teacher and all the sacred sites in the land of Magadha. You sit at the head of all the eighteen schools and everyone accepts you.”

So, out of the people at these universities and among all the four schools, he was from the Mahāsāṃghika, and he did not have any pride about being from that school. Also, in the four communities, the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen all respected and listened to him.

Also, there were great debates between the Mind-Only and Middle Way, but Atisha would take the best parts of both, and practice them in union. So, he was able to practice both the Lineage of Profound View and the Lineage of Vast Conduct without conflict.

Anyway, Atisha was very important in India. So, the Indians were very reluctant for him to go off to Tibet.”

### “Losing his tongue” translator in Nepal and Nagtso’s encouragement to continue to Tibet with the aid of Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo



Rinchen Zangpo

“Atisha went to Nepal with his translators, and probably spent one year there. What is unfortunate is that on the way to Nepal, Gya Tsondru Senge, the older translator passed away. When he died, Atisha said: “The translator has died, so it is like I no longer have a tongue.” In the olden days, if you did not have a translator, it was the same as not having a tongue. So, Atisha thought there is no point in going to Tibet.

Nagtso said: “Oh, don’t talk like that, there is a really well-known translator, Rinchen Zangpo in Tibet and he can serve you. For ordinary conversation, then I can help with that. But you must continue on to Tibet.” Due to that advice, Atisha continued on his way to Tibet and in 1040, when Atisha was 59 years old, he arrived in the region of Ngari.”

### The Tibetans’ grand welcome for Atisha and the invention of the Ragdung horn



*A pair of horns photographed by a 1938 German expedition in Tibet*

“Now I will speak about how they welcomed Atisha when he arrived in Ngari. At that time, the King was Jangchub O. He was a royal but he had become ordained and his monastic name was Jangchub O. So, this was probably when he had become a monk and he had been waiting a long time for Atisha’s arrival. They prepared the welcome well before Atisha arrived at the Toling monastery, founded by Yeshe O. It had been enlarged a bit since then.

When Atisha and his party were getting close to Toling monastery, it was said there were three hundred laypeople riding white horses and carrying banners, pennants, and various offerings to give a grand welcome.

In particular, at that time Atisha arriving was considered something that all the gods and humans should rejoice about, so they thought they have to do something very impressive. Jangchub O thought they had to invent a musical instrument that was very loud. We have the horns that we play, Ragdung, sometimes we call them dungchen, or dungmar, but that is when these horns were invented.

For that reason, we also call the Ragdung, “the horn for inviting translators and scholars”. At that time, there had never been a Ragdung before, so they needed something very loud and when Atisha came, they played it. What happened was all the livestock and animals had never heard anything like it before. If you know how to play it, it can be very powerful and strong sound, so all the animals on the hill fled, and the horses they were riding panicked and ran, it probably also frightened Atisha and all those mild-mannered Indians [laughter]. So all the milk being held just fell and poured onto the ground. I don’t know if it actually pleased Atisha, he had probably not heard anything so loud in his life. They probably were quite scary to the mild Atisha.

[Addition from Karmapa’s 2025 teaching: However, when the old people heard these horns, and all the animals had fled, and milk had been lost, they became a bit angry. They were thinking: “Whether or not he is Jowo, whatever he is, they had lost their milk because of him, who the heck is this Atisha guy? Today, all our milk was totally wasted!” So they whipped their horse and said ‘go there now’.

However, as soon as these people who had lost their milk and animals saw the handsome beauty of Atisha's face and complexion, they immediately stopped in their tracks in awe and completely forgot about their annoyance. There are stories like that about it.]

[Transcriber's note: for me, the Ragdung sound is something other-worldly, like the sound of an open central channel resounding AH. So, whoever, invented it was perhaps also a greatly realised practitioner too.]

### Atisha called 'Guru Karma, Cause and Effect': Teaching the profound Dharma of Karma in Tibet

"Atisha arrived in Toling monastery, and Jangchub O explained the whole situation of Tibetan Buddhism and how the Dharma Kings had established the teachings and Langdarma had persecuted the Dharma teachings. Then how his predecessor, Lha Lama Yeshe O disregarding his own life had worked to establish the teachings but there were so many false teachers of the Dharma that it had become very mixed up and chaotic. He was crying as he explained this.

In the end, he said: "You have come to Tibet now, and now that you have come here, please don't teach at all those really profound teachings, just teach the Dharma of cause and effect." The false teachers had taught about miraculous and profound teachings and called it secret mantra. They wanted Atisha to just teach about karma, cause and effect.

Atisha was very pleased to hear this and told them that: "Among all the profound Dharmas, karmic cause and effect is even more profound than those miraculous teachings. Even seeing the yidam deities' face is not as important. If you have a stable conviction in karma, cause and effect that is better than seeing the face of the yidam."

In India, there was a yogi who practiced Yamantaka and he saw the deity's face. He thought that if I make a few mistakes, it won't matter much and used the ritual substance as he wished. Due to this he was later reborn as a hungry ghost and had the same shape as the Yamantaka he had been meditating on before. Atisha told many other such stories and did as Jangchub O had requested and taught a lot about karma, cause and effect.

For that reason, the people in Tibet called him Guru Karma, Cause and Effect. Even that name was very beneficial to Buddhism. Because it is a very important subject and the profound and miraculous things are not as important as that."

