

Atisha and the Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

Parallels

There are many parallels between the lives of the great Buddhist teacher Atisha, and His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama. Like His Holiness, Atisha was a monk, and a renowned scholar in the Buddhist philosophical systems of his time. Also, like His Holiness, Atisha travelled widely, leaving India - the country of his birth - to venture to distant parts of the then known world to study and practise the Buddhist teachings. Like His Holiness, Atisha also faced the challenge of finding new ways to present the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha – already more than 1500 years old – by creatively adapting and interpreting them for the people of his own time and culture.

Atisha's life story

Prince, Buddhist monk, traveller, scholar, great meditator – and devastatingly handsome as well! Tibetans love telling the stories of the great masters and yogis of the past, and it is not surprising that the life story of Atisha is one of their all time favourites.

Atisha's early life

Atisha was born in the year 982 AD in East Bengal. Like Shakyamuni Buddha before him, he was born into a royal family and was given the name Chandragarbha, meaning “Moon Essence”. He was later given the name Atisha, meaning peace, by the Tibetan king Jangchub Oe. It is said that at the time of his birth there were many auspicious signs, and that from his very early childhood Prince Chandragarbha displayed an unusually peaceful and compassionate nature, and an aspiration to spiritual practice.

At the age of only 18 months his parents took the young prince on a visit to a nearby temple. Thousands of people lined the streets of the city to catch a glimpse of the child. Atisha asked his parents: “Who are these people?” They replied; “They are your subjects.” The child looked on the crowds with compassion and said: “If only they could each have the same good fortune and wealth as I. May they all follow the Dharma!” Clearly this was no ordinary child. According to the Buddhist teachings, our actions and experience in previous lives carry over to influence our experience and personality in this life. In the case of the young prince Atisha, only the experience of very high spiritual realisations carried over from previous lives could explain this behaviour.

The young prince also had a special connection with Tara, the female Buddha embodying all the Buddhas' activities of great compassion. It is said that when he was a baby sitting in his mother's lap, blue flowers would sometimes rain from the sky and the baby seemed to be smiling at an unseen presence. The great yogis of the kingdom interpreted this as a sign that Tara was appearing to the child. With their son's obvious connection with spiritual matters, Atisha's parents feared that he might

leave his kingdom to become a monk. Therefore they surrounded him with luxury and, as he grew into a young adult, planned to arrange a marriage for him. Some of the most beautiful young women of noble birth in the kingdom were introduced to him in the hope that Atisha would take a bride. At this time Tara manifested to Atisha and counselled him not to be attached to his kingdom or worldly life in general. She advised the prince that he had a strong karmic potential to become a great spiritual teacher, as a result of meditation and practice in previous lives. Just as an elephant stuck in a swamp cannot free itself due to being weighed down by its own body, so, Tara said, Atisha would be trapped in worldly existence if he used his potential for mundane pursuits.

Inspired by Tara's words, Atisha formed the firm determination to practise Dharma and to attain enlightenment.

Atisha's search for a master

The prince's first step on the path to enlightenment was to find a spiritual master who would instruct him in meditation and the Buddhist teachings. However, his father had arranged for a guard of 130 cavalymen to accompany his son at all times. However, Atisha managed to steal away secretly, pretending that he was travelling to the mountains. He then quickly sought out a number of renowned Indian masters of his day. The great teacher Jetari first gave him teachings on taking refuge in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and on bodhichitta, the mind aspiring to reach enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Jetari then advised him to travel to the great monastery of Nalanda to study with the spiritual guide Bodhibhadra. Bodhibhadra gave Atisha brief instructions on bodhichitta, and advised him that to further his practice, he should seek out the great meditator and teacher Vidyakokila, known to have attained the perfect realisation of the wisdom perceiving emptiness. Having instructed Atisha in the vast and profound paths, Vidyakokila then advised his student to study with the great vajrayana master, Avadhutipa. Avadhutipa said that he would give teachings to the prince, but that he should first seek out the famous Rahulagupta, known as the Black Mountain Yogi, for instruction and then return to him later for more detailed teachings on the vajrayana path. The prince travelled to the Black Mountain and found Rahulagupta, a great tantric practitioner, who first tested his new student's resolve by hurling a lightning bolt at him as he approached! After Atisha had made requests for instruction for thirteen days, Rahulagupta agreed, and gave him the secret name Jhana-guhya-vajra, or Indestructible Wisdom, and the empowerment of the Hevajra lineage. However, he told Atisha that before practising further he should first obtain his parents' consent to be released from his royal duties. He also arranged for an escort of eight naked yogis and yoginis to accompany Atisha home.

