

## **First Teachers and Translators in Tibet**

**Santaraksita**, the 'great sage from Sahor ', was one of the three great Indian masters who anchored Buddhism in Tibet, the other two being his disciple Kamalasila and Atisa Dipankara. He was distinguished not only through the depth but also the breadth of his learning. He is revered by both great mahayana traditions ( Yogacharya and Madhyamaka) as being a mainstay of their lineage and seems also to have been Abbot of both great monastic universities of the time — Nalanda and Vikramasila. He was respected throughout India and Nepal for his learning. He is mainly remembered for introducing the fundamental principles of Buddhism into Tibet, supervising the building of Samye monastery and, along with Master Vairocana, supervising the translation of the main part of the Buddhist canon into Tibet. He also ordained the first Tibetan Buddhist monks.

### **108 scholars at Samye**

**Vimalamitra** was a renowned tantric master from the ancient north-western land of Uddiyana (between the Indus and Swat valleys to the north of Islamabad in present-day Pakistan). King Trisong Detsen and Abbot Santaraksita invited him to Tibet to give teachings and supervise the correct transmission (both scriptural and practical) of the tantric aspect of the doctrine. Indian Buddhism felt his loss, to such a point that some followers invented a ruse, posting a sign at the Tibetan frontier saying that he had come to sabotage the kingdom. Non-Buddhist ministers, seizing on this, translated certain omens at his arrival as bad auguries and succeeded in turning the king against him. It took some time, and several miracles, it is said, for the king's confidence to be restored. Once it was, his devotion and respect for this outstanding Buddhist master became unconditional.

**Vairotsana** was a Tibetan, despite his name, which is a Tibetanised form of the Sanskrit Vairocana. King Trisong Detsen sent him to study with the finest masters in India, China and Khotan. His twenty-five years of travel turned him into a great scholar, a tantric master and a superb linguist. Returning to Tibet, he taught the king and a small, select group of disciples. The validity of his teachings was heavily disputed by jealous rivals, who also spread rumours of immorality between

him and the queen. He was exiled to Eastern Tibet (Kham) where he built a considerable reputation for himself. He was eventually rehabilitated through Vimalamitra, who not only confirmed the authenticity of his teachings but revealed them to be extremely rare and precious. His talents made him the natural head of the hundred and eight master translators gathered at Samye. He supervised their all-important work with the wisest of counsel.

**Kamalasila** in many ways determined the long-term nature of Buddhism in Tibet. After Santaraksita's death, a large formal debate was held at Samye to clarify the doctrine and to find the one best suited for Tibet. This had to be done because two main tendencies were developing in Tibet, through the respective influence of Indian and Chinese masters. The problem was the conflicting doctrinal as well as practical differences between them. The Chinese tended to a nihilistic understanding of voidness, denying all reality. The Indian's theory was one of voidness of any ultimate reality simply through the inter-relatedness of all relative things. Kamalasila, a disciple of Santaraksita and a leading exponent of madhyamaka, led the debate for Indian Buddhism against Hwa-shang, who defended the Chinese Ch'an school. The latter were defeated and so embittered that one of their followers murdered Kamalasila. The Hwa-shang faction was asked to leave Tibet. King Trisong Detsen was so greatly upset by Kamalasila's death, it is said, that he died soon afterwards.

### **The Second Wave of Buddhism**

**Smrtijnanakirti** is notable for being the first great Indian pandita to restore Buddhism in Tibet, following its destruction there by King Langdarma. Towards the end of the tenth century, he left Nepal for Eastern Tibet, where he established the teachings of abhidharma and tantra with vigour. This marked the beginning of the 'renewed Buddhism' (*sarma*) which was to definitively conquer Tibet over the eleventh century.

**Rinchen Zangpo** was the first outstanding Tibetan of the *sarma* revival. Sent to Kashmir by the monarch of the small Gu-ge kingdom in Western Tibet, he passed many years at the feet of outstanding masters before returning to his homeland. His work — and that of many other *sarma*

masters — was not simply a revival and restoration. Many cycles of tantra previously unknown in Tibet were translated, taught and propagated by them. In his later life, Rinchen Zangpo collaborated on several major translations with the great Indian teacher Dipankara.

