190: A Life for the Dharma
Sangharakshita

(Birmingham Buddhist Centre, Feb? /1999)

Well, thank you very much Vajragupta for that introduction. I'm afraid there aren't going to be any bombs this evening; there might one or two little squibs (laughter) – but we shall have to wait and see.

A few years ago - I don't remember exactly how many it was – I gave a lecture on 'great Buddhists of the twentieth century'. Some of you may remember that lecture, if for no other reason, because it was one of the longest I've ever given in this country – it was something over two hours. Well in India I was quite accustomed to giving Dharma talks lasting two hours, but in this country people usually don't have that sort of stamina, they start, you know, fidgeting and looking out of the window.

But anyway on that occasion at least I gave this quite exceptionally long talk which some of you may remember, a few years ago. Some of you may remember what the talk was about. The title I gave it was 'great Buddhists of the twentieth century' and some of you may remember who those great Buddhists were. There were five of them altogether about whom I spoke. I spoke about Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka, who restored the Buddhist holy places around the turn of the century, and did a great deal toward the revival of Buddhism in the land of its birth. I spoke about Alexandra David-Neel, who was the first woman, a very intrepid woman, to make the journey to Lhasa. And I spoke about Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the great leader of the ex-untouchables, under whose leadership many hundreds of thousands of them took refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. And then I spoke about Lama Govinda, the German lama, a lama of German birth, who for many years concentrated on the subject of 'Tibetan mysticism' as he called it, and wrote a quite important book on the subject. And then finally I spoke about Dr Edward Conze, who had devoted more than twenty years of his life to the translation of the Prajnaparamita corpus of Mahayana sutras.

So all these were truly great Buddhists, great Buddhists of the twentieth century. But one of the things I mentioned in the course of this lecture was the fact that though they were all great Buddhists, they were very, very different in character, very different in background, very different in education, different even in nationality, different in culture. At the same time I also emphasised the fact that they possessed certain very definite and important qualities in common. They were all single-minded. Dharmapala was single-minded about the restoration of Bodh Gaya and other Buddhist holy places. Alexandra David-Neel was single-minded eventually about getting to Lhasa, which she did, in disguise. Ambedkar was single-minded about emancipating his people - the ex-untouchables - from the socio-religious slavery of many centuries. Lama Govinda was single-minded about getting to Tibet, especially to Western Tibet and the old temples and monasteries of Tsaparang. And Dr Edward Conze was very single-minded in his devotion to the translation of those thirty-odd difficult and abstruse texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Prajnaparamita sutras.

So they were all single-minded, they were also all fearless. They had courage; they were prepared to face and overcome opposition, even ostracism. And not surprisingly

all five of them were quite unconventional in so many different ways. And they were also self-motivated, they were autonomous, they were therefore true individuals. In short we say that all five were heroes, and of course in the case of Madame David-Neel a heroine in the very best sense of the term. And I concluded my lecture those few years ago by saying we needed to cherish our heroes and heroines. Not put people up on a pedestal in an artificial way and then knock them off for the sake of amusement, so to speak. We need to cherish our real, our true heroes and heroines. We need to admire them, we need to cherish their memory, and we need to rejoice in their merits. So, we needed to appreciate our great Buddhists. But of course it's not only in the twentieth century that great Buddhists are to be found, not by any means. They are to be found in all of the centuries that have elapsed since the Paranirvana of the Buddha. They are found in many Asian countries, and begin to be found in western countries, speaking different languages, and following different forms of Buddhism.

But there is a difficulty, a difficulty that arises at this point. My five great Buddhists of the twentieth century all lived of course quite recently, and we do know quite a lot about them. Some of them even have written autobiographies. And there are many records even apart from their autobiographies, many documents about them; in fact as I did mention on that occasion when I gave the lecture, I had had some kind of personal contact with every one of those five great Buddhists. But with regard to the great Buddhists of previous centuries the case is in fact very different. We often know very little about them, sometimes in fact the greater they were the less we know about them. Think for instance of Nagarjuna, think of Asanga, how much do we really know about them. Perhaps we've seen thankas; Tibetan painted scrolls, representing them. We see Nagarjuna sitting on his raft floating on the ocean, and we see a sort of mermaid-like figure, a naga princess, coming up from the depths of the ocean and offering him the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. We have that sort of representation. And in the case of Asanga we have thankas representing Maitreya, the bodhisattva Maitreya looking down from the *tushita* devaloka, sending down a ray, a beam of multicoloured light, and along that beam of multicoloured light, come teachings, higher spiritual teachings which Asanga then records. So we have these sort of pictures which are very vivid and inspiring even, but we don't have much in the way of concrete information about these great teachers, these great Buddhists of earlier days. We do of course have their writings for which we must be very grateful, and in a sense we can know them, we can know Nagarjuna, we can know Asanga, we can know Vasubhandu, we can know Dharmakirti, Shantideva, through their writings. We can even feel that we know them very well, despite the de-constructionists. We can know what they thought, even how they felt, but there's very little solid biographical information.

Nagarjuna and Asanga of course were Indians; they lived and worked in India. And Indians we have to recognise historically were rather different to biography and history. So far as I recollect in the whole of classical Sanskrit literature there is only one historical work, and that is the Raja-dharangini (?), the ah, the chronicle of the kings of Cashmere. So far as I remember there is no other historical work at all in classical Sanskrit. They cultivated, the ancient Indians, almost every other, you know, form of literature, drama, commentary, sutras in the brahminical sense, drama, philosophical exposition, hymns, they cultivated all those different forms, but not history, not biography. So generally speaking we know about the great Buddhists of

India only when they or their disciples come in touch with the countries outside India, or even when they go those countries outside India, or come from those countries outside India. And especially when they go to or come from China and Tibet. Traditionally the Chinese and the Tibetans are rather fond of biography and history. The Chinese cultivated those two genres quite intensively, and the Tibetans also, later, under the influence of Buddhism did likewise.

