

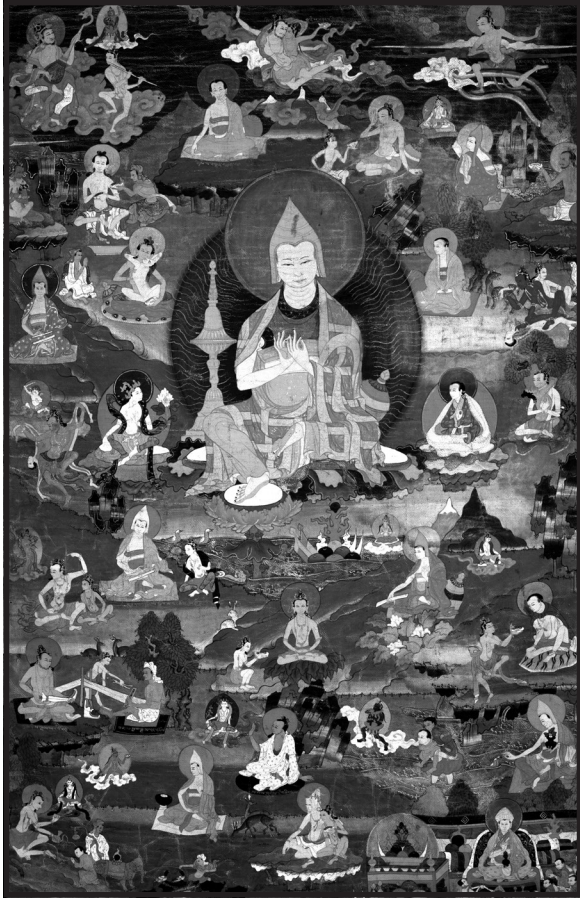
ATIŚA
DĪPAṂKARA

ILLUMINATOR OF
THE AWAKENED MIND

James B. Apple



LIVES OF THE MASTERS



Atiśa Dīpaṃkara

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THE AWAKENED MIND

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Series Introduction

BUDDHIST TRADITIONS are heir to some of the most creative thinkers in world history. The Lives of the Masters series offers lively and reliable introductions to the lives, works, and legacies of key Buddhist teachers, philosophers, contemplatives, and writers. Each volume in the Lives series tells the story of an innovator who embodied the ideals of Buddhism, crafted a dynamic living tradition during his or her lifetime, and bequeathed a vibrant legacy of knowledge and practice to future generations.

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KURTIS SCHAEFFER, *series editor*

Preface

GESHÉ LHUNDUP SOPA (1923–2014) jovially introduced me to the life and teachings of Atiśa in the early summer of 1992 while I was on retreat at Deer Park Buddhist Center outside of Oregon, Wisconsin. Around the same time, I acquired a used copy of Phabongkhapa’s *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* from an old bookstore on State Street in Madison, Wisconsin, and read Atiśa’s life story in English as well.

When I returned to Indiana after the summer to finish my undergraduate degree at Indiana University, I worked during the 1992/3 academic year as a book shelver on the ninth floor of what was then Memorial Library. The ninth floor of the Memorial Library (now Herman B. Wells Library) at Indiana University has one of the largest collections of Tibetan books in North America. I would often look at the Tibetan books in between shifts of shelving regular bound books. One time while perusing Tibetan books, I spotted a Tibetan volume that was entitled *Writings of Lord Atiśa on the Theory and Practice of the Graduated Path*.¹ After my summer retreat at Deer Park, I was excited to see a work by Atiśa, so I unpacked the bound volume and began to flip through the Tibetan folios. My initial excitement became disappointment as the text was in a difficult to read handwritten script, which I was not yet able to read. I carefully put the volume away and explored other Tibetan works. Now, over two decades later, I have translated the works in that volume of

Atiśa's writings, and a selection is found in chapter 12 for the first time in modern publication.

I returned to Wisconsin as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in the fall of 1994, and in the spring of 1996, Geshé Sopa led my graduate school classmates and I through Atiśa's biography in a second-year classical Tibetan class. The following academic year we read Atiśa's *Open Basket of Jewels* (excerpt in chapter 4).

I did not intend to research Atiśa, as I was interested in Tsongkhapa Losangdrakpa (1357–1419). When I landed a tenure-track position at the University of Calgary in 2008, and having published a book related to Tsongkhapa (*Stairway to Nirvāṇa*), the works of Izumi Miyazaki on Atiśa came to my attention.² I immediately found my class notes from Geshé Sopa's class, revised the English translation and annotation of Miyazaki's paper, and published this in 2010 as "Atiśa's Open Basket of Jewels: A Middle Way Vision in Late Phase Indian Vajrayāna." At the same time that I arrived at the University of Calgary, the availability of the Collected Works of the Kadampas, unknown to Tibetan scholars after the seventeenth century and published in fascimiles only recently, had been announced. Over the last ten years, I have focused on these manuscripts that contain the works and teachings of Atiśa and his early Kadampa followers.

Rather than a minor figure as some modern scholars might portray him, Atiśa emerges as a fully trained and well-educated Buddhist master who was subtle in thought and cagey in action. The Tibetans at the time were seeking an authoritative Indian teacher to revitalize the dharma in West Tibet. In coming to Tibet, Atiśa was a great Indian Buddhist master who fulfilled, and in a number of ways even exceeded, the expectations of the Tibetans.

In the study of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, it is often said that the study of Sanskrit and classical Tibetan is like the sun and

the moon. The two languages complement each other in the study of Indian Buddhist texts, reflecting the light of understanding. However, in preserved writings of the life and teachings of Atiśa, the scholar currently only has access to the Tibetan side of the story. As there are currently no surviving, or at least accessible, Indian manuscripts of Atiśa's writings or accounts of his life, the Indian side of the story is not represented in Sanskrit or Old Bengali. Scholars cannot even be sure of the underlying meaning of his nickname, "Atiśa." So, the reader should be aware that the life and teachings of Atiśa are in some ways filtered by the Tibetan accounts of his life and the Tibetan translations of his teachings.

Atiśa's life and teachings are a Tibetan story, and what an amazing story it is. Atiśa's life is guided by dreams, visions, and predictions from buddhas and bodhisattvas, including the savioress Tārā. In the story of Atiśa's life, we enter a world of gold, sailing ships, palm-leaf manuscripts, and mantras, rather than credit cards, automobiles, social media, and cell phones. The story involves transactions in over two million dollars' worth of gold and travels throughout maritime Buddhist Asia. The Tibetans have faithfully preserved what is known of Atiśa Dipaṅkaraśrījñāna, the vicissitudes of his life, the struggles in his travels, and the spirit and meaning of his teachings.

Calgary, Alberta
August 7, 2018

Acknowledgments

I ESPECIALLY THANK Kurtis Schaeffer for the invitation to contribute to the Lives of the Masters series. At Shambhala Publications, I have benefited from the advice and editorial skills of Casey Kemp and Nikko Odiseos. I acknowledge and thank the scholarly community, whose work has contributed to my understanding of Atiśa. First and foremost I'd like to thank Helmut Eimer, the great pioneer of the scholarly study of Atiśa, whose works provided a foundation for understanding this Indian Buddhist master. Richard Sherburne, Glenn H. Mullin, Dan Martin, Hubert Decler, Thupten Jinpa, Izumi Miyazaki, Kaie Mochizuki, and Kazuo Kano have also contributed to my understanding of Atiśa's life and teachings. I thank Roger R. Jackson for his editorial acumen in significantly improving my translations over the years.

I would like to thank my parents, Jeanne Bedwell and James Apple, for their support and advice. Finally, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my wife, Shinobu, who, step by step, has supported me throughout the writing of this book.

