

PRAJÑĀ PĀRAMITĀYAI NAMAḤ

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Abstract: Ācārya Atīśa Dīpaṃkara, one of the eight most revered teacher-monks (*Sthavira*) at the famous Buddhist Mahavihara (University) of Vikramaśilā in Bihar during the early 11th century A.D., was invited by the then Tibetan king, an ordained monk himself and the grand-nephew of the builder of the great monastery of Tho-ling in western Tibet, in the central Himalayas near Mount Kailash, Byang-chub-'od, to expound the true teachings of the Buddha to the youths aspiring to be monks in Tibet. Despite his not liking the idea of leaving his beloved institution of Vikramaśilā, he accepted his invitation after much persuasion and having come to know of his personal sufferings to save the pure and ethically and morally upright form of Buddha's teachings in his country. Atīśa landed up in Tibet and travelled all over the country to have a look at the geographic-cultural space of Tibet and gauge and have a firsthand information about the intellectual traditions of the its monasteries. When Ācārya Atīśa left for Tibet, he was already 60 years of age and it took him about a year to reach there which greatly exhausted him but once he was there he did many things like teaching at the monasteries, writing and helping in the revival of the spiritual spirit and fervor that had been lost due to the persecution of the Buddhists by some anti-Buddhist kings, most notorious of whom was Glang-der-ma after A.D. 836. Within nine months of his reaching Tho-ling, he wrote his famous manual for the training of the monks, the *Bodhi-patha-pradīpa* (The Path to Enlightenment and its commentary). This new treatise introduced a new training ritual called the *Bodhisattva* Vow (The Vow of leading the life of a particular kind of monkhood leading to the *Bodhisattva* status) for the spiritually inclined Tibetan Youths who wanted to imbibe the spiritual nectar of Buddhism by being trained as *Bodhisattva* (Buddha to be) monks and sought perfect enlightenment and Buddhahood through the stage of a *bodhisattva*. Through this paper, we shall be attempting to analyze the form, nature and function of this ritualistic vow (*Vara vidhi* as used in the text or *Vrata* for the vow) and see the scientific procedure of the training of the monks in Tibet from 1042 A.D onwards.

Introduction: The '*Bodhisattva Vrata* or Vow' is the stepwise ritualistic training and it was devised for the young monks aspiring to achieve the *Bodhisattva* status and wanted to be as perfectly enlightened as the Buddha himself. This is the most important part of the gradual-step (Lam-rim) for the Buddhahood talked about in this text-the *Bodhi-patha-pradīpa* whose only Tibetan version has survived. This was the first text that Ācārya Atīśa Śrī Dīpaṃkara Jñāna, respectfully called Atīśaya or Atīśa -Jo-bo-rje ("The Noble Lord") by the Tibetans, wrote after coming to Tibet in about 1042-43.¹ He wrote it in 68 verses and was simultaneously translated by his disciple Dge-ba'i Blos-gros in Tibetan. Its original Sanskrit version is not available but is intact in its Tibetan version. Richard Sherburne, one of the translators and commentators of this text says that although this work has been little known to outsiders but has been used and cherished by the Buddhist communities within Tibet and inner Asia for well over nine hundred years. The text *Bodhi-patha-pradīpa* (Lamp for the Enlightenpath and its Commentary) proved to be a novel model for a religious literary genre and which was a concise and comprehensive manual to be kept as lifelong guides by the monks. Both the beginner and the skilled find a map in this poem which was to be memorised, while its commentary section provides the practical explanation for further reflection and study. It came to be resected so much that it was made a part of the curriculam for training and study in Tibet's first distinctive religious order called the Bka'-gdams-pa or Dge-lugs-pa, popularly known as the "Yellow Hats" in the west, the order to which the Dalai Lamas have belonged to.²

Atīśa's Coming to Tibet in 1042-43 marked the revival of the Buddhist monastic life there and is hailed as the "Second spread" (*Phy-dar*) of the religion that had come to their land during the 7th century A.D. It is this text which provides an insight about the uniqueness of his contribution that presented a blend of Buddhism's three systems (*Hinayāna*,-the lesser Vehicle, *Mahāyāna*-the greater vehicle and *Vajrayāna*-the vehicle of the thunderbolt) into one for a harmonious spiritual development. He, for the first time, presented a synthesized

relationship between Buddhism's essential monastic basis and compassionate *Bodhisattva's* high flowering in the true mystical expression of *Tantra*.³ I recall a line in the foreword of the Sherburne edited *Bodhi-patha-pradīpa* that Atīśa taught that Buddha's message was primarily a method to relieve the suffering of human beings. He sought to heal the division which threatened the growth of Buddhism in Tibet by emphasizing the central Buddhist teachings and by showing clearly that each teaching was relevant at the appropriate time and for the appropriate person.⁴

