BUDDHA DĪPAṆKARA
TWENTYFOURTH PREDECESSOR
OF GAUTAMA

—B. GHOSH

Buddhism in all its forms goes back to the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha. While the austerity practised by Buddha till he attained enlightenment appeal to the Pali or Southern school called Hinayana, his life of service and compassion for 45 years after the attainment of Enlightenment is the authority to Sanskrit or Northern school called Mahayana (S. Radhakrsnan, preface, Pali Tripiṭaka, Ed. Kashyap).

The Buddhavarga in Khuddakakāya or "the collection of smaller pieces", gives an account of the Previous Buddhas with whom Bodhisattva Gautama had name in contact and who had made prediction that Bodhisattva Gautama would attain perfect Enlightenment. It is interesting to note that the Jain mythology also gives a similar account of the previous Tīrthankaras, it is all the more interesting that even the number of the previous Buddhas and that of Tīrthankaras are not very different (Kashyap, Khud, Nik, vol. VII). Dīpankara Buddha is remembered specially and held in high esteem for the reason that according to legend it was while Dīpankara was the Buddha that Gautama Buddha was an ascetic named Suneha and had made his vow to become Buddha.

Buddhavarga (edited by Morris in P.T.S 1882), contains poetical legend of the 24 Buddhas who are supposed to have preceded Gautama Buddha in the last twelve ages of the world (Kalpa). After the introductory, one chapter is dedicated to each of the 24 Buddhas. It is related in case of each single Buddha, how he seats the Wheel of Law in motion and how -- with but trivial differences -- the principal events in the life of Gautama Buddha were enacted in the life of each of the former Buddhas. It is Gautama Buddha himself who narrates the life story and speaking in first person, he recounts who he himself was in each of the preceding lives, how he worshipped the Buddha, and how his own Buddhahood had been foretold by the Buddha of that time. "The only part which is a little more imaginative and poetical is the second chapter" (Winternitz: A History of Indian literature, vol. II, Buddhist literature p 161), which deals with Dīpankara, the first Buddha. Maurice Winternitz noted here that usually the Buddha was Sakka (skt. Sakra), the king of the Gods, another time a lion, the king of beasts, twice a king of the Nagas, once a yakṣa and several times an ascetic.

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We quote an account of Dipankara Buddha as briefly narrated by Winternitz.

"Gautama Buddha was at that time a rich Brahmā named Sumerda, and he relates in verse (7-27) which are reminiscent of Theragathas, how one day he felt disgusted with the world, how he cast off the wretched body, as though it were dirt, and withdrew to a hermitage in the Himalayas. This was precisely his campaign of conquest throughout the world, and men and gods worshipped him. Sumerda, the hermit, comes too, and at a marshy spot loosens his plaited hair, spreads it out on the dirty ground, with his hempen garment and his cloak of skins, and lies face downwards. (This scene has often been depicted on Buddhist monuments, probably it already appeared on the stupa of Bharhatu) inspired with the wish that the exalted Buddha Dipankara, with his host of disciples, may step over him without having their feet soiled by mud. Prone on the ground, he resolves to become a Buddha one day and bring salvation to the world. Dipankara approaches and prophecies the future greatness of Sumerda. The inhabitants of the ten thousand worlds make a joyful noise and signs and miracles happen, as it always the case when future Buddha is foretold. But Sumerda determines to realise in himself all the ten perfections (Pñālīkās), in order to 'fulfil the preliminary conditions of Buddhahood.' " (A History of Indian literature, vol. II: p.160-161).

**DIPANKARA LEGENDS**

Buddhavagya describes the splendours of the first Tathāgata Buddha that is, Dipankara in magnificent terms. The verses (15,27,28 and 31) are reproduced at end of the article. We give in short the details thus: Dipankara was 80 cubit tall, shining like big tree of lamps, he was always attended by 84,000 Arhats, he lived for 100,000 years and the 500 in which his remains were enshrined was 56 yojanas high.

Gautama Buddha, it is said, came down to this world from the Tusita heaven where he was the presiding god. He had reached that heavenly state by acquiring immeasurable merits in his several previous existences. There were two stories, one in the Mahāvastu: Dipankaravastu and the other in the Nidāna-Kathā, about his past life, in which he was assured by Dipankara Buddha that he would ultimately attain Bodhi, the Supreme knowledge. The two stories are as follows:

1. Mahāvastu: Gautama Buddha was once born as a Brāhmā's son known as Megha Mānava. He completed his Brāhmāngic education and came down to the plains of the Himavanta to procure the fee to be given to his Guru on the termination of his studies. He collected 500 coins (Puṇyas). He then went to see the capital Dipavali and found the city in a festive mood. On inquiring he learnt from a beautiful young maiden with seven lotuses in her hand that the city had been decorated to welcome Buddha Dipankara. He thereupon
offered to purchase her five lotuses by paying 300 purīsas. He was told that he could have them if only he would promise to take her as his wife. After

remonstrating a little, he agreed to her proposal on her assurance that she would not stand in the way of his spiritual career. On seeing the glorious
appearance of Buddha Dipākara, he became deeply reverential and attained
the notion of non-duality (advayāntikā). He became a devotee of buddha
by seeing the miraculous powers and expressed his devotion and admiration
by wiping the lotus-like feet of Buddha by his long hair, and while doing so
he developed the aspiration to attain Bodhi.

II

Nīlantakāśa: Gautama Buddha was once born as Sumedha Brāhmāna at
Amaravati in a very rich Brāhmāna family of pure lineage. He lost his parents
at an early age. He learnt the Brāhmānic sciences and was sick of the wealth
left by his parents. He gave them away in charity and became an ascetic
seeking immortality (amātama-mūla) a state free from origin and decay,
pleasure and pain, disease or suffering. He realised that as everything in this
world had two aspects, positive and negative so as an antithesis to origin
(birth) there must be something unoriginated, and he was to realise it. He
went to the Himalayas and took up an abode at Dhammakā mountain living
only on fruits falling from trees. He sooned attained perfection in meditation
and six higher powers (abhiññā): The six abhiññās are: lobha (malignant
power), diṭṭhi (heavenly ear), parokṣa (father’s thought-
reading), diṭṭhi (heavenly eyes) and gavīkī (knowledge of extinction of one’s
own impieties) occasionally he paid visits to the villages for salt and verjooice
and one day came down to Rennakā, a city in a pakkantadavinaya (border
country).

At that time Buddha Dipākara reached the city and stopped at Sudassa-
namahāvīra. Sumedha tapasa found all the people busy in making the place
neat and tidy for welcoming Dipākara Buddha, and so he also came forward
to take a share in the work. He was charmed by the glory of Buddha’s
appearance and wanted to lay down his life for him. Lest Dipākara Buddha
should spoil his feet in a miry place he lay flat on it like a bridge made of
jewels (tajgahalakasetu) in order that he and his disciples, who were all
arhats (perfects) might tread on his body. While so lying, he wished that he
would not merely attain his own salvation by putting an end to the impurities
which he could have easily done, but he would also become a Buddha in order
that he might rescue endless beings from the stream of existence. At that
time, Dipākara standing just before his head, made the forecast that the
great Jñāna ascetic would become a Buddha after numberless aeons, and
related in detail where he would be born, how he would attain the supreme
knowledge (budhi), and how would become his chief disciple. The prediction
was confirmed by many miraculous events including an earthquake, and there
was no doubt left that Sumedha was a "Buddha-Dipākara".

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Since his existence as Megha Mānava or Sumedha Brāhmaṇa, the Bodhisattva (i.e. one destined to become the Buddha) was born several times to acquire the ten supreme perfections (pāramitās) preparatory to Buddhahood, which he attained in his last mortal existence as prince Siddhattha, his penultimate existence, he was born as the god of the gods the Tusita heaven. (N. Dutts: Early Monastic Buddhism, pp. 77-79).

We find in Nāgārjuna Katha, Lalitavistara and Mahāvastu Abhinikramana Sutta (extant in Chinese only) Buddha legends giving the story of Buddha down to the events after enlightenment, but no records of the previous lives from the oldest time cycles when at the feet of Dīpankara, the Bodhisattva first made the resolution to attain Buddhahood.

Six previous Buddhas are mentioned in the Suttas. Longer lists vary, though all agree on Dīpankara as the leading previous Buddha.

Sir Charles Elliot observing on actual historicity of some human Buddhas says "In the older books of the Pitakas six Buddha are mentioned on proceeding Gautama (Dīk. Nik. 14/Mahāpadānasuttas there, 499: Sem. Nik. XII 4-10) namely vipassī, sīki, vinātchā, kakusanda, kṣemūṣa and kassapa. The last three at least may have some historical character. The Chinese pilgrim Fa-hien, who visited India from 405-411 A.D., saw their reputed birth places and says that there still existed followers of Devadatta (apparently in KShemūṣa) who recognised these three Buddhas but not Gotama. Asoka erected a monument in honour of Kṣemūṣa in Nepal with a dedicatory inscription which has been preserved. In the Majjhima Nikāya (Majjh. Nik. 50 Māgala-sūtra), we find a story about Kakusanda and his disciples and Gotama once gave (Dīk. Nik. 16) an extended account of Vipassī whose teaching and career are represented as almost identical with his own ..........." (Hindulism and Buddhism, vol. I, p. 342.)