Selected chapters of this book were originally published as journal articles:

Chapter 4. "Atiśa's Open Basket of Jewels: A Middle Way Vision in Late Phase Indian Vajrayāna," *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 11 (2010): 117–98.

- Chapter 4. *On the Awakening Mind* and Chapter 5. *Entry to the Two Realities* are excerpts adapted with permission from Wisdom Publications. Readers should consult *Jewels of the Middle Way: The Madhyamaka Legacy of Atiśa and His Early Tibetan Followers* (Apple 2019a) for complete annotated studies of these works.
- Chapter 5. “An Early Tibetan Commentary on Atiśa’s *Satyadvayāvātāra*,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 41.3 (2013): 263–329, and “An Early Tibetan Commentary on Atiśa’s *Satyadvayāvātāra*: Diplomatic Edition with Introduction and Notes,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 41.5 (2013): 501–33.
- Chapter 14. “Atiśa’s Teachings on Mahāmudrā,” *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 18 (2017): 1–42.

Atiśa Dīpaṅkara

Introduction

ATIŚA, also as known Dipaṅkaraśrijñāna (982–1054), is famous for being a master from the ancient Indian Buddhist land of Bengal and for his journeys in Indonesia and Nepal.³ He is most well known for the last thirteen years of his life in Tibet. Atiśa was one of the most influential Indian Buddhist masters ever to set foot in Tibet. Atiśa’s Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, encompassing instructions on entering the way of bodhisattvas up through the most advanced practices of the esoteric secret way of mantras, came to influence all subsequent traditions of Buddhism in Tibet.

Atiśa lived at a unique juncture in the history of India and Tibet. Atiśa resided in India during a revival phase of the East Indian Pāla Dynasties (760–1142) of Bihar and Bengal. During this time, Bengal was an “international” region with trade routes on land from Assam and Burma passing through to the ancient Buddhist pilgrimage holy sites of Magadha. Buddhist holy places in Magadha included such sites as Vajrāsana, the “Diamond Seat,” where Śākyamuni Buddha attained awakening, located in present-day Bodh Gayā, India. The international environment of northeast India also included maritime routes connecting the Bay of Bengal to harbors in South and Southeast Asia.⁴ The Pālas ruled over the northeastern lands of Bihar, West and North Bengal, and explicitly claimed to be Buddhist in their inscriptions. They utilized the dharma wheel of the Buddha’s teachings on the top of inscribed copperplates and described themselves as “entirely devoted to the Buddha” in the

colophons of manuscripts they sponsored.⁵ The Pālas supported a perpetual endowment of donations for the Buddhist monastic community and established a network of major monasteries, including the prestigious centers of Vikramaśīla and Somapura. Atiśa, the Princely-Lord, came of age, studied, meditated, and taught during this buoyant time of maritime Buddhist Asia.

The Pāla Dynastic period was permeated with the religious practices of esoteric Buddhism, or Secret Mantra practices. This form of Buddhism was primarily disseminated from master to disciple and based on groups of texts called *tantras*. Institutional monastic esoterism and the esoterism of *siddhas*, accomplished adepts on the margins of society, dominated the Buddhist culture of the time. By the late tenth and early eleventh century, during the lifetime of Atiśa, Buddhist monastic communities and the siddha culture had undergone almost two centuries of blending and accommodation. The accommodation of esoteric Buddhism into monastic communities was influenced, in part, by a highly competitive environment between Buddhists and non-Buddhists seeking patronage and economic support. Esoteric Buddhists lived in a cultural context where Buddhists who did not support esoteric practices, as well as non-Buddhist esoteric practitioners such as the diverse groups of Śaivas, the followers of Śiva, contested for prestige and authority. These groups took part in a whole range of ascetic and ritual practices.

The kings in West Tibet at this time were seeking to rejuvenate Buddhism in order to replicate the order, ethical principles, and stability that Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals had brought to the Tibetan Empire during the seventh to ninth centuries. In seeking out Atiśa as the rejuvenator of Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals, the Tibetans must have initially considered him to be a descendent of the great bodhisattva-scholar Śāntarakṣita, who was also from Bengal. Śāntarakṣita was responsible for establishing the first ordained monks

in Tibet and contributing to the translation of texts and the construction of Tibet's first monastery of Samyé.⁶ Although Atiśa and Śāntarakṣita may have been from the same region, Atiśa lived in an era of Indian Buddhism different from Śāntarakṣita. Rather than a Mūlasarvāstivāda monk who blended Yogācāra and Madhyamaka philosophies like Śāntarakṣita, Atiśa upheld the Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage and was a follower of the Madhyamaka tradition of Candrakīrti. Atiśa was also a lineage holder of a number of Yoginī tantras, such as the *Laghuśaṃvara Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra*, whose practice was only introduced into Tibetan culture in the late tenth century by Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055). Tibetans at this time were not fully familiar with these areas of monastic discipline, Madhyamaka philosophy, and esoteric Buddhism that Atiśa brought with him to Tibet.

Atiśa also brought with him to Tibet fervent devotion to the goddess Tārā, and he is responsible for the extensive worship of the goddess in the Land of Snows. Atiśa revitalized the Tibetan devotion to the great bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, as well. Atiśa introduced a number of ritual practices that were formative in the renaissance of Tibetan Buddhism, such as the ritual recitation of the *Heart Sūtra*. Atiśa's teachings were formative for all Buddhist groups in Tibet. He introduced to Tibetan Buddhists a number of topics and issues, such as the stages of the path, three vow theory, the doctrine of three continuums, the complementary use of Candrakīrti and Bhāviveka's Madhyamaka philosophy, and his understanding of the practice of the Great Seal (Mahāmudrā). Atiśa brought these topics and issues to the attention of scholar-meditators of West and Central Tibet, but not all Tibetans adopted his suggestions. Atiśa's views on a number of issues of Buddhist thought and practice differed from how many later Tibetan sectarian developments such as Sakya, Kagyu, Geluk, or even later Kadam followers came to understand them. Nevertheless, Atiśa's influence

on Tibetan Buddhist practices of moral discipline, integrated stages of the path, meditations of the advanced Secret Mantra Vehicle, and practices of mind training are still visible in present-day Tibetan forms of Buddhism.

In coming to Tibet, Atiśa was stripped of the social and ritual institutional duties he had while residing in his Indian monastery of Vikramaśīla. Ironically, when Atiśa arrived in Tibet, because he followed the Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya instead of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya already established in Tibet, he had no other responsibility than to teach Mahāyāna Buddhism in a purified dogmatic manner. Atiśa did not have any institutional power and did not establish a Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya ordination lineage while in the Land of Snows. While in Tibet, Atiśa was like a prestigious guest lecturer visiting a modern university. A prestigious guest lecturer, rather than assessing student performance and assigning grades, attending committee meetings, or negotiating with administrators and colleagues about administrative or pedagogical duties, ostensibly teaches and instructs on just the subject matter at hand. Likewise, while in Tibet, Atiśa instructed on just the Mahāyāna Buddhist practices of the perfection path and the way of the Secret Mantra Vehicle rather than founding and administering monastic institutions and ordaining monks and nuns.

