



DIPANKARA ATISA

DHARMA, TANTRA AND ATISA
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PROLOGUE

Tantra in Sanskrit or Rgyud in Tibetan is generally rendered in English as mysticism, mysteries etc. Like 'religion', the term 'mysticism' has multiple or diverse and even contradictory connotations. Not being a scholar in the discipline of religion or philosophy, I begin this article with a prefatory explanation.

In a recent controversy about Dipankara Atisa (982-1054) I am accused as having said that the great savant was a Tantrika preaching "debased Tantra" in Tibet. I have contradicted this as a false allegation in the last issue of this *Bulletin* pp. 41-43. My Tibetan friends, who know my opinions and sentiments well expect an elaborate writeup on what they consider slanders and insinuations against their Dharma of which Tantra is an essential component. I comply as a student of history-hard facts of history, and as one with particular interest in the history of Buddhism.

I hold here no brief, pro or contra, for any religion or ideology. Born in a conservative Bengali Hindu family, schooled early with Presbyterian Scots, I had the unique opportunities of sitting at the feet of Muslim scholars of Bihar Sharif and Jamia Milia and also with the Jesuit scholars in Darjeeling and elsewhere. My important and relevant credential for the present debate is my close association for three decades with the Mahayana or

Northern Buddhist monks and lay believers. I do not deny my highest veneration for Gautama Buddha. However I join this debate not so much as a believer but as a student of history.

DHARMA

The Dharma taught by Gautama Buddha is different from all other religions because of Buddha's silence on God or Godhead and because of his reservations on miracles and mysteries. Nevertheless will be historically wrong to assert or affirm that Buddha was not a superman or that he was neither a Muni nor Yogi, as these appellations implied in the sixth century B.C. and down to the current century A.D. Buddha's teachings cannot be bracketed with the teachings of mere intellectuals; his life as well as his teachings were more phenomenal than noumenal. Madhava, the encyclopaedic scholar, in *Sarva-darsanasangraha* (c. 1380 A.D), classes Buddha Dharma as *sui generis* and places Buddhism in a central position between the clearcut atheism/materialism on one side and the clearcut theism/spiritualism on other side.

On this point I can do no better than express my findings in the words of Edward Conze from his book *Buddhist Thought in India* (London 1962). "There are of course, a few modern writers who make Buddhism quite rational by eliminating all metaphysics, reincarnation, all the gods and spirits, all miracles and supernatural powers. Theirs is not the Buddhism of the Buddhists". (p. 29 foot note) Conze continues "Bitter and incredible

as it must seem to the contemporary mind, Buddhism bases itself first of all on the revelation of the Truth by an omniscient being, known as "the Buddha", and secondly on the spiritual intuition of saintly beings." (p 30)

A brilliant Theravada scholar, K.N. Jayatilleke, in his monumental work *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London 1963), presents the teachings of Buddha with a studied avoidance of supernatural or transcendental matters. Yet the concluding sentence of Jayatilleke's book is a runaway deduction. "It was not that there was something that the Buddha did not know, but that what he 'knew' in the transcendent sense could not be conveyed in words because of the limitations of language and of empiricism." (p. 476)

A saint of modern India, Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), not read in Pali Canon, used to say that Gautama Buddha had the Vision of Brahman but had no adequate or appropriate words to convey his experience. Ramakrishna would quote wellknown as well as obscure Vedic texts to emphasise that Revelation of Truth or Enlightenment of Mind is not capable of expression in terms already coined.

EARLY RELIGIONS

It is now admitted that the earliest spiritual speculations of man were about the Nature - its forces and wonders, and the ancient man made efforts to propitiate

and utilize the Nature. The mysteries or mystic rituals were thus the first religions generally designated Shamanism by modern scholars. A comprehensive handbook by a foremost authority is Myrcia Eliade: *Shamanism* (London 1964).

In India mysteries or mystic rituals were no doubt practised by the Indus Valley and other peoples (c. 3000 B.C). Whether the so-called Aryans borrowed any idea or ritual from the Indus people or not, the later Vedic religion as in *Atharva Veda* was full of mystic rituals and magic spells. The wonder and veneration for Nature and the deities representing the different forces of Nature was however the independent speculations of the Aryans. This mystic cult found its sublime expression in the Upanishads.