**Atisa Dipankara** (982-1054), was a monument of learning and goodness; one of the brightest lights of Indian Buddhism. Born a prince of Sahor, he entered monastic training in Nalanda at the age of eleven and studied with mah-siddha Maitripa until the age of twenty. At Vikramañila he trained extensively under the Supreme Abbot, mah-siddha Naropa, for some ten years and then went to study under the great expert in monastic conduct, Silaraksita, at Bodh Gaya. By the age of thirty-one, he was master of sutra and tantra. He next sat at the feet of the renowned scholar, Dharmapala, in Sumatra, where he studied dialectics and also received his own disciples. Having spent some twelve years in Sumatra, he returned to India and became leader of the 51 great scholars and 108 viharas constituting the Vikramañila university.

The prince of Guge in western Tibet, a monk called Jnanaprabha, had tried sending 21 of his brightest subjects to Kashmir, for long-term study there and eventually to bring back dharma teachings. All but two died, unable to take the climatic change, and he decided that it might be wiser to invite Indian pandits to Tibet. He went to Gartog province, to gather gold to offer to the Indian monasteries but was captured by the local ruler and held to ransom. The money for this was successfully raised but Jnanaprabha sent a message, saying that, as he was old, the money would be better spent as offerings to bring Indian masters, and in particular Atiñā, to his land. This was done, Atiñā giving all the gold he received to good causes before his departure. Around 1042 CE, over seventy years of age, he entered Tibet.

He spread the dharma there for thirteen years. The most famous text he composed was "A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment" (*bodhipathapradīpa*). Too old to master Tibetan thoroughly, he taught through the gifted translator Ratnabhadra, an eminent master in his own right. His faithful disciple was Dromtönpa.

**Dromtönpa**, from central Tibet, had studied first with Smrtijanakirti before imbibing the spiritual treasures held by Atisa Dipankara. He used the latter's teachings to establish the Pure Canon

(*Khadampa*) school, which was to greatly influence the Kagyu tradition and some centuries later itself became the Gelugpa tradition.

The title 'translator' may lead some people to underestimate the importance of **Marpa**, the Tibetan founder of the Kagyu tradition. He was one of the most important Tibetans of the *sarma* period to visit India to bring teachings to Tibet. Doing this under his own initiative, he applied himself to the task with tremendous energy and single mindedness, making the perilous trip across the Himalaya no less than three times. His main guru was the great Indian pandita Naropa, heir to spiritual wealth of Tilopa. Tilopa and Naropa, two of the most important figures in vajrayana Buddhism, had both been remarkable scholars and supreme Abbots of important monastic universities before leading the life of a solitary yogin.

Marpa spent sixteen years and seven months studying under Naropa and several more years with illustrious masters such as Kukuripa. He fully assimilated their teachings and was made Naropa's regent for Tibet. He took to Tibet the tantras of Guhyasamaja, Hévajra, Chakrasamvara and Mahamaya. Although he translated these teachings, his importance is not just linguistic but as a great guru and patriarch of one of Tibet's most important Buddhist lineages.

**Dro-mi** the Translator was another important Tibetan of this prolific eleventh century. Having travelled widely in India in search of teachings, he returned to Tibet where he propagated the Hevajra and Chakrasamvara tantras he had translated. He is most remembered for his influence upon Khon Konchog Gyaltsen, who founded the first monastery of the Sakya sect

When **Dampa Sangye** was born into a family of merchants in south India, a soothsayer had declared him to be a 'seven-times born siddha'. Such beings are beautiful to behold, with powerful eyes, and have special powers of speech. He studied under numerous teachers. His hagiographies mention many famous names from the eighty-four mah-siddhas, such as Anangavajra, Saraha, Kanha and Tilopa. Given the estimated dates of these masters, we must deduce that either he was extremely long-lived or that some of his gurus were direct lineage-holders of the illustrious earlier masters rather than the masters themselves. He meditated in many sacred places throughout the sub-

continent and made no less than five visits to Tibet and spent some twelve years in China.