The stories of Atiśa's life are preserved only in Tibetan sources. Helmut Eimer has identified over forty Tibetan sources that provide biographical information about Atiśa.⁷ Among these sources, I have primarily followed (unless noted otherwise) two of the oldest, which furnish almost all the information known about Atiśa's life story. I have utilized *The Extensive Biography*⁸ attributed to Ja Dülzin Tsöndrū Bar (1091–1166 or 1100–1174) and *The Universally Known Biography*⁹ attributed to Chim Namkha Drak (1210–1285). These accounts of Atiśa's life record the vicissitudes of his travels in India, Indonesia, and Tibet. One moment he is seeing rainbows and the

next he is living in a cave hungry for food. One moment Atiśa and his entourage cannot find a place to stay and in the next they are staying in the treasury of Samyé Monastery. Atiśa's life story also reveals a contrast between the rejuvenation of Buddhism in West Tibet under Jangchup Ö and the conservative establishment in Central Tibet with the political figure Bodhirāja. The divided conservative establishment in the Central Tibetan provinces of Tsang and Ü, although somewhat supportive of Atiśa and his entourage, were established in the system of the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya and entrenched in clan-based factional disputes for power and authority.

When telescoping back to think about Atiśa's thought in its historical context, one must be careful not to read into his life and teachings later developments in the history of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, such as the Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika division in Madhyamaka thought and practice, the "empty of intrinsic existence" (*rangtong*) versus "empty of other" (*zhentong*) debate, or even the Old Translation (*Nyingma*) versus New Translation (*Sarma*) divisions of esoteric Buddhist literature. The Tibetan Buddhist institution of incarnate spiritual teachers, or *tulkus*, had not yet been established either. Atiśa lived in India and Tibet at a juncture when these concepts and their divisions had yet to be discussed and debated.

Atiśa composed over one hundred works throughout his life while in India, Indonesia, Nepal, and Tibet.¹⁰ Recent publication of his collected writings in Tibetan organize his compositions into those related to view, conduct, union of view and conduct, and Secret Mantra practices. The selections of his writings and teachings that follow are found in each one of these areas. *Open Basket of Jewels* (chapter 4), *Entry to the Two Realities* (chapter 5), and the Song with a Vision for the Realm of Reality (chapter 6) are related to Atiśa's teachings on the philosophical view, or vision of reality. *Lamp for the Summary of Conduct* (chapter 7), *Special Instructions on Unique Mindfulness* (chapter 8), *Bodhisattva's Jewel Garland* (chapter

9), and *Middle Way Special Instructions for Cultivating All the Qualities in the Scriptures* (chapter 10) are writings and teachings that center around conduct. The *Lamp for the Path to Awakening* (chapter 11) and *Stages of the Path to Awakening* (chapter 12) are related to both view and conduct. Selections of Atiśa's writings on Tārā (chapter 13) and his teaching on coemergent union (chapter 14) focus on Secret Mantra practices.

One principle that pervades almost all of these writings as well as Atiśa's other works and teachings is the cultivation, increase, and full actualization of the awakening mind (*bodhicitta*). Atiśa is remembered for being the master illuminator of the awakening mind. As the famous fifteenth-century Tibetan crazy yogi Drukpa Künlé explained, "There is no rivaling Atiśa and his sons in terms of the awakening mind."¹¹ Indeed, Atiśa always recited the following four-lined prayer during his travels:

I pay homage to the awakening mind,
Which destroys any rebirth in the lower realms,
Liberates from all obstructions, and
Illuminates the majesty of complete buddhahood.¹²

A Note on Tibetan Transliteration

Tibetan proper names of persons and places have been transliterated phonetically in the main body of this book. Wylie transliteration equivalents for these terms can be found in the Table of Tibetan Transliterations section.

The Biography

India

THE BENGALI MASTER Atiśa was born in the Tibetan year of the Water Horse (Western year 982) in the great city known as Vikramapura in the eastern Indian land of Sahor (Tib. Zahor). Today, the area is most likely located in the present-day Mushiganj district of Bangladesh.¹³ Traditional accounts emphasize that he was born into a royal family of great wealth and power. His father was King Kalyāṇaśrī and his mother Śrīprabhāvati. He was born into the same royal lineage as the Indian master Śāntarakṣita (725–788), who established monasticism in Tibet during the eighth century.¹⁴ Atiśa's birth name was Candragarbha. He was the second from among three sons, the oldest being Padmagarbha and the youngest Śrīgarbha. Śrīgarbha would later become the monk Viryacandra. Atiśa, as the youthful prince Candragarbha, was a prodigy from his childhood and became proficient in math, writing, and grammar at the age of three. His mother, who was a Brahmin, instructed him in the Vedas, and his father introduced him to the way of mantras. He also began studying works of crafts and medicine. Later, when the prince reached six years of age, he could differentiate between non-Buddhists and Buddhists. By the age of fifteen, he could thoroughly refute non-Buddhist tenets.¹⁵

Atiśa's early education in Buddhist thought and practice begins with his training under numerous Indian masters. Five masters that are prominent in his early education include the brahmin Jitāri, the scholar-monk Bodhibhadra, the contemplative-monk Vidyākokila,

and the tantric yogis Avadhūtipa and Rāhulaguptavajra. Atiśa would study under these masters from around the age of ten up to the age of twenty-one.

At ten (ca. 992), not satisfied with the palace life, Atiśa went to the forest, where he met Jitāri (ca. 940–1000). Jitāri was a lay Buddhist scholar and master of tantra who also taught at the monastery of Vikramaśīla in the region west of Vikramapura.¹⁶ Well versed in epistemology (*pramāṇa*), Jitāri received the honor of *paṇḍita* during the reign of Mahāpāla (ca. 977–1027).¹⁷ Atiśa took refuge in the three jewels and received initial teachings on the awakening mind from Jitāri. Atiśa also learned the basics of Buddhist doxography and epistemology under Jitāri. Jitāri then guided the young Atiśa to travel away from Vikramaśīla Monastery to the more distant monastery of Nālandā in Magadha in order to study under the scholar-monk Bodhibhadra.

Around 994, Atiśa met Bodhibhadra upon arrival at the Indian monastic university of Nālandā, where the young Atiśa received novice vows from the scholar-monk. Bodhibhadra instructed the young prince on how to generate the awakening mind, the altruistic resolution for achieving the awakening of full buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.¹⁸ Practices on the awakening mind would permeate Atiśa's life of study and teaching. Bodhibhadra also gave the prince instruction on death and impermanence, encouraging him to renounce his kingdom and become a fully ordained monk. Bodhibhadra then instructed Atiśa to study with Vidyākokila, a monk living in retreat to the north of Nālandā. Atiśa left Bodhibhadra and sought instruction from Vidyākokila.

Vidyākokila was an accomplished master who upheld the Madhyamaka lineage of the great Ācārya Candrakīrti descending from Nāgārjuna.¹⁹ Based on this lineage of practice, Vidyākokila guided Atiśa in the general instructions on the stages of the path and gave specific guidance on the view of emptiness.²⁰ Vidyākokila instructed

the young prince on how to realize nonduality in meditative absorption and then view sentient beings with compassion during post-concentrative activities. Vidyākokila also instructed Atiśa in the cultivation of the awakening mind. After a period of instruction, Vidyākokila advised Atiśa to visit the tantric yogi Avadhūtipa, who lived to the south of the Black Mountain (Kṛṣṇagiri), one of the mountains near the ancient city of Rajgir.²¹

Atiśa then resided with the tantric yogi Avadhūtipa in the forest. Under the tutelage of Avadhūtipa, the youthful bodhisattva received a consecration (*abhiṣeka*), or tantric rite of initiation, that empowered him with a generative force of the awakening mind for advanced Great Vehicle practices. Atiśa studied the Middle Way teachings with Avadhūtipa from the age of twelve until the age of eighteen. Avadhūtipa also taught him the principles of adhering to the karmic laws of subtle cause and effect until one is free from self-grasping. Avadhūtipa had opened Atiśa's heart to the dharma, and Atiśa returned to his home region to ask permission from his parents to renounce the palace life. His father was upset that Atiśa did not wish to govern the kingdom. Atiśa replied that he was unattached to running a kingdom and wished to achieve the path to awakening and achieve liberation. Atiśa's mother was upset as well. She tried to dissuade Atiśa from renouncing the palace life and suggested that he seek out the path at a later time. Despite his parents' efforts to entice Atiśa with the wealth and resources of the kingdom, Atiśa bid his parents farewell and returned immediately to stay with Avadhūtipa.