In *Katha Upanishad* it is clearly stated that deepest learning or highest instruction can not lead to realization of the Absolute for which Inner Illumination is the only means. Upanishadic lore began on the eve of Gautama Buddha's advent and several texts were composed before Buddha's teachings. On this subject reference may be made to Deussen : *Philosophy of the Upanishads* (1906), Ranade : *A Constructive Survey of Upanishadic Philosophy* (1927), and Dutta : *Early Monastic Buddhism* (1960).

The point to press here is that though elaborate rituals and animal sacrifices were denigrated, mystic contemplation, Dhyana and Yoga were prized. Gautama Buddha was thus come in a milieu, where supernatural or transcendental knowledge was not taboo. Tantra as

a sublime process was not altogether unknown in Buddha's time.

Mahayana believers need not quote extensively from Kanjur and Tanjur or Rinchen Terzod and Tsongkhapa to prove that Gautama Buddha was a mystic who did perform miracles. My friends from Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan regions ask me to note the Southern Buddhists' adoration of the Buddha relics, their adherence to the epithet Tathagata ('the meaning of which non-Buddhists may not comprehend') and above all their pilgrimage to Sankissya (Farukhabad : UP), site where Gautama landed after preaching to his mother in the Heaven of Thirty Three Devas.

The above digression is made to repeat a truism that all religions have a core of mystic rituals or mystic philosophy. From my limited knowledge, I would consider 'sacrament of bread and wine' among Christians as a necessary reminder for the hope eternal.

MYSTICISM : SACRED & PROFANE

Mystic rituals or mysticism can be overdone and even debased. History of different religions abounds with malpractices; and neither Buddhism nor Hinduism can claim completely clean record. This however does not detract from the merits of mysticism as a sublime process. A Roman Catholic scholar, R.C. Zaehner, while Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford, wrote in his book *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford 1957) the following.

"Let us first consider what is common to all mysticism. Now it is generally agreed that there are two primary instincts in man, the instinct of self-preservation and the sexual instinct. The first is a wholly individual instinct and is concerned with maintaining individual life; the second, *qua* instinct rather than *qua* biological purpose, is the instinct to unite with what is other than and different from oneself. The form the union will take will, naturally, depend on the sex of individual concerned. The crude instinct of the male is to hunt and subdue, of the female to surrender and accept. The sexual instinct is in any case inimical to the instinct of self-preservation, as anyone who has observed animals in heat will have noticed: for when an animal's sexual instinct is overwhelmingly strong, its instinct of self-preservation is reduced practically to zero. So on the psychological plane, on the one hand there is pride in being a unique person, different from all others, alone, and rejoicing in one's isolation: on the other, there is the desire, usually submerged in the unconscious, to lose the sense of individuality and to merge into a greater whole. There seem to be two motives for this; first the sense of isolation becomes unbearable, for as Aristotle correctly pointed out, man is a social animal, however much he may regret it. Thus there comes a point in most lives when one tires of the ceaseless responsibility of having to act and choose, and one longs for a higher power to take over the direction of one's life even if the higher power is only the army or a party organization. Further one longs for a more intimate union with one's

surroundings, one has a pathetic desire to belong. The equivalent of both instincts can be found in the varieties of mystical experience and mystical theory as we shall have occasion to see". (pp.141-42)

THE TANTRAS : PROS & CONS

The Tantras, Buddhist and Hindu, have devout admirers as well as bitter critics. John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon) and Marco Pallis (Thubten Tenzin) wrote in admiration while Austine Waddel was the leading denigrator. It may cover both sides if I quote an Anglo-American member of the Ramakrishna Mission, Christopher Isherwood, from his book *Ramakrishna and his Disciples* (Calcutta Edition 1974).