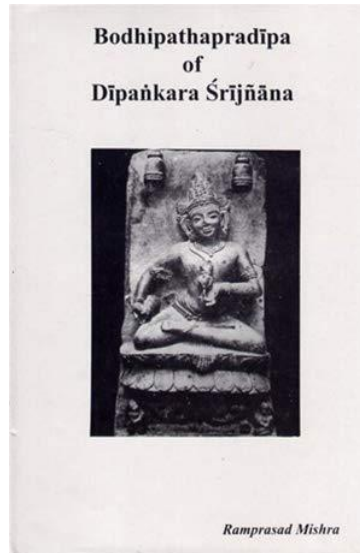
### Meeting Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo and requests made to Atisha that led to the composition of *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*

"At Toling monastery, the translator Rinchen Zangpo was there and probably thought he would see him later. Later, Zangpo understood what a great lama he was and followed and served Atisha as his guru. Not only himself, but Rinchen Zangpo encouraged everyone else to take all the teachings they could from Atisha.

Due to this, also Jangchub O then offered a lot of gold to Atisha and said:

"Here in this land of Tibet, there are a lot of individuals with misconceptions about Buddhism, who explain it incorrectly, they have never met authentic spiritual teachers. There are a lot of such people. They pretend to know things they don't know. They make up a lot of falsehoods and various other things. And even among them there are many disagreements. They really dispute with each other. They are always in conflict with each other. For that reason, in order to eliminate this, please teach the Dharma to dispel our doubts."

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.



*Bodhipathapradīpa of Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna: A guide for realising the path of bodhi reconciling the Mādhyamika Śūnyavāda, Vijñānavāda of ... English translation and critical annotation by Ramprasād Mishra*

Moreover, Jangchub O asked Atisha two questions about the common vehicles, two about the paramitas and three about the Vajrayana. So, Jangchub O asked seven questions and asked Atisha to write a treatise that summarised the entire teaching of Buddhism in a few words, related to the guru's own practice that explained his own experience. Likewise, he requested, "There are pith instructions on the Guhyasamaja Tantra by Buddhajñāna; please write a sadhana based on this, with Avalokiteshvara as the main deity of the mandala."

Atisha replied, "Nāgārjuna's *Garland of Jewels* (Rinchen Trengwa) is already in Tibetan; that is enough, you won't find anything better. As for the sadhana on the Guhyasamaja Tantra, there is the Samantabhadra (Kunzangpo) sadhana."

However, in order to fulfil the first request and not disappointment them, Atisha later wrote the *Lamp for the Path of Enlightenment* (*Bodhipathapradīpa*; བྱང་ཆུབ་ལམ་སྒྲོན་པོ།). For the second request, he wrote (or translated) the Guhyasamāja sadhana.

The *Lamp for the Path of Enlightenment* is a renowned text with sixty-seven stanzas. As Tsongkhapa says in his *Stages of the Path*, it has three features. First, it summarizes the points of both sutra and tantra, so the topic is complete. Second, it focuses on how to tame one's mind, so it is easy to put into practice. Third, it is adorned with the advice of two gurus who are learned in the two traditions: Rigpe Khujuk in Nagarjuna's tradition and Survarandivpa in Asanga's tradition. Since this text is adorned with the instructions Atisha had received directly from them, it is better than one that is solely from the Lineage of Profound View or the Lineage of Vast Conduct. It had many different features. The advice given was so great. It shows the teachings are not in conflict and that one can attain Buddhahood easily.

## Geshe Dromtonpa's role in spreading Atisha's teachings in Tibet as 'the living commentary' on *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*



*Dromtonpa Gyelwa Jungne (1004-1064)*

“Due to Atisha writing the *Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment* text, it was no longer necessary to directly or forcefully block the false Dharma and false mantra. There was no need to tell people they should not do that. It just naturally stopped on its own and had a very strong influence on Tibet.

Even though Atisha wrote that text, if there had not been someone like Dromtonpa Gyelwa Jungne (1004-1064) who would then later spread and teach the text, it would have been like Kamalashila's *Stages of the Meditation*. That text is studied a little bit in the philosophical schools, but they were not something that people really practised. However, because of Dromtonpa, he first meditated on *Lamp for the Path* and developed its meaning. Due to his practice, he was able to practice the real and undiminished teachings of the *Lamp for the Path*. So, the fact it is still here with us, is due to Dromtonpa's kindness.

Once a person asked Dromtonpa: “It would be good to have a commentary on the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.” Yet, Dromtonpa said: “You don't need a commentary on the words. I am a student who received it directly from its author, so I am the commentary on its meaning. Look at how I act. I am the living *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*.” In brief, that is about the origin of the *Lamp for the Path*.”

## The seven questions posed to Atisha and the composition of *Lamp for the Path*



LOSSAN OHHO KYI GYAL-TSHAN

*Penchen Lobsang Choki Gyaltsen (ལྷོ་བཟང་ཚེས་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་མཚན་) (1570–1662)*

“When talking about the seven questions asked to Jowo Je Atisha in his *Life Story the Path of Liberation*, it says that Jangchub O wrote the seven questions and posed them and Atisha wrote the *Lamp for the Path* text as a response to those questions. That life-story does not identify what the seven questions are.