Avadhūtipa then advised the young prince Candragarbha to go train under the tantric yogin Rāhulaguptavajra. Avadhūtipa told Atiśa to go to a Black Mountain temple in the presence of Rāhulaguptavajra, as Atiśa had a special connection with this teacher from previous lifetimes. When Atiśa initially approached the spiritual teacher Rāhulaguptavajra, he saw him speaking about tantra

and understood the previous lifetime spiritual connection. When Rāhulaguptavajra saw Atiśa, he was amazed that such a prince was unattached to his kingdom. As soon as Atiśa met Rāhulaguptavajra, he listened closely to his teachings on the way of mantras. Atiśa alone received consecrations into the practice of the tantric deity Hevajra for thirteen consecutive days from Rāhulaguptavajra. Rāhulaguptavajra conferred upon Atiśa the esoteric initiatory name Jñānaguhyavajra.²² Atiśa engaged in the tantric practice of the awareness observance during this time, a practice where the yogin wears the ornaments of the deity, relies on a consort, and uses code language.²³ Atiśa also heard a number of tantric teachings from *ḍākiṇīs* and had visions of many tantric deities during this phase of his life. From the age of twenty-one to twenty-nine, he received consecrations and special instructions within the four main groups of tantra. Atiśa intended to take up the conduct of Secret Mantra discipline in order to attain the accomplishment of the Great Seal.²⁴ In a vision of Tārā, however, the goddess asked Atiśa, “Hey paṇḍita, are you proficient in Secret Mantra practices?” Atiśa replied, “Yes, I am.” The goddess asked him, “Do you understand this tantric *sādhana*, or how about this *sādhana*?” Since Atiśa had never seen the esoteric Buddhist texts before, the goddess told him, “The knowledge about Secret Mantra practices in your human realm is not even the mere tip of a horse’s hair. Many examples and meanings of Secret Mantra practices are in the hands of *ḍākiṇīs*.” The goddess broke Atiśa’s pride about his knowledge of Secret Mantra practices.²⁵

In a dream around this time, Atiśa saw Śrī Heruka, the supreme wrathful deity of the Cakrasaṃvara and Hevajra tantras, before him in the sky. Śrī Heruka told Atiśa that *avadhūti* conduct did not lead to the status of a monk who could guide many disciples.²⁶ On another night, Atiśa had a vivid dream in which Śākyamuni

Buddha himself, surrounded by many monks, directly asked Atiśa, “Why don’t you become a monk?” In still another dream, Atiśa was hindered by an elder monk who was, in fact, the bodhisattva Maitreya. The elder stopped Atiśa from approaching a throne in a temple since the place was sacred space for monks. Atiśa understood these dreams as an invitation to renounce the world.²⁷ Atiśa then went to Rāhulaguptavajra, who encouraged him to quit sporting around in the life of a tantric yogi and become a monk to benefit sentient beings.

With these visions and advice, Atiśa became ordained into the Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage at the age of twenty-nine years at Mati-vihāra in Bodh Gayā. The preceptor of the Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage was Śīlarakṣita, who had attained the level of patience in the path of preparation.²⁸ At that time Atiśa received the ordination name Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna,²⁹ a name in the lineage tradition of Devabuddhajñāna. Atiśa then studied the extent of Buddhist knowledge with one hundred fifty-seven spiritual teachers. He trained in all the spiritual teachings found in the sūtras and tantras at the time. In particular, he studied the *Mahāvibhāṣakośa* of Upagupta under Dharmarakṣita at Odantapuri for several years. This work, comprised of eight hundred chapters, provided a complete overview of the seven main texts of Abhidharma.³⁰ In learning the Abhidharmapiṭaka, Atiśa mastered the scriptures and tenets among the four main ordination lineages: the Mahāsāṃghika, Sthaviravāda, Saṃmatīya, and Sarvāstivāda. During his study with Dharmarakṣita, a member of the Saindhava śrāvakas, Atiśa had to change his residence every six days because his bodhisattva discipline did not permit him to spend more than seven days residing among śrāvakas.³¹

Atiśa studied other subjects at this time as well, including the Sanskrit grammatical works of Kalāpa, Candrapa, Pāṇini,

Samantabhadra, and so forth. Atiśa also studied the “science of justificative reasons/evidences,”³² including Dignāga’s *Compendium on Valid Knowledge (Pramāṇasamuccaya)* and the seven works of valid knowledge by Dharmakīrti.³³ Atiśa trained in the science of logic and epistemology as part of the five fields of knowledge to refute non-Buddhists and Buddhists.³⁴ For Atiśa, the science of epistemology and logic was only utilized at the level of conventional reality to refute opponents. He continued his training at Vikramaśīla Monastery, learning dharma in both sūtra and mantra.

During his studies, Atiśa continually thought about the quickest path to reach buddhahood, and one time he went to visit his guru Rāhulaguptavajra, who was dwelling in the caves of the Black Mountain. Rāhulaguptavajra, through his supersensory powers, told Atiśa that even if one has a direct vision of a chosen deity, witnesses many assemblies of *maṇḍala* deities, or attains many common accomplishments, or *siddhis*, one’s practice will not go anywhere unless it is based on the awakening mind comprised of love and compassion. Rāhulaguptavajra instructed Atiśa to hold the great compassionate one, Avalokiteśvara, as his preferred deity in order to benefit beings.³⁵

On another occasion, while circumambulating the main temple at Vajrāsana, the Mahābodhi Temple in modern-day Bodh Gayā, Atiśa overheard two women speaking about the one method to quickly attain awakening. One woman asked, “What is that one method?” The other replied, “You should train in the awakening mind.” Along a stone wall that had been built by Ācārya Nāgārjuna, he overheard an older woman tell a younger woman that if one wishes to attain full awakening quickly, one should train in the awakening mind. Atiśa, having overheard these discussions on the awakening mind, made a commitment to produce this precious altruistic resolution and to expand and increase the awakening mind until he attained full awakening. Atiśa then began to seek out

a qualified teacher who completely possessed the special instructions on how to fully actualize the awakening mind.³⁶

Sojourn to Sumatra

Atiśa heard from colleagues and associates that the renowned teacher Serlingpa was a master of awakening mind teachings. Serlingpa, “The man of Gold Island,” also known as Dharmakīrtiśrī, was the adviser in the field of religion to King Cūḍāmaṇivarman in the capital city of Śrīvijayapura in the kingdom of Śrīvijaya on the Indonesian island of Sumatra.³⁷ Śrīvijayapura was not only a political and economic power in maritime Southeast Asia, the city was a major center of Buddhist culture as well. Scholar-monks from India and China had traveled to the region for centuries to study and practice Buddhism.³⁸ Around the year 1012, Atiśa undertook a thirteen-month journey to Sumatra in order to study under Serlingpa. Atiśa went on a ship with a retinue of one hundred twenty-five disciples of the Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage. During the dangerous journey, the ship and its passengers were challenged by Maheśvara, an emanation of the god Śiva, who took the form of a large sea monster. At first, Atiśa meditated on love and compassion to subdue the monster. However, as this cultivation was not successful, Atiśa and his close disciple Kṣitigarbha called upon the meditational deities Yamāntaka, Aparājita, Acala, Tārā, and then Raktayamāri (“Red Slayer of Death”) to overcome the obstacles. When the ship finally arrived in Sumatra, Atiśa and his entourage spent two weeks on the outskirts of the island near a golden reliquary among meditator monks inquiring about Serlingpa.³⁹