Atīśa laid the foundation of Buddhist religious culture by making wide use of the texts (*Sūtras* pertaining to *Mahāyāna* school) with particular stress on the doctrine of emptiness-*Śūnyavāda* by Nāgārjuna (for theory), Asaṅga (for practice of the monastic life, spirit of compassion, meditation and perfections) and Śāntideva (for combined theory and Practice according to *Mādhyamika* theory of emptiness). Apart from these theorists, he has also quoted and paid respect to the past masters like his teacher of Nalanda Mahavihara Bodhibhadra under whose tutorship Atīśa lived as a novice monk up to perhaps 20 years of age, his teacher Suvarṇadvīpa from modern day Indonesia where he had gone to receive instructions in *Vajrayāna*, the philosophy and rituals pertaining to the swift path and indestructible path, the seers Mañjuḥṣa, Vasubandhu, Jñānakīrti, Chandragomin, Śāntarakṣita, Śāriputra, Maitreyaṅgāra, Aśwaghōṣa and Ācārya Upāli for authenticating and making his texts interesting.⁵ This also reminds us of an academic probity that he does not want to own up anything which he does not consider as his own and honestly accepts and adduces the facts and theories uttered or written by the past masters at appropriate places.

Let us now begin his poem of 68 *Ślokas* (verses) and its commentary. He begins by bowing to all past, present and future victors (perfectly enlightened ones) to their doctrines and commentaries and lighting a lamp for the path to Enlightenment. He says that in this path there are inferior, mediocre and superior persons. The one who seeks the pleasure of life and cares for himself only is an inferior person. The one who puts life's pleasure behind and turns from the deeds of sin, yet cares about his own peace and *mokṣa* (final emancipation from the mundane cycle of birth and death) is a mediocre person but the one who seeks the complete end to the suffering of others considering their suffering as his own, is a superior person. To this kind of superior person whose desire is the highest stage of Enlightenment that the teacher-monk Atīśa says that he will explain the right means as taught to him by his own revered teachers.⁶ Elaborating on the *Bodhisattva* Vow he says that even a superior person who desires perfect enlightenment must not think it enough to simply have the *Prātimokṣa* vow (a purificatory rite conducted every fortnight on *Amāvasyā* i.e. dark fifteenth and *Pūrṇimā* i.e., bright fifteenth for the monks and nuns to confess their transgressions and get absolved through undergoing appropriate punishments) but a monk bound by the vow of the *Bodhisattva* training is the one who accepts that he can be awakened to the perfect Enlightenment by training himself in everything the *Tathāgatas* have enjoined as *Bodhisattva* practice and training in the *sūtras* and by their examples.⁷ He says that one must take the vow from any good *Guru* (preceptor) who is learned in the ritual of the vow and himself lives the vow he has taken and has the compassionate forbearance to impart it. He further goes on to explain the (a) ritual for taking the vow (b) how the vow is forsaken (c) how it will not be forsaken and (d) the benefits of good conduct. In this regard he quotes the former teachers Asaṅga and Śāntideva because theirs is the spirituality of the superior person which is the great path of the great vehicle. Śāntideva in his *Sikṣāsamuccaya* (p.19) says that the fullest practice of *Mahāyāna* comes from the *Bodhisattva* Vow.⁸ A *Bodhisattva* who wants to observe some precepts of the training makes a promise to do so in the presence of the Buddhas. If he has no *Guru* or spiritual friend, he acts on his own power to do so and takes the vow in the presence of the Buddhas and the *Bodhisattvas* but see to it that he does it correctly. About the causes of forsaking the vow are the failure to renew the resolve for the great Enlightenment and, through great entanglement, to commit the four basic sins. The former means to grow tired of seeking the good of all creatures, and feeling that the Enlightenment is too far off. The latter means to be without shame or regret and to give back the vow. About the ways of preventing transgressions he says that they could be prevented by deliberateness and by a sense of shame and regret.⁹ About the benefits of right conduct he says that it leads him to the Buddhahood. The *Bodhisattva* also needs to preserve and extend his conduct and thereby needs to purify his body, speech and mind. The body and the speech are purified by avoiding the seven unvirtuous deeds beginning with killing and so on and the mind is purified by avoiding the three beginning with greed. Ācārya Asaṅga has been quoted as saying that 'The conduct of a purified body is devoid of lust, anger and illusion, and the conduct of purified speech is marked by

no deceit toward the godly Three Jewels and the conduct of a purified mind holds no covetousness or ill will or false views.¹⁰