Then when Atisha went to central Tibet, others also asked him five questions. One of the questions was: “If means and prajna are divorced from each other, can one achieve buddhahood through one of these alone?” Atisha replied, “Jangchub O asked most of those questions and they are in the *Lamp for the Path of Enlightenment*.” It is clear that the two questions on the transcendences and three on tantra were asked by Khu and Ngok, but it is not clear what the two questions regarding the common path are.

There is a commentary on the *Lamp for the Path* by Penchen Lobsang Choki Gyaltsen (ལྷོ་བཟང་ཚལ་གྱི་རྒྱལ་མཚན་, *blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*) (1570–1662) the fourth Panchen Lama and the first to be accorded this title during his lifetime) which mentions a commentary by Nagtso Lotsawa called the *Ornament of the Explanations* and this presents each of the seven different questions.

I have read a few old commentaries by the Kadampa masters and they mention five or six of them by Jangchub O. They also clearly say how the answers relate to the questions. They say that these words in the texts, from this stanza to that stanza etc. These days, there is not much of a custom of teaching the *Lamp for the Path* in such a way. But Penchen Lobsang says in his commentary explanations that are very detailed and the ways beginners should practice are excellent. When there is Question and Answer then one has a very profound understanding and it is beneficial for beginners to put it into practice. If one is able to teach the *Lamp for the Path* according to that method of question and answer it is of real benefit.

The question as to whether there is an auto-commentary or not and Atisha’s travels to central Tibet, I would like to speak about but there is not enough time today. Later, if I have a chance I will do so. That is enough for this Special Monlam and we don’t have time to say more than that.”

### Atisha’s meeting Dromtonpa, and permission from India to travel to central Tibet

[Addition from Karmapa 2025 teaching] “When Atisha’s three years had finished and he was ready to go to India, he first went to Purang. This is when Dromtonpa met Atisha, Tārā had prophesised that he would meet a layperson. So he was always thinking about that and had some regret about it. Then they said a great lay practitioner would arrive there and Atisha was waiting there every day.

Where was Dromtonpa? Originally he was born in the area of Dochung, but then he moved to Ngari, in Kham. Dromtonpa heard about Atisha having gone to Ngari, and then he travelled there and when he arrived in Purang asked where Atisha, was at that time, and they told him he had gone to sponsor’s home and was not at his residence. So they told him to wait a bit there. So Dromtonpa said that was not OK, he said I have to meet the spiritual friend quickly, I cannot wait a moment. So he ent off in the direction of the sponsor’s house. So Atisha had just left, and they ran into each other on the road. So Dromtonpa did a prostration and Atisha was overjoyed, he put a text on his head and recited prayers.

Dromtonpa had never been to India, but he knew Sanskrit very well. So Atisha was able to make conversation easily. So Atisha and Dromtonpa stayed in a single room. So Dromtonpa was not a monk and there are rules for the monastics not to stay in the same room as laypeople. However they had a rule in the Mahāsāṃghika school it was permissible to stay in the same room if there was a curtain between the two of them.

Nagtso the translator, was still planning to bring Atisha back to India. However, they had to go through Nepal, but a war broke out there so they were unable to continue there and they had to stay in Tibet for a while. So, at that time, Nagtso was very worried because he made an oath to bring Atisha back after three years. So he was anxious about not being able to keep his promise. Atisha told him not to worry because he had tried his best but because of the situation, it did not work out. He said they should write a letter to Indi to explain the situation, so Atisha wrote a letter.

They also included the *Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment* which had been written while he was in Tibet. When the letter arrived in India, in particular the manuscript for the path to enlightenment, there was a lot of discussion about it by the Panditas.

There was a lot of discussion but I do not have time to speak about that now. Actually, many people thought that Atisha should not return to India but should stay in Tibet. Many people thought Atisha should not go to India and should stay in Tibet. However, Nagtso had made a strong promise and oath so they could not go against that. But Dromtonpa had the idea that if only Atisha could stay in Tibet, but he also was able to think about things, he could come up with good ideas. He was not able to ask Atisha directly not to return. He used different methods about the different masters and monasteries in central Tibet. Atisha was really pleased when he heard this and said “these days in India there are not so many masters. And if it will please you to go to Central Tibet then I will do so. The reason is because I will do whatever the sangha direct me to do.” So then Dromtonpa understood this, and he wrote a letter to all the masters and monasteries in central Tibet asking them to invite Atisha to invite him to central Tibet.

### [Dromtonpa’s letter that left out the name of an important Tibetan teacher, Khuton](#)

In that letter, Dromtonpa wrote all the names of the important people, Ngog Loden Sherab and so on. So when they got the letter these people all gathered in central Tibet, and had a discussion about how they would bring him to Central Tibet.

There was one important lama in central Tibet whom Dromtonpa forgot to invite to Tibet, called [Khuton Tsondru Yungdrung](#) (1011-1075). There were three important lamas, and he was one of them. It is not clear if he forgot but he did not include them. As he was such an important lama in Central Tibet, he was rather annoyed by it, and said how could he ignore me, so he decided to invite Atisha first and set out on the road to invite Atisha. When he had left, then the other lamas set out on the road to invite him and set off to Ngari.

So when these people were going to invite him on horseback, they were wearing these huge hats, like Gesar wears, and particular clothes and were actually quite intimidating. So as Atisha was from India, he had never seen anything like it, and when he saw them he thought they were like ghosts/demons, and so he covered his head. When they saw that Atisha was being like that, they then changed clothes and put on Dharma robes.