Atiśa did not initially meet with Serlingpa for twelve months. Atiśa eventually met Serlingpa at a great offering ceremony attended by over five hundred monks. Due to a relation from previous lifetimes, they both knew each other upon meeting. When they

met, Guru Serlingpa uttered many blessings and placed his hand on Atiśa's head. Guru Serlingpa asked Atiśa if he was able to train in the awakening mind comprised of love and compassion and emphasized that in three years Atiśa would be able to possess super-sensory powers. Serlingpa then asked Atiśa if he would be able to stay for twelve years in Sumatra. Atiśa replied in the affirmative to Serlingpa's questions and then Atiśa received a golden statue of Śākyamuni Buddha as a gift.⁴⁰

Atiśa then trained in all the Mahāyāna trainings he could receive from Serlingpa for twelve years. Atiśa attended lectures in fifteen sessions on the *Ornament for Clear Realization*.⁴¹ Atiśa's study of this work under Serlingpa indicates the high level of scholarship and presence of royal sponsorship in Śrīvijayapura at the time.⁴² Atiśa also received instructions for achieving the perfections (*pāramitās*) and received special instructions in the works of Śāntideva, including the guidance for bodhisattvas in the *Compendium of Training* and the uncommon special instructions in the *Introduction to the Practice of Awakening*.⁴³ Atiśa learned from Serlingpa the pure higher resolve instructions of cultivating the conventional awakening mind through the practice of exchanging oneself and others. In particular, Atiśa learned from Serlingpa the single most important teaching of establishing love and compassion.

Among Atiśa's spiritual teachers, Guru Serlingpa was unmatched and unrivaled in terms of faith and devotion. When Atiśa was among his disciples, he would press his hands together in prayer and utter verses of praise when he heard the name of one of his spiritual teachers. But, when he heard the name Serlingpa, Atiśa would raise his joined hands in prayer above his head and shed tears. Atiśa was one of the four main disciples of Serlingpa; the others were Jñānaśrimitra, Ratnākaraśānti, and Ratnakirti.⁴⁴ Even though Atiśa had great faith in Serlingpa, they differed as to philosophical view. Serlingpa followed Yogācāra thought, while Atiśa was a

Mādhyamika. Atiśa composed his *Entry to the Two Realities* (see chapter 5) to convert Serlingpa to the Mādhyamika understanding.⁴⁵ When Atiśa returned to India, he brought back at least seven manuscripts of Serlingpa's works and various sacred objects. Among the manuscripts was the *Illumination of Points Difficult to Understand*,⁴⁶ a subcommentary to Haribhadra's *Illumination of the Ornament of Clear Realization*,⁴⁷ which Atiśa would later translate in West Tibet. Atiśa also brought back several of Serlingpa's esoteric Buddhist teachings and ritual texts. These included Serlingpa's practices of venerating the goddess Tārā, as well as manuscripts of the Sādhana of Noble Acala and the rare Sādhana of Wrathful Gaṇapati.⁴⁸

Back to Bodh Gayā and Life at Vikramaśīla

Atiśa returned to India in 1025 around the age of forty-four. Serlingpa had instructed Atiśa to study with one of his former students, Ratnākaraśānti, at Vikramaśīla upon returning to India. Before going on to Vikramaśīla Monastery, Atiśa carried out religious work in the Vajrāsana area.⁴⁹ While in Vajrāsana, Atiśa instructed various religious pilgrims, monks, and yogis in the trainings of love, compassion, and the awakening mind. One time, a yogin at the root of a tree saw Atiśa approaching and prostrated his full body on the ground toward Atiśa. The yogin then said, "I pay homage to you, master of Jambudvīpa. I pay homage to you, the life-tree of the Buddha's teaching. Please offer guidance." Atiśa replied, "It is necessary to gather immeasurable accumulations of merit to have trust in the profound dharma of the Great Vehicle. There is not a distinction in the Lesser and Greater Vehicles through philosophical view. They are distinguished according to the practice of compassion."⁵⁰

On another occasion, Atiśa was meditating on love and compassion in an Amitābha temple on the west side of Vajrāsana. While

meditating on love and compassion, Atiśa had a direct vision of Avalokiteśvara, who said, “It is good, it is good, holy one. You have understood the secret treasury of all the buddhas of the three times.” Avalokiteśvara then predicted, “My realm is in the northern direction from here. Noble Tārā also dwells there benefitting sentient beings. Since many beings are there for you to train, go north!”⁵¹

At this point in his life, Atiśa was well trained, having received direct transmissions of a number of teaching lineages from various Indian masters. Atiśa upheld lineages of classical Mahāyāna practices and philosophies as well as lineages from the great adepts (*mahāsiddhas*). Traditional accounts mention that he had twelve root gurus. The great adept Nāropa instructed him in the vision of emptiness, Ḍombipa in yogic discipline, Balinācārya in tantric ritual, Mahājana in miraculous abilities, Bhutakoṭi in the worship of Vajravārāhī, Paramaśva in the special instructions of Nāgārjuna, Prajñābhadra in the awakening mind, Ratnākaraśānti in the meaning of the commentaries, and Serlingpa in the stages of mind training. Jitāri, Bodhibhadra, and Dharmarakṣita rounded out the list of twelve.⁵² In addition, Avadhūtipa and Kamalarakṣita bestowed the teachings on the Great Seal to Atiśa. Atiśa upheld the lineage of the profound Middle Way, the pure view of emptiness descending from the tenth-stage bodhisattva of wisdom Mañjuśrī, Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Vidyākoka the elder and younger, and Avadhūtipa the elder and younger. Atiśa also held the complete lineage of extensive meritorious deeds descending from the tenth-stage bodhisattva Maitreya, the brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, Ārya Vimuktisena, Bhante Vimuktisena, Paramasena, Vinitasena, Vairocana, Haribhadra, Kusali the greater, Ratnabhadra, Ratna the lesser, and Serlingpa. Atiśa also fully possessed the transmission lineage of blessings from Vajradhara, Tilopa, Nāropa, and Ḍombipa.⁵³

In addition to having the oral instructions and embodying the virtuous qualities of all these lineages of sūtra and tantra, Atiśa

upheld the three types of vows.⁵⁴ Atiśa upheld the *prātimokṣa* vows of a fully ordained monk within his Mahāsāṃghika ordination lineage, the ethical conduct of the bodhisattva vows,⁵⁵ and the commitments of the Secret Mantra vows.⁵⁶ Atiśa strictly adhered to the vows of conduct and would not break even small vow commitments. For example, Atiśa avoided touching things belonging to women and, according to the rule of Mahāsāṃghikas, he would not accept flour stored in a wine jug.⁵⁷ If Atiśa did break a small vow, or have a fault within the precepts, he would immediately purify any downfalls and transgressions through confession. He would not allow an uncleansed transgression to last overnight. In guarding and protecting his commitments in this way, Atiśa was of complete honorable character due to his diligent maintenance of his vows as well as his immediacy in confessing any transgressions.⁵⁸

While carrying out religious work in Vajrāsana, Atiśa may have arrived at Vikramaśīla after being appointed “preceptor” at Vikramaśīla with responsibility also for Uddaṇḍapura under King Bheyapāla, who reigned, according to the Tibetan historian Tārānātha, as the predecessor of Neyāpāla (r. ca. 1027–1043). Other traditional accounts mention that King Mahīpāla I (r. ca. 977–1027) was the predecessor and that this king invited to Vikramaśīla fifty-seven scholars among the four schools of Sarvāstivāda, Sthaviravāda, Mahāsāṃghika, and Saṃmatīya to resolve doubts about Buddhist and non-Buddhist doctrines. The king saw that the venerable Atiśa, by his excellence in knowledge and compassion, far surpassed the other pandits, and he proclaimed him the crown jewel among the gathering.⁵⁹ Later sources state that the king gave him the name “Atiśa” at this time, as he was “eminent, superior.”⁶⁰ Atiśa was held in high esteem at Vikramaśīla, as a painting of Nāgārjuna was hung to the right of the gate of Vikramaśīla’s main temple and on the left side was painted Atiśa, indicating that he was considered equal to the Ācārya Nāgārjuna. In addition, on

one side of the temple were painted many siddhas and on another side were painted paṇḍitas. Atiśa's image was painted within the murals on both sides.