So this evening, to unveil the mystery at last (laughter), this evening I want to speak about a great Indian Buddhist who went to Tibet, who went there in the eleventh century of the Common Era, and who came to play a very, a crucially important part in the development of Tibetan Buddhism, and who is therefore deserving of our highest respect. I refer to Dipankara Srignana (?), generally known as Atisha, which means something like the 'great lord'. Comparatively speaking we do know quite a lot about Atisha. We have of course the Tibetan translations of his own writings. His original writings of course were in Sanskrit, and their colophons sometimes contain biographical information, and we also have several biographies of Atisha written in the Tibetan language by disciples and disciples of disciples. And we also have records in Tibetan of some of his personal teachings to his disciples; not formal teachings, not teachings in the form of treatises, but teachings in the form of what came to be called precepts, teachings suited just to the character, the temperament, the state of spiritual development of that particular disciple. Now it's not that it is possible to extract a straight-forward biographical account from all this material which we have about Atisha, and of course naturally, I was going to say Tibetans being Tibetans, but perhaps I should say Buddhists being Buddhists, there are also plenty of legends. So what I shall try to do this evening is give an outline of the generally agreed facts of Atisha's career both in India and Tibet, and in so doing I shall dwell in particular on those episodes in or features of his career that have a significance for us today. And when I say for us today I mean for people who are trying to practise the Dharma in the industrialised, secularised, urbanised, competitive, consumerist, materialistic, violent society in which at the end of the twentieth century of the common era we find ourselves, fortunately or unfortunately, living.

Atisha was born in the year 982 of the Common Era; that is to say he was born about fifteen hundred years after the Buddha. It is quite important for us to realise this fact; he came at the end of a very long period of development of the Dharma in India. You could say that he, Atisha, was as far removed from the Buddha, in point of time, as Martin Luther was from Jesus, this will give us some idea of the historical perspective involved. Incidentally, it is rather unfortunate that we refer, perhaps have to refer, to events, dates in Buddhist history as occurring either CE or BCE, yeah, it used to be of course BC or AD, but there has been some change, some improvement more recently, and we now say CE 'Common Era,' or BCE 'before Common Era', but even this is rather unfortunate because when we have these dates in Buddhist history, BCE and CE, it suggests a sort of break in the continuity of Buddhist history which is not really there at all. We're now living in the 2545th year I think it is of the Buddhist era, at least according to the southern reckoning. So, we should try not to allow that break which is suggested by CE and BCE to influence us when we survey the course of Buddhist history in the east.

But to get back to Atisha, Atisha was born in Bengal in eastern India, we're not sure exactly where he was born, but it may in a village as it now is near Dakar (?), the

capital of the present day state of Bangladesh. And we're told, all the accounts agree, that he was born of noble parents, in fact his father may even have been the local chief, the local raja. Later accounts of course tend to represent Atisha as having been the son of a great king, and there of course his biographers take as their model the legendary life of the Buddha, because if you can represent Atisha or any other great Buddhist as having been the son of a king and the heir to the throne well when he gives up all that it's even more impressive. But actually it seems his father was really not much more that the local chief, no doubt an important man, but within a relatively small area. Atisha apparently received a good education, he studied various arts and sciences, and according to some accounts at least, he was married at an early age to five wives – that suggests he probably did come from the nobility – and had seven sons and two daughters, so presumably he wasn't lacking in worldly experience. But what about his religious life at this time? Strangely enough considering his later career his religious life at this time was almost entirely tantric. In a way this is not surprising. Atisha lived towards the end of the Buddhist period in India, and within three hundred years of his death Buddhism had practically disappeared from the land of its birth, the last blow having been given by the destruction of the great monastic universities by the Turkish Moslem invaders. And even in Atisha's own day Buddhism was more or less confined to Northeast India.

As most of you are probably aware Indian Buddhism passed through three great phases of historical development, each phase lasting about five hundred, maybe six hundred years. There was a Hinayana phase, a phase during which the Hinayana was dominant, a Mahayana phase, and finally a Vajrayana or Tantric phase. I've spoken and written elsewhere about these three great phases, for instance in the introduction to the *Survey [of Buddhism}*, so there's no need for me to go into them now, most of you I'm sure are quite familiar with them. Suffice it to say that by the time Atisha was born the Vajrayana or tantric Buddhism was predominant in that part of India where Buddhism still survived. Atisha therefore grew up in a tantric environment, in a tantric atmosphere even, so to speak. And it is said that he received his first tantric initiation from his own father, and after that he associated with many great and famous tantric yogins and teachers of the Mahayana. Some accounts among his own teachers were some of those who are included in the list of eighty-four Maha-siddhas, or 'great perfect ones'. So, we find Atisha during these early years, when he was still apparently living at home with his family, practising tantric meditation, taking part in the guna-chakras(?) or 'tantric feasts', and listening to what are called the 'secret tantric songs', which imparted esoteric instruction through that particular medium. According to at least one account he even went to the land of Uddiyana(?), and practised the tantras in the company of the dakinis, whatever that might mean. So in this way he spent very many years, he gained a thorough knowledge of the Vajrayana, of its rituals, of its meditations, and so on.

But it seems that despite his thorough immersion in the Vajrayana, despite his vast acquaintance with tantric disciplines and teachings, it seems he was not satisfied. He felt he had not made any real spiritual progress, he had certainly not gained enlightenment. Now this is strange, this is strange, in theory the Vajrayana is not just the latest phase in the development of Indian Buddhism, in theory at least it is also the highest stage of the Buddhist spiritual path and life, at least according to the triyana system. But here was Atisha, he'd practised the Vajrayana, systematically, thoroughly, sincerely for fifteen or more years, and he'd had some of the greatest tantric yogins as