"The Tantras are a vast body of literary works in Sanskrit, dating from the ninth to the fiteenth century A.D. They deal with various forms of ritualistic worship, magical and sacramental formulas, mystical letters and diagrams. On the upper level, the aim of Tantra is union with God, and specifically with the Divine Mother. On the lower level, it is success in love or business, avoidance of disease, revenge upon your enemies. So Tantra ranges from ritual worship to mere magic. It is two-faced, and therefore very easy to condemn. What is symbol to one participant is gross physical action to another. For example, the many Tantrik pictures to be found in India and Tibet may be taken either as representations of the symbolic play of Shiva and his Shakti, Brahman with the Power of Brahman : or as illustrations to a manual on the art of sexual intercourse. In the practice

of left-handed Tantra, male and female devotee translate the Shiva-Shakti relationship into an act of copulation". (p. 74)

The male-female feature in Tantra has attracted great notice from Western Psychologists. Much is written by such scholars on "sublimation of biological energy into art, literature or religion" in both Buddhist and Hindu Tantras. This point however does not concern the present debate, that is, whether Buddha accommodated Tantra and whether Atisa was a Tantrika; and I would refer any interested reader to Jung's introduction in Evans Wentz : *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (Oxford 1954).

Materialistic interpretation of Tantra, with no emphasis on purely carnal aspects, is however not much attempted, at least in our country, in modern times. This relates to the productivity of earth and the more important role of woman in productive economy of mankind. It is a matter of pride for our country that an Indian scholar, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, has made an original and substantial contribution. The work is *Lokayata* (People's Publishing House 1959). I mention this study to high light that Tantra is not all black magic and that history has some good words for Tantra in the past.

TANTRA IN BUDDHISM

Highest heights of Yoga involving clairvoyance and such supernatural powers are attributed to Gautama Buddha in Sanskrit (Mahayana) texts and more in Tibetan

and Mongol literary works. Pali (Theravada) sources are not so categorical and much less spoken. Whatever the monks, scholars and intellectuals of early Buddhism and later Theravada school said and believed, the masses along with the less intellectuals like kings and other patrons of Dharma knew Gautama Buddha as Yogi, Muni, Bhagavan and Tathagata. Buddha was not described as Tantrika in contemporary or even later Indian records. But was Buddha ignorant of Tantra and yet could do miracles ? His Sankissya landing was a physical impossibility, so far as history would attest, but feats like levitation and communion with beings in other worlds were admitted by even rationalists and puritans.

Nagarjuna (c. 150 A.D) and the Prajnaparamita texts are accepted from the historical point as the incorporation period of Tantra in Buddhism. The Mahayana deities Manjusri or Avalokitesvara and the consort deities Prajna or Tara are objects of mystic meditation, and more approximately deities of esoteric mysticism, which came to be universally known as Tantra in both Buddhist and Hindu scriptures. By the end of the Gupta Age, Tantra was an established fact.

Whether the import of the esoteric mysticism, Tantra, and the saviouress, Tara, was from the north-western frontier regions or from the heart of Dravidian south is a matter of controversy. (Hirananda Shastri: *The Origin and Cult of Tara* (ASI Memoir 20) and E. Conze : *The Prajnaparamita Literature* (The Hague 1960) may be seen). The popularity of this new cult was same with

Hinduism as with Buddhism. Mahayana had completely made Tantra a Buddhist mode of spiritual striving.

The monasteries and universities in eastern India, generally called Vangala in Tibetan literature, specialised in Tantrik learning as much as some Mahayana centres of learning in south India. There was nothing un-Buddhist or anti-Buddhist in such studies and as Chinese pilgrims had noted Mahayana and Hinayana (Theravada) sects and sub-sects lived in harmony in the monastic universities that the Chinese visited. Under the patronage of the Palas of East and the Cholas of south, monks and priests of different schools and sects travelled to Suvarnavipa and the adjacent lands. These monks and missionaries carried the new learning, that is, Tantra across the seas. In this new development there was sometimes incorporation of similar concepts and rituals from the native past of the islands. These facts, I mention, not to glorify or malign Tantra, but to make clear that much before Dipankara Atisa journeyed to Suvarnavipa the new learning from India was an old affair. Whether this learning was all sacred, all profane or all hocus-pocus may be the theme of a separate discussion. But what must be said here is that even the concept of Adi-Buddha, the focal point of the Kalachakra, was not unknown in Suvarnavipa etc before Atisa came here for advanced courses. The advent of the Kalachakra in India is amply discussed by B. Ghosh in this issue of the *Bulletin* and nothing I may add on this point.