When Atisha saw them he told them that the robes of the Tibetan sangha are very nice. The robes of Indian monastics are not that nice.

At that time, there were so many great masters from central Tibet who were inviting so many people. So Khuton directly asked Dromtonpa “why did you not include me in that letter you wrote?” This was a surprising question for Dromtonpa and he did not know what to say. Then he said, I put your name in it because I wrote Ngog Lotsawa etc., I wrote etc. and that included you right? This made him even more irate, how could you include such an important person as me as etc.? From then on he disliked Dromtonpa and had a bit of a grudge and enmity towards him and friction between them.

As he was heading to Tsang and the central province, when he was 66 years old he reached central Tibet at Samye. At that time, Samye was very important in Tibet. When Atisha went to Samye and saw the main statue, he praised it and said this is just like the statue in Bodh Gaya. So then, many scholars heard Atisha was staying there and he gave Dharma teachings while he was there.

### Atisha's stay in Yarlung and not being neglected and not being given food for one week by his rich Tibetan host, Khuton

Dromtonpa then thought it would be good to establish a place where Atisha could stay for a long time. There were four choices. One was the Yarlung region where Khuton lived, the second area was Samye, the third was the area of Ngog Lotsawa, and the fourth was the area of Nyethang, the latter was the area Dromtonpa thought was the best. So Dromtonpa wrote a letter to the leader of Nyethang, and said he thought it was a good place for Atisha to stay, and asked him to bring Atisha there. When the leader got the letter, he also thought that was right and said we should all take the responsibility of bringing Atisha there and made an announcement.

Dromtonpa understood this but he did not realise that Khuton had said to Atisha, if he stayed with an inferior person like the person at Nyethang there, then he would not be able to get all the resources he needed. But he told Atisha that if he stayed with him he could offer all he needed, and made promises he would also make a separate summer residence as well.

So Atisha was a foreigner and thought it sounded good and accepted. Dromtonpa went to get Atisha but he could not get him because Khuton did not like Dromtonpa, and so he went back to Nyethang. So Atisha went to Yarlung and stayed in a large area there, while he was there he wrote many texts such the *Prajñāparamita in 25000 Lines*, the *Sublime Continuum* and many other texts and translated many texts with Ngog Lotsawa.

While staying there, Atisha had to follow certain rules and so he was not able to do exactly as he wanted. So for a whole week, it was not intentional, but Khuton was very busy and had some difficulties, it was not intentional, but did not have time to organise things for Atisha, and forgot about it. So for a whole week, Atisha did not get any food.

At that time, Dromtonpa was staying near Nyethang, and was worried about Atisha. He said to his friend, "we have to bring him to Nyethang, Khuton is too proud and will not serve him well." So Dromtonpa said he would go and see Atisha and see how he was.

So Dromtonpa went to Yarlung to see how Atisha was. So he arrived when the sun was about to set. He sought out a student of Khuton, and when he asked him where Atisha was they would not tell Dromtonpa because they thought he had ignored their teacher in his letter. However, there was a student of Atisha from India, and when he saw Dromtonpa he was delighted to see him and brought him to Atisha's residence.

Atisha had probably not spent more than or two months there, but the way he looked was thin and as if he had gone through many hardships. As soon as Atisha saw Dromtonpa, he said:

"Oh great layperson, take me back to where I came from. My retinue and horses are having great difficulties. Khuton has as many resources as a Great King, but I have been reduced to a beggar."

And Atisha wept when he said this. So Dromtonpa said if you want to go somewhere else then please come to Nyethang, there are forests and even in winter there are flowers there, even when it is very cold. So Atisha said let us go straight away. Dromtonpa said that would not be good, because Khuton

is a very important person. However, Atisha told him he could not wait, and to leave with him now, and they left before dawn.

### Atisha's flight from Yarlung to Nyethang with Dromtonpa

When they fled from there, a student saw them going and he immediately went to see Khuton. However, even though the student wanted to speak with him, he could not get there, no matter how fast he was unable to reach it and it took a very long time.

When he finally got to Khuton's residence, normally in the morning he would be out walking, but on that day he had closed his doors and closed them tight. The student got very anxious, and was knocking on the door, and said they have kidnapped Atisha. He then came out of his residence and he said they had to go and get Atisha. He had very good horses, normally when he called his horse, the horse would come immediately. That day, the horse would not come and they had to get several people to try and catch the horse.

So then they all set off to get Atisha. Atisha and his party were on foot and arrived at an area which had to be crossed over a river, and there were small boats and not many people fit in them. Normally, Dromtonpa said let me cross the river first because if Khuton sees me he will beat me. So Atisha let him go first.

But then just as the boat came back Atisha saw Khuton riding towards him on his horse, who yelled at him from his horse, "have you forgotten your students?" Atisha yelled back: "You forgot me though didn't you, please go back". When Khuton finally reached the riverbank the horse would not go further and immediately stopped, hurling Khuton into the river, who was then almost swept away by the current. He was lucky his students came behind him to rescue him. The students also said to Atisha, "why do you not try and work things out, why are you going?" Atisha said, "please do not speak this way." There was nothing they could do to persuade Atisha to say. So they asked him to leave something they could worship. So Atisha took off his hat and threw it onto the water.