About the trainings he says that they are three (a) the conduct of the Vow (b) conduct for garnering virtue, and (c) conduct for others' sake. The conduct of the vow includes the vows of the *Prātimokṣā's* seven acts which prohibit wrong acts. The conduct for garnering virtue means gathering up virtues in body, speech and mind for the sake of Enlightenment particularly applying oneself to study, reflection and contemplation with delight, greeting ones *Gurus* with folded hands, praising the gifted persons, forbearing the contempt of others, offering worship to the three jewels (the Buddha, the *Samgha* and the *Dhamma*), restraining the doors of the senses, knowing the moderation in food and not sleeping in the early and later parts of the night.¹¹ The conduct for others' sake means that one must work for the good of creatures, helping others like the blind, the deaf, the afflicted and sick ones and bestowing all your virtues on others for their benefit.¹² Then there is talk of perfecting the equipment. These three kinds of conduct are actually the equipments of merit. Then there is talk of the good effects that these conducts will have, like one will have happy destinies, noble births, will be born a male, will remember rebirths, etc. Then there is also discussion of *Ācārya* Nāgārjuna's theory of emptiness (*sūnyavāda*) i.e., everything is like a dream. It is said that a beginner *Bodhisattva* must be constantly conscious of the fact that his whole body, life, enjoyments and all the phenomena of *Samsāra* (material world) and *Nirvāna* (the final goal of Buddhism in which one reaches a transcendental stage and there remains neither suffering nor desire nor a sense of self and the subject is released from the effects of ones *karma* i.e., deeds, and the cycle of birth and death) are dreamlike. He must bear in mind the idea of detachment from all material things.¹³ Nāgārjuna's theoretical proposition of emptiness must have been used by the author as an effective tool to convince the bearer of the *Bodhisattva* Vow that the material pleasures of life are dreamlike, so why hanker after them.

By way of critical evaluation of the *Bodhisattva* Vow and its nature as discussed and explained in the text, it would serve us fine to also bring to the kind notice of our readers that there appear certain elements in Atīśa's text that land us up in piquant situations. The points that we are going to discuss now are his succumbing to the prevailing practice of allowing the Vow to be observed by the monks or faithfuls who are not chaste and there are a few other rituals and imageries which point to his imbibing them from the Hindu *Brāhmaṇical* practices that obtained in the Gaṅgā river Valley in North-Eastern India during his time which is quite possible and natural as the university of Vikramaśilā, where he was a professor, was situated on the banks of the revered river Ganges and was also the region which was predominantly Hindu/*Brāhmaṇical* by thought and practices. Let us see them in a little greater detail.

We have already said that it was his genius that he integrated all the three systems of Buddhism- *Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna* and *Tantrayāna* or *Vajrayāna* in one. *Tantrayāna* or *Vajrayāna* talked of the swift path to attain enlightenment or *nirvāṇa* swiftly but it was also immersed in sexual imageries and practices and this was the reason why Buddhism was going down in Tibet. This was a matter of serious concern to the Tibetan king who fervently tried to bring an Indian master of knowledge and character to impart the true teachings of Buddhism and path to real enlightenment to the Tibetans. Despite Atīśa's presenting a combined form of Buddhism, he himself rejected the swift path for realizing true Enlightenment,¹⁴ and he, very cleverly, and in a calculated way, devoted his talent on establishing the morally most correct form of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in his text through the *Bodhisattva* Vow but still he had to yield to those faithful practitioners of *Tantrayāna* who had their days before his landing up there. In his 64th and 65th verses he says that:

'The secret and insight initiations should not be taken by religious celibates as it is emphatically forbidden in the Great *Tantra* of Primal Buddha (v.64) and if those initiations were taken by one who stays in the austerity of a religious celibate, it would violate his vow of austerity' (v.65).¹⁵

