

Atiśa's Explanation of the Union of the Two Truths:

Focusing on the Fourth Initiation

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1. Introduction Initiation (*abhiṣeka*), which is an initiatory rite and, at the same time, a spiritual practice, is one of the features characterizing tantric Buddhism. In general, initiation is divided into four kinds: vase initiation (*kalaśābhiṣeka*), secret initiation (*guhyaābhiṣeka*), wisdom initiation (*prajñā[jñānā]bhiṣeka*), and the fourth initiation (*caturthābhiṣeka*). Of these four, the definition and purpose of the fourth initiation remain unclear, and various interpretations have been suggested.¹⁾

Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (982–1054) describes the purpose of the fourth initiation in his *Abhisamayavibhaṅga* (hereafter, AV) as follows: “Further, through the four initiations as a spiritual practice, [the following results are achieved respectively]: by the vase initiation, the conventional truth is achieved. By the wisdom initiation that comes after the secret initiation as preliminary, the ultimate truth is achieved. By the fourth initiation, the realization of the non-dual union (**yuganaddha*, *gnyis med zung 'jug*) is achieved.”²⁾ In the same work, Atiśa also explains the ritual of receiving the four initiations through visualization, as Sakurai (2004) and Gray (2020) have revealed. However, it is not fully clarified how Atiśa interprets the fourth initiation in the AV and his other works. This paper aims to reexamine Atiśa's theory on the fourth initiation, focusing on his AV and the *Ita sgom chen mo* (hereafter, TG).³⁾

2. Definition of the Fourth Initiation As mentioned above, Atiśa states that the fourth initiation leads to the realization of the non-dual union. The term “non-dual union” refers to the union of various elements, such as skillful means (*upāya*, *thabs*) and wisdom (*prajñā*, *shes rab*), calm abiding (*śamatha*, *zhi gnas*) and special insight (*vipaśyanā*, *lhag mthong*), and so forth, and its content varies depending on the context. To understand the precise meaning of the non-dual union that Atiśa intends, it is necessary to carefully read his description of the fourth initiation in the AV. In this work, Atiśa explains the rite of receiving the four initiations from the Buddhist deities invited by visualization. The fourth

initiation is performed in a way where Śrī-Heruka delivers his teachings. Before conferring the fourth initiation, Śrī-Heruka expounds on the ultimate and conventional truths attained through the three previous initiations, according to which the ultimate truth is identified with luminosity (*prabhāsvara*, 'od gsal) experienced through the visualized sexual yoga performed during the wisdom initiation. Further, it is taught that to see luminosity is not to see inherent nature (*svabhāva*, rang bzhin) in anything, and there is neither sense object, nor cause, nor effect in it. From the viewpoint of the conventional truth, it is taught that sense objects such as visualized deities appear like images of a mirror, conditioned by wind and mind.⁴⁾ Then, Śrī-Heruka defines the fourth initiation as follows:

The union that does not divide the two truths is the great awakened mind, the fourth initiation.⁵⁾

Thus, it is clear that Atiśa regards the fourth initiation as the verbal teaching of the non-dual union of the conventional and ultimate truths obtained through the previous three initiations.

It is also noteworthy that Atiśa explains the meaning of the four syllables: *Śrī*, *He*, *Ru*, and *Ka* in relation to the fourth initiation. The explanation of the four syllables appears in several tantric scriptures and treaties. Although there are some variations, the basic content of the explanation is that the syllable *Śrī* means non-dual awareness (*gnyis med ye shes*), *He* means lacking cause (*rgyu*), and so on, *Ru* means being free from accumulation (*tshogs*), and *Ka* means not abiding anywhere.⁶⁾ In his TG, Atiśa gives the following explanation:

“Śrī is the non-dual awareness” means the innate co-emergent awareness, the union of appearances and emptiness. **“He is the lack of cause, and so forth”** means that co-emergence does not arise from itself, does not arise from others, does not arise from both, and does not arise without cause; consequently, inherent nature is originally pure. **“Ru is being free from accumulation”** means that co-emergence is free from the accumulation of birth, aging, abiding, and perishing. **“Ka is not abiding anywhere”** means the union of the generation and completion stages (*utpatti-* and *sampanna-kramas*), the union of appearance and emptiness, and the union of skillful means and wisdom.⁷⁾

In the AV, it is stated as follows:

Further, it is taught that the incarnation of the ultimate truth is Vajravārāhī, and the incarnation of the conventional truth is the Lord (=Śrī-Heruka), and so on. To explain their non-duality, it is

stated, “*Śrī* is the non-dual awareness,” and the non-dual awareness means a union. (...). “[*Ka* is not abiding anywhere” means not abiding in two extremes, which is the union called the great seal (*phyag rgya chen po zung ’jug*).⁸⁾

In Atiśa’s view, the four syllables present the non-duality of the two truths, which is to be taught in the fourth initiation. Further, from the fact that Atiśa enumerates the union of appearances and emptiness, the generation stage and the completion stage, and skillful means and wisdom, it can be inferred that Atiśa considers that appearances, the generation stage, and skillful means represent the conventional truth, while emptiness, the completion stage, and wisdom represent the ultimate truth.