### Atisha's time at Samye Monastery



*View of Samye Monastery, Tibet*

After this, Atisha went to Samye and only then was he actually happy. He was able to relax there. but another reason he said he liked Samye because there was a lot of Sanskrit manuscripts, in particular Tantras of the Secret Mantra. When he read them he thought previously I thought I had read all the tantras, but they are as vast as an ocean. There had been many fires in Indian temple and we lost many tantras. However, those that were lost here one can read them. So he would read them and would sometimes circumambulate the temple. He also gathered many students and would have them copy the texts, and send them back to India.

Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

Originally, Atisha himself wanted to spend a long time in Samye. However, the leader of the area was King Bodhiraja, who was the King of Tibet at that time. However, some of the people in the King's retinue were a bit jealous of Atisha, so he was not able to stay that long there .

Then, the leader of Nyethang sent a cavalry of horses to meet Atisha and bring him to Nyethang. On the way, they went through Lhasa. In Lhasa, at that time, there was one of three of Atisha's main students, Ngog Legpai Sherab. Atisha at that time gave him, and many others empowerments and transmissions of the secret mantra, and translated many secret mantra texts, including a Tārā sadhana. In particular, they also translated a commentary on *The Essence of the Middle Way: Blazing Logic*.

Then Atisha went to Nyethang, and most of the last part of his life he spent in Nyethang. While he was there he translated along with Nagtso the translator many Sutric and Tantric texts. Atisha had many plans for spreading Buddhism in Tibet, but many did not turn out as he had hoped.

Now in the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya in Tibet it was not an offence/root vow to drink alcohol. However, in the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya it was considered to be a root offence to drink alcohol. For that reason, Atisha thought it would be a good idea in Tibet to bestow the Mahāsāṃghika vows. However, Dromtonpa stopped him because he said the Tibetan Kings would not give any other types of vows other than Mulasarvastavada. Also, in India there were many disputes within the schools in India, so that may also cause a lot of conflict in Tibet too.

Also, Atisha wanted to spread the tantras of the pith instructions, but Dromtonpa also stopped him. In fact, many of his plans were blocked by Dromtonpa. So Atisha was kind of disappointed and asked "what was the point of me coming to Tibet if I cannot spread my teachings and vows?" and so on. It says in one account.

At that time, if you look at it was probably a good thing, but if we think about it in the long term it was a bit of a problem. For that reason, many people was a bit disappointed that Atisha was not allowed to teach that.

For example, Milarepa who was essentially a contemporary of Dromtonpa, told Je Gampopa that: "A ghost has wormed its way into Tibetan hearts, and they will not allow Atisha to spread the Tantras." So for that reason, even though the Kadampas did get some of the Vajrayana teachings, but they do not have the pith instructions. So this is a criticism that is reported in Gampopa's biography.

Now Atisha, reached Nyethang and then when he reached the age of 70 and the last years of his life, he would occasionally sing a song and later these songs were translated into Tibetan. Occasionally he would go outside and view the mountains, meadows, flowers and rivers. In particular, he was delighted by how clean and pure Tibetan water was. He praised it and said one can gather merit by just offering this water. In India the climate is so hot, there are not springs that are nice and cool like in Tibet. So Atisha would make offering of water. In our modern tradition, we have the tradition of offering water bowls, and this was said to have originated from Atisha.

Likewise, when Atisha saw poor animals, he would ask them "Oh little horse, or goat, how are you doing?" In particular he really loved puppies, and whenever he saw them he picked it up and would say "Oh you made a mistake to take a body like this, but he would treat them very lovingly."

When Atisha was about to pass into nirvana, he gathered his disciples and gave them advice. He told all of them, when I am not here, he said you should follow Dromtonpa as your teacher. Dromtonpa said well who will I follow? Atisha said you should use the scriptures as your teacher. Likewise, until you have achieved clairvoyance, you should not do much to benefit beings. Otherwise, you should do everything you can to spread the teachings and whether or not the teachings flourish, depends on the

sangha. When the sangha flourishes depends on there being monastics, so in the future, you must nurture many fully ordained monks.

For that reason, there were many monastics and spiritual friends who gathered and asked him what they should do with his remains when he passed away. He told them to do what they did with the Buddha's remains as was described in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra.

At the age of 73, in the Horse year 1054, Atisha passed away and his remains were cremated at Nyethang. After the cremation they were having lunch, then Khuton came with a metal box and said if I do not take any now, I won't get even a little bit later. So he took a huge bag of ashes. Then later, Khuton made them all into tsa tsas and sent them off to different locations. And it was because of this kindness of Khuton that his relics were able to spread throughout Tibet.

### The huge influence of Atisha in Tibet and Je Tsongkhapa the Dagpo Kagyu lineage holder

Now I will talk about the influence of Atisha in Tibet. Atisha was a Mahāsāṃghika monk but he was not able to establish that tradition but he was able to emphasise the Vinaya teachings when he was in Tibet. That was when the main traditions of the Tibetan schools developed. Likewise, he said there were many people who called themselves Geshes and people of high realisation, who did not even really understand refuge. Yet, in order to become a Buddhist one has to know what refuge is, and so he taught them that. So even if we are only reciting four lines of text, at the beginning of the text we are also reciting Atisha, that was also his influence.