his teachers, but he was still not satisfied with his spiritual progress, still not satisfied with his spiritual attainments. He felt that there still was something missing, something he hadn't achieved, something he hadn't experienced. Perhaps in a sense everything was lacking, everything was missing. So what had gone wrong? Well in a word or in a few words with I think most of you will be very familiar he had been following the path of irregular steps. Before he could go forward he had to go back. He had to start following the path of regular steps. And this is the sort of thing that happens to us, not once but perhaps many times. We find perhaps that we've got stuck, got stuck in our spiritual life, we feel dissatisfied with our spiritual progress, we may feel well here we are, been practising all these years, doing all the right things, very good, very obedient, all the rest of it, but we haven't really made any progress. Maybe we've been at it, maybe we've been good Buddhists of one sort or another for ten, twelve, fifteen, even twenty years, but perhaps the time comes when we feel well, we're not making any progress, or that we feel we've never made any progress at all. Well as and when we reach that point, it's no use blaming conditions. It's no use saying, 'Well, I've got a full time job, so what can you expect', or 'I've got a wife or a husband and children, so what else can you expect of me, just a poor, miserable, householder Buddhist' (laughter). So, or you might say 'what's the use of blaming me. Perhaps I'm a busy monk, have to go around giving lectures all the time, attending international conferences all over the place. A jet-set Buddhist monk. So, there are lots of them around these days, and some of them are good friends of mine. I don't see them very often. They fly in and fly out. They're busy, I could say like angels, few and far between. Not exactly like angels, but they certainly do come and go with astonishing rapidity. So, if a person in that sort of condition is not making any real spiritual progress it's no use blaming external conditions. It's no use our blaming our lifestyle, and of course it's no use blaming our teachers, 'Oh, if only my teacher had given me more time, if only I could see him every day, sit at his feet every day, look up into his eyes, well, I'm sure then I would make, you know, more progress'. And, sometimes you start thinking well perhaps your teacher doesn't really care for you very much, and so you perhaps start thinking, well, perhaps you'd better start looking for another teacher. Well, that's the sort of thing that happens. At one level we call it 'shopping around', the 'Sainburys syndrome', or even the 'Tesco syndrome' for the better educated.

And of course we may blame our fellow disciples, we might say, well, here I am working hard maybe for the Centre, maybe for the Order, or maybe just for the Dharma in general, but I don't get much help, I don't get much co-operation, they just leave it to me. I'm all by myself and they don't give me emotional support when I need it. You know, there's no one's shoulder that I can go and have a good weep on, and no one with whom I can be vulnerable and all that, that sort of thing. So, in that way we sometimes blame our fellow disciples, so, when we get into that sort of state, I was going to say stage, but it isn't really a stage, it is much more of just a state.

Well, what we generally have to do, at least one thing that we can do, a very important thing we can do, is to re-trace our steps. To go back to fundamentals. If we are mentally confused for instance, and there's a great deal of mental confusion around these days, one finds it in the newspapers, well, one hears it on the radio, and I'm sure if one watched TV, which I don't I'm glad to say, you'd probably find lots and lots of it there. You find mental confusion of course in some of the books you read, and even some of the Buddhists you meet, even some of the Buddhist teachers you

meet, you find mental confusion. So, if we are mentally confused, as we very often are, as we usually are when we're not making spiritual progress, we have to go back to meditation. That may seen a very dull, a prosaic sort of remedy, back to the old cushion, back to the old 'mindfulness of breathing', back to the old 'metta bhavana', back to 'samatha bhavana' in other words. But that's what we have to do. If we are mentally confused, if we are not able to develop wisdom and in that way make real spiritual progress, we have to go back to meditation, back to samatha bhavana, because as the Buddha said, 'It is the concentrated mind that sees things as they really are, not the unconcentrated mind'. It is the concentrated mind that develops prajna. But suppose our meditation is unsatisfactory, suppose that we don't have too much time for it, or suppose we are troubled by all sorts of wandering thoughts, distractions, what happened yesterday, what I've got to do tomorrow, all that sort of thing with which I'm sure you are only too familiar, so if we find meditation difficult, if we can't concentrate, we have to get back to sila or ethics.

We have to practise the precepts more carefully and more vigorously, because an ethical life is an integrated life, and the more integrated we are the easier we shall find it achieve mental concentration. It's no use leading an ethically unintegrated life and on top of that, in despite of that almost, trying to achieve mental concentration, trying to meditate. But suppose our practise of ethics is not very successful, supposing we find it very difficult not to be cruel, maybe we do sometimes take something we haven't been given, and as for that third precept I'd better not say anything about that, and what about speech, I mean I sometimes say well that this is the easiest precept of all to break. The precept according to which we should abstain from not just false speech but harsh speech, speech which divides people, and just useless talk. Well, I'm afraid most of us have to admit that we break this precept many, many times a day, perhaps. I sometimes say it is really the most difficult precept to take, you're very unlikely to kill anybody in the course of the day, or actually to steal anything in the course of the day, you don't usually rob a bank in the course of the day, and you're not very likely to commit adultery in the course of the day, but you're almost certain to infringe the speech precepts. So, one needs to watch that. And of course there's that fifth precept which is of course a matter of some controversy, whether the fifth precept requires total abstention, or just not taking too much. Well, those are just the five precepts, there are other sets of precepts, there are the ten precepts, the ten kusala dharmas, and akusala dharmas.

So, supposing we do find even the practise of ethics, in a flawless way, difficult, what shall we do then? Is it possible to go back to something even more fundamental? Well it is, fortunately. If we find even the practise of sila, ethics, difficult, well we should just practise dana or giving. At the very least we can do that, and through Dana, through giving, in all sorts of ways, we learn to empathise with other people. And we can therefore say that imaginative identification with other people, with other living beings in fact, is the foundation of ethics. And in this way we get back to the path of regular steps. We start making progress again.

And this is what Atisha did, this is what Atisha did. He re-traced his steps from the Vajrayana to the Mahayana, and from the Mahayana to the Hinayana, and at age of twenty-nine he became a monk. He gave up all his tantric rituals and tantric paraphernalia and ganachakras - 'tantric feasts' - he became a monk. We're told he became a monk in the mahasangika branch of the sangha, of the monastic order.

It's not clear where he was ordained, or under whom. But apparently he was ordained at one of the great monastic universities of Northeast India. And thereafter he spent two years studying, he studied the *tripitaka*, and the *maha-vipasha* (?). He studied the *tripitaka* in the sense of studying the *vinaya*, and as far as we know the *agamas* which are the Sanskrit counterparts of the Pali *nikayas*. And he studied the Maha-vipasha which is a great commentary of the Sarvastivadins on the seventh and last book, the jnana pasthana (?) of the Sarvastivadin Abhidhamma Pitaka. These of course were Hinayana works. But even these didn't satisfy him, he wanted to study the great classical Mahayana works, but strange to say he couldn't find any teachers. There were some important texts, but others were no longer available, in India, at least in that part of India.