References to source material about introduction and development of Tantra, including Kalachakra, in

Suvarnavdipa regions will be found in two standard handbooks. These are Quaritch Wales : *The Making of Greater India* (London 1961) and Reginald le May *The Culture of South East Asia* (London 1954). Authoritative works of Indian scholars like Ramesh Majumdar, Nilakanta Sastri, Nihar Ray, Bijanraj Chatterjee and Hemanta Sarkar are too well-known to be detailed here.

DIPANKARA ATISA NOT A TANTRIKA !!!

"Dipankara Srijnana was not a Tantrika." Under this caption a Lama wrote an article in *Atish Dipankara Millennium Birth Commemoration Volume* (Calcutta: Jagajjyoti Publication 1983). In view of its diverse and contradictory implications, the term "Tantrika" is sparingly used and is used if adequate explanation is provided. The Lama has obviously no inhibitions or reservations and on clear presumption that "Tantrika" means an adept in black magic, sorcery and all that, he issues a sort of character certificate with a blanket statement that Atisa was not a Tantrika. The basic premises for the Lama's simplification are obviously that "Tantra" is nothing but a corrupt cult and "Tantrika" is nothing but a corrupt man. I have already commented on such basic premises.

I have also to say much about the Lama's fact finding and reasoning processes for his novel theory that Atisa had nothing to do with Tantra after his return from Suvarnavdipa, and that in Tibet he did not speak on Tantra and never on Kalachakra Tantra.

The too simple premises of the Lama are as follows.

First, Dipankara was not satisfied with his education at Nalanda and Vikramasila which was Tantrik and "alien to Buddhism". Second, Dipankara went to Suvarnavipa for schooling in "classical Buddhism". Third, Dipankara's ordination in Suvarnavipa was a break with his earlier career, according to Indian colleagues of the Lama. Fourth, on return to his homeland Dipankara dropped Tantra and had no associations with Tantrika masters. Fifth, the works of Dipankara in *Tanjur* do not speak of any preachings on Tantra in Tibet Last, there is no evidence in the Lama's knowledge that Dipankara preached Kalachakra in Tibet.

Before I comment on these premises of the Lama, I would submit that I am not proficient in Tibetan language and am not read in Tibetan literature to a degree that I should confront a Lama without hesitation. I have disputed the Lama's "basic premises" about Tantra and Tantrika on purely academic grounds at some length. Now I dispute the Lama's "simple premises" about Atisa with my elementary knowledge of the language and a fair acquaintance with the sources and traditions relevant to the present question.

My credentials are a few. I have three decades' close association with Tibetan monks, scholars and lay believers; I have lived in the monasteries and temples of Central Tibet for a whole winter and mostly with Gelugpas who trace their concepts of Dharma and Tantra to Atisa; I have learnt much about religion and culture of Tibet through lessons and sermons of Lamas, largely Gelugpa; I gained much about Gelugpa tradition and

Atisa legacy from the last Indian Pandita, Rahul Sankri-tyayan; I learnt also from the Northermost Buddhists, Baikal Buriats, about Atisa's great role in the spread of Saddharma; I consider my knowledge of Tibetan literary sources as a supplementary to the other credentials; another supplementary credential is my knowledge of Indian history acquired from masters like Devadatta Bhandarkar, Ramesh Majumdar, Hem Ray Chaudhuri, Upendra Ghoshal, Prabodh Bagchi and Niranjana Chakravarti (1). It has to be noted that Indian sources are all blank on Atisa in Tibet but Indian sources are indispensable for correct comprehension of the milieu of the period.