Also, at the time Atisha went to Tibet, there were many people there who said they have the view of Dzogchen and emptiness, but they disregarded conduct. Atisha said no matter how high your view is, you still must pay attention to karmic cause and effect. That they must refrain from negative actions and to pay attention to karmic cause and effect. Similarly, in the Mahayāna one must emphasis love, compassion and bodhicitta. So Atisha taught that in the morning when people woke up they should make dedications for the sake of sentient beings. This is primarily because of Atisha's emphasis on love, compassion and bodhicitta.

Also, at the time when Atisha was in Tibet, there were two different types of rituals, those from Nāgārjuna and those from Asanga. The tradition of the lineage of vast conduct and the profound view. First, Atisha would teach the lineage of the profound view. Primarily, this became known as the consequentialist Madhyamika view, and that spread widely mainly due to Atisha's influence because he has praised Chandrakirti so highly. He said the Consequentialist view was superior, and because he said this so much. So the high regard for that view also came from Atisha.

Atisha also emphasised the teachings on Prajnaparamita and was the first person to teach Maitreya's *Sublime Continuum (Uttaratantrashastra)*<sup>25</sup> in Tibet. In terms of the Sutra teachings, when we recite the practice we call the Sutra rituals, the most important one among those is the Medicine Buddha ritual. This ritual there was one that came from the earlier transmission, of Shantarakshita, and one that came from the later transmission of Atisha. So he had a great influence on the Medicine Buddha rituals. Also the prostrations to the sixteen Great Arhats started around that time, because of his strong connection to the Kadampas. Also, the teachings on Tārā also appeared around the time because of Atisha's great kindness.

The greatest influence of Atisha in Tibet was the spread of the Kadampa teachings. The Kadampa tradition only established itself as an independent lineage for a few centuries. But they placed a great emphasis on practice and pure discipline and everyone liked seeing them. So, the Kadampa tradition had a unique feature that they would meditate on love, compassion and bodhicitta, or on revulsion for

samsara and wish to emerge from it. So for every single point of the Dharma, they would emphasize this for their entire lifetime. Many people had faith in them and delighted in their teachings. Also, they established the monastic colleges. These were the source of the different texts. They also made the Narthang monastery, and had the most important shedras in the later transmission period. One could even say it was like the Nālanda of Tibet.

If we talk about the Dagpo Kagyu tradition, then the Dagpo Kagyu are holders of the Kadampa tradition. In Je Buton's *History of the Dharma*, it says that Je Gampopa and Je Phagmo Drupa wrote many treatises on the Stages of the Path.

In fact, the places where Gampopa became a monastic and where he studied first were all Kadampas. When we read Je Gampopa's writings he said, Nāropa's teachings were all very profound but if you are unable to combine them with the teachings of the Kadampas then you are unable to benefit sentient beings. Thus, he considered the teachings of the Kadampas to be very important. Likewise, Drigung Jigten Sumgon, when he was transmitting view and conduct, he also transmitted the view and conduct of Atisha's students. When he was teaching on the Three Vows they had to be read three times and he taught that karmic cause and effect were most important and emphasised conduct. So these features of the Kadampa also became features of the Drigung Kagyu.

Also, there was Je Gampopa's student Lho Lhayapa who really emphasised the Four Dharmas of Dagpo Gampopa. So, the source of these are the Kadampa teachings because they teach the three stages of the three types of individuals.

Also, when we talk about the yogas of Mahamudra, particularly the co-emergent yoga. One of the sources is the Kadampa tradition. In the Kagyu we talk about the four yogas, the stages of the channels and paths and so on. These instructions came from Atisha.

So, in brief, Gampopa and his disciples took the basis of the stages of the path of the Kadampas, and added the instructions of the path of means such as Je Milarepa's Tummo and so on. In that way, it became the confluence of the two rivers of the Kadampa and Mahamudra.

Later, Je Tsongkhapa, who wrote the text *Stages on the Path* said they were instructions from Atisha. He also said that for the secret mantra, there was no better source for that than the teachings of Marpa Lotsawa. In any case, the Gelugpa tradition is also a Kadampa tradition and many other features of the Marpa lineage well.

So, people who practice the union of Mahamudra and Kadampa, in terms of the practice they are very close in terms of the Kagyu and the later Gelugpas. There was a student of Je Tsongkhapa, who wrote a short text, which says that basically, that Je Tsongkhapa was probably like a Dagpo Kagyu master. That is what it says, that Je Tsongkhapa was a Dagpo Kagyu master. In particular, later then the Gelugpas became known as the New Kadampa school.

Similarly, we think about the Sakya school, Atisha visited one of the Sakya monasteries and one of the five Sakya forefathers was one of Atisha's students. So many of the Kadampa traditions were also passed down and entered the Sakya lineage.

So whatever lineage it is, Sakya, Gelug, Nyingma or Kagyu it is impossible for them to practice what they do without the influence of Atisha. There is no separate Kadampa lineage, or lineage or part of Tibet that the Kadampa instructions have not permeated and pervaded. Basically, in Tibet we have the teachings of Sutra and Tantra. The sutra teachings are on dialectics and on meditation these come from the Kadampa tradition. So in that way, Je Atisha had a strong influence and bestowed a great kindness for the teachings in Tibet. This kindness is something we need to remember and appreciate.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bodhipathapradīpa* (Tib: Byang chub lam gyi sgron ma, *A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*) is a Buddhist text composed in Sanskrit by the 11th-century teacher Atiśa and widely considered his magnum opus. The text reconciles the doctrines of many various Buddhist schools and philosophies, and is notable for the introduction of the three levels of spiritual aspiration: lesser, middling and superior, which in turn became the foundation for the Lamrim tradition.