So, what did Atisha do? He decided he would have to leave India, he would have to continue his studies abroad as we might say. But where to go? In the end he decided to go to what is now called Indonesia. Indonesia was then a great centre of the Mahayana. You all know, I'm sure, about the great stupa of Borobudur in Indonesia. Some of you have visited it and photographed it; it's in Java. But Atisha didn't go to the island of Java; he went to the island of Sumatra. He went to the city of Srivijaya (?) which then was the capital of a great empire. The site of Srivijaya is now occupied by the city of Palamban (?). And of course he went, he had to go all the way by sea, and the voyage took altogether thirteen months.

So, let's just pause to consider this, let's just compare Atisha's position with our own. We don't have to go abroad to study the Dharma; we can study it at home, so to speak. Here there's no shortage of material; we can even study the Dharma in our own language. So many important texts, especially during the last thirty or forty years, have been translated into English, into German, into French, Spanish, so many other western languages. That's not to even mention books which are simply *about* Buddhism, whether histories of it, or expositions of its philosophy, and so on. In fact nowadays there's so much material, that sometimes we don't know where to start. I can remember thirty, forty, fifty years ago when I was relatively new to Buddhism, if two or three books about Buddhism, including translations, came out in the course of a single year, that was a great event. You knew, if you were a serious student of Buddhism, if you were seriously interested in Buddhism, you knew each and every book that came out in those days. But you can't do that now. Nowadays there are not only scholars, there are hundreds perhaps even thousands of books on Buddhism, on the different forms of Buddhism, different Buddhist practices, schools, and so on, art, architecture, available in English and other languages. So, very often we're confused, we don't know where to start. Well, just think of the scriptures, Pali texts, Sanskrit texts, Sanskrit, Chinese which have been translated into English, think of all the commentaries. Sometimes people wonder, well, do we have to study all of these, do we have to study all the Pali texts, do we have to work our way through the Pali *tripitaka*? With the exception of just a little bit of *Abidhamma* it's all translated now. Nice, fat volumes, only five or six hundred pages each, containing all these great wonderful teachings. And these great Mahayana sutras, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages of them, one or two of them a thousand pages long, yeah, so, do we have to study all of them? I mentioned that Dr Conze had translated thirty-odd Prajnaparamita sutras alone, just one group of Mahayana sutras. Do we have to make our way through all of these? Well, I'm not going to say anything about that today (laughter).

I'm going to say something; I'm going to say something about it in my next lecture here. This is of course where the 'spin-doctoring' comes in, or at least the advance publicity, just in case anybody forgets. But in any case, whether we make our way through many or few Buddhist texts, whether we study for many hours a week or just for half an hour, we can study the Dharma at home, so to speak, both metaphorically and literally. We can, we can practise the Dharma at home, we can practise meditation here, we can go on retreat here, so to speak, we can enjoy spiritual friendship here, and above all, there is nothing to stop us Going for Refuge to the Buddha, and Dharma, and the Sangha here. So, in a sense, in this country and other western countries, we now have it very easy. Everything is available, everything is accessible. But we don't always realise this, don't always appreciate it, don't always realise just how fortunate we are. And we don't therefore always take full advantage of those opportunities, which we do undoubtedly have. Instead of taking advantage of them we even sometimes grumble and complain that we don't have even better advantages. So, let us remember Atisha and others like him in Buddhist history. Atisha had to go abroad to study the Dharma. He had to make a dangerous voyage lasting thirteen months. We can get to India in thirteen hours, we can go comfortably, relatively comfortably, 'round all the holy places, pay our respects there. Worship there, maybe meditate there, and back all within the week, so let us admire Atisha's heroism, let us admire his devotion to the Dharma. Let us try to imbibe something of his spirit. Well, Atisha spent twelve years in Sumatra, from when he was thirty-two to when he was forty-four. And he studied with the great teacher Dharmakirti, not to be confused with the famous Indian logician of that name of a few centuries earlier. And this Dharmakirti, the Sumatran Dharmakirti, it seems had studied himself in India in his younger days. So, there at the feet of Dharmakirti, in the city of Srivijaya, in Sumatra, Atisha became thoroughly acquainted with all the great classical works of the Mahayana, especially with the writings of Nagarjuna, Asanga and Shantideva, and we're told that he paid particular attention to all the teachings connected with the bodhicitta, with the arising of the bodhicitta, the *will* if you like, the *citta*, the aspiration, to achieve enlightenment, supreme enlightenment, not just for one's own personal benefit, but for the sake of all living beings. And Atisha's interest, more than interest in these teachings connected with the bodhicitta, is certainly not just theoretical. He really took those teachings to heart. Atisha, we may say, was a Mahayana Buddhist in the very broadest sense, and the bodhicitta we may say is the heart of the Mahayana. It is the bodhicitta, the arising of the bodhicitta, the will to universal enlightenment that makes a bodhisattva a bodhisattva. So, Atisha was inspired by the bodhisattva idea, he tried to develop the bodhicitta within himself, and how successful he was in doing this we shall see as demonstrated by his life later on.

Probably those twelve years of intensive study in Sumatra passed very quickly. At any rate at the age of about forty-four Atisha returned to India, and not long after his departure Sumatra was conquered by a South-Indian Hindu king, and Buddhism started to decline there. Still later of course, Sumatra and the neighbouring island of Java and the other smaller islands were all conquered by the forces of Islam and Indonesia became part of the Moslem religious empire. Atisha spent the next fifteen years in India, that is to say in North-east India, particularly it seems at the great monastic university of Vikramashila. During that time he seems to have been very active, even very busy, he wrote a number of books in Sanskrit, a number of which were subsequently translated into Tibetan with the help of Atisha himself, he taught

his disciples, he had many disciples, and he engaged in vigorous debate with various non-Buddhist teachers, and it seems he even found time to meditate. In addition he had various administrative responsibilities to discharge within the monastery itself.