While residing at Vikramaśīla, Atiśa served in an administrative role related to upholding discipline. Later sources state that he was a supervisor or disciplinarian.⁶¹ The earliest biographies mention that Atiśa was the master of eighteen keys and that a group of twenty monks was established in a residence for each key. Atiśa would expel from a residence any monk who was undisciplined.⁶² One particular episode in this regard involves Atiśa's well-known junior contemporary Maitripa (986–1063).⁶³ Maitripa was spotted by another monk carrying alcohol as part of the *samaya* substances, or esoteric sacraments, for worshipping Vajrayoginī, and this was reported to the monastic community (*saṃgha*). The community ruled, "Although there is not harm to you, this is harmful to others," and requested Maitripa to depart. Maitripa declared that it is not suitable for those who transgress saṃgha rules to exit by the main gate and then departed unobstructed, passing through a wall. Atiśa considered whether his own conduct was right or not and prayed to Tārā. When Atiśa fell asleep, he heard a voice say three times, "Your conduct is not good." Tārā appeared in person and told Atiśa that Maitripa was a bodhisattva who had produced the initial awakening mind. She stipulated that accumulating transgressions against such a bodhisattva causes serious karmic repercussions. Atiśa asked Tārā about his karmic maturation for this act. Tārā told him that he would be reborn as a sentient being three times as large as Mount Sumeru and would be feasted upon by birds. Atiśa asked, "How can I avoid this karma?" Tārā told him, "To purify the karma you should go north and benefit beings by promulgating the Great Vehicle. You should also cast seven small clay images every day." According to the Tibetan sources, Atiśa perceived this as an influential sign to come to Tibet in order to benefit sentient beings.⁶⁴

Around this time, King Neyapāla of Magadha had a fierce dispute with a brahmin king Karṇa from a region to the west. King Karṇa invaded Magadha and led his armies to Vikramaśīla, where five people—four monks and one layperson—were killed. At the time of transporting goods during the conflict, Atiśa, without an angry heart, entered into a concentration on love and compassion. Atiśa’s cultivation had the effect of subduing the violence, and the armies ceased attacking one another. King Karṇa gained great faith in Atiśa and led his troops to the west. Atiśa succeeded in mutually bringing together both kings in agreement and became known as a peacemaker in the region.⁶⁵

Western Tibetan Kings and the Invitation of Atiśa to Tibet

The traditional accounts of Atiśa’s life at this point segue to the formative events in West Tibet, leading to Atiśa’s invitation and eventual journey there. The revival of Buddhism in West Tibet had been going on for several decades in the late tenth century. A well-developed Buddhist community and monastic institutional infrastructure were in place and prepared to receive teachings from an advanced Indian Buddhist master like Atiśa.⁶⁶

Formative in this regard was the monk-king Lha Lama Yeshé Ö (947–1019/24), a descendent of the royal lineages from the earlier Tibetan Empire of the seventh to ninth centuries. His birth name was Song Nge, and at the age of thirty-one, in 989, in the year of the Earth Ox, he was ordained and received the name Yeshé Ö.⁶⁷ Lha Lama Yeshé Ö invited scholars such as Dharmapāla from eastern India to explain the Vinaya and reestablish the Mūlasarvāstivāda ordination lineage in Gugé in West Tibet. This ordination lineage became known as the “Upper Tibet Vinaya.”⁶⁸ Yeshé Ö, having studied the different vehicles of the noble dharma, perceived a

contradiction between the vehicle of mantras and vehicle of perfections. Some practices which were followed in the Vinaya were contradicted in the path of mantra. Some practices in the path of mantra were contradicted in the Vinaya. For Yeshé Ö, the Buddhist teachings of sūtra and mantra became contradictory, like hot and cold.

In the late 970s, Yeshé Ö sent twenty-one sharp-minded Tibetan youths to Kashmir and India in order study and translate Buddhist teachings. The great translator Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) and the junior translator Lekpai Sherap were the only ones that returned to West Tibet. All the other young Tibetans died from the heat. These two translators became masters of dharma and eventually translated many works that came to be included in the Tibetan Buddhist canonical collections of the Kangyur and Tengyur. The two translators reported to Yeshé Ö that the position and conduct of all Indian masters was that the sūtras and tantras did not have internal contradictions. Yet, Yeshé Ö was still concerned about the tantric teachings that were circulating in his kingdom. In 985, Yeshé Ö issued a decree, “Refutation of False Mantras,” that perverted teachings must be refuted and were not competent.⁶⁹ In 996, Yeshé Ö supervised the construction of the great Tholing Golden Temple.⁷⁰ In a number of traditional histories, Yeshé Ö is said to have sacrificed his own life in order to make the invitation of Atiśa to Tibet possible. However, as these are apocryphal stories, it was most likely the case that the invitation of Atiśa occurred during the reign of Jangchup Ö (984–1078), one of Yeshé Ö’s descendants.⁷¹

Jangchup Ö commissioned Gya Tsöndrū Sengé in the Female Iron Sheep Year of 1031 to make the journey to India to invite Atiśa to Tibet.⁷² Gya Tsöndrū Sengé, a layperson and one of the preeminent members of the Gya clan from the Tsang Taktsal area, was given sixteen ounces of gold along with a letter. In the letter Jangchup Ö stated, in part,

I am a Tibetan king here in the Land of Snows. Although we had former excellence, nowadays our merit has degenerated. Please have compassion for us. I constantly think of you, O Protector, as someone would think about water while in the plains of a desert.⁷³

The translator Gya Tsöndrū Sengé along with a retinue of one hundred arrived at Vikramaśīla without any difficulties and delivered the invitation and gold to Atiśa. Atiśa said, “There are two reasons that I would go to Tibet. One is to go with the desire for gold, and I have no need for gold. On the other hand, the awakening mind, which treats others as more important than oneself, would be a reason to go, but I do not have that, so therefore I will not go.” Gya Tsöndrū Sengé was devastated and held the corner of his monastic robes and cried. During that time, a great number of the Tibetans among the translator’s retinue died from fever and the heat. Atiśa expressed his deep empathy for the Tibetans. Then, the translator Gya Tsöndrū Sengé returned to Tibet and offered the gold back to King Jangchup Ö. He informed the king that the invitation of Princely-Lord Atiśa was not successful. At that time, another Tibetan translator, Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyalwa (1011–1064), had asked Gya Tsöndrū Sengé for guidance on the study of the Abhidharma. As Gya Tsöndrū Sengé planned to return to India to study at Vikramaśīla, he told Naktso Lotsāwa that he did not have the time. Gya Tsöndrū Sengé along with a retinue of five then returned to India.⁷⁴

Jangchup Ö observed in Tibet at the time many crude behaviors misrepresented as the practice of the Secret Mantra Vehicle propagated by such figures as the Red Ācārya, Blue Robe extremist teachers, eighteen Arsho bande, and others. Practices such as animal sacrifice and kidnapping were distorted and seen as legitimate esoteric Buddhist rituals.⁷⁵ The king prayed to the three jewels and

petitioned astrologers for divinations on who could invite Atiśa for the sake of the Buddhadharma that was disappearing in West Tibet. They determined that Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyalwa was the person to make the journey.

Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyalwa was a monk originally from the Gungthang region of Mangyul. He was regarded as an expert in Vinaya and Abhidharma. At the time that Naktso Lotsāwa was summoned by Jangchup Ö, the twenty-seven-year-old translator was staying in the Golden Temple of Ngari Gungthang. Jangchup Ö sent for Naktso Lotsāwa from the village to come to Ngari. Jangchup Ö venerated the translator and eulogized him for his great competence and discipline.

Jangchup Ö gave Naktso Lotsāwa seven hundred ounces of gold to offer to Atiśa. Around 1033, Naktso Lotsāwa Tsultrim Gyalwa along with a retinue of seven carried the gold and set out on the road to India. Jangchup Ö escorted Naktso and his retinue for some distance and then, before turning back, told them to pray to Avalokiteśvara for protection on their journey. Naktso Lotsāwa and his delegation encountered numerous obstacles on their way through Nepal into North India, including sickness, robbers, poisonous snakes, and extreme fatigue. They finally arrived at Vikramaśīla during the night.⁷⁶

When they arrived near the entrance gates, they called out in Tibetan and Gya Tsöndrū Sengé heard them from a window in the gate tower. Gya Tsöndrū Sengé said, “Hey, where have you venerable Tibetans come from?” Naktso Lotsāwa and his retinue replied, “We are from Upper Ngari.” Gya Tsöndrū Sengé warned them to wait outside the gate until dawn. In the early morning, the travelers recited sūtras in Tibetan. Gya Tsöndrū Sengé heard them and was glad that they had not been robbed, and he got up and went to them. Naktso Lotsāwa and his retinue greeted Gya Tsöndrū Sengé with some gold. Gya Tsöndrū Sengé asked if they had

come to invite a scholar or to study. Naktso Lotsāwa reported the order of the Tibetan king to invite a scholar who was as significant as Atiśa. Gya Tsöndrū Sengé replied that there were scholars like Tathāgatarakṣita, Vairocanakṣita, Ratnakīrti, as well as others, mentioning over thirty names. Gya Tsöndrū Sengé emphasized that, as only Atiśa could benefit Tibet, they should not speak of any plans of invitation and should quickly register as students by meeting with Ratnākaraśānti, the senior superintendent in Vikramaśīla.⁷⁷

Gya Tsöndrū Sengé and Naktso Lotsāwa then met with Ratnākaraśānti and presented him with a half ounce of gold. Ratnākaraśānti welcomed them to Vikramaśīla and offered his assistance but told them that Atiśa was vital to the administration of the monastic institution as well as a significant authority for the Buddha's teaching. Ratnākaraśānti wished the translators well in their study at Vikramaśīla. The translators settled in the monastery and pursued their studies.

Naktso Lotsāwa did not initially meet Atiśa for several days. One day Naktso Lotsāwa recited the *Heart Sūtra* at one of the gates of the monastery. When he was reciting "form *ha*, feeling *ha*," at a certain point in the recitation, other scholars passed by but did not say anything. However, when Atiśa came near Naktso Lotsāwa, Atiśa stopped and smiled. Atiśa then said, "Thank you, venerable one. But your recitation has vulgar pronunciation. You should say, 'form *a*, feeling *a*.'" Naktso Lotsāwa did not realize that he was speaking with Atiśa but thought to himself, "This kind scholar seems special. He is gentle, humble, clear, and whatever he says is spoken with the wish to be helpful. If I cannot invite Atiśa, then I must invite this scholar to come to Tibet." The next morning, Naktso Lotsāwa was reciting "form *a*, feeling *a*" when Atiśa came by again and smiled. Atiśa said, "Venerable one, even that recitation comes out sounding harsh. This is the speech of the protector Avalokiteśvara. There's nothing wrong with it. It is fine to just say, 'no form, no feeling.'"

As a result of their conversations, Naktso Lotsāwa had strong faith in the kind scholar-monk, and a few days later Naktso Lotsāwa realized the kind scholar-monk was Atiśa.⁷⁸

One evening, the two Tibetan translators went to Atiśa's living quarters, and Gya Tsöndrū Sengé formally introduced Naktso Lotsāwa to Atiśa. Naktso Lotsāwa presented the seven hundred ounces of gold as a gift, and Gya Tsöndrū Sengé reported on the development of Buddhism in Tibet from the time of the religious kings to Lang Darma and then up until the time of Yeshé Ö and Jangchup Ö. They then asked Atiśa to come to Tibet.⁷⁹

Atiśa agreed that Yeshé Ö and Jangchup Ö were bodhisattvas and that, for the sake of his invitation, many people and great treasures had been offered. Yet, Atiśa stated, "I am old and have many duties." Atiśa explained that it was first necessary to examine whether his presence in Tibet could be of use, and then Atiśa returned the gold.⁸⁰

During the night, Atiśa prayed three times to Tārā and asked if his trip to Tibet would benefit the Buddhist teachings, whether he could help the Tibetan king spiritually, and whether his own life would be shortened by the journey. In the dream, the goddess told him to go to a city of non-Buddhists near Vikramaśīla, Mukhena, to question a *yoginī* there at a Buddhist temple. Atiśa went there, met the *yoginī*, and asked if his journey would benefit the Tibetans. She said the journey would be greatly beneficial, especially for a certain Buddhist layperson, or *upāsaka*. The *yoginī* also said that Atiśa's life would last ninety-two years if he stayed in India but would last only seventy-two years if he journeyed to Tibet. Since Atiśa received indications that the trip would benefit the Tibetans, his resolve to go to Tibet was strengthened.⁸¹

Atiśa then went on a pilgrimage to Vajrāsana, and he received from his colleague Jñānaśrimitra a hint that he would meet there an old woman who was an emanation of Tārā. On the journey,

Atiśa along with the Tibetan translators and others, a group comprised of twelve persons, met a superhuman female figure. Atiśa asked her whether the journey to Tibet in the border area would benefit living beings. This emanation of Tārā advised him to travel without regard for life and limb and said that the journey would be beneficial for others. In Vajrāsana, Atiśa met an old woman, to whom Jñānaśrimitra had referred. Atiśa questioned the yoginī, who told him that the encounter with the layperson would bring benefits and that in the next life the Great Seal would be achieved. After the pilgrimage, Atiśa called the two translators, Gya Tsöndrū Sengé and Naktso, and told them that he would come to Tibet. But Atiśa then explained that he would have to spend another eighteen months in India for spiritual preparation and fulfillment of his duties. Atiśa told them not to talk about the invitation. The two Tibetans agreed, and Naktso Lotsāwa studied and translated texts with good success.⁸²

Gya Tsöndrū Sengé and Naktso Lotsāwa studied under Atiśa during this time and worked together translating works by Atiśa and his disciples. Atiśa's *Entry to the Two Realities* (see chapter 5) and its commentary were translated into Tibetan at this time. The *Open Basket of Jewels* (see chapter 4) was translated into Tibetan at Vikramaśīla around this time as well. The two Tibetan translators also accompanied Atiśa on teaching tours to other monasteries. While Atiśa taught a Madhyamaka course utilizing the *Jeweled Lamp of the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakaratnapradīpa*) and the *Blaze of Reasoning* (*Tarkajvālā*) at Somapura around the year 1034, Gya Tsöndrū Sengé and Naktso Lotsāwa initially translated the works into Tibetan.⁸³