<sup>2</sup> See video of teaching: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6BGf2XSbS8>

<sup>3</sup> See video of teaching: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLnxqoJowPQ>

<sup>4</sup> In the *Treasury of Lives* biography of Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyelwa, it says: “he is credited with around one hundred translations in the Kangyur, including texts in the Prajñāpāramitā and tantra sections, and in the Tengyur, including works by Atiśa. He also authored a biography of Atiśa, the "Extended Biography" (rnam thar rgyas pa).” See: Nag tso tshul khirms rgyal ba. 1982. Jo bo rje dpal ldan mar me mdzad ye shes kyi rnam thar rgyas pa. In Lokesh Chandra, ed., *Biography of Atiśa and his Disciple Brom-ston*, Zho[I] edition. Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, vol. 2, pp. 820-862.

<sup>5</sup> Vikrampur ("City of Courage") was a pargana situated 19 kilometres (12 mi) south of Dhaka, the modern capital city of Bangladesh. In the present day, it is known as Munshiganj District of Bangladesh. It is a historic region in Bengal and was a part of the Bhawal Estate.

Ashoka, the emperor of the Maurya Dynasty, ruled all of major parts of Bengal from ca. 269 BC to 232 BC. Being a devotee of Gautama Buddha, he propagated Buddhism across his kingdom which included Bikrampur to the east. Following the high ideals of this religion, Pala Kings came to Bikrampur to rule the region.

The second ruler of Pala Empire, Dharmapala, built a Buddhist monastery in Vikrampur during his reign in 770–810. After his death, his son, Devapala ruled this area until 850 CE. Then the region is successively ruled by Vighrahapala I, Narayanapala, Rajyapala, Gopala II, Vighrahapala II, Mahipala, Naya Pala, Vighrahapala III, Mahipala II, Shurapala II, Ramapala, Kumarapala, Gopala III and Madanapala.[4] Pala empire disintegrated in 1174 weakened by attacks of the Sena dynasty.

<sup>6</sup> *The Blue Annals* (དབུ་མེད་ལྷན་པོ་, Wylie: deb ther sngon po), completed in 1476, written by Go Lotsawa Zhonnu-pel (gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, 1392–1481), is a Tibetan historical survey with a marked ecumenical (Rimé movement) view, focusing on the dissemination of various sectarian religious traditions throughout Tibet. An English translation by George de Roerich with help from Gendun Chopel was published in 1949 and has since remained one of the most widely consulted sources on the history of Tibetan Buddhism up to the fifteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> was an important and influential Indian Buddhist philosopher, of the Madhyamaka school who studied at Nalanda monastery under Jñānagarbha, and became the founder of Samye, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet.

<sup>8</sup> Utpala in Sanskrit is a neuter noun with two meanings, both given by Amarakośa (a lexicon of circa. 400 AD). The first meaning is *Nymphaea caerulea*, the "blue lotus", also known as *kuvalaya* in Sanskrit.

<sup>9</sup> In *Images of Enlightenment* (Shambhala, 2006), in Chapter Six about Atiśa, it says that Rahula Gupta had to devise a special [and hilarious] plan to enable him to get the tantric teachings:

“When this great yogi saw that his young and eager disciple was still not free of his parents' worldly expectations for him, he devised a plan to win Atiśa his release:

[Rahulagupta] sent him back to the palace with eight of his disciples, four male and four female, dressed scantily in the bone ornaments of [advanced Vajrayana practitioners]. For three months Atiśa stayed in the environs of the palace with these strange new companions, behaving in a completely unconventional and outrageous manner. In the end his parents were forced to give up all hope for their precious son. Thinking him to have gone mad, they gave full permission for him to leave with his rather unsavoury-looking friends and be gone once and for all.”

---

<sup>10</sup> Avadhūṭīpa was an Indian master of tantric methods, the 6th guru of the Lamdre lineage descending from Virupa surrounded by the ‘Tip of the Flame’ Perfection Stage Lineage. <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/60>

<sup>11</sup> Śāntīpa was one of the eighty-four Buddhist Mahāsiddhas and a monk at the monastic university of Vikramashila in what is now modern-day Bihar in India. At Vikramashila he was instructed by Nāropa, and taught both Atīśa and Maitrīpa. He was known as kalikālasarvajña meaning “Omniscient One of the Degenerate Age”

<sup>12</sup> See video of that speech here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8p1IHq0ImQ>

<sup>13</sup> In the *Treasury of Lives* biography of Atisha, by Dr. Alex Gardner, it says: “The Eastern Vinaya tradition had already brought the Vinaya back to Tibet by the time Atīśa arrived, and, because Atīśa’s ordination was Lokottaravāda rather than the Mūlasarvāstivāda ordination that Tibetans had followed ever since the days of the Empire, he was not involved in any ordinations. There is evidence that many Tibetan communities of monks opposed Atīśa’s presence, and that he was largely forbidden from teaching in the manner to which he was accustomed.” The 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa did not mention this in his teaching though. See: <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Atisa-Dipamkara/5717>

<sup>14</sup> The Mahāsāṃghika ( Chinese: 大眾部 ) was a major division (nikāya) of the early Buddhist schools in India. They were one of the two original communities that emerged from the first schism of the original pre-sectarian Buddhist tradition (the other being the Sthavira nikaya). This schism is traditionally held to have occurred after the Second Buddhist council, which occurred at some point during or after the reign of Kalashoka. The Mahāsāṃghika nikāya developed into numerous sects which spread throughout ancient India.

