JO ATISA IN SERLING AND THOLING

--S. R. CHATTERJI

In the latest edition (1954) of his Histoire Anciennne d'États Hindous d'Extreme Orient Professor G. Coedes writes that King Chudumanivarmanavadeva was reigning in Srivijaya early in the 11th century A.D. It was in his reign that the Acharya Dharmakirti composed a commentary on the text Abhisamayalankara. In the sub-title of the Tibetan translation of this work, entitled Dungthodhaloka which is attributed to Atisa, it is stated that it was composed in the reign of Chudumanivarmanavadeva of Srivijayapura at Malayaqila (Malaya?)—now known as Jambi north of Palembang, the former capital Srivijaya—in Suvarnadvipa (Sumatra). Professor Coedes quotes M. J. Nandou on this point.

Dharmakirti continued to reside in Suvarnadvipa in the reign of the succeeding monarch Maravijayatungavarmavadeva, for, according to the Tibetan Bu-ston, it was in the period 1011-1022 A.D. that Atisa was studying under Dharmakirti, the head of the Buddhist congregation in the life of Suvarnadvipa in the reign of King Dharmavalka. This name Dharmavalka does not appear among the royal names in Srivijaya annals. Probably it was the title ‘Protector of the Law’ or Maravijaya. This Dharmavalka, King of Suvarnadvipa, was also (according to M. J. Nandou quoted by Coedes) a teacher of Atisa and of Kamalarakita and was the author of several works relating to Bodhicaryavatara. As further evidence of Atisa’s stay in Suvarnadvipa we find an early 11th century manuscript with miniatures in which the first miniature has the explanatory note—Dipasara (Atisa) in Yasavadvipa, Yasavadvipa often means Sumatra as well as Java.

The text of the Tibetan Bu-ston, translated by Sarst Chandra Das, gives in greater detail the career of Atisa (Dipasara Srijana). Dipan-kara (the future Atisa) born in the royal family of Gauda, was ordained in the highest order of Bhiksu at the age of 31. At last he resolved to go to Acharya Dharmakirti, the High Priest of Suvarnadvipa. There is a country filled with precious minerals called Suvarnadvika (Sumatra). Though Acharya Dharmakirti (who belonged to the royal family of that country and had been instructed in the Dharma at Vajrasana—i.e. Bodhgaya) resided in Suvarnadvipa, his name became known everywhere abroad. In the company of some merchants Dipan-kara embarked for Suvarnadvipa. The voyage was long extending over several months. At this time Suvarnadvipa was the head-quarters of Buddhism in the
East and Its High Priest was considered to be the greatest scholar of his age. Dipankara resided in Suvarnadvipa for 12 years in order to master the pure teachings of the Buddha of which the key was possessed by Dhammakiri alone. He returned to India accompanied by some merchants in a vessel visiting Tamrapadripa (Ceylon) on the way. After his return from Suvarnadvipa he resided at Vajrasana (Buddhagaya) and acquired the fame of being the foremost Buddhist scholar of India. Hearing of this fame King Mahipala invited him to Vikramasila. During his stay here Atisa (Dipankara was now known by this name) received three earnest invitations from King Ye-ses-od of Gu-ge (in W. Tibet). At the third appeal, Atisa left Vikramasila, in spite of the protests of the Pala King, in the company of the Tibetan monk Nag-tsho. It is the account given by this monk which is the primary source of information about Atisa’s visit to Tibet.

Atisa passed through Nepal and reached the shore of Manasa Sarovara where he performed tarpana; then he was escorted by Tibetan generals to Tholing, the monastery of the king of Western Tibet, where his majesty King Ye-ses-od was waiting for him. At Tholing (the Taktling of Sven Hedin) Atisa preached the Mahayana doctrine to the people of Nah-ri (W. Tibet), “in short he revived the practice of the pure Mahayana doctrine by showing the right way to the Lamas of Tibet who had become Tantrik”. After a residence of 13 years in different parts of Tibet, Atisa died near Lhasa in 1053 A. D. He was the guru of Brochton, the founder of the first grand hierarchy of Tibet.

It may not be inappropriate in this context to relate how we found ourselves before the gates of the Tholing shrine on the evening of 14 August 1922. The intrepid mountaineer Professor Shy Ram Kashyap of the Indian Educational Service had led a party of four lecturers (including myself) of the Khalsa College, Amritsar, across the Lipu La, pass to Manasa Sarovara and Kailasa. After finishing our circumambulation of Kailasa, in stead of going back the way we came, we travelled in a westerly direction starting from the source of the Sutlej near Rakshas Tal (the sister lake of Manas Sarovara). Passing through Guniana, a well known mart of W. Tibet, Daba, and Mangnang with its artistic wall paintings, we reached Tholing after a fornight’s journey from the foot of Kailasa. The approach to this great monastery, situated in the deep gorge of the Sutlej, was through an intricate labyrinth of deep canyons. Both Sven Hedin and Tucci have described it as a night-mare landscape.

On 15 August (1922) we obtained permission to enter what Tucci
(the Italian Tibetologist) calls the White Temple at Tholing. Here is the entry in our diary (mine and my colleague S. Kashmiri Singh's) on that date: 'In the porch there were four huge figures—two on each side. Our companion, a Naga sanyasi, called them the four 'Vugus' (Satta, Tara, Veera and Kali). Inside the room there were two gigantic doormen or doorknobs. In the centre was something like an altar partitioned from the main room which contains a colossal image of the Buddha seated on a great lotus. The face led the sweet smile and repose of divine wisdom and the eyes seemed to be smiling with love. It certainly was the work of a great artist. On both sides of the Buddha were rows of life-size standing figures representing worshippers paying homage to the Lord Buddha. The lofty roof was supported by tall pillars of square trunks which must have been brought from a great distance as no large tree can grow in the cold desert of West Tibet. We then entered another room which had a 'murti' of a four-headed deity (Brahma? or our Naga sanyasi said) surrounded by figures of other gods. They were of clay but they showed artistic finish. This room had four other rooms on its four sides full of images. There was one perhaps of Narasimha with a vina in his hand. On the walls were paintings which reminded us of the Ajanta murals. Outside the main building there was a 'parikrama' (for going round the shrine) on the other side of which were cells full of brass and clay images. In some cells we found old manuscripts scattered about, carelessly. In one cell we saw a great standing figure with a sunflower in his hand (Surya?)'.

The final comment in this entry is: 'Really the main temple of Tholing would well repay the careful study of a learned Orientalist'. This wish of ours has been fulfilled by the great Italian savant Tucci who has visited this shrine since then and has written a valuable book on Tholing.

At that time (1932) we had no idea of the great importance of Tholing in Tibetan history. We heard at that time only the tradition among Hindu sanyasis that this main temple of Tholing was the Adi Badrinath: when Sankarcharya visited this shrine he thought that it was not difficult for Hindu pilgrim to reach this place across the Hima. In 1938, a Tashi established the present temple of Badrinath on the Indian side of the Himalayas.

(After a stay of five days there we left Tholing on 20th August. On 25th August we reached the Mana Pías and after passing through
Himalayan scenery in its sublimest aspect we returned to India (north of Badrinath) on the same evening.

I shall just add that it was in 1925, while working on the early history of Southeast Asia and the spiritual conquests of Buddhist and Brahman sages that I found in Indian Pundits in the Land of Snow by Sarat Chandra Das the true significance of Tholing.