During this period, during this period of fifteen years during which he was back in India, two important events occurred. The first event was that, well, war broke out. A war broke out between a Hindu king of western India and the ruler of Maghada, Maghada of course being broadly speaking the area, the kingdom, within which Atisha lived, and which was ruled by some of the later Pala kings. So, that was the first important event that occurred during that period, and the other one was that Atisha received an invitation to visit Tibet. So just let me say a little about each of these two important events of that fifteen-year period. We're told that the Hindu king was the aggressor and at first he was very successful. The Pala king's troops were defeated, but eventually the tide of battle turned and that Hindu king himself was defeated, and he and his troops were at the mercy of the victors. Well we're told that Atisha, who was around at the time, took the king and the defeated warriors under his protection, and did not allow them to be harmed, because he had it seems great influence with the Pala king at the time, who may well have been his disciple. Not only that but Atisha played an active part, an active role, in the negotiation of a peace treaty between that Hindu king and the ruler of Maghada, the Pala ruler of Maghada. So, this indeed was an important event in Atisha's life. But the invitation to visit Tibet was an even more important event in his life, in a way it was the crucial event in his life we may say.

But how did Atisha come to be invited to Tibet, what was the background to the invitation? So, in order to understand this we have to go just a little into the history of Tibet. Buddhism was introduced into Tibet in the seventh century of the Common Era, along with a good deal of Indian culture. Before that Tibet didn't have a written literature, didn't even have an alphabet. And in the eight century, Buddhism was given a further impetus in Tibet, mainly due to the arrival and the work there of Shantarakshita and the great guru Padmasambhava. In the ninth century the king called a great Buddhist council, the then king called a great Buddhist council, and arrangements were made for the systematic translation of Buddhist scriptures into the Tibetan language, using the newly devised Tibetan alphabet, which was based on a contemporary Indian alphabet. So far, so good, Buddhism seems to have been well established in Tibet by that time.

But then a terrible setback occurred. The Buddhist king, the pious Buddhist king, was assassinated. It seems there was a certain amount of opposition to the introduction and establishment of Buddhism. So, the king was assassinated, and he was succeeded by a king who was very anti-Buddhist, who destroyed monasteries, and who forced monks to return to lay life. To such an extent was Buddhism destroyed during that king's reign that it was practically wiped out. But then, 'those who live by the sword...', we're told, but not in the Buddhist scriptures of course, somewhere else, 'those who live by the sword will die by the sword', and the king was assassinated in his turn. I'm sorry to have to say that the king was assassinated by a monk. The Tibetans do maintain that the monk was actuated by pure bodhisattva compassion, he wanted to prevent the king from performing any more evil deeds, and he wanted to save Buddhism in Tibet; well, that may have been the case, but it is not a course of action that Buddhism generally recommends. But further disasters followed. Tibet

disintegrated politically, not only that but the whole of Tibet came to be overun by freelance tantric teachers from India. They weren't all Buddhists, some of them were Hindu, there were all sorts of strange Hindu sects. And some of them went so far as to teach that the practise of the tantra consisted in the enjoyment of two things – wine..., I'm sure you can guess what the other one was (laughter), well yes, you're dead right, yes, sex. And some of these tantrics even practised ritual human sacrifice and ritual cannibilism. So that one can see that they were really quite extreme, and had strayed a very long way, not just from the Buddha's teachings but from the Vajrayana itself.

But meanwhile a descendent of the last king of old Tibet, had migrated to Western Tibet, and there set up a separate kingdom. And he and his descendents were devout Buddhists. They did their best to revive Buddhism, to revive true Buddhism, at least in that part of Tibet. One of those descendents was Jnanaprabha, and this brings us down to the eleventh century of the Common Era, that is to say the century of Atisha. Jnanaprabha seems to have heard of Atisha. At any rate he sent a delegation to Vikramashila to invite Atisha to visit Tibet. And the delegation was led by the king's own nephew. They found it difficult enough to get to India, difficult enough to get to Vikramashila, but when they got there they must have found it rather frustrating because, well, they had difficulty meeting Atisha, in fact it seems that they, it took them two years. Sometimes people complain if they can't meet a monk or holy man within the next week. But these unfortunate people, the members of the delegation had to wait it seems a couple of years, and they even had to meet Atisha secretly, because they didn't want the monastery, they didn't want the authorities of Vikramashila to know that they'd come to take away their greatest scholar, their greatest ornament.

But eventually they succeeded, they managed to find a way of meeting Atisha personally, and they extended the intvitation. They didn't just invite him. There is a very interesting custom in those days, if you invited a monk to visit your place or give lectures you presented him with a large amount of gold, (not a hint), you presented him with a large amount of gold, so the delegation presented Atisha, we're told, with a large quantity of gold, I don't know whether it was gold bars or gold dust, but anyway it was gold, and gold of course is gold, and we're told that Atisha was deeply moved by the invitation, here were these people, they'd come all the way from Tibet, from the land of snows, taking weeks and months to get there. Some members of the delegation had died along the way. But at last the rest of them had reached Vikramashila, and here they were, inviting him to visit Tibet. And Atisha was also greatly moved by the gift of the gold, not of course moved by the gold itself, but by the story of how it had come to be collected. Some of you may have heard that story, but anyway it's worth telliing, or even re-telling. It has some bearing on Atisha's acceptance of the invitation.

It seems that Jnanaprabha had been engaged in fighting a certain war-like tribe on the borders of western Tibet, and in the course of the fighting he was captured. And it seems that his captors couldn't have been very sympathetic to Buddhism, because they gave him a choice. They said look, we're prepared to release you, we're prepared to set you free, but on one condition - you must renounce your refuge in the Three Jewels. So for Jnanaprabha, as a devout Buddhist, that was a quite impossible ccondition, so he refused. So his captors now set another condition, alright you won't renounce your commitment to the Three Jewels, but if your subjects can collect, if

they can produce, if they can give us gold equivalent to your weight, then we shall release you. So word was conveyed to Jnanaprabha's nephew and the nephew spent a number of years collecting gold from all over the country, all over western Tibet. And he collected a truly enormous amount. But even after collecting and collecting all those years he still hadn't collected quite enough, he had collected enough to ransom the king's body but not enough to ransom also his head. So, when Jnanaprabha heard this, well by the time he heard it, he was quite old. So he told his nephew, or sent a message to his nephew, not to bother to collect any more gold. In any case his subjects had been sufficiently oppressed to raise all that gold to ransom him. He said, let me die in captivity, I am old, my time is nearly finished anyway. Use the gold to invite Atisha to Tibet. In this way I though a captive will be of some service to the Dharma before I die. So this was the gold that was presented to Atisha and Atisha was deeply moved by the story of how the gold of how the gold had come to be collected, he was moved by Jnanaprbha's deep devotion to the Dharma. He was moved by his spirit of self sacrifice.