Atisha returned to his parents' palace. For the first three months, he behaved as if he had lost his mind, wandering aimlessly and speaking incoherently. All who saw him, accompanied by his entourage of eccentric yogis and yoginis, decided that Atisha had become a madman and was not fit to govern. One day his father, most distressed of all, could no longer contain his sadness. Approaching Atisha, together with the queen he said to him: "Alas my son! From the time of your birth I believed you would become a superior king and live in great happiness. What has the forest retreat done to your mind?" To his parents' surprise the prince replied lucidly: "Royal father! If I

became a king I would be with you only for this life! In future lives we would never meet, and this life, for all its luxury and wealth would have been for nothing. I wish for nothing more than to practise Dharma purely in this life to achieve liberation and enlightenment. In that way I can properly repay the kindness of you my dear parents and all living beings. Please release me from royal duties so that I may devote my life wholly to the Dharma.” Recalling the auspicious signs and dreams that had attended Atisha’s birth, his mother quickly consented. The king remained unhappy at the prospect of losing his son, and would not at first accept the request, but in time granted his son’s wish.

The very next day after receiving his parents’ consent, Atisha returned to Avadhutipa to receive further instructions in the vajrayana tradition from the great master. After seven years’ strong practice of study and meditation, he developed great accomplishments, to the point where one day he began to experience a sense of pride. He felt to himself: “In all the world, there may be no one who understands these texts as well as I!” That night while he was sleeping Atisha dreamed that he was visited by dakinis who showed him countless vajrayana texts, even the names of which he had never heard. Atisha awoke to find that as a result of his dream his feelings of pride had been dispelled.

From India to Indonesia

At the age of twenty-nine, Atisha experienced a vision in which Rahulagupta appeared to him, walking through the wall of his room. The Black Mountain Yogi scolded him and told him that it would be most beneficial for his practice and for the Dharma if he were to take ordination as a monk. Atisha had several more dreams in which his teachers and deities appeared before him and gave him similar advice. Following this direction, Atisha received ordination from the great master Silarakshita shortly thereafter and was given the name Dipamkara Srijnana.

Studying the three higher trainings and the tenets of the Great Exposition school under the renowned teacher Dharmarakshita, Atisha deepened his realisations of wisdom and compassion and was known for his pure ethical behaviour. Still, after many years of further study, he found himself more and more preoccupied. For all his progress in study and meditation he still yearned to find the method that would bring him quickly and directly to enlightenment. If there was any place where he might find an answer to this riddle, surely it was Bodhgaya, the holy place where Shakyamuni Buddha had himself manifested the attainment of enlightenment so many centuries before? Atisha accordingly journeyed there on a pilgrimage.

Circumambulating Bodhgaya’s great stupa, Atisha experienced a clear vision in which two manifestations of Tara appeared in the space before him. One asked the other: “What is the most important practice for achieving enlightenment?”. The other replied: “The practice of bodhichitta, supported by loving kindness and great compassion is most important.”

Convinced that he had now found the answer to his question, Atisha formed the single-minded aspiration to perfect his understanding and practice of the mind of enlightenment, or bodhichitta. After checking thoroughly with a number of scholars and yogis he learned that a high master called Suvarnavipi (later known to Tibetans as Serlingpa) was reputed to have the most vast and profound realisations of

bodhichitta. However, Suvarnavipi lived on the distant island of Sumatra, in present day Indonesia. Atisha nonetheless quickly arranged to travel there, so intense was his wish to learn more about the methods that could quickly bring him closer to enlightenment.