<sup>15</sup> Dharmarakshita was an Indian Buddhist credited with composing an important Mahayana text called the Wheel of Sharp Weapons (Tib. blo-sbyong mtshon-cha ‘khor-lo).]

<sup>16</sup> Maitrīpa was also known as Maitreyaṅgā, Advayavajra, and, to Tibetans, Maitrīpa), was a prominent Indian Buddhist Mahasiddha associated with the Mahāmudrā transmission of tantric Buddhism. His teachers were Shavaripa and Nāropa.

<sup>17</sup> Video clip of 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa speaking about Atisha’s fondness for the guru Serlingpa: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4rn1A6BLVc>

<sup>18</sup> King Songtsen Gampo (Srong-brtsan-sgam-po (born c. 617, Rgya ma, Tibet—died 650) was a Tibetan king (crowned 629) who extended his dominion to include Nepal and parts of India and China and whose reign is said to have marked the beginning of recorded history in Tibet. He commissioned a court scholar to create the Tibetan written language using an Indo-European model for the script. Because two of his wives, a Nepalese and a Chinese princess, were Buddhists, he is credited by some historians with introducing Buddhism into Tibet.

<sup>19</sup> Langdarma (ལང་དར་མ།, lit. “Mature Bull” or “Dharma the Bull”) was likely the last Tibetan Emperor who most likely reigned from 838 to 841 CE.

<sup>20</sup> Lachen Gongpa Rabsal (bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal) (b.832? - d.915?) was ordained by the ‘Three Men from Kham’—Mar, Yo, and Tsang—during Langdarma’s persecution, and went on to play a critical role in the transmission of monastic vows from Amdo so that they could reemerge in Central Tibet in the late 10th century. See his Treasury of Lives biography here: <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Lachen-Gongpa-Rabsel/2816>

<sup>21</sup> For an obituary of Tsering Gyalpo who passed away in 2015 in Berlin, Germany, see here: <https://www.iats.info/2015/07/tsering-gyalpo-1961-2015/>

<sup>22</sup> Regarding Rinchen Zangpo’s connection with India and Indian panditas, the Treasury of Lives biography states that:

“Whether he went first on his own or both times in royal employ, during his two trips to India (some sources have it that he went three times) Rinchen Zangpo is said to have studied with over seventy-five Indian paṇḍitas. Among them, he learned the Yogatantras from Ratnavajra, Guhyasamāja from Nāropa, the Durgatipariśodhanatantra from a teacher whose name in Tibetan was Norbu Lingpa (nor bu gling pa), and, at Vikramashila, he studied with Dīpaṅkarabhadra, Jinākara, and Duryacandra, whose commentary on the Cakrasaṃvara was later of significant importance for the Sakya tradition. In Tamalasanta he studied Yogatantra with Śrāddhakaravarman. In Tibet he also studied with Śrāddhakaravarman, who taught him the system of Vajrodaya (rdo rje ‘byung).

Among the Indians who worked with him in Toling was Dharmasrībhadra, who contributed, together with Shākya Lodro (shAkya blo gros, d.u.) to the translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra. The name of at least one artist he hired is known: Bhidhaka, who created a statue of Avalokiteśvara of the size of his father that was installed at Gokhar Lhaxhang (go khar lha khang) in Khatse (kha tse) and still exists today. Adele Tomlin/ Dakini Publications, 2025.

---

He is credited with promoting the Prajñāpāramitā literature in Tibet, having translated several important works, including the Prajñāpāramitā in 8,000 verses (Aṣṭasāhastrikā), as well as in 20,000 verses, and the Abhisamayālaṅkāra, one of the most important commentaries on the Prajñāpāramitā literature. In addition to his translation work he also composed commentaries on topics such as Prajñāpāramitā, sādhanā, and abhiṣeka.

He promoted several tantric traditions, particularly Yogatantra, translating numerous commentaries on the Sarvatāthagatatattvasaṃgraha, and he was the first to introduce the Cakrasaṃvara tantra to Tibet. He also is credited with disseminating the “mother” (*ma rgyud*) and “father” (*pha rgyud*) classes of the Anuttarayoga tantra.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See previous endnote 1 on this text.

<sup>24</sup> Langdarma (Tibetan: ལང་དང་མ་, lit. "Mature Bull" or "Darma the Bull"), was the 42nd and last king of the Tibetan Empire who in 838 killed his brother, King Ralpachen, then reigned from 841 to 842 CE before he himself was assassinated.

<sup>25</sup> Uttaratantra Shastra (Skt. Mahāyānottaratantra Śāstra; Tib. རྒྱལ་པོ་ཆེན་པོ་རྒྱུད་ལཱ་མའི་བསྟན་བཅོས་, Gyü Lama, Trad. Chin. 分別寶性大乘無上續論), Treatise on the Sublime Continuum or the Ratnagotravibhaga (Skt. Ratnagotravibhāga) — one of the Five Treatises of Maitreya, a commentary on the teachings of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma explaining buddha nature. It is included among the so-called "Thirteen great texts", which form the core of the curriculum in most shedras.