So, here the great master Atīśa seems to have yielded to the prevailing practice of *Tantrayāna* which allowed its practitioners to have the taste of women and sex and use the sex rituals to achieve enlightenment. This seems to have been a major concession given to the earlier practitioners of the faith in Tibet. Then he proceeds on to add new details of offering worship to the lord *Samantbhadra* (the one who is completely good, i.e., the Buddha) and the three jewels. In verse 67, he says that 'having acquired preceptor-initiation, he may listen to

all *Tantras*, and perform fire-offering and gift-worship and the like and there is no wrong in wisdom about reality.¹⁶ The system of fire worship and giving of gifts are integral parts of the /Hindu/ *Brāhmaṇical* religion and culture, particularly the *Vrata* (ritual of vows) system of religion. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, a text of about the 3rd-4th century A.D. (and the *Vrata*, *Tīrtha* and other *Grhya* rituals being added around 5th-6th Century A.D.) talks of a meritorious *Vrata* (religious vow) day called the *Caturdaśī* (the fourteenth lunar day which is very meritorious for religious deeds) which exhorts its performers to do *Yajñas* i.e., fire worship.¹⁷ The *Brhatsaṃhitā*, an astrological text of about 5th-6th century A.D, talks of fire oblations as a part of the worship of god Indra on the festive *Vrata* occasion called *Indradhvaja-sampada* (The occasion of the raising of Indra's banner).¹⁸ The same text talks of fire worship in one of the *Vrata* occasions called *Nīrajana-Vidhiḥ* (lustration Ceremony).¹⁹ The *Agni Purāṇa*, a Hindu/*Brāhmaṇical* scriptural text of about 9th century A.D, and also popular in the region where Aīśa had his residence, his studentship and job as a professor, talks of the 'offering of libations of clarified butter into the fire as an obeisance to the fire-God' in a ritual vow called the *Dhānyavrata*.²⁰ After the ritual of fire-worship, the author proceeds for another ritual to be performed and that is the ritual of gift-worship (verse 67). He says that there is no wrong in wisdom about reality.²¹ At page 539, the author further says that 'Having taken special refuges, he envisions in his mind the blessed Śākyamuni (the one belonging the lineage of the great *Śākyas* i.e., the family of the Buddha), and makes offerings of whatever he possesses.'²² The real import of the ritual of gift-worship can be seen and gauged here where two kinds of worship have been prescribed- (a) Worship with Pleasing Objects and (b) Meditative Worship. The worship with pleasing objects has been explained as (1) either of things actually at hand, or (2) of things created by the mind. Things actually at hand can be kinds of flowers, incense, music, a kingdom or one's precious gems. Things created by the mind are the arrays of offerings like the seven precious things of a universal monarch's kingdom, and jewels, gold, silver, conch, crystal, moonstone, sapphire, emerald, pearl and red-pearl, ruby, diamond, cat's eye, topaz, lapis lazuli, veined turquoise, beryl and shell-crystal, coral and quartz, and countless palaces bedecked with jewelled banners, cloths, lotuses, pennants and parasols. The same method of worship can be applied to the eating and drinking of refreshments whose colour, aroma and taste is excellent.²³ Now this can be compared with the giving of precious gifts by the observers of the *Vrata* rituals and ceremonies in the Hindu/ *Brāhmaṇical* system of religion. In this system, the gods have been asked to be worshipped with 16 *Upacāras* or auspicious items like flowers, incense, perfume, lamp, *ghī* (clarified butter), libations of fire, and the presiding priests or preceptor priests (*Gurus*) have been asked to be given gems, cloths, bedsteads, lands, kingdoms and many other things which they need in their daily lives.²⁴ A detailed study of the whole book '*Vratas and Utsavas in North and Central India*' by Radha Madhav Bharadwaj will make our readers competent enough to compare the giving of gifts in Aīśa's *Bodhi-patha-pradīpa* and the entire literature on *Vratas* and the gifts and grants made to the preceptors and *Vrata*-ritual presiding priests on the religiously meritorious *Vrata* occasions in North and Central India from which *Ācārya* Aīśa Dīpaṅkara hailed. Hence the impact of gift culture and gift worship on Aīśa and the *Bodhisattva Vrata* can be understood. But one would still like to know one thing that in the *Bodhisattva Vrata* under study, where the character of the preceptor (*Guru*) is so much eulogized and painted as an icon of renunciation, of what use will be such precious gifts, like the gems, land and kingdoms, to him? To ask a trainee monk to observe gift-worship by donating such precious things will, in a way, establish a relationship of give and take between a disciple and the preceptor, receiving of the highest form of enlightenment and paying fees to his preceptor for giving knowledge and *dīkṣā* (initiation). This kind of payment is common in *Brāhmaṇical* terminology and is called *dakṣiṇa* (religious fee for providing services in religious ceremonies) which is usually accompanied with the performance of Vow rituals with the help of presiding priests). Even if many precious gifts are to be given only through mind but still even the mental giving of such precious gifts like the gold and gems and palaces and many other things do point towards a craving for such things. Don't we think that there seems to exist a discrepancy between the idea of renunciation for worldly pursuits and a craving for luxuries in life?