Atisha made the journey to Sumatra by boat with a group of traders. The voyage took more than 13 months and many difficulties arose along the way. At one point an extremely violent storm blew up, driving the boat back in the direction it had come from. It is said that Atisha was able to subdue the storm by the power of his meditative stabilisation. At another stage in the journey, a monstrous whale, said to be an emanation of a demon blocked the boat's passage, and the voyagers were lucky to escape with their lives. Eventually however, the small boat reached its destination at the very edge of the known world.

Having reached the end of his long journey, Atisha did not approach Suvarnavipi immediately. Understanding the importance of selecting a spiritual master, and following the methods taught by his previous teachers, he first carefully investigated Suvarnavipi's qualities by closely questioning his friends and students. Having satisfied himself of the master's wisdom and compassion, he then approached Suvarnavipi to request teachings. Suvarnavipi joyfully accepted Atisha's request. Through his clairvoyant powers, he was aware that this very special student had been travelling over the sea to Sumatra to receive teachings from him and perceived Atisha's great potential to develop realisations. Many great offering ceremonies were performed in subsequent days. Suvarnavipi agreed to provide the transmission of all the bodhichitta teachings held by him, including the secret mind training techniques passed down through a direct oral lineage originating with Manjushri, the Buddha embodying all the Buddhas' qualities of perfect wisdom. He explained that Atisha should remain in Sumatra and practise these methods for 12 years, prophesying that if he did so he would attain perfect realisation of bodhichitta.

Atisha practised strongly for 12 years, fulfilling his teacher's wishes. Then one day Suvarnavipi suddenly advised his student to leave Sumatra, telling him: "Noble One, do not stay here. Go to the north. In the north is the Land of Snows!" A new phase was about to begin in Atisha's life, a phase that would irrevocably change the course of Tibetan history and Tibetan Buddhism.

His return to India

Atisha returned initially to India. He quickly became famous for the brilliance of his teachings, and his unparalleled abilities in debate with other teachers and philosophers. As a result, he was appointed abbot of Nalanda Monastery, the greatest of all Buddhist monasteries in India, and the largest that has ever existed.

While a golden age of Dharma reigned in India, in Tibet it was a very different story. The Buddhist teachings had been conveyed to Tibet two centuries earlier but had been suppressed by the evil king, Langdarma. Although the teachings had again been established in the Land of Snows, there was great confusion about correct practice, especially about the way to correctly combine the practices of sutra and tantra. Some people were also misled by teachers who gave instructions in black magic and harmful mantras under the guise of teaching Dharma.

The story of Yeshe Oe and Jangchub Oe

The Tibetan king of that time, Lhalama Yeshe Oe, was a sincere Dharma practitioner. His strongest wish was to re-establish the pure lineage of teachings and rid Tibet of the great confusion that existed. Yeshe Oe therefore requested 21 of the brightest students in the country to travel to India, where there were so many great teachers and pandits. His hope was that some of those teachers could be persuaded to come to Tibet to teach pure Dharma. For the Tibetans, the journey from their high country beyond the Himalayas to the heat of the Indian plains was extremely difficult. All but two of them died. While the two who survived managed to significantly further their understanding of Dharma, and returned to Tibet with many new scriptures and teachings, they were unable to persuade any of India's great teachers to return with them. During their time in India however, they had learned of the great Dipamkara Srijnana. On returning to Tibet they had an audience with their king. They said to Yeshe Oe: "In India there lives a monk of royal birth known as Dipamkara Srijnana. If you could persuade him to come to Tibet, it is certain that he would be of great benefit." On merely hearing Dipamkara Srijnana's name, Yeshe Oe was overcome by an unshakeable faith in him and his qualities. He resolved to do all in his power to bring the great teacher to Tibet.