The Carlyle tale in the sense of metrical narration put in the mouth of the Buddha himself giving accounts of his previous lives, taken from the Jātakas, showing how he had fulfilled the ten pāramitās for the attainment of Buddhahood.

Extension of the legend went on in other schools also in different ways. The Lalitavistara has a list of fifty four Buddhas and Mahāvastu more than hundred, but both include Dīpankara. We conclude our account with the comments of E.J. Thomas on the topic.

"In the doctrine of nature of Buddha we can see the development of new conceptions, the most important of these, are the belief in previous Buddhas, the theory of a great man (Mahāpuruse), who to become either a universal ruler as a Buddha, the thirty two bodily marks of such a being and theory of Bodhisattva."
"It has been held that the belief in previous Buddha points to the actual existence of at least some of them, we know that Aksaika enlarged Stūpa of Koṭāpāna, the fifth of six preceding Buddhas, and the Chinese pilgrims visited the stūpa of the last three of them. This only proves that the legend concerning them, then exists, but it does not prove these Buddhas to be historical, and more than the foot print of Buddha on Adam's Peak prove that he visited Ceylon" (The Life of Buddha, p. 218).


In Sanskrit sources, list of previous Buddhas differs very widely in enumeration and nomenclature. The predecessors count anything from 6 (six) to more than 100 (hundreds). In all these lists, Dipaṅkara features as the first, even though not as the first in Buddhavamsa. The importance of Dipaṅkara lies in the fact that he (Dipaṅkara) had blessed the future Buddha (Gautama Śākyamuni) and prophesied Gautama's realization of full enlightenment in a future life. The story of the meeting presented here is gathered from the accounts of Sūkhāvatīvyūha, Bhavavatsavāda-KapalaS and Keśava-avadiśram.

In Sūkhāvatīvyūha, when Lord was at Oṣdañcī near the town Rājagṛhī, Ananda asked the Lord for an account of the great Tathāgata, who, in former ages, acquired the most perfect Body. The Lord in reply said, one of the earliest was Dipaṅkara (R.L. Mitra, The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal, p. 231).

We give below brief legendary account of Dipaṅkara Dharmaruc/ Timūrga Avadāna from Bodhisattvavāda-KapalaS of Kammerer (11th century A.D.). We find the Dipaṅkara legend in a somewhat different form. We extract the relevant portion of the story. In another Kalpa two Brahma brother, Mati and Sumati appeared as the ascetics of Viśvavri, king of Bénaras. They obtained whatever they sought from the king. The king's daughter, named
Sundari became enamoured of Sumati but her suit was rejected by the stern Brahman. Thus deeply mortified, she resigned the world, and became Brāhmin. Sumati dreamt a strange dream, for the explanation of which she, inspired by the advice of the Pandita, went to Lord Dipankara, who lived at Dipavali. There he met Sundari and asked flowers from her. When offering him the flowers Sundari prayed that he be her husband in the next existence. Sumati fell prostrate before the lord with his clothed hair scattered all over the ground, Lord Dipankara took them down, explaining you shall become a great Buddha, Śakyamuni by name, Māri, who was standing by, felt his Brāhmānic pride scandalised by the unbrahminic conduct of his brother but Sumati induced him to reverence the Lord. I am that Sumati, Yaśodharā is Sundari and Māri is Dhammarāja. (R.L. Mitra, The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal, p. 71).

In kapāhā-avatāra, the following story said to have been told by (one of the former human Buddh) Vāsūyū, long before the Lord’s advent. Here we find episode of Monkey named Gāmukha and Gāpakhara. Gāpakhara promised him transformation into man and gave him instruction in the philosophy of Buddha, the monkey was born a merchant’s son named Dharmaśī Gāpakhara granted him born, saying “for good conduct, you are to become Santana” the king of Gāpakhara (bad, p. 98).

दीप दरकुंदांसैः

चतारि सन्तकपलिकः, चन्द्रिणाय महिदिका।

दीपोऽजु लोचनिं प्रसंगोऽनि सत्यदा । ११५

सत्यतिमकुंदांसैः, दीपकुंदां वाराजिः।

सोभाति दीपकुंदांसै व, सावतिनां व फूलिनांसै । ११६

सरस्वातवस्मानि, मधु वस्म महिदिका।

स्वदा निमुक्तानि शीतारथजति वुष्क । २१२

सोपकुंदां जिनोऽसा सत्यदारमसिंह निमुक्तानि।

तत्रयस्वस्क निमुक्तानि छतसुदेश्य योक्तो न । १२१