The Lama's contention that in Dipankara's time Buddhism "was withering in India" is not so novel as that a discontented Dipankara went in search of "classical Buddhism" in Suvarnadvipa. Dipankara's principal teacher in Suvarnadvipa was Acharya Dharmapala at whose feet had once sat Mahasiddha Ratnakarasanti, the master of Dipankara at Vikramasila. Besides further studies in Pitakas, Dipankara took interest in Tantras in Suvarnadvipa and was duly initiated in the mysteries of the Tantra. As in Vikramasila, Nalanda and Vajrasana, Dipankara took greater interest in Vinaya and Prajna but never disowned the merits of Tantra. On his return to Vangala, Dipankara kept regular company with the Mahasiddhas. He even went through a full course of the new Tantra called Kalachakra from Mahasiddha Tilopa. All details are found in Tibetan sources, besides Tanjur.

The Lama and his Indian colleagues assert, without

any qualification, that Tanjur is the "only source" for the knowledge of Indian Panditas and their works. It is completely forgotten that for Guru Padmasambhava and a few other Indian Panditas very important sources are Tibetan original works, that is, not translations from Sanskrit as in *Tanjur*. For Dipankara Atisa, the more important sources are the original Tibetan works like *Kadam Phacho*, *Kadam Phucho* and chronicles of Bu-ston, Pema Karpo, Taranatha and Sumpa Khenpo. Details of Atisa's life - in India, Suvarnavdipa and Tibet - are all recovered from the works of Tibetan disciples of Atisa and later monk writers.

The pioneer scholar, Alexander Csoma de Koros (1784-1842) had a thorough and systematized knowledge of the contents of *Tanjur* and yet could not gather details of Atisa's life. Sixty years later Sarat Das (1849-1917) could find a wealth of data in Tibetan works and revealed the life of a great Indian savant forgotten in his homeland. The Tibetan works including Gelugpa writings, make it abundantly clear that Atisa wrote commentaries and gave sermons on Kalachakra Tantra. I recall with pride my stay for a couple of days at Yarpa where Atisa expounded Kalachakra for some weeks. The Lama's Indian colleagues are obviously innocent of all Tibetan sources. I would not bracket a Lama with such Indian scholars.

EPILOGUE

I conclude by firmly stating that Mahayana had

the seeds of Tantra in Nagarjuna's time. No Mahayana scholar or saint of later days could deny or disown the doctrinal metaphysical truth in Tantra. Guru Padmasambhava (+750+) attained full mastery in the application of Tantra. Acharya Santarakshita or Acharya Kamalasila were not adepts in such art but would not deny the Tibetans a matching cult from India against their pre-Buddhist, Bon/Shaman.

Dipankara Atisa was certainly not interested in the art of Padmasambhava and was totally hostile to rituals involving women devotees. He laid down strict rules of Dharma (Vinaya), and Atisa's disciples and their successors openly fought the older sects on charges of debasement of the Tantra. But not even the most puritan Gelugpa would deny or disown Tantra as a component of Dharma.

About Dipankara Atisa I would only remind the Lama scholar that Tara was the Yidam (Istha) of Atisa's meditation. And that Dipankara Atisa had sought advice and blessings of Vajra Yoginis for his historic journey to Tibet. (2).

NOTES

(1) I have mentioned these six great names not to enhance my credit. I learnt in 1930-34 from the first four and in 1940-50 from the last two, that besides the Kanjur-Tanjur, the Tibetan literature is of immense value for Indian history and that for lives of Indian Panditas Tibetan historical literature is indispensable. I

can never forget the name Taranatha first heard as an undergraduate student more than fifty years ago. The names Bu-ston down to Sumpa Khenpo I first had from P.C.Bagchi and N.P.Chakravarti forty years ago. I am sorry that the Lama and his Indian colleagues do research about Dipankara Atisa with *Tanjur* only.

(2) In this article I have confined myself to the current controversy. I and my colleagues, Indian as well as Tibetan, plan to write at length on the true role of Atisa the monk cum scholar cum statesman across the Himalayas. I have written several notes on the place of Atisa in the history of Tibet and Mongolia which Atisa did not visit. I do not know why and how Lama Chimpa, an old friend, misrepresents me.