It was the custom at the time to offer gold to teachers of the Dharma, as a sign of the student's respect and aspiration for the teachings. Yeshe Oe therefore set about amassing a great treasure of gold that he would offer to Atisha, to support his request for the master to come to Tibet. Yeshe Oe decided to travel himself with followers to the four corners of his country to search for gold. His journey took him to the border regions however, and the party was captured by the ruler of a neighbouring kingdom, the Garlog khan. Yeshe Oe himself was thrown into prison. Yeshe Oe's nephew, Jangchub Oe learnt of his uncle's capture and went to Yeshe Oe's aid, pleading with the Garlog khan for his release. The khan offered Jangchub Oe – two options: he would release Yeshe Oe firstly if he and Jangchub Oe abandoned their plan to bring the great pandit to Tibet and became his vassals, or alternatively if Jangchub Oe brought him the king's weight in gold. Jangchub Oe immediately set out to search for more gold to pay the ransom. After a great deal of difficulty he managed to collect the weight of Yeshe Oe's body in gold, excluding his head. He returned to the Garlog khan, hoping that he would accept this treasure. The khan flatly refused. The distraught Jangchub Oe managed however to find Yeshe Oe's prison and speak to his uncle through the locked door. Jangchub Oe was distressed. He explained to his uncle that he did not wish to oppose the khan by making war against him, because so many innocent lives would be lost. Nor did he wish to accept the khan's demand that they yield to him and give up Yeshe Oe's plans to bring Atisha to Tibet. Therefore, Jangchub Oe said, he would leave again and search far and wide for more gold so that the full ransom could be paid. Yeshe Oe laughed, and said: "No, please do not give even a speck of gold to this evil khan! I am old now and there is nothing more beneficial that I could do with my life than offer it for the benefit of the Dharma and Tibet. Please take the gold you have already collected and offer it to Dipamkara Srijnana. Please tell him of Tibet's need for his help. Tell him that our need is so great that I have given up my own life in the hope that he will come to Tibet and teach the pure Dharma! Nephew, please do not think of me. Think of Tibet and the Dharma." Jangchub Oe could not bear the thought of leaving his uncle in prison, but

he also perceived clearly that Yeshe Oe's deepest aspiration was that he try to bring Atisha to Tibet. Buoyed by his uncle's courage, Jangchub Oe bade Yeshe Oe farewell and resolved to carry out his wishes to the letter.

The Tibetans plead with Atisha to travel to Tibet

Jangchub Oe, now king in his uncle's place, quickly set about arranging for a party to journey to India with the golden offering for Atisha. Jangchub Oe himself travelled with the party, led by the translator Nagtso, for much of the way. After many months the weary Tibetans arrived at Nalanda monastery. They were recognised as Tibetans and taken to the house of a Tibetan lama, Gyatsoen Senge, who had lived in India for some years. Nagtso explained the purpose of their journey – to persuade Atisha to travel with them back to Tibet. Gyatsoen Senge said immediately: "Speak about this to no one. If the Elder Ratnakarashanti learns what you intend to do he will never allow it! In order to succeed in your objective you will have to work very carefully and skilfully."

Gyatsoen Senge arranged for Nagtso and his followers to make offerings of gold to the Elder Ratnakarashanti, which pleased him very much, without disclosing their true purpose. Gyatsoen Senge watched carefully over the following weeks for a chance for the Tibetans to meet Atisha in person without arousing suspicion. One day the opportunity arose and Gyatsoen Senge quickly told Nagtso to come with him to Atisha's room. There they offered Atisha a world mandala one cubit high, richly decorated with gold. Gyatsoen Senge spoke of the confusion about Dharma in Tibet, of Yeshe Oe's sacrifice and of the Bodhisattva Jangchub Oe's heartfelt request that Atisha come to their aid.

Atisha was deeply moved by the obvious courage and sincerity of the Tibetans who had travelled so far to make this request. He said: "The Tibetan king is a Bodhisattva. These people have made great sacrifices to benefit the pure Dharma. It would be wrong for me to disregard this request. Still I am now old and have many duties here at Nalanda. If I travel to Tibet I can never hope to return. I will consider this further. Please keep your gold for now."