Around this time the former abbot of Nālandā Monastery and famous mahāsiddha Nāropa (956–1040) visited Vikramaśīla.⁸⁴ Nāropa descended from his transport, with Atiśa supporting him with his right arm and Jñānaśrimitra supporting him with his left arm. While seated on a lion throne, Nāropa stated that he did not

have much longer to live and said to Atiśa, “You, Dipaṃkara, are now master of the Buddha’s teaching.” Twenty days after leaving Vikramaśīla in a southerly direction, Nāropa died.⁸⁵

Shortly thereafter, while on pilgrimage in Vajrāsana, Atiśa announced to his companions that he wanted to travel to the outlying Indian district of Tsindhili Krama to consecrate the site for a temple. Ratnākaraśānti sent a retinue of sixty persons. When the temple dedication was completed, Atiśa then said he wanted to go to Svayāmbhūnātha in Kathmandu, Nepal. Ratnākaraśānti now saw through the plans and realized Atiśa’s intentions to go to Tibet. Ratnākaraśānti and Naktso Lotsāwa discussed the plans for Atiśa’s journey, and they came to an agreement that Atiśa must return to India in three years. Naktso Lotsāwa then pledged to return Atiśa within the stipulated time frame. The seven hundred ounces of gold that the Tibetans had offered for the invitation were divided by Atiśa into four parts. One part of the gold was offered to Atiśa’s teachers, one part for rituals in Vajrāsana, one for the monastic community in Vikramaśīla under Ratnākaraśānti, and one for the king to distribute to his own teachers. Atiśa then transferred his administrative duties to Ratnākaraśānti.⁸⁶

Atiśa set out on the journey to Tibet riding on an elephant and surrounded by an entourage of nineteen companions. Atiśa’s retinue included his foremost Indian disciple Kṣitigarbha, his youngest brother, Viryacandra, the Tibetan translators, and attendants. They received a warm welcome from a small monastic community in an outlying Indian district while traveling north. The community expressed concern that Atiśa’s journey to Tibet was a loss for India. The Indian monks asked if he could be prevented from leaving India because his absence would lead to the downfall of the Buddhist teaching. Atiśa and his retinue said they would not be diverted from their purpose.⁸⁷

In the frontier lands, Atiśa had debates with fifteen non-Buddhist

teachers about their religion, which he knew well, and they gave Atiśa umbrellas as a token of their gratitude for his knowledge and compassion. The non-Buddhists were worried that Buddhism in Tibet would be spread through Atiśa and sent people to kill the teacher. Atiśa banished them with the help of mantras. As they crossed the border country, the entourage faced obstacles against non-Buddhist naked ascetics, who Atiśa subjugated with the creation stage practices of Ārya Tārā. In an abandoned nomad camp, Atiśa found three puppies and took them on the journey. The biographies report that the offspring of the puppies could later be found in Radreng Monastery.⁸⁸

Atiśa and his entourage then arrived in the Kathmandu Valley in 1041. There was a great reception at the Svayambhū sacred site offered by delegates from West Tibet. The Tibetans constructed a hearth for boiling tea, arranged seats in rows, and set out porcelain cups to serve food and drink. Atiśa was offered a throne in the shade of a tree. On his right side were seated Tibetans headed by Gya Tsöndrū Sengé and on his left side were seated Indians, including Viryacandra. Mahārāja Bhūmi Saṃgha, a royal monk disciple, sat on a central throne seat. Atiśa was then offered tea, a drink unknown in India at this point in history. A group of six main delegates then presented Atiśa with a white horse named “Swift as the Wind”⁸⁹ that was steady like a horse-drawn chariot. Its forehead was adorned with pieces of turquoise and gold. The horse’s saddle and saddle carpet were soft and adorned with ornaments, and the halter was made of white silk. Atiśa then said, “All of this is extremely auspicious, like a container converging with its contents. But, what is this drink?” The translator replied, “This is called tea (*ja*). It is a drink of Tibetan monks. The tree itself cannot be eaten, but once boiled the juice is consumed. It has many wonderful qualities.” Atiśa then said, “This is most certainly established from meritorious qualities of Tibetan monks. It is most excellent.”⁹⁰

Atiśa and his entourage then stayed at a royal residence in the Kathmandu Valley, and Gya Tsöndrū Sengé became extremely ill.⁹¹ Atiśa asked him, “What did you do?” Gya Tsöndrū Sengé replied, “I did not do anything other than receive a harmful mantra from a non-Buddhist. I gave him some gold powder from the gold that was left with me, but he was not satisfied. The non-Buddhist told me, ‘Melt it into one piece!’ I was not able to do so and had a fight with him. Ever since, I have been slightly sick.” Atiśa said, “Although, in general, it is not possible to melt it, had you thereafter disclosed the matter to me, I would have used a method leading to a solution,” and added, “Despite my blessings, Gya Tsöndrū Sengé has gone beyond the possibility of being saved.” Since Gya Tsöndrū Sengé was going to be murdered by the non-Buddhist’s harmful mantra in Nepal, the local law sanctioned that, if one died in a house, the householder would take for himself the deceased person’s property. Therefore, that night, Atiśa and the entourage camped at the bank of a river on the plain ground. Gya Tsöndrū Sengé died later that night and most of his belongings were brought to Tibet.⁹²

At the death of Gya Tsöndrū Sengé, Atiśa exclaimed in grief, “My going to Tibet has no purpose. It is useless as my voice has been silenced!” Naktso Lotsāwa tried to reassure him, pointing out that there were other translators in Tibet, such as Rinchen Zangpo, Lekpai Sherap, Gewa Lodrö, Geshé Khu Lotsāwa, himself, and others. Atiśa replied that it was not up to a student to speak to his teacher in such a way. “In our land of India,” Atiśa explained, “yogis console the grief of paṇḍitas, and the paṇḍitas explain the Buddhadharmā to the yogis.” However, as Naktso Lotsāwa had traveled through all the hardships, Atiśa said he would be satisfied with learning Tibetan from the translator.⁹³

While in Nepal, Atiśa wrote a letter to King Neyāpāla entitled *Letter of Unblemished Precious Jewels* and translated it into Tibetan with Naktso Lotsāwa.⁹⁴ In Wölka, in Nepal, Atiśa and his compan-

ions stayed with a deaf Sthavira for a month. The monk requested a teaching on the perfections not including the way of mantras. In the teaching, Atiśa emphasized that both mantras along with the perfections lead to awakening. Atiśa then composed the *Lamp for the Summary of Conduct (Caryāsaṃgrahapradīpa)*, which he translated together with Naktso Lotsāwa (see chapter 7).⁹⁵ Atiśa and his entourage next reached the “Plain of Kathmandu Valley” in present-day Tham Bahil in Thamel, north of old Kathmandu. Atiśa met with a Nepalese king named “Boundless Fame.” Atiśa entrusted his elephant mount named “Admirable to See” to the king, as the elephant would not be able to survive in Tibet. Atiśa instructed the mahārāja not to use the animal as a mount or servant. Rather, the king should use the elephant to help construct the building of a monastic complex known as Tham Vihāra. Atiśa and the king then had the complex built to support a saṃgha of both Indian and Tibetan monks to be led by the king’s son, Prince Padmaprabha, who became a monk.⁹⁶

"No Indian who visited Tibet in the past thousand years had a greater impact on the Buddhism there than Atiśa Dīpaṃkara. He was a Buddhist monk, world traveler, devout practitioner, philosopher, and brilliant synthesizer who was heir to most of the great ideas and practices of later Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. James Apple's book on Atiśa is a deeply researched, historically nuanced, and lively overview of the master's life and teachings. Atiśa has always been dear to the hearts of Tibetans, and by bringing his words and deeds to life, Apple shows us precisely why this is so—and why we ourselves should look to Atiśa for guidance."

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