3. Purpose of the Fourth Initiation What is the reason for presenting the non-dual union of the two truths to those who have already realized the ultimate truth? In the AV, Atiśa states as follows, citing the *Vajradāka-nāma-mahātantrarāja*:

The reason for not presenting only luminosity (=the ultimate truth) is taught in the *Vajradāka*, “If, otherwise, *yoga* is incomplete [i.e., the yogin does not realize the union of the two truths but only the ultimate truth], [the yogin] extinguishes like butter-lamp.” The fault here is that one does not illuminate the benefit of self and others like an extinguished lamp. Therefore, in order that one completes perfecting the benefit of others after residing in the manner of the two truths, it is taught [in the *Vajradāka*], “Insofar as the supreme sage stays in the state of *samsāra*, he brings incomparable benefit to sentient beings without passing into *nirvāṇa*.”⁹⁾

As stated here, if one attains and stays in the state of the ultimate truth where there is no birth, death, cause, effect, and sense objects, then there is no need to strive for the benefit of sentient beings. Even those who have attained the ultimate truth must continue to strive for the benefit of sentient beings. Therefore, Atiśa emphasizes the non-dual union of the two truths through the fourth initiation as a field of altruistic behaviors.

As altruistic behaviors, Atiśa presents a set of behaviors that he calls the conduct of progressing on the path (*lam yongs su bgrod pa spyod pa*), which is divided into the outer conduct (*phyir spyod*) and the inner conduct (*nang gi spyod*). The former is briefly described as the practice of ten *pāramitās*, maturing the sentient beings, and purifying the Buddha land. The inner conduct is further divided into four: the conduct of secret (*gsang spyod*), the conduct of requisite (*tshogs spyod*), the conduct of awareness observance (*rig [pa brtul zhugs kyi] spyod*), and the conduct that is victorious in all respects (*phyogs las nram par rgyal ba’i spyod*).¹⁰⁾ The conduct of secret focuses on the benefit of oneself rather

than other sentient beings and aims to remove conceptual thoughts, relying on which the experience of the supreme bliss is induced. The conduct of requisite and the conduct of awareness observance are similar and refer to the deeds of benefiting others, such as maturing sentient beings, gathering two requisites, purifying the Buddha land, and guiding disciples. At last, the conduct that is victorious in all respects concerns the practitioner's way of living, such as conquering the desire for good, the sleep of ignorance, the attachment to clothes, and the partiality caused by the subject-object concept.¹¹⁾ These conducts are, according to Atiśa, required for the benefit of others.

4. Conclusion Although the ultimate truth is the highest goal that Buddhists strive for, as long as one stays in it, one loses the need to perform altruistic behaviors. To prevent this, Atiśa presents the state of the non-dual union of the two truths, which he also calls 'the great awakened mind' or 'the union called the great seal,' through the fourth initiation. He teaches that those who have attained the ultimate truth should continue to strive for the benefit of themselves and others. This teaching of the fourth initiation with an emphasis on the practice of altruistic conduct is one of the characteristics of Atiśa's Buddhist theory. It is also remarkable that Atiśa relates the state of the non-dual union of the two truths to the meaning of the four syllables: *Śrī*, *He*, *Ru*, and *Ka*, although it needs further examination whether other scholars in India and Tibet widely accepted this interpretation.

