ATISHA THE TANTRIC INITIATE

Some scholars say that Atisa did not receive Tantric teachings and hence did not give Tantric initiations since it is forbidden for a monk to do so. They would substantiate this by quoting three slokas from Bodhipathapradipa. Evidently they have misinterpreted the slokas as there is much deeper mystic meaning in them.

The later revival of Buddhism began following the death of King Lang Darma in Eastern and Western Tibet in the 11th Century and after the Lotsawa Minchen Zangpo (985-1065 A.D). During this period, Pandita Acharya Marpo also named Shes-rab gsang-dpa (11th Century A.D) from Odiyana and a disciple of Kashmirian Ratna-vajra, visited Tibet (G.P. Hoerich The Blue Annals pt. II p. 1649-50, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta 1955). He was a competent and well-known scholar both in India and in Tibet. But his disciple Pandita Shambhur mgon-po taught that a beginner in Tantric practices could be given Las-rgya (private Sakti) during the secret initiation. This was of great harm to the moral vow taken by the monks, atisa, therefore, has objected to this in Bodhipathapradipa. It however does not mean that a monk cannot receive Tantric teachings and initiations. It was clearly mentioned by Kun-mkhyen 'Jam-dbyang bsahad-pa'i rdzogs-je 11th Century A.D) in his work Lam-thim rnam-bsahad lung-tig gter-snyod vol. 4 (NGA), p. 424 (New Statesman Press, New Delhi 55).

Most of the Tantric texts mentioned that the best disciple to give Tantric initiation is one who has obtained the three following vows: the individual liberation vows (Prātimokṣa samvara rdo-sor-rnal pa'i-sdom-pa); the Bodhisattva vows: (Bodhisattva samvara/Byangchuhe snea-dpa'i-sdom-pa); and the tantric vows (Mantri samvara/gsang-snags-khyi-sdom-pa).
While looking through many Sanskrit manuscripts during the stay in Samye, Atisa was filled with pride at the thought that he was the most learned in Tantric literature. At that time in his dream a Dakini appeared and showed him many Tantric texts he had never seen before. This humbled Atisa and it has been mentioned in all Atisa’s biographies written by different Tibetan scholars. This shows that Atisa had received various Tantric teachings and initiations.

- J.K. Rechung