So Atisha felt he had to take the invitation to visit Tibet very seriously. These Tibetans seemed very sincere people, really commited to the Dharma, and they really seemed desirous of further, truer Buddhist teaching. So what did Atisha do? What did he do? It seems he didn't consult the other monks, he didn't ask them what they thought, whether they thought he should go, or not go, he didn't even think about the matter in the ordinary sense. So what do he do? We're told that he consulted the goddess Tara. But why Tara? Why not some other bodhisattva? It seems Atisha had been particularly devoted to the goddess, or rather I should say the female bodhisattva, Tara since his childhood even, and regarded her as being his yidam, his ishta devata, his tutelary divinity. So at this crisis, this turning point in his life, in his whole career, he consulted her. We don't quite know exactly how he did this. We don't quite know how he established, so to speak, communication with Tara. There's more than one version of this important episode. But it seems he had a vision of Tara. And it seems that Tara spoke to him, as though he heard words, or perhaps thought he heard words, or words were impressed upon his heart. And Tara said, Accept the invitation, go to Tibet, go to Tibet. But that was not all she said. She also said, if you go to Tibet your life will be shortened by twenty years. So Atisha accepted the invitation, afterall he took the Bodhisattva ideal, and the bodhicitta seriously; he decided to go to Tibet. He couldn't leave at once; he had to hand over his responsibilities, he had to get the permission of the head of the monastery, but eventually he succeeded in doing so and he left Vikramashila for Western Tibet in 1040 CE. And he was then 58 years of age, not a young man at all as we can see. But before we accompany him on his journey, I want to look at just a few points. First of all there's this question of his consulting Tara. What does it mean to consult her, or for that matter of that any other bodhisattva? Who or what is Tara? Tara, like the other archetypal bodhisattvas as we sometimes call them, is a particular manifestation of the Dharmakaya, a manifestation of the Dharmakaya in an ideal human form, in this case of course a female form. So that when we are in contact with Tara, we are in contact with the Dharmakaya, we're in contact with the Transcendental. And this contact may take the form of a vision, as it did in the case of Atisha, or it may take other forms. Whatever form it takes that contact affects us deeply. It may even transform us, afterall contact of that kind amounts to an Insight experience, and that experience, that Insight experience may throw light on our existing condition, it may show us what we have to do next, but of course we do have to be careful. It is easy of

course to mistake our own whims and fancies, our own subjective imaginations, for the voice of Tara. In Atisha's case there was no such danger, so he could go ahead and do what Tara advised him to do. But now of course there is a danger, so we, even if we have heard the voice of Tara so to speak, would be well advised to consult our spiritual friends and ask for their advice, their opinion. In the very broadest sense, in the very broadest terms consulting Tara, or any archetypal Bodhisattva, means acting in accordance with our awareness of what is highest and best in us, the highest and best that is also beyond us. Well, that is just what Atisha did, he decided to go to Tibet, even though going there would shorten his life by twenty years. Like Jnanaprabha, he was prepared to sacrifice his life, or a portion of his life, quite a substantial portion, for the sake of the Dharma. And after all that is the great test, that is the great test; are we willing to die for the Dharma, are we willing to die for the Three Jewels.

In this country we have it very easy, we have no difficulty practising the Dharma if we want to, here Buddhism is not persecuted, it's not discriminated against. But if it was ever persecuted, if it was discriminated against, how many of us I wonder would pass that test? I don't know, it's a question at any rate we at least have to ask ourselves, but one thing I do know, you will be able to die for the Dharma if you have lived for the Dharma. Fortunately for us there are still people, even in this twentieth century, towards the end of this twentieth century, people who live for the Dharma. Just a few days ago I was reminiscing to a few friends about two Indian Order members, who lived for the Dharma. Their names will be familiar to some of you, perhaps to many of you. Shakyananda and Sanghasena. They lived for the Dharma, and they died for the Dharma. They were both old men. They were old men even when I ordained them quite a few years ago,and they both suffered from various ailments, especially Shakyananda, he was just a mass of ailments. But that didn't stop them. Year after year they went from village to village and town to town, giving talks on the Dharma, encouraging people to practise the Dharma. Sangasena was a little, quiet man, who operated in the northern part of Maharastra and he was known as ‘the lion of the north’, and Shakyananda, who was a very fat, very jolly man - I used to call him the Buddhist Falstaff except that he didn’t have any of Falstaff’s weaknesses – he operated in the southern part and was known as ‘the lion of the south’, and between them in the course of - I forget exactly how many years, perhaps five, six, seven - between them they must have covered easily a thousand villages and towns, bringing the Dharma to each and every one of them, and they both died ‘in harness’. One might say they both sacrificed their lives for the sake of the Dharma. If they’d not worked so hard, and so happily! – it wasn’t a question that they were sort of getting burned out or anything like that. They loved their work, they were happy, joyful, despite their ailments, and they communicated that joy in the Dharma to other people, to thousands of other people. If they’d not worked so hard in that way, well they may well have lived a few more years. They weren’t great scholars, in fact they weren’t scholars at all, but they were living embodiments of compassion and energy, and they were in my opinion worthy successors in spirit, of Jnanaprabha and Atisha, and examples to us all. And I would like them not to be forgotten, I would like them to be remembered and that's why I'm mentioning them at this point.