One important impact of Hindu/*Brāhmaṇical* texts that is discerned in Aīśa's treatment of the *Bodhisattva Vow* is the word 'Vow' or *Vara-vidhi* (in Sanskrit).²⁵ Although its Sanskrit version is not available but Sherburne's repeated use of the word Vow indicates towards its being borrowed from the Hindu/ *Brāhmaṇical* texts where the institution of *Vrata* is a major topic of merit-making through ethical pattern of conduct. In the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*, a vow is mainly used in the sense of a religious undertaking with certain restrictions about food and behavior.²⁶ The 9th century *Agni Purāṇa* says about its nature that a Vow or *Vrata* is a 'restrictive rule' declared by the *Śāstras* (scriptures), restraint of senses and other rules are but special incidents

of *Vrata*; *Vrata* is called *Tapas* because it causes hardship to the performer and it is also called *Niyama* (rule) since therein one has to restrain several sense organs.²⁷ I would also like to quote one of the greatest Indian Indologists Dr. Sir P.V. Kane about the nature of a vow (*Vrata*) so that the readers of the *Bodhisattva Vow* can be able to see the possible linkages between the nomenclature '*Bodhisattva Vow*' that Ācārya Atīśa devised for the training of the monks in Tibet and what obtained in the Hindu/*Brāhmaṇical* literature about the nature and function of a vow. Kane says that a *Vrata* (vow) covers several items such as *Snāna* (bath), *Prātaḥ sandhyā* (morning prayer), *Saṅkalpa* (resolve), *Homa* (offering into the fire or fire-worship), *Pūjā* (worship of the deity in whose honour the vow has been undertaken), *Upavāsa* (fasting) feeding the *Brāhmaṇas*, the presiding priests and the poor, gifts (of cows, money, garments, etc), and the observance of certain rules of conduct during the period of the vow-ritual.²⁸ About the noble birth that is assured by observing the *Bodhisattva Vrata* by Atīśa,²⁹ we have instances of such assurances even in the *Vrata* literature in India as the *Kṛtyakalpataru*, a text of about 1125 A.D, although of a later date than Atīśa but a carrier of the earlier religious tradition, talks of a *Vrata* called *Tilapradānasapatamī* in which the performer has been assured of a respectable and noble birth.³⁰ Here a parallel has been drawn with the *Vrata* literature from India just to show the possible linkages between the two. Another linkage that could be brought to our notice is Atīśa's exhortation that "the valid reception of the *Bodhisattva Vow* should not be talked about in the presence of the non-believers."³¹ The *Viṣṇu Purāna*, talks of a bathing *Vrata* – *Kārtik Pūrṇimā Snāna Vrata* in which the performer has been warned not to talk with a heretic/atheist in course of this *Vrata*.³² The Devala *Smṛti*, a work of about the eighth century A.D. and a very popular religio-social digest, talks of the *Cāndrāyaṇa Vrata* in the course of which its performer has been warned not to talk to an atheist.³³ One peculiar imagery that Atīśa has drawn from the region and Hindu Scriptures is that of the sand of the river Ganges on the banks of which his Vikramasila university stood and where he must have seen the ordinary Hindu people taking dips and smearing the clay of the pious river over their bodies on religiously meritorious *Vrata* and *Utsava* days (Vows and Festive occasions) for purificatory rites and religious merit. He is using it in the context of the perfect enlightenment thought and says that-

'Or take a man who owns jewels, and with them
Fills every one of the Buddha-fields-
Reckoned as more than the grains of Ganga's sands-
Then offers all this to the Lord of the World"³⁴

So, through the practice of the above-mentioned training, the *Bodhisattva Vow* was supposed to be complete and the achievement of the Buddhahood could become possible. This text became like a guide book for the monks belonging to the "Yellow Hats" sects and others in Tibet from early and about mid-11th century A.D. onwards and greatly helped check the confusion and rot that had set in Tibetan Buddhism after 836 A.D. and continued well over two centuries till the time Ācārya Atīśa was invited by a monk-king of Tibet to help restore the true form of Buddhism. The *Bodhisattva Vow* was his novel idea which helped in the mission for which he was invited to Tibet. He very brilliantly amalgamated the three systems of Buddhism-*Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* into one in the form of a text book for the monks. But on the basis of certain observations that we have seen above, we may be impelled to also accept the fact that he also took the help of certain ideas and practices and metaphors prevalent in the *Vrata* system (vow rituals) of Hindu/ *Brāhmaṇical* religion that obtained during his time in his region in India.

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