The Tibetans then departed, while Atisha carefully considered whether it would bring greater benefit if he travelled to Tibet rather than remaining in India. He consulted with Tara, who told him that by accepting the request to go to Tibet, Atisha would produce the greatest benefit for the Dharma teachings and sentient beings. However, it would also shorten his own lifespan. If he were to remain in India he would live to ninety-one, but if he went to Tibet, he would live until seventy-three. Thinking of the benefits that would flow from travelling to the Land of Snows, Atisha decided that he would do so.

However, perceiving that if he left too quickly people would speak of the Dharma in India going into decline, Atisha skilfully spoke of his intention to go on a great pilgrimage to various holy places. He then asked the Elder Ratnakarashanti if he could include the many holy sites in Nepal and Tibet in his pilgrimage. After some thought the Elder consented, but on condition that Atisha should come back to India in no more than 3 years. The Elder charged Nagtso with the responsibility for

ensuring that Atisha returned within that time. With great joy, Atisha, Nagtso and the rest of their followers prepared for their journey to the Land of Snows.

Atisha in Tibet

With advance notice that Atisha was indeed coming to Tibet, Jangchub Oe rode to meet him with a guard of 300 horsemen. After the joyful celebrations had finished, Jangchub Oe made special requests of Atisha. He explained how the Dharma had declined in Tibet. Some people followed the sutra teachings only and never practised tantra. Others engaged only in tantric practices and neglected sutra. “Compassionate Atisha”, he said, “there is great confusion about correct practice in Tibet. If it pleases you, I request you not to teach on the most profound subjects. Rather please teach about karma, the law of cause and effect. Please teach us those practices that are most easy to follow, and that include the essential meaning of all the Buddha’s teachings of sutra and tantra.” Jangchub Oe also asked a number of questions about correct Dharma practice.

Atisha was greatly pleased by Jangchub Oe’s sincerity and wisdom. In response he composed the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*. Only three folios long, this text nonetheless answered all the questions that had been put by Jangchub Oe and, as requested, distilled all the Buddha’s eighty four thousand teachings of Dharma into a clear simple guide for practice.

As a result of Atisha’s activities and his great reputation, the practice of pure Dharma in Tibet quickly flourished. At the end of three years Atisha prepared to return to India as he had promised. On the long road back to India, he was accompanied by Nagtso and his foremost Tibetan disciple, the layman Dromtoenpa. However, on reaching the border with Nepal the party found that their way was blocked as a result of a war that had broken out. Nagtso was very concerned because of his promise to the Elder Ratnakarashanti that Atisha would return. Atisha said that Nagtso should not worry – he had done everything possible to fulfil his promise. However, Atisha did arrange for a message to be sent through to the Elder at Nalanda explaining that he had been unable to return but could do so once the war had ceased. However, he also wrote in his letter that in his opinion it would be most beneficial if he remained in Tibet. He requested permission to do so, pointing out that if this was possible, he would be able to compose texts similar to *The Lamp for the Path*. Atisha also enclosed a copy of the text, personally signed, and an offering of gold.

When he received the message, the Elder Ratnakarashanti submitted the copy of *The Lamp for the Path* to his highest and most skilled pandits at Nalanda. They were astonished at how Atisha’s composition clearly and accurately condensed all the manifold teachings of sutra and tantra into a single short text. The great pandits recognised that Atisha would never have composed this work had he not travelled to Tibet. Ratnakarashanti therefore sent a message back to Atisha, consenting to his wish to remain in Tibet.