But it's time we returned to Atisha and his journey. It took him two years to reach the Nari region of western Tibet, and this was partly because he spent on the way a whole year in Nepal. We know the route he followed, and we know that he made the first

half of his journey on the back of an elephant - presumably supplied by the king - and the second half he made on horseback. He was accompanied by about thirty people, including monks and translators, and we do know quite a lot about his journey. I'm not going to say much about it, I want to get Atisha to Tibet as quickly as possible. So I'll just outline the route he followed, just in case anybody feels like following in his footsteps at some point, which wouldn't be a very difficult thing to do. From Vikramashila he went to Bodhgaya, and there made offerings, paid his respects to the Vajrasana, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, and then he went straight up into Nepal, into the Khatmandu Valley, to the Swayambunath Chaitya or stupa which of course is still there, and which of course some of you have visited, it's on the outskirts of the present day Khatmandu. From there he proceeded in a westerly direction and eventually arrived in Palpa in western Nepal. Some of you may remember, those of you who've read my memoirs, that in 19... only 1950, I spent some time in Palpa. It was then the capital of Nepal, but when I visited it, it wasn't very much more than an overgrown village. There he stayed quite a while. Atisha wrote books there and with the king's help he built and endowed a large monastery. And from Palpa the party made its way to Lake Manosarovar, and those of you who have read Lama Govinda's Way of the White Clouds will remember his wonderful description of the magical beauty of that lake. Atisha was now in Tibet and from the famous lake he travelled to Thon, and from Thon to the Nari area of western Tibet. He was given a splendid reception by the local rulers, and accomodated in the Thon-lin Monastery. And this was his headquarters for the next three years. These three years were of crucial importance for the success of his mission. During them he met Rinchen Sangpo, the greatest Tibetan scholar of his time; there also he composed his most important and influential work, and he also met the man who became his chief Tibetan disciple.

But before dealing with these major events I want to mention just one minor one, by way of light relief as it were. Perhaps some of you are feeling the need of a little light relief by this time. This particular event, this minor event, occurred when Atisha reached a Tibetan border. Of course he was received, as I've mentioned, by a delegation, by local rulers, made him very welcome. And of course he'd been travelling, perhaps he was thirsty, so they offered him a drink in a porcelain cup, rather beautiful porcelain cup we're told, with dragons on it. And Atisha liked the drink, and he asked what's this delicious drink? And one of the translators told him it was called 'cha' – tea. Of course it was Tibetan tea prepared with salt and butter. But Atisha seemed to have taken to it, and according to Tibetan sources he even composed a poem in praise of tea. But let us go back to the main story.

Let us go back to the meeting with Rinchen Sangpo. As I've said Rinchen Sangpo was a great scholar, he'd studied the Dharma in India, in fact he'd made three trips there. He had translated many Sanskrit texts into Tibetan, mainly Perfection of Wisdom or Prajnaparamita texts and many, many tantras. And he was, he's therefore still referred to as 'the great translator'. He had also established, founded many temples and monasteries, not only in western Tibet but also in what in now Ladakh and other parts of what is now north-west India. At the time of Atisha's arrival in Nari, in western Tibet, Rinchen Sangpo was eighty-five years old. Even older than Atisha. So he was quite a distinguished person, and we may say that he was a member of the religious establishment. And at first, perhaps not surprisingly, he treated Atisha with a certain amount of reserve. Of course until Atisha's arrival he'd been the leading Buddhist monk in the area. But thanks to Atisha's not just diplomatic but genuinely Buddhist

behaviour Rinchen Sangpo was won over. We're told that Rinchen Sangpo on one occasion invited Atisha to come and stay with him for a while at his monastery. So Atisha accepted the invitation, went along to the monastery, maybe with some of his disciples, and he found that this monastery was a large and beautiful one, with many images, images of all the different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, arranged apparently in different chapels. So on his arrival at the monastery Atisha just went round all these chapels, no doubt escorted by Rinchen Sangpo, and he paused just for a few minutes in front of each and every image, whether of Tara, Avalokiteshvara, Shakyamuni, Titatapatrata, Manughosa, there must have been hundreds of them. And each time he stopped he recited in Sanskrit a verse in praise of that particular Buddha or Bodhisattva. So Rinchen Sangpo hadn't heard these verses before and he thought, well they're really beautiful, I wonder, you know, where Atisha learned these, you know, who wrote them. So when Atisha had finished his tour of all these chapels and had finished reciting all these verses in praise of all these different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Rinchen Sangpo said, well, excuse me, but what stotra were you chanting? Where did you learn it; when was it composed? So Atisha said, well I just composed those verses on the spot, spontaneously. So this shows not only Atisha's great devotion, but his great skill in the spontaneous production of poetry in Sanskrit sloka form. So, Rinchen Sangpo began to have a great respect for Atisha.

The next incident is not so easy to explain; there are different accounts in fact of what happened, even different interpretations. It seems that Rinchen Sangpo used to get up very early in the morning and he used to practise tantric meditation. He used to practise it seems, tantric sadhanas of different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, various combinations, various mandalas, and so on. And it seems that in the morning Atisha asked him how he had practised. It seems that Rinchen Sangpo replied that he practised all those different sadhanas separately one after the other, as though one had to be added to the others in order to produce so to speak the total effect. Apparently he was under the impression, so far as we can understand, that they were essentially different from one another. So, Atisha disagreed. He explained that all the different sadhanas should be practised together. And one practised them together by practising any one of them deeply, for in principle all sadhanas were the same. So there was no question therefore of finishing with Tara and then going on to Manjughosa, as though there was something in the Manjughosa sadhana essentially which was not in the Tara sadhana. He explained that what you encountered in the depth of your own practise of a particular sadhana, you also encountered in the depth of the practise of any other sadhana. So, in a sense you needed to practise only one sadhana, you didn't have to sort of collect sadhanas, as though it was only the totality of all the sadhanas considered separately that helped you to achieve what you wanted to acheive through the tantric path. So, Rinchen Sangpo was greatly impressed by this explanation and he felt more respect than ever for Atisha, and therafter he helped him with his translation work. And when Atisha left Nari Rinchen Sangpo shut himself up in his room and devoted himself entirely to the practice of meditation, as explained by Atisha, and he did this for ten years, and it is said that eventually he attained enlightenment. By that time he was nearly a hundred – so this shows one is never too old to learn.

Before leaving the Nari area Atisha composed his most important and influential work. This was the Bodhipartha Pradipa or Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment. He also composed his own commentary on that work. The Bodhipartha Pradipa consists, that is to say the original text on which he commented, consists of sixty-eight verses

divided into two parts. The first part deals with the Mahayana, and the second with the Mantrayana or Vajrayana. The first part is very much longer than the second, that is to say the Mahayana part is very much longer than the Vajrayana or Mantrayana part, and this is a very interesting fact, because it suggests that Atisha was concerned not to emphasise the Vajrayana. We must remember that at that time Tibet was overrun by freelance tantric teachers from India, some of whom had given the tantra a very bad name indeed. So Atisha was concerned to emphasise ethical and spiritual values, he was concerned to emphasise the Mahayana, the Bodhisattva ideal, the development of the bodhicitta, the practise of the paramitas and so on. So he tended to play down the tantra, at the same time he couldn't of course ignore it completely, afterall he'd practised it himself in his youth. Not only that, at that time it was believed that the tantras were Buddhavacana, that is to say they were the word of the Buddha, part of the word of the Buddha, it was believed, traditionally, that they had been taught by the Buddha himself, though not necessarily in his ordinary human form. So Atisha in a sense was in rather a quandary; he couldn't really accept the tantras wholeheartedly, at the same time he couldn't reject them, so it seems he simply played them down. Today of course we're in a rather different position, we know that the tantras were not literally taught by the Buddha, Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. We know that they came into existence many hundreds of years later. We also know that they contain, some of them at least, many non-Buddhist featrures or elements. So, we're free to reject whatever in them is not in accordance with the fundamental principles of Buddhism.

Some Tibetan commentators maintain that Atisha played down the tantras as a result of the influence of Dontompa, his chief Tibetan disciple. As a Tibetan Dontompa was no doubt well aware of the damge that had been done to the Dharma in Tibet as a result of wrong tantric teaching. So, this brings us Dontompa himself. In a way it's a remarkable fact that though Dontompa was Atisha's chief disciple, and though he subsequently became the founder of the Kadampa school based on Atisha's teaching, he wasn't a monk, he never became a monk, he remained a layman. But very highly resected, and a man of deep spiritual realisation. He seems to have met Atisha just as Atisha was about to leave Nari, or perhaps had just left Nari, for India, having spent three years in the Nari region of Tibet. And Dontompa persuaded Atisha to visit central Tibet. And in any case the road back to India was blocked at the time as there was a war going on. Atisha therefore spent ten years in central Tibet, that is to say in the Lhasa area. Atisha also visited the famous monastery of Samye, the oldest monastery in Tibet, which had been founded in the eighth century by Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava, and here in this great ancient old monastery Atisha found copies of Sanskrit Buddhist texts that were no longer available in India itself. And this was further evidence of the extent to which Buddhism had already declined in the land of its birth. Wherever he went Atisha gave teachings, he composed books, he translated texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan with the help of his interpreters. And in his personal teaching he place particular emphasis on Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, and is therefore often known as the refuge lama because he emphasised that supremely important act of the Buddhist life to so great an extent. He also emphasised and encouraged the practise of the ten precepts and the development of the bodhicitta, including of course the practise and development of metta and karuna as the basis of the development of the bodhicitta. In addition to these practises he encouraged the worship in particular of four holy persons, four arya-pudgalas, and these were Shakyamuni the Buddha himself, Avalokiteshvara, Tara, and Achala. Achala means

'the immovable one', he's an aspect of Vairocana, the Buddha of the centre of the mandala, in wrathful Bodhisattva form. He's very popular incidentally in Japanese Buddhism, where he is known as Fudo; he is represented as a wrathful, very muscular, almost angry figure, carrying a noose or lasso and a sword and attended by two small acolytes.

Atisha spent his last days in Natang, south of Lhasa, and he died there in 1054, aged seventy-three, and it's said that his tomb can still be seen ther, or at least it could be seen there until recently. And before his passing away Atisha appointed Domtompa as his successor. From existing sources we get a very definate impression of Atisha's character. He wasn't just a great scholar, he was a man of great spiritual attainments. It's clear that he was very modest, very unpretentious. It's clear that he had a sort of charismatic personality, as we sometimes say nowadays, but the charisma, I get the impression, was of a mild and gentle persuasive kind. And it seems from all accounts that he was exceptionally kind and compassionate. He had a great love of animals even it seems. And he was very courteous, very mild, gentle in speech and in behaviour, but above all perhaps Atisha was characterised by a tremendous spirit of self-sacrifice. He indeed gave a life for the Dharma.

Dontompa lived for nine years after Atisha's death. He too was an extraordinary person. He kept Atisha's disciples together, he preserved his teaching, and he founded a monastery near Lhasa to act as a centre, a spiritual centre so to speak, for the movement of spiritual regeneration inaugurated by Atisha. He founded there what became known as the Kadampa school of Tibetan Buddhism. This school was firmly based on Atisha's teaching and his example. And it was called the Kadampa school because it was based on the word, 'ka' in Tibetan, of the Buddha, vacca or vacana in Sanskrit, that is to say it was based on all the teachings of the Buddha as contained in all the Buddhist scriptures. Like Atisha the Kadampa school accepted all the Buddhist scriptures both Hinayana and Mahayana, and it drew inspiration and guidance from them all. The attitude of the Kadampa school thus, was we may say ecumenical or non-sectarian. It also paid particular attention to six non-canonical works, six shastras as they are called, and two were by Asanga, the Yogachara Bhumi, and the Mahayana sutra Alankara, and there were two by Shantideva, the Siksasamucaya, and the Bodhicaryavatara. Quite a few of you will be familiar with at least some of those works, and also, the other two to which the school gave particular attention, were the Jatakas, recounting the story of the Buddha's previous lives, and the Udana Vagga, a sort of anthology roughly corresponding to the Dhammapada in Pali. Naturally the Kadampa school studied Atisha's own writings especially the Bodhipartha Pradipa. The Kadmapa school is of very great historical importance. Three centuries later it became the basis for Tsongkapa's Gelugpa school, and the Gelugpa school is also therefore known, not just as the Gelugpa school but as the New Kadampa School. And the Gelugpa School of course became the dominant school of Tibetan Buddhism to which the Dalai Lamas belonged. But there's no time to go into all that this evening. I think I've covered a good deal of ground even if I haven't reached that two hour limit. We've seen something of the state of Buddhism in India and Tibet in the tenth and eleventh centuries. We've seen something of the life and work of a very great Buddhist of that period. We've appreciated perhaps how fortunate we are today to have such easy access to the Dharma in all its forms. We've seen perhaps how important it is that we should follow the path of regular steps, seen how importantthat we should make full use of our spiritual opportunities. So let us rejoice in the merits

of Atisha, let us be thankful for the example he has given us, let us try to imbibe a little of his spirit of self-sacrifice. Let us too try to give, in our own measure, a life for the Dharma.