Notes

- 1) See, e.g., Sakurai (1996, 207–252). 2) AV, D186a5–6; P186a6–7: *de yang sgrub byed dbang bzhi'i sgo nas te / bum pa'i dbang gis kun rdzob kyi bden pa dang / gsang ba sngon du song ba'i shes rab ye shes kyes don dam pa dang / bzhi pas gnyis med zung 'jug tu rtogs pa bsgrub pa'o ll*. (cf. tr. Gray 2020, 5). 3) See Apple (2017, 5–13) for an overview and partial translation of the TG.
- 4) See AV, D197b2–5; P198a7–b3. (cf. tr. Sakurai 2004, 331; Gray 2020, 7). 5) AV, D197b5; P198b3: *de ltar bden pa gnyis [gnyis] D; nyid P) mi phyed pa zung 'jug pa ni byang chub kyi sems chen po ste bzhi ba'o ll*. (cf. tr. Sakurai 2004, 331; Gray 2020, 7). 6) Lūipa, *Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya*, D192b4: *shrīr yig gnyis med ye shes te ll he ni rgyu sogs rgyu sogs rnam par spangs ll ru yig tshogs dang bral ba nyid ll ka ni gang du 'ang mi gnas pa'o ll*. (Sanskrit ed. Sakurai 1998, 12: *śrī-kāram advayañānaṃ heti hetvādiśūnyatā / ru-kārāpagataṃ vyūhaṇ ka iti na kavacit sthītam ll 41 ll*).
- 7) TG, 62.11–18: *shrī ni gnyis med ye shes te ll zhes pa / dpal gnyug ma lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes snang ba dang / stong pa zung 'jug pa'o ll he ni rgyu sogs rnam par spangs ll zhes pa la lhan cig skyes pa de bdag las kyang skye ba ma yin / gzhān las kyang skye ba ma yin / gnyis ka las kyang skye ba ma yin / rgyu med pa las kyang skye ba ma yin pas / rang bzhin gdod nas dag pa'o ll ru ni tshogs dang bral ba nyid lhan cig skyes pa de skye ba dang / rgas pa dang / gnas pa dang / 'jig pa'i tshogs dang bral ba'o ll ka ni gang du yang mi gnas pa ni / bskyed rim dang rdzogs rim zung 'jug ll snang ba dang stong pa zung 'jug ll thabs dang shes rab zung 'jug go ll*. 8) AV, D200b4–6; P202a1–4: *de yang don dam pa'i*

bden pa'i sprul ba phag mo'i gzugs su bstan la / kun rdzob kyi bden pa sprul ba gtso bo la sogs pa'o ll de gnyis med du bstan pa'i phyir / shri ni gnyis med ye shes te ll zhes bya ba la sogs pa la / gnyis med ye shes ni zung 'jug go ll rgyu sogs ni bdag dang gzhan dang gnyis dang rgyu med pa las skye ba rnam par spangs pa'o ll tshogs ni gnas pa dang (dang] D; om. P) 'jig pa'i tshogs dang bral ba'o ll gang du'ang mi gnas pa ni mtha' gnyis la mi gnas pa ste (ste] D; ste / P) phyag rgya chen po zung 'jug go ll.

9) AV, D201a1-3; P202a6-b1: 'od gsal 'ba' zhig mi ston pa ci zhe na / dpal rdo rje mkha' 'gro las / gzhan du gal te sbyor ba ni // ma tshang (ma tshang] D; mtshang P) mar me lta bur 'da' zhes gsungs pa'i phyir ro ll (ll] D; om. P) de la skyon ci yod ce na / de ni mar me shi ba ltar rang gzhan (gzhan] D; bzhin P) gyi don gsal ba med pa'i phyir ro ll de bas na bden pa gnyis kyi tshul la gnas nas gzhan don phun sum tshogs pa bsgrub pa'i phyir / ji srid 'khor ba'i gnas su ni ll mkhas mchog 'dug par gyur ba'i bar ll de srid sems can mtshungs med don ll mya ngan mi 'da' bar ni mdzad ll. (Sanskrit ed. Sugiki 2002, 88: *sarvasaṃpūrṇayogena anyathā yāti dīpavat ll 15 ll*; 98: *yāvat saṃsāravāsathā bhavanti varasūrayaḥ / tāvat sattvārtham atulaṃ śaktīḥ kartum anivṛtāḥ ll 25 ll*). In the first of the two quotes from the *Vajradāka-nāma-mahātantrarāja*, the Sanskrit text "*sarvasaṃpūrṇayogena*" does not correspond to the Tibetan "*sbyor ba ni ma tshang*." My translation is based on the Tibetan translation, which, in my view, makes sense in this context. See also TG, 59.11-14: *de'i phyir rdo rje mkha' 'gro kyang / gnyis su med pa sgyu ma dang bral ba ll gzhan dang gal te sbyor na ni ll ma tshang mar me lta bur blta ll zhes gsung pas kyang / zung 'jug gi mtshan nyid ma tshang ba ni / mar me lta bu mya ngan las 'das pa yin zhes bya'o ll.* 10) See TG, 64.23-65.3. 11) See TG, 65.15-66.16.

Abbreviations

AV *Abhisamayavibhaṅga-nāma*, Atiśa, D1490; P2205. *Cakrasaṃvarābhisamaya*, Lūipa, D1427; P2144, Sanskrit edited in Sakurai 1998. TG *Ita sgom chen mo bzhugs so*, Atiśa, in Jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha'i gsung 'bum, vol. 2, 48-68. Lha sa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying skrun khang, 2012. *Vajradāka-nāma-mahātantrarāja*, D370; P18, Sanskrit edited in Sugiki 2002.

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