Atisha stayed in Tibet for 17 years in total. His clear and pure teachings initiated a golden age of Dharma in the Land of Snows. Through his foremost disciple Dromtoenpa, Atisha gave the teachings of the stages to the path of enlightenment, known in Tibetan as *lam.rim*. Through these instructions three great lineages of

lam.rim teachings were passed down to subsequent generations, including the great Je Tsong Khapa. Tsong Khapa's lam.rim texts, following the structure and content of Atisha's tradition, remain the cornerstone of Tibetan Buddhist teachings to this day. In the new millennium, Atisha's clear and practical methods are taught in places as diverse as India, Europe, the US and Australia.

A Postscript

A small postscript to the Atisha story: as mentioned, legend has it that Atisha was unusually handsome, even in his later years. One story from his time in Tibet tells of how he approached a small farmhouse to request an offering of food. An elderly woman lived in the house. At the time she was milking her cow. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. The cow took fright at the unexpected sound and kicked the full pot of milk over. The old lady, in a rage, picked up a clod of mud from the earthen floor of her house as she advanced to the door, meaning to teach the disruptive visitor a lesson. Flinging the door open, and ready to take aim, she found herself face to face with an extremely attractive man. "Oh!" she gasped, letting the clod of mud slip quickly from her hand, "Please come in for some butter tea!"

Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment

Atisha composed the *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* to cut through the great confusion about the Buddhist teachings that existed in Tibet at the time.

It is said that Shakyamuni Buddha taught eighty-four thousand Dharmas – a huge variety of teachings, methods and meditations encompassing the five paths, the three vehicles and the methods of sutra and tantra. Why did Shakyamuni Buddha teach so many different methods? Every person's situation is different – their aspirations, environment, problems, outlook and expectations. So the most effective method for developing inner peace, wisdom, compassion and understanding also varies from person to person. In order to find the methods that are the most useful for us personally, we need to understand how the various teachings relate to one another and which methods are the best to use in each situation in which we find ourselves. If we don't understand this, we can be as confused about spiritual practice as so many Tibetans were before Atisha travelled to the Land of Snows.

From a Buddhist point of view the Dharma includes methods that can utterly transform the lives and experience of every sentient being. If we practise Dharma properly and sincerely we can find the solution to any problem or difficulty whatsoever that we or others might experience. But if we use these methods without proper understanding or skill, we may make ourselves more confused.

For example, we might have all the ingredients in our kitchen cupboards that we need to prepare a delicious meal. If we try to prepare the meal by simply throwing the various ingredients together in a random order, the result will be a disaster rather than a delight! The same principle applies to spiritual practice.

Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, and the *lam.rim* tradition of teachings that has followed from it, present the various methods in a clear order and according to a progressive structure. It begins with the subjects that are easiest to understand, gradually leading students up to the most profound and subtle teachings of the true nature of phenomena.

It is said that the teachings following Atisha's *Lamp for the Path* tradition have four great qualities:

1. They show that teachings and methods that might at face value appear contradictory, are in fact not. For example, we may be advised not to follow certain methods at the beginning of our practice, but those same methods may be useful at later stages as our understanding develops.
2. They show that all scriptures are instructions for practice. The *lam.rim* teachings are uniquely practical. Their main aim is not to increase our knowledge of philosophy or other intellectual knowledge. Rather they show us how we can change our perspective on every moment of our lives, transforming all our day to day experiences – whether they are things that we enjoy or dislike - into opportunities for personal growth.
3. They enable us to understand how the eighty four thousand Dharmas taught by Shakyamuni Buddha fit in with one another, and which method will be most useful for us at any one time.
4. By enabling us to see that all these manifold methods are useful, we become free of sectarianism, imagining that the traditions or practices that we personally favour provide the only valid approach to spiritual practice.

Lam.rim was the main method that Atisha taught to dispel confusion in Tibet and it has continued to form the heart of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition for more than 1000 years. Many Westerners find *lam.rim* especially suitable to the outlook of Western societies and cultures – in that its teachings are clearly and logically structured, and because its emphasis is utterly practical. If we want to find out how to respond more constructively to that person who is really bugging us at work, or the crazy driver who cuts us off on the freeway, at the same time as developing profound meditative insight, *